"WELCOME TO REALITY!"

Populism and mistrust among the Sweden Democrats

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Abstract

This thesis explores populist tendencies in political representatives from the Sweden Democrats (SD) in a Swedish city. Through ethnographic data and drawing on Ernesto Laclau's theory on populist reason, I show how the SD constructs itself as "the people", as opposed to "elites", through chains of equivalences. United in having their demands denied by "elites", my interlocutors were able to incorporate widely different demands into the party's ideological composition. An internal, antagonistic frontier was established between "the people" and "elites" in the struggle over such demands. I argue that my interlocutors' mistrust of "elites" – mainstream media, political representatives from other parties, as well as state and municipal institutions – made this antagonism between "the elites" and "the people" manifest. By examining my interlocutors' ideas about "Swedishness" and national belonging, I also show that "the nation" – a key term in the SD's political discourse, and which I analyse as an "empty signifier" – was crucial in shaping, and in turn being shaped by, the SD's worldview. More or less every demand my interlocutors put forward was in some way centred around "the nation" and its protection, which in turn shaped subsequent demands. Finally, I argue that a neoliberal logic was also present in shaping my interlocutors' worldviews: welfare chauvinism, while nationalist in my interlocutors' rhetoric, was also, I suggest, underpinned by neoliberal ideas about "responsibilization".

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Introduction – method and ethics

These introductory pages will outline the methodological and ethical challenges I encountered during the production of this thesis, both in fieldwork and in writing. I will present the process which led to my fieldwork, how it was conducted, and how I reasoned when challenges arose, for example the 2020 covid-19 pandemic and thorny issues of positionality and complicity. Furthermore, I will discuss the difficulties in conducting fieldwork among, and writing about, people with whom one disagrees. Lastly, I will outline an overview of the ensuing chapters.

Method

Motivation and gaining access

My choices of ethnographic field and research questions were born out of a long-standing curiosity on my part. Having grown up in Sweden, I watched the gradual rise of the Sweden Democrats (henceforth "the SD") over the last two decades in somewhat fearful fascination. My friends and family spoke about them with revulsion; "we have Nazis in Parliament now", "they're fascists!", they would say, faces drawn with disgust. I am sure I said similar things on occasion, myself. But I grew increasingly curious over the years. I would watch SD volunteers in their campaign tents in the street, scared to go up for fear of being associated with them, but incredulously wondering how they could believe what they believed. It went against everything I had learned and believed in. I did not know a single SD sympathiser personally (at least no-one who said it out loud) and websites and party manifests did little to satisfy my curiosity. As my education in social anthropology progressed and I fell deeper in love with the discipline, I knew that the anthropological method of participant observation offered a chance to finally gain a better understanding of the SD's worldview. When the opportunity to conduct fieldwork presented itself as part of an M.A degree, I jumped at the chance.

I began by contacting Benjamin Teitelbaum from the University of Colorado, a Swedish-American ethnographer who has worked with the nationalist milieu in Sweden (2017). Following a phone call where we discussed my project, he sent an e-mail to Mattias Karlsson, at the time group leader for the SD in Parliament, with whom Teitelbaum had worked. Karlsson put me into contact with Annika, the chairman of Centreville's SD office. I e-mailed Annika and explained my proposed project. She agreed to let me shadow her and

anyone else who agreed to it. When the time came in January 2020, I moved to Centreville with my fiancé and I met Annika at the SD's party office. She acted as my gatekeeper and contact person and graciously introduced me to my other key interlocutors.

The overwhelming majority of the people I met during fieldwork were curious, open, forthcoming, and happy to share their thoughts and time with me. At first I was a little surprised at this. I had, perhaps prejudiced, expected to be met with some suspicion and a reluctance to engage with me. But this was not my experience at all. Occasionally, I was asked to leave the room if there was a particular, personal or confidential, matter my interlocutors wanted to discuss, but generally, I was free to observe and join them in their day-to-day professional activities.

I cannot be sure whether this forthcoming attitude was orchestrated and pushed by the local party leadership in an effort to influence my data in a positive direction, but in private conversations with my interlocutors I never got the impression that they had a pre-planned coordinated approach to my presence. Of course, they were eager to present themselves and the party in as flattering a light as possible, but I always felt that they genuinely believed in what they were saying and that I was indeed welcome. Below, I elaborate on the topic of impression management and participant observation.

(Participant) observation

Following established social anthropological praxis, I employed participant observation as my main research method. I spent time with my interlocutors in their professional activities; mostly in the City Hall and the party office, as well as more informal settings such as lunches and dinners. In addition to everyday conversation in such informal settings, I also made use of unstructured interviews, asking them questions about what they were doing and why, and what they thought about different topics.

Of course, as H. Russell Bernard (2017) points out, participant observation inevitably entails a certain amount of impression management. My key interlocutors were all used to dealing with journalists and critics and had experience in presenting themselves in the best possible light. There is, of course, the possibility that this may have skewed my data. However, the strength of participant observation over a longer period of time is that the researcher gets the opportunity to study their interlocutors in a variety of situations, as well as, hopefully, gaining their trust. As Bernard, again, notes: "Presence builds trust. Trust lowers reactivity [the fact that people change their behaviour as a result of the researcher's presence]. Lower

reactivity means higher validity of data" (2017, 282). I cannot be certain whether my interlocutors really trusted me, however. They often joked about how my thesis would paint them as racists, or that I was a member of AFA (Anti-Fascist Action). I would laugh along with them, and reassure them that I was not; that it would be both scholarly unacceptable and unethical to conduct research in that manner. I once overheard Gunilla telling Annika in the hallway in City Hall that she did not think I was a spy, "because if she had been, we would have been finished [*så hade det varit kört*]". I took her comment to mean that she thought it was very unlikely that I was an undercover spy from AFA, sent to infiltrate them and make them look bad. It may not be trust, exactly, but given the difficulty of gaining their trust (elaborated on in chapter 2), it was some small success. All in all, I believe I succeeded in establishing an acceptable rapport with most of my interlocutors, by attempting to be as transparent and honest as I possibly could.

Zahle (2012) discusses the two parts of participant observation; participation and observation. Given the particularity of my chosen field, however, participation was not always possible – I could obviously not participate as a working politician, as I was neither a member of a political party nor elected to any office. Therefore, the emphasis during my fieldwork was generally on observation. I watched and listened to what was going on around me and took notes when possible. Nonetheless, I participated in what I could. I joined my interlocutors for lunch every day and dinner when they went out to restaurants, stood beside them in the cold when they were handing out fliers, and helped make coffee and clear plates before and after meetings. The plain fact of my being there helped me gain insight in much of the "tacit knowledge" (Zahle 2012), taken for granted by my interlocutors. I return to this topic below, under the heading of "fieldwork at home".

Furthermore, in contrast to anthropological convention, I did not stay with my interlocutors, and did not see them much outside of working hours and a professional setting. This was a decision born out of several factors. First, my research focus was mostly on their professional activities and behaviour. Second, the private sphere is very private indeed in Sweden, and gaining access to a host family would surely have proven almost impossible. Third, I moved to Sweden with my fiancé, and we wanted our own place. I could surely have gained a different and possibly more varied set of data had I stayed with my interlocutors, but while that is the ideal in anthropology, it is far from unheard of to conduct fieldwork in less orthodox ways. Jon Harald Sande Lie (2013), for instance, considers the ways in which his fieldwork differed from Malinowski's ideal. Studying the World Bank and a Ugandan ministry, Lie did not stay with his interlocutors, nor was he able to participate in many of his

interlocutors' daily activities – just like me. He turned these difficulties into data; the impenetrability of the state and the challenges of access were important findings and told him something about the nature of his field. Nonetheless, he argues that a Malinowskian ideal of fieldwork is useful as an ideal to strive towards, though not always feasibly applicable in practice.

An additional quirk in my fieldwork was the fact that when my interlocutors left for the day, my "field" disappeared. Sawa Kurotani (2004) had a similar experience in her study of Japanese expatriates in the US. She conducted fieldwork with Japanese housewives in their domestic activities, but when their husbands returned home after work, she left. She argues that her research focus nevertheless made this largely unproblematic, as it was the housewives and the relationships between them that were her primary object of study. In a similar vein, my research focus was on my interlocutors' professional activities, not their relationships with family and friends outside the spheres of their party political work.

Notetaking, however, a key tool in participant observation, proved more challenging than I had expected. In meetings and larger gatherings it was mostly unproblematic; I would sit in the back and quietly tap away on my iPad on which I took notes. In one-on-one interactions, however, it often hampered the discussions and gave the situation a stuffier, more interview-like feeling. It seemed to me that my interlocutors often stiffened when I had the iPad and keyboard in front of me. Therefore, I generally put it away and focused on having present and mindful talks with them, which appeared to relax them. I did my best to remember what they said and how the discussions progressed, and as soon as I had the chance, I would write out as much as I could remember into my notes. Occasionally, if they said something strikingly poignant, I would excuse myself, bring out the iPad and write it down, explaining that they put it so well that I did not want to risk forgetting it.

My interlocutors sometimes wondered about this approach. I was occasionally asked why I was not writing anything down, to which I replied that I wanted to be present in the moment, taking notes distracted me from the conversation, and assured them that I would take notes afterwards. I told them that I was mostly interested in their thoughts and worldview, not necessarily in particular quotes, even if I would like those, too.

I might have used a tape-recorder to record the conversations. However, I felt that a tape-recorder would have the same effect as obvious notetaking and cause my interlocutors to feel self-conscious, as if they were being interviewed by a journalist, rather than having a conversation with a student researcher. I thus decided against it. Nonetheless, I could probably have established the use of one early on, so that my interlocutors would have gotten used to it,

sidestepping the discomfort that I anticipated. If I could do it over again, I might have used a tape-recorder during informal chats and for clarifying semi-structured interviews, provided that I had done so consequently for some time and felt that my interlocutors were comfortable.

A typical day would usually go as follows. I would normally come to City Hall around ten o'clock, when most of my City Hall interlocutors would have arrived. I would do the rounds, in no particular order, and pop into everyone's offices and check on what they were doing. This would usually result in unstructured interviews or conversations, as they would tell me what they were working on, or I would ask about whatever I was wondering about. I would be careful to ask if they had the time and tell them I did not want to disturb their work, but they generally had the time to spare, and if they did not, I would go to the office next door. Around one o'clock, we would usually have lunch, informally chatting about anything that was on our minds. Sometimes we went out, but usually we ate in the City Hall lunch room. In the afternoons and evenings, I would sometimes go to the party office and meet with Annika and perhaps a party member or attend an Open House, or accompany an interlocutor to a city district committee meeting.

As a final comment, it may be noted that my fieldwork, while of the SD, was conducted with a group of individuals. They may not always be representative of the party and its policies as a whole. Nevertheless, I would argue that, as most of them held elected positions within the party, their beliefs and actions were critical in shaping party policy and ideology.

Positioning

Concerning my own position, two features should be noted about me: first, I am quite "Nordic-looking"; I am fairly tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, and second, I am a woman. There is no denying these two factors in particular may have influenced my access to data. It is an inevitable reality in fieldwork that one's gender affects one's access to and perspective on any given field – some questions become easier to ask, and some events stand out (Bernard 2017, 296). Additionally, I looked like my interlocutors, talked like them, I even dressed like them. Ramalingam (2021) points out the difficulties she experienced as a researcher of colour (ROC) in conducting fieldwork among the SD. Initially, at least, she was mistrusted by her interlocutors, and was asked not to attend certain meetings or events as her presence would "confuse" participants (2021, 261). In stands to reason, then, that my being fair-skinned and blonde – the very picture of "Swedishness" – may have had the opposite effect and facilitated my access to the field. Kurotani (2004), however, emphasises the potential for a blurring of

self-other boundaries when coming from a similar background as one's interlocutors. Nonetheless, I did not experience that particular issue to any significant extent. I did, however, sometimes worry about being associated with my interlocutors. This was uncomfortable for me as I strongly disagreed with my interlocutors' politics and values. That is nevertheless a topic better suited for an ethical discussion, and I will elaborate on it below.

Fieldwork at home

As I grew up not far from Centreville, a few words must also be said about conducting fieldwork in one's own society. This has become more common in recent decades, but still presents some methodological challenges. First, one generally avoids culture shock – for better and for worse. It makes it possible to start gathering data more quickly and might make it easier to navigate everyday necessities. Furthermore, one speaks the vernacular local language, which is helpful in communicating with one's interlocutors. Knowing the language saves time and effort in learning a new language or finding and using a translator, as well as picking up on nuances and subtext which might otherwise be lost in translation. Nonetheless, culture shock can be of value, as it brings differences into sharp relief and allows the researcher to view a group, or a society, with fresh eyes (Bernard 2017).

Yet, although I was familiar with Centreville, national politics, and the language, I still experienced something like a culture shock in the first weeks with the SD. I had to learn the political jargon and abbreviations as well as the municipal and political organisational structure. Additionally, it was somewhat jarring to hear my interlocutors speak about things in a completely different way than what I was used to – I have generally always trusted the media, for example, which my interlocutors, as a rule, did not. Through observation, I learned appropriate ways to behave and talk (Zahle 2012), and which questions made sense to ask. Some of these tacit rules I knew from having grown up in Sweden, but some were entirely new to me, for instance, when and in what ways was it acceptable to joke about a newspaper or a journalist? When could "non-politically correct" comments be made? How did one talk to political opponents?

Furthermore, I grew up in a particular national imaginary, in which a hegemonic narrative about Sweden as a tolerant, democratic, multicultural society was dominant (Ramalingam 2012). While I have tried my best to suspend my own judgement (Bernard 2017, 296), my upbringing in this particular imaginary has undoubtedly shaped my own values and worldview, and, as a corollary, my data and analysis. Nonetheless, I have tried to be aware of

this throughout the project, and done my utmost to be "sufficiently estranged from them" (Shah 2017, 51), and attain "deliberate alienation from the world under study in order to understand it as it cannot understand itself" (Hastrup in Shah 2017, 51).

There was also the potential risk of running into my interlocutors outside of a research capacity, e.g., if I was out with a friend and happened to meet an interlocutor. This, fortunately, never happened. However, as a precaution, I have told my friends and family about the sensitive nature of my research and the importance of anonymisation, and that if it were to happen, they would promise to keep it to themselves.

The pandemic

As an ideal, fieldwork should be conducted over a long period of time (Shah 2017; Bernard 2017). However, the 2020 covid-19 pandemic naturally affected both me, my fieldwork, and my interlocutors a great deal. My fieldwork was interrupted, though eventually concluded more or less in full, albeit in two blocs, separated by several months. I had planned to conduct fieldwork between January and June 2020, but instead I spent time in the field between January-March, and August-October 2020.

Sweden's approach to the pandemic has faced both domestic and international critique, and the country never implemented the lockdowns common in the rest of Europe. Sweden remained comparatively open, with mostly recommendations rather than regulations in effect. Nevertheless, in March 2020, my interlocutors decided to work from home, suddenly leaving me without a "field". Meetings took place on Zoom or by phone and even the Municipal Board and Council meetings were affected as representatives allowed to attend were reduced to a bare minimum. Had I asked, I am sure I would have been allowed to sit in on Zoom meetings. However, no-one asked me, and I was wary of imposing. Moreover, I felt that the data I potentially would have gathered would be lacking regardless, as, in my opinion, body language and social dynamics are difficult (though of course possible) to assess and observe through a computer screen. Besides, we all (naively) thought that restrictions would not last more than a few months. Additionally, over the summer my interlocutors were on holiday, which meant that in June and July, there was nothing much for me to observe with regards to my research focus. Instead, I took the spring and summer months to immerse myself in reading, trying to get a head start on the theoretical part of this thesis. Nevertheless, I kept a close eye on Twitter, Facebook, and newspapers, and followed national and local politics closely. Information I gleaned online helped me to track what was going on and confirmed, to an extent, what I had

learned through traditional fieldwork, but I have not used this data in this thesis as it was not systematically gathered.

In mid-August, as restrictions had lightened somewhat and my interlocutors were back from their vacations, I contacted Annika and asked how things were going, and was invited to come back the following week. Meetings were once again largely held in person, albeit with as few participants as possible and with attempts to keep physical distance. I remained in the field until late October, when restrictions hardened again due to the rising number of covid-19 cases in Centreville. By then I had conducted roughly five months of fieldwork, at which point I exited the field. This was undramatic. I offered my interlocutors some pastries and they gave me a small, very sweet gift (a pair of warm socks and a plastic ring), wished me well, told me to contact them if I ever had any questions, and I repeated the same sentiments.

The pause in fieldwork was, of course, not ideal, and certainly not planned. As it was, I ran the risk of my interlocutors never quite "getting used" to me (O'Reilly 2012, 87), as the pause between field stays was several months long. This may have affected reactivity during the second part of fieldwork and caused them to adjust their behaviour to influence my data, which may have been partly prevented by getting used to me if fieldwork had progressed as planned. Furthermore, as my thesis advisor Iselin Strønen pointed out, having too much theory in mind (since I read a lot during the summer) may make one blind to other analytical angles.

However, I believe the break may have offered some benefits as well. Indeed, Bernard (2017) considers a break in fieldwork a potentially good idea. He argues that it allows the researcher time and space to reflect on one's insights up until that point, and focuses one's efforts when one returns. This was my experience, as well. With a potential theoretical framework in mind it was, despite the potential downsides of temporarily leaving the field, easier to spot relevant events and conversations and ask more revealing questions.

Ethics

Anonymisation

Apart from the name of the Sweden Democrats, all names and places in this thesis have been anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms. Some non-essential details have been changed or omitted in order to avoid identification of individuals and places. I have tried to do this in a way that still retains the important contextual details within my data. This is, of course, a balancing act. I am still uncertain whether a dedicated person might still not be able to identify

the city, and thus easily my interlocutors. I have, however, attempted to make it as difficult as I possibly can, while still keeping informative contextual clues.

I identified the SD because I believe the party holds a special place in Swedish politics, and anonymising its name would, first, not have been possible – it would have been easy to identify it anyway, considering the way my interlocutors talk about other parties, and their own political views. Second, I would argue that naming the party and understanding it better yield a valuable insight into Swedish politics in general, which would not have been possible had the SD's name been anonymised.

A related issue is that of my fiancé. While I am not politically affiliated, he is an active member of the Left Party. He joined the party some time after I had embarked upon fieldwork and we discussed it at length. I have thus been extremely careful not to divulge anything to him that I do not believe my interlocutors would want a political opponent to know, and only discussed the topics covered in this thesis, which will be submitted anyway. Naturally, I talked to my fiancé every day about my day and how things were going, but I took great care in choosing my words and topics. If there was something I felt strongly about but could not discuss, I wrote it down in a journal. On his part, my fiancé has been mindful when talking to his party acquaintances, not revealing the specifics of my field of study or anything related to it.

I wondered whether or not to tell my interlocutors about my fiancé's political activism, but since my advisor had suggested I not tell them about my own political standpoint unless they asked – and they never did – I never told them. I return to this below. Still, I am unsure whether I should have, but since my interlocutors never asked about my or my fiancé's political views, I hope they understand.

Informed consent

In accordance with established research ethics, I did my utmost to attain informed consent from my interlocutors. My key interlocutors all signed an informed consent form with which I presented them. They kept one copy and I another. The form outlined the purpose and theme of the project and that I would shadow them, as well as who I was and for how long the fieldwork was meant to last. It also clearly stated that they could withdraw their consent at any time.

At other times, however, it was too inconvenient to be feasible to ask for a signature, in which cases I chose to attain consent verbally. For instance, during Open House-meetings

with members, I would ask Annika to give me the floor at the beginning of the evening and introduce myself and my project, told them everyone would be anonymised, and encourage anyone who had any questions or qualms to come see me afterwards. If anyone came late and missed my introduction, I would slink over to them and quietly repeat it under my breath so as not to disturb the meeting. Furthermore, I printed out some "business cards" with my name and contact details and put them in plain sight next to the coffee dispensers during Open Houses. During my regular introductions of myself and my project, I told people that if they had any questions or wished to revoke their consent at any time, they could take a business card and contact me whenever and do so. I also regularly made a point of mentioning, in passing, something about "my thesis" or "my university" to gently remind my interlocutors that I was there in a research capacity.

In some rare cases, however, it was not possible to attain informed consent, for example, if I accompanied one of my interlocutors to a large exhibition or fair, as I did on a few occasions. I did not, of course, study or collect data about most of the people I saw there, but I was still present as a researcher. In those cases, I tried to focus on my interlocutors, and if we spoke with another person and I had a chance to interject, I would mention who I was and what I was doing.

In addition, I also signed a standard confidentiality agreement with Annika, which was a precondition for gaining access. It covered confidential information outside of the scope of my research questions. Whereas I was interested in the SD's worldview and underlying logic, I was less concerned with confidential topics covered by the agreement, such as election strategies or upcoming votes in the Municipal Board or Council.

Anthropology of "people we don't (necessarily) like"

One of the most challenging aspects of this project has been the fact that I strongly disagree with my interlocutors' values and politics. How does one keep an objective (to the extent that that is possible) perspective of topics one cares deeply about? How does one write a fair (to the extent that that is possible) representation of "people we don't (necessarily) like" (Bangstad 2017)? Perhaps complicating the matter further, I did not dislike my interlocutors at all; in fact, most of the time I truly enjoyed their company. Nonetheless, I found their *political views* largely reprehensible.

Fortunately, I have had some anthropological writings to guide me. First, I have tried to remain objective rather than value neutral (Bernard 2017, 295); to apply "empathy, not

sympathy" (Gingrich 2006, 11). In other words, I have strived to establish a rapport with my interlocutors through empathy, by connecting with them as people and suspending my own judgement (in an attempt at objectivity). Empathy, write Gingrich and Banks, "is indispensable for any seriously methodological focus on actors' experiences and perspectives" (2006, 11). However, I also recognised that I do not sympathise with their views – that is, I am not, and could not be, value neutral. Gingrich and Banks, again, put this eloquently: "Sympathy is impossible because the basic orientation of neo-nationalism… is towards cultural exclusion and assimilation, an orientation that contradicts anthropology's basic premise of socio-cultural diversity" (2006, 11). This, naturally, is reflected in my writing, as well. I have tried to refrain from valorising my interlocutors; to judge if they are "good" or "bad"; instead attempting to simply understand why they think and act in the ways that they do.

Second, thorny issues of complicity and reciprocity inevitably arose. For example, having a smoke outside the SD's party office, local party chairman Annika and Johanna, the leader of the SD's local youth chapter, were talking about filming the recording of a podcast. Johanna had initially enlisted the help of a tech-savvy friend to film, but he had cancelled the appointment. Johanna and Annika were discussing how to solve this problem while I stood next to them. I have some experience with photography and videography and I knew that I would be able to help them. I also enjoyed the idea of being able to repay my interlocutors' kindness and helpfulness, at least in a small way. Yet I was uneasy about actively participating in the dissemination of material whose content I personally found appalling. I agonised over the decision while they debated the issue, but finally I offered to help and Johanna gratefully accepted. I reasoned that the video would be made one way or the other regardless, and that it would be arrogant of me to assume that my modest skills would have any influence over voter sympathies. By offering my help, however, I hoped that I might be able to prove to my interlocutors that I could be trusted; that I was not out to make them look bad, I was only curious about their life-world. Nonetheless, the whole thing made me uncomfortable, and I am still not sure whether I did the right thing.

Benjamin Teitelbaum (2019) argues that scholar-informant solidarity is vital, regardless of whether or not we like our subjects or what they stand for. Working with "(radical) nationalists", he refers to his interlocutors as "friends" (Teitelbaum 2019, 414). Nonetheless, he stresses that in his work he defends national*ists*, not national*ism*. He concedes that this is an "immoral ethnography", but an epistemologically indispensable one. Indeed, the kind of data we can gather through intimate engagement marked by trust and reciprocity is impossible to obtain through other means, and the knowledge thus gained, he suggests, trumps

the potential immorality of furthering causes that may be deplorable to us (Teitelbaum 2019, 414). My own approach is similar in that I chose to reciprocally help my interlocutors, but I do not defend their politics.

Finally – and crucially – as I oppose the SD's politics, I am also, in Busher's words, "keen to see [them] lose traction" (2021, 272). I share his argument that the way to counter their ideas and influence is to understand them better, and this can only be achieved by exploring their full range of agency; seeing one's interlocutors "*as* people, capable of beauty, kindness, love, joy and creativity, just as they are capable of spite, unkindness, aggression and hate" (Busher et al. 2021, 271, emphasis in original). However, conducting fieldwork among people one ultimately wishes to see fail is complicated, to say the least. Following the "moral turn" (Kierans and Bell 2017) in anthropology, scholars within the discipline have, following Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995), called for a "witness"-approach, where the anthropologist has a responsibility to act as a witness, promoting the interests of those she studies, who are – generally – the oppressed and vulnerable in a society. This approach has been criticised by Roy D'Andrade (1995), among others, who asks what becomes of our methodological relativism if we start moralising and deciding what is good or bad about the people we study. What responsibility, then, do I have towards my interlocutors, versus what I, personally, believe would be in the best interest of society at large? To turn Scheper-Hughes' point on its head, am I a "witness", not on behalf of my interlocutors, but on behalf of vulnerable sectors of society, potentially (in my view) at risk of being hurt by the SD's politics? Or am I a passive bystander, simply a methodological relativist?

I would never wish to harm my interlocutors; however, nor do I want to see them succeed. How can these two positions be reconciled? I have no satisfying or conclusive answer. However, I would tentatively suggest that the two may, in fact, be aligned: by taking my interlocutors seriously and attempting to understand their grievances and worldviews on their own terms, I satisfy the demand for methodological relativism. By potentially making the knowledge thus gained legible to others who, perhaps, do not understand the SD – thereby providing tools for counter measurements – I satisfy the demand for "witnessing".

Prior to fieldwork, I had agonised over whether or not to tell my interlocutors from the beginning that I disagreed with their politics. Under advice from my academic advisor, though, I decided not to volunteer the information, but happily tell them if they ever asked. However, they never did. I told them several times that they were welcome to, if the conversation seemed to be nearing the subject, but they politely shook their heads and declined. The closest anyone ever came was during a lecture with a visiting member of Parliament (MP), when a member

asked if I was politically active (*politiskt engagerad*) in a party. I said that I was not, and he did not pursue the topic.

Research questions, thematic focus, and chapter overview

In its early stages, this project asked the most overarching question possible: Why do the SD believe what they believe? As fieldwork progressed, more focused questions began to crystallise, such as: Is the SD populist, and if so, in what ways? Why do they mistrust the media as well as state and municipal institutions, and how is this mistrust articulated? Is the SD "left" or "right", and does this continuum even make sense in their case? How do they imagine "the nation", and what role does this vision play in shaping their policies and worldview? Does the SD's nationalism co-exist with global trends of neoliberalism and globalisation, and if so, how?

In chapter 1, I will sketch out the SD's background; how the party came into being and its journey up until the time of writing. I will also outline the political scene and organisation in Swedish national politics. These sections are important to understand how the SD is positioned in the Swedish political landscape. Finally, the main theoretical foundation for this thesis, Ernesto Laclau's theory on populist reason (2005), will be laid out. I will argue that the party's self-identification with "the people" is crystallised through chains of equivalences: by establishing a common identity through unsatisfied demands, "the people" is pitted against "the elites" who deny these demands.

In the second chapter, I shall consider my interlocutors' prominent and almost omnipresent mistrust. This will be done in a dialectic discussion with Laclau and Florian Mühlfried (2019). I will argue that my interlocutors' mistrust of "elites" – mainstream media, political representatives from other parties, as well as state and municipal institutions – made the populist antagonism between "the elites" and "the people" manifest. It will also be suggested that my interlocutors had a certain confirmation bias; the closer a source was believed to be to their own political position, the more it could be trusted. Nevertheless, they were ambivalent about sources perceived to be right-wing extremist – while the content of such materials was often felt to be reasonable, my interlocutors were told by the party leadership that the sources themselves were "racist" and thus not to be trusted. Finally, I suggest that this ambivalence may be a strategy on the SD's part: by being vague enough on what was and was not acceptable, they were able to integrate as many demands as possible into their chain of equivalence. By maintaining some boundaries, however, cohesion and a sense of community were retained.

Chapter 3 will be centred around a discussion of nationalism, and I will argue that my interlocutors' idea of "the nation" acts as an "empty signifier" which crystallises the SD's identity. Considering ethnographic examples showing my interlocutors' ideas about "Swedishness" and national belonging, I will suggest that essentially all my interlocutors' demands, heterogenous as they were, were subsumed under "the nation" as empty signifier, which also in turn shaped their demands. Finally, I will consider how nationalism and populism co-constitute one another through establishing a symbolic equivalence between "the nation" and "the people".

In the fourth and final chapter, I will examine some of the ways in which my interlocutors interact with local and global ideas about neoliberalism. I will propose that a neoliberal logic, as well as nationalism, is present in shaping my interlocutors' worldview. I show this by examining how welfare chauvinism, while nationalist in my interlocutors' rhetoric, was also underpinned by neoliberal ideas about "responsibilization". Through a brief comparative discussion of the SD's similarities and differences with the populist radical right in Hungary, I will suggest that neoliberalism and nationalism are entangled in multifaceted ways and combine in shaping my interlocutors' worldview.

Chapter 1

Constituting "The People"

Introduction

This chapter will form the backdrop to the rest of this thesis. I will outline the SD's history and electoral success, the Swedish political landscape and organisation, as well as previous scholarly work on the SD and radical right-wing parties. Lastly, I will briefly sketch out Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theory on populist reason and argue that it is an especially relevant theoretical framework through which to analyse the SD.

The Sweden Democrats are born

The founding of the SD is still somewhat shrouded in mystery. My interlocutors had different versions which were, in turn, different from official as well as critical versions. Most sources seem to agree, however, that the SD was founded in 1988 (Widfeldt 2015). The early membership cadre was partly, but not exclusively, made up of several neo-Nazi sympathisers, the number of which is debated (Widfeldt 2015; Sverigedemokraterna 2008). The party was established by the remains of The Sweden Party (*Sverigepartiet,* SvP, established in 1986), which in turn had grown out of The Progress Party (*Framstegspartiet*, established in 1968) and Keep Sweden Swedish (*Bevara Sverige Svenskt*, BSS, established in 1979). All groups shared, albeit in various degrees, anti-immigrant and right-wing notions (Widfeldt 2015). A splinter faction from SvP eventually broke out and created the SD in 1988.

The SD's success has been exponential. The first two decades saw a very slow but fairly steady increase in votes. An important moment for the young party came in 2001, when the party split into two factions: the SD, and the more radical *Nationaldemokraterna* (the National Democrats, the ND). In a book with collected essays from various SD front figures, party leader Jimmie Åkesson wrote about this time that "many remaining basket cases [*tokstollar*] quickly found their way there" (Sverigedemokraterna 2008), which paved the way for an even more pronounced mainstream party profile.

In the last decades of the previous millennium and up until 2010, Sweden was considered an exception in Western politics, with its glaring absence of a radical right party in Parliament (Widfeldt 2015). There was the short-lived tenure of the xenophobic party New Democracy (*Ny Demokrati*, established in 1991) between 1991-1994, with 26 out of 349 seats

in Parliament (Widfeldt 2015), but otherwise, Sweden had no such parliamentary parties. That is, until 2010, when the SD entered Parliament with a meagre 5,7% of votes and 20 seats in Parliament (Widfeldt 2015). Between its inception and entrance into Parliament, the party had worked hard to change its image. They implemented a zero-tolerance policy for extremism and excluded members that were deemed unsuitable. Despite this, the SD was plagued with scandals, internal conflicts and dramatic drop-outs.

Another important shift from its early, radical days to a more polished image was the appointment of Jimmie Åkesson as party leader in 2005 (Widfeldt 2015). Under his leadership, the party softened some of its more radical stances (e.g., pro- death penalty and anti-abortion), which, as noted, caused some of the more radical proponents to leave the party and seek a platform elsewhere. Today, the SD calls itself a "social conservative party" and their main issues are immigration, national security, and national cohesion.

Since 2005, the SD has grown rapidly, at the time of writing (autumn 2021) polling at around 20% (Sjörén 2021), making it the third largest party in Swedish politics. Especially following the "refugee crisis" of 2015, the SD's support skyrocketed.

A brief overview of Swedish politics

National politics in Sweden was, up until the late 2000's, fairly evenly and straight-forwardly divided into two blocs: the political Left, consisting of the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*, V), the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterna*, S), the Green Party (*Miljöpartiet*, MP); and the political Right, consisting of the right-wing coalition *Alliansen* (The Alliance). This was made up of the Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*, C), the Liberals (*Liberalerna*, L, previously *Folkpartiet*), the Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*, KD), and the Moderates (*Moderaterna*, M). The two largest parties, dominating the political arena, have traditionally been S and M, whose party leaders have become prime ministers and led the government. The SD has to date never been part of any formal coalition in Parliament.

With the entrance of the SD into Parliament in 2010, however, the political status quo began creaking at the seams. The SD was initially treated as a political pariah with a solid cordon sanitaire. As late as 2018, just before the September general election, party leader for the Moderates Ulf Kristersson made a heavily publicised promise that he would never work with the SD (Tenitskaja 2019). Since then, things have changed rapidly. Kristersson and his right-wing coalition lost the election by a hair, the victory instead going to a fragile centre-left coalition led by Social Democratic prime minister Stefan Löfvén. This coalition was born

primarily out of a desire to maintain the cordon sanitaire against the SD and minimise their influence. The old centre-right bloc *Alliansen* broke down after almost fifteen years of cooperation, as the Centre Party and the Liberals agreed to enter into a coalition with the Social Democrats and the Green Party. The Left Party was not a part of this coalition, but endorsed it. In the years since the 2018 election, the cordon sanitaire against the SD has all but broken down. The Moderates claim that they will not form a government with the SD, but the SD would in all likelihood gain considerable influence over national politics if there is a shift in government in the 2022 election.

At the time of my fieldwork in 2020, general and municipal elections were two years away, due in 2022.

Political organisation

Sweden is a constitutional monarchy with legislative Parliament and executive government, led by a prime minister. The nation is organisationally divided into overlapping levels: 25 provinces (*landskap*), 21 counties (*regioner*), and 290 municipalities (*kommuner*). Centreville, in turn, was during the time of my fieldwork divided into a number of city districts, each of which had its own committee. In addition, there were also professional committees for, for instance, culture, properties, schools, and sports.

Figure 1. The author in City Hall in front of an attempted explanation of Sweden's administrative organisation

My interlocutors were primarily concerned with municipal politics, which was organised in levels of increasing reach of authority. On the lowest level there were the professional and city district committees, with representatives from political parties proportionately given seats in accordance with municipal election results. Above that, there was the Municipal Board (MB) – not to be confused with the Municipal Council (MC), which was the highest organ in the city. The Municipal Board was made up of political representatives with seats proportionately distributed according to election results; all in all about 15 people. The board made day-to-day decisions and meetings were not open to the public. The board met every other week and its speaker was the local leader for the governing party. In Centreville during the time of my fieldwork, the speaker was from the right-wing party the Moderates. Municipal Council meetings, on the other hand, were open to the public and were held once a month. The Council consisted of more than sixty politicians and was also led by a speaker from the Moderates.

Behind the scenes, as it were, were officials [*tjänstemän*] – working in the city management office, executing what the politicians decided. They were, crucially, not politically affiliated (in any official terms, though, presumably, privately).

The SD, in turn, was organised as follows. At its lowest levels, there were local associations [*föreningar*] on a municipal level, e.g., SD Centreville. Then, there were regional

associations, and finally, the national association, colloquially referred to as "*riks*" (short for "*riksdagsgruppen*", the Parliamentary group). These associations were sites for members and political decision-making, whereas the political work took place in the Municipal Boards and Councils, County Councils, and Parliament, respectively. My interlocutors were thus members of the local SD Centreville association, and worked in municipal politics (though one or two held seats in the County Council, too).

About Centreville and the field

Centreville is a relatively, by Swedish standards, large coastal city in the south of Sweden. Its population is mostly urban and the city boasts a rich cultural scene with a plethora of bars, restaurants, museums, and concerts. The city was founded in the 1600's but was burned and pillaged by Danish troops several times during occasional border conflicts. Centreville was and is an important industrial city with good communication and export lines to the rest of the continent.

For decades, Centreville, like many parts of Sweden, was governed by the Social Democrats. Today, however, the city is governed by the old right-wing *Allians*-parties, the Moderates, the Centre party, the Liberals, and the Christian Democrats. Also represented in the Municipal Board and Council were the Social Democrats, the Green Party, the Left Party, the SD, and a local party which I will refer to simply as the Local Party.

My "field", such as it was, was mostly centred in City Hall and the SD's party office. The two buildings were strikingly different. City Hall was an imposing, historical structure in the city's central square. After entering through the reception, one was met by a vast, high-ceilinged hall, lined on its side by floors of corridors with offices where politicians and their political secretaries worked. The wood, covering the floors and walls, was a warm, walnut colour, but large windows facing a small courtyard provided ample lighting. On the top floor were the SD's offices, home to Mats, Gunilla, Hampus, Johan, and Thomas. Their offices were reached through a bright, modern communal kitchen and eating area with several large tables, through a narrow corridor with a conference room, until one reached a long hallway lined with my interlocutors' offices. There was, in addition, an extra office which stood mostly unused, which I occasionally occupied.

The SD's party office, on the other hand, was quite a bit outside the city centre in a semi-industrial area. It was on the second floor, reached through a narrow staircase, and consisted of Annika's and Gudrun's offices, a small kitchen with a table and some chairs, a

bathroom, and a fairly large, open room, where lectures and meetings were regularly held. All in all it was roughly the size of a two-bedroom flat.

Introducing the main characters

My key interlocutors all worked full-time with politics but occupied various positions.

Annika, my point person and gatekeeper, was 29 years old and chairman of the local SD association. Among other things, she handled membership issues, organised events, and dealt with the media. She was also an SD representative in a city district committee, as well as in a professional county committee. She probably worked at least 60 hours a week and was always in full control, but quick to laugh. Holding a diploma from university in physical therapy, she had come to work for the SD fulltime for the last two years.

Mats was the SD's municipal councillor, meaning he was the local SD politician in charge. He had been a party member since 2010. He was in his 40's, hair greying at the temples, and almost always wore an impeccable suit and tie. His voice was booming and loud and could be heard from another floor of City Hall.

Gunilla worked as a political secretary for Mats but was also one of seven Municipal Council representatives for the SD. In her late 40's, she had naturally dark-blonde hair and was the office's unofficial fixer – she bought pastries and sandwiches for meetings and always kept things running smoothly. I spent the majority of my time in City Hall in an armchair in her office.

Hampus was the only one of my key interlocutors not holding an elected office. He was in charge of economic issues and could usually be found in front of his two large computer screens pouring over massive Excel sheets. He was the youngest of the bunch in his late 30's.

Johan was a political secretary but a municipal councillor in a neighbouring municipality. He used to be a CEO for a fairly large production company but found his calling in politics in his 40's. He was soft-spoken but charismatic, and I never saw him wearing anything but immaculate grey suits.

Thomas, too, was another one of Mats's four political secretaries as well as a Municipal Council representative. He also sat in a few professional committees.

Scholarly contributions

There is a dearth of anthropological studies of the SD, with at least one notable exception, a benchmark study by Vidhya Ramalingam (2012). She conducted fieldwork with the party

around the time it entered Parliament in 2010. Even though her fieldwork is more than a decade old at the time of writing (2021) and much has happened since then, her analysis is strikingly insightful even today. She explored the stigma surrounding the SD, noting how "norms" and "anti-norms" are constructed and negotiated by various political actors. Significantly, she concludes that the SD casts itself in the role as "victim" of anti-democratic attempts at silencing the party, expertly drawing on liberal norms of freedom of speech and equality.

Furthermore, she shows how the Swedish national self-image as a "beacon of democracy and equality" (Ramalingam 2012, 8) is a rather recent phenomenon and traces it back to post-WWII efforts to distance the nation from its dubious neutrality during the war. Racism, xenophobia, and intolerance were indeed quite common in Sweden for a long time in the 20th century, and the Social Democrats – today proudly proclaiming its inclusivity – "were instrumental in propagating fears about war-time immigration" (Ramalingam 2012, 8). However, after the war, there was a concerted effort to change the national self-image to one of humanitarianism and multiculturalism. The stakes in this effort were high as this self-image became increasingly understood as the national identity – to "be Swedish" was to be humanitarian and tolerant. Against this backdrop, Ramalingam understands the rise of the SD, embodying a resistance to this national self-image of Sweden as a multicultural nation, as a threat to the very national identity. Stigma against the SD is thus deeply rooted in an almost existential fear, in her understanding.

In general, however, studies of the SD have mostly been carried out by sociologists (e.g., Mulinari and Neergaard 2014), political scientists (e.g., Oskarson and Demker 2015) and journalists (e.g., Larsson 2001). Such studies generally examine the SD's voter base and attempt to draw conclusions from it (Oskarson and Demker 2015; Jylhä et. al 2019), analysing supply- and demand side dimensions. Other works instead suggest definitions of the party's ideological basis and practice and attempt to predict future developments (Hellström and Nilsson 2010). Journalistic works have scrutinised the SD's past and present indiscretions (Larsson 2001). Within these and other contributions, a plethora of labels are used to describe the SD, such as "extreme-right", "radical right", "populist-nationalist", "populist radical right" (PRR). Throughout this thesis, I sometimes employ the term "populist-nationalist", as I argue that the party is characterised by both populism and nationalism – an argument which will be elaborated on throughout the ensuing chapters.

While some of these non-anthropological works employ qualitative research methods at least in part (e.g., Mulinari and Neergaard 2014), I would argue that their background in these other disciplines nonetheless yields a rather etic understanding of its subjects.

Ethnography and anthropological analysis can, in contrast, be valuable in contextualising and nuancing these works. Furthermore, there have been especially few contributions, both from anthropology as well as other disciplines, focused on politicians themselves, and here I believe this thesis could be a valuable contribution[1].

On the general theme of right-wing populism and nationalism, however, anthropologists have in recent years produced a growing body of research. From Sri Lanka and Australia (Kapferer 2011) to Hungary and England (Thorleifsson 2019b; Schiering 2021; Hann 2016; Kalb 2018), scholars have explored various approaches to radical right-wing movements. Common lines of analysis include considerations of local histories and norms (Hann 2016), class (Kalb 2018), and resentment and insecurities in a globalising world (Thorleifsson 2019a). Cathrine Thorleifsson (2019a), for instance, compares the ultra-nationalist Jobbik party in Hungary with the pro-Brexit party UKIP in the UK. Despite some glaring differences in their origins and ideological foundations, she finds certain striking similarities between the two parties. Both, she argues, racialize minorities – especially Muslims – by using populist nationalist rhetoric, pitting immigrants, monolithically understood as a threat to national purity, against the defenders of the nation and a Christian civilisation in danger (Thorleifsson 2019a, 14).

Additionally, anthropologists have increasingly begun studying populism (Mazzarella 2019; Hann 2019), but to my knowledge no such works have been done on the SD, which is where this thesis enters into dialogue with this growing body of research. Below I outline my theoretical approach, arguing that populism is a particularly useful analytical lens through which to understand the complexities within SD's worldview.

Why populism? And what is it?

If one calls up the SD's party website, the first thing that pops up in bold, red letters is the text: "Welcome to the people's movement the Sweden Democrats!" (Sverigedemokraterna 2021). Every political party, of course, claims to represent "the people", but the SD makes its claim unusually explicit in their self-appointed designation as "the people's movement". Not only their website draws attention to this, but it was frequently invoked by my interlocutors as well. One of the first instances in which the party's claim to be "the people" became clear to me was during a talk by an SD member of Parliament (MP). The air was heavy with anticipation and

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[1] A noteworthy exception is Cathrine Thorleifsson's work (2019a) with Jobbik and UKIP politicians. However, she mostly conducted interviews with these politicians, rather than "deep hanging out" (Geertz in Kurotani 2004, 210).

the faint smell of coffee from the café below. We were in a venue in the city centre where an MP was hosting a talk. About fifty people had gathered in the large room, padding the well-worn wooden chairs with their coats, hanging on the MP's every word. One middle-aged woman in the audience raised her hand. She said that it does not feel like the government cares about the people because many feel unsafe but the state does not do anything about it. The MP nodded. "There's definitely a big gap between the state and the people", he said. "The SD is the only party that's growing… other parties just have small interest groups, not wide people's movements. And I don't think other parties have these kinds of meetings."

Both the woman in the audience and the MP invoked the idea of "the people" as opposed to "the state" or "the government". This antagonistic dichotomy stayed with me, and I began to notice it in other comments and events.

There are as many ways of approaching the SD analytically as there are researchers, but in this thesis, I will primarily apply an analytical perspective focused on populism; more specifically, Ernesto Laclau's theory on populist reason (2005). I argue that this approach to populism is a particularly useful analytical framework through which to understand the SD as it allows us to conceptualise many of the multifaceted, complex ways the party operates and understands the world and themselves. It captures, for instance, how the SD constitutes itself as "the people", how the party can represent so many heterogeneous demands under the same organisational umbrella, and why it can be so difficult to pinpoint exactly where on the classic political Left-Right spectrum the party belongs.

Some theories about populism focus on the concept's vagueness and attempt to determine some ideological or political content (e.g., Canovan and Germani in Laclau 2005). Laclau (2005) does the opposite – he argues that populism is not an ideology, but rather a political logic. In other words, widely different movements can apply the same populist logic. What they all have in common is the division between two antagonistic camps, usually "the people" versus "the elite".

In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline Laclau's theory concerning populist reason and use it to examine how the SD constructs itself as "the people". This examination takes us through chains of equivalence, antagonism, and empty signifiers. These concepts also partly overlap with the structure of this thesis (with the exception of the last chapter): chapter 1 deals with chains of equivalence, chapter 2 with antagonism, and chapter 3 with empty signifiers. Throughout this thesis, then, I will draw on Laclau to consider various aspects of the SD's worldview.

Naturally, other political parties and configurations follow the same populist logic as the SD to various degrees. Laclau himself recognises this, writing that "populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such" (2005, 67). Yet, as noted above, the SD is interesting to study as it makes its claim to be "the people" unusually explicit as they call themselves a "people's movement".

Laclau's (2005) theory on populist reason is, however, a notoriously difficult read. As this thesis is not a theoretical discussion, I will limit myself to the very basics. In its simplest form, the theory is about how "the people" is constructed as an historical actor primarily through unsatisfied social demands, empty signifiers, and antagonism. I will attempt to explain these in order.

Laclau's minimal unit of analysis is not the group or the individual, but rather the *social demand*. As illustration, he gives the example of agrarian migrants who arrive in the outskirts of a city. They request, for example, housing. If the demand is satisfied that is the end of the story. If, however, it is not, people may begin to notice that their neighbours also have unsatisfied demands; e.g., calls for clean water or schooling. These different demands may begin to enter into a *chain of equivalence* – they are united in not having their demands met, against the powerholders who deny them. This is the early stage of a populist configuration (Laclau 2005, 73-74).

To become more than a loose chain of unsatisfied demands, however, and become "the people", the chain must be consolidated through an *empty signifier*. To explain what an empty signifier is, Laclau takes the reader on a journey through Saussurian semiotics, which I will sidestep here for the simple sake of legibility and focus on where his argument ultimately ends up. In my reading, an empty signifier is, at its core, a way to conceptualise and represent "the people". It is a name, or a demand, which has no relation to a signified (the thing to which the name refers). In other words, the link between signifier and signified is severed. There is no *a priori* content to the empty signifier, no real content to which it refers. It must be filled with radical investment – in other words, "the people" chooses, to an extent, how to define itself, but is also defined through the empty signifier. If, for instance (as I argue later on), "the nation" acts as an empty signifier, the way my interlocutors understand "the nation" comes to decide which demands can be incorporated into the chain of equivalence; in this case demands that can be understood to promote "the nation". Crucially, what "the nation" *means* is established through radical investment by populist actors. However, this construction of meaning works both ways. The demands, incorporated by populist actors through their radical investment in the meaning of an empty signifier, also affect that empty signifier's meaning. If one of the

incorporated demands call for ethnic homogeneity, for example, that affects the meaning of "the nation" as an empty signifier, as it becomes understood as an ethnically homogenous nation. In order to incorporate as many demands as possible, the empty signifier must be vague enough to satisfy the heterogeneity of the demands, but be defined clearly enough to still provide cohesion and a sense of community.

Furthermore, "the people" is defined in opposition to an Other – in order to have an "inside", there must be an "outside"; there must be a "them" if there is to be an "us". "The people" claims to represent everyone in a given society, but as it also makes demands of those who deny their claims – most often "the elite" – it does, in fact, *not* represent everyone, and could not, as it would lose its constitutive outside. "The people" is thus constructed through an internal antagonistic frontier (Laclau 2005). The impossibility of "the people" as a totality is also why the empty signifier must be empty: it cannot refer to "the people" as a totality, because there *is* no such totality. Hence, "the people's" identity, its representation, relies on an empty signifier, whose meaning is constructed through radical investment.

However, this internal frontier is not necessarily always stable (Laclau 2005, 131). If competing populist projects lay claims on an empty signifier, it is filled with various, contested meanings (Moraes 2014). It thus becomes a *floating signifier*. I return to this in chapter 3.

In this chapter, I have presented an overview of the SD's background, as well as the Swedish political landscape and organisation. I have also sketched the basics of Laclau's theory on populist reason. In the ensuing chapters, I apply Laclau's theory on the praxis of my interlocutors.

Chapter 2

Smear and Fear – Establishing (Mis)trust

Introduction

> I am in City Hall in Mats's office, perched on the edge of his sofa. Everything is blue. The sofa, the tablecloth with SD's blue hepatica logo on the side table, the chairs. Even Mats's eyes are blue as he turns from his cluttered desk to look at me. We are doing an unstructured interview and I have just asked him why the SD is being smeared [*smutskastade*], which my interlocutors routinely complain about. "Why would journalists write things about you if they are not true?" I ask curiously. He thinks for a moment, searching for the words. He then explains that it is partly because newspapers get clicks if they write about the SD – preferably scandals –, partly because the party just cannot shake its past, and partly because other parties are afraid of them. It is not that prime minister Stefan Löfvén actually thinks they are going to start a concentration camp, Mats explains, but the PM is scared to share his power and means.
>
> "If I were to say that 'I like red', the media would write 'he hates blue' – but I didn't say anything about blue!", Mats says animatedly, and continues: "if Jimmie Åkesson [SD party leader] could walk on water, the media would write that 'Jimmie Åkesson can't swim'… It's the same if I'd say I'm proud to be white." He whooshes and winces. "The amount of shit I'd get! But I *am* proud to be white, and if I'd been black I would've been proud to be black."

This brief empirical vignette contains some interesting information. Throughout Mats's comments, there is a theme of mistrust and suspicion, from the fact that he believes his party is being smeared, to his impression that it is because other parties do not want to share their power and means, to his insistence that the media deliberately distorts the facts.

His words made explicit a logic of mistrust that pervaded my time in the field: the SD representatives and members I studied believed that institutions were politically biased and that the mainstream media was prejudiced against the party, and thus both were treated with mistrust and suspicion. Two recurring rationales in particular emerged for this perception – first, both institutions and the media were believed to be naive and not see the actual state of

Swedish society, and second, they were thought to be afraid to lose their power to the SD and so worked against them in a way they did not work against other political parties.

While Laclau's theory on populism (2005) offers a fruitful point of entry into an analysis of the life-world of my SD interlocutors, it does not fully account for the prevalence among my informants of the theme of *trustworthiness*. It is to this theme I now turn.

In this chapter, I will consider some aspects of this apparent mistrust, and show how radical mistrust (Mühlfried 2019) was manifest in certain situations, and nuancing and ambivalent attitudes in others. I will argue that, in general, a source's trustworthiness was in direct relation to its perceived position on the political scale – the further from one's own position, the less the source was perceived as trustworthy. This is arguably nothing new: confirmation bias has been studied in numerous psychological works (e.g. Dibbets, Borger, and Nederkoorn 2021; Kappes et.al 2020). Nonetheless, I believe it is instructive to study it through ethnographic material to better understand how it works in practice. Furthermore, I will show the ambivalence that set in among my interlocutors when a source – a newspaper, the city management office, a political representative from another party, etc., – was thought to stray too far to the political Right. If a source was perceived to be left-leaning, more or less radical mistrust tended to set in among my interlocutors, but attitudes to perceived right-wing sources were more ambivalent. The source – the sender – often seemed to matter more to my interlocutors than the actual content of the material. This became clear in the obvious ambivalence among my interlocutors concerning which news sources were and were not acceptable and trustworthy, both to the party leadership and mainstream society. I will suggest that this ambivalence may be a strategy on the SD's part: by being vague enough on what is and is not acceptable, they are able to integrate as many demands as possible into their chain of equivalence. By maintaining some boundaries, however, cohesion and a sense of community are retained. Finally, I suggest that an already present antagonism between "the people" – and the SD as self-designated representatives of "the people" – and "the elite" becomes manifest through more or less overt mistrust.

A general sense of suspicion was pervasive among my interlocutors, but this is of course not to say that my interlocutors were all pathologically suspicious conspiracy-theorists. My intention is only to show that it was a particular logic and mode of relating to the world. I will focus here on two loose, albeit interrelated, categories: suspicion of *corruption* and *bias*. My interlocutors generally suspected state and municipal institutions in particular to be more or less corrupt because of long-serving, purportedly Social-Democrat sympathising officials. I

understand "corruption" here in a broad, colloquial meaning, as "illegal, bad, or dishonest behaviour, especially by people in positions of power" (Cambridge Dictionary 2021).

Second, my interlocutors also suspected different media (especially mainstream and public service media) to be lacking in objectivity and of treating the SD unfairly. These suspicions were generally explained by my interlocutors partly by mainstream political parties' and media's purported naivety, and partly by these actors' perceived fear of losing power. However, some institutions and media outlets were deemed more trustworthy than others, and more so in certain situations than others. Understanding the work put into establishing when and to what extent an actor may be trusted tells us something valuable about populist logic, antagonism, and my interlocutors' life-world. I will situate these suspicions and logics within a theoretical framework based on Laclau (2005) and Mühlfried (2019).

Understanding mistrust

Apart from Laclau's (2005) theory, which runs as a theoretical vein throughout this thesis, in this chapter I will also draw on Mühlfried's analysis (2019) of (mis)trust in a Georgian setting. The field from which Mühlfried draws his examples is of course radically different from my Swedish field, both in historic and cultural-economic conditions. Nonetheless, I believe that his analysis of the ways in which mistrust operates is still relevant to my case.

Mühlfried views mistrust as an active endeavour, entailing a large amount of work to establish to what extent someone or something may or may not be trusted. He points out that mistrust is not the same as the absence of trust, which rather "leads to fear or indifference and thus to passive attitudes that have nothing to do with mistrust" (Mühlfried 2019, 8). The cost-intensity of mistrust results from having to operate on two levels in a mistrustful interaction: the surface, overt level, showing hospitality and friendliness, and the underground, covert level, where mistrust is located. In order to maintain status quo and ensure friendly relations, this underground level must not become apparent, as that might "cause – or manifest – antagonism" (Mühlfried 2019, 43). Mistrust also works through the overt level, however, allowing the subject to glean information about the mistrusted and evaluate their trustworthiness. Nonetheless, maintaining two levels of interaction is an energy-draining and complex endeavour. Mühlfried contrasts this with another mode of relating: radical distrust. Here such work is reduced to a minimum, as the mistrusted is dismissed as totally untrustworthy, period. I thus understand mistrust among my interlocutors as on a continuum between mistrust as an active endeavour, and radical mistrust.

A salient point in Mühlfried's analysis is his conclusion that mistrust also has the potential to be constructive, as a certain amount of mistrust serves to "keep a suspicious eye on the state" (Mühlfried 2019, 8).

Suspicion of corruption

As noted above, a common suspicion among my interlocutors was that state institutions and other mainstream political parties (i.e., "elites") were corrupt: either infiltrated by officially apolitical officials with a purported hidden agenda, or through treating the SD differently than other parties based on a fear of losing their own power and means. This was made clear to me during a meeting which I attended for Municipal Council representatives from the SD. The purpose of the meeting was to go over the items on the agenda for an upcoming Municipal Council meeting later that week. We were in City Hall and about 15-20 minutes before the meeting was to start, a few of the representatives had gathered in Mats's office, making small talk. Just as I was walking in, one of the representatives, Jakob, complained that: "officials are so marinated in all this because *sossarna* [slang for the Social Democrats] have been in power for so long. It'll take decades before they learn, before they can… yeah." He trailed off and the others nodded their agreement, mumbling "it's crazy" and "such a disgrace". During the actual meeting, the representatives went over a motion put forward by the Local Party to simplify and shorten the information packages [*handlingar*] politicians were given by officials[2]. Mats read the headline and announced "We'll vote yes to this, right?" in a tone of voice suggesting he did not anticipate any argument. Annika tentatively raised her hand and said: "You want to vote yes?" Gunilla and Mats nodded. Annika slowly told them that she had already voted no to the same motion in her city district committee. The group mockingly gasped, and a discussion ensued. "I think it's dangerous to vote yes to something like this", Annika said. "I want to choose for myself what I read. The risk is that the officials will choose what they think is important for us to know." Participating on Zoom, another representative, Emma, chimed in, voice raspy from the laptop speakers: "They already do!"

Here, Annika and those who agreed with her were wary of the power that officials had to choose what to include in the briefing material. They suspected that facts that would make the established political parties – especially the Social Democrats that had governed the city

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[2] Prior to Municipal Council and Board meetings, the city management office (*stadsledningskontoret*), staffed by non-politically affiliated officials (*tjänstemän*), prepared information packages (*handlingar*) for politicians – documents that outlined the background and information required for politicians to make decisions regarding the topics to be discussed during Council and Board meetings.

for decades – look bad would be downplayed or not included at all. However, under the current system officials already had that power, as they prepared and conducted feasibility studies of various projects and reported the results to politicians, who then, based on that material, voted and made the decisions.

Not only were officials thought to try to promote other political parties, but they were also suspected of actively sabotaging for the SD in a way they did not work against other parties. This belief was made clear to me one day when Hampus, in charge of economics, told me about the difficulties he had in obtaining the model for resource distribution from the city management's office last year. He told me that he had e-mailed them repeatedly but had been told that they did not have such a model, which he knew to be untrue; otherwise the city would not have given out any money (in social welfare benefits) that year. The situation was eventually resolved when Mats brought the matter to the municipal board chairman, who in turn talked to the officials in charge, and Hampus was finally given the information he needed. Having finished his story, he smiled ironically and told me that if *I* had asked the officials for it, I probably would have been given access immediately, but since he was from the SD, they withheld the information from him.

Suspicions of corruption were, as we have just seen, usually centred on officials and state and municipal institutions. Also the media, however, was occasionally perceived as corrupt. For instance, discussing an article in the local newspaper about how the Liberal Party's municipal commissioner in Centreville would be stepping down, Johan asked drily: "Is it even interesting?" (because, as I understood it, the party is so small and thus of little common interest). "They must have some friends at the paper", Thomas pondered. "Like, 'we have to write about the Liberals now because we're a liberal paper'." The assumption was that the local newspaper wrote the article not because it was of public interest, but because the Liberal Party were thought to "have friends" there; that is, journalists who wanted to promote the party. As Johan put it on another occasion: "The left has governed for so long, so they have their own reporters in the media". The journalists were thus believed to disregard their journalistic duty to be impartial.

Whenever I asked about why officials or journalists would behave so poorly – why they were "corrupt", in my interlocutors' words – I usually received somewhat vague and dodging answers that nonetheless tended to focus either on the fact that the Social Democrats had ruled the city for so long, and thus had put sympathetic officials in charge in key positions, or that the officials or political parties simply did not have a good grasp on reality. When blame was shifted to the Social Democrats and I prodded further and asked why *they* were corrupt, I would

be met by scoffs: "*sossarna* is a power party", i.e. would do anything to remain in power and were scared to lose it; or "the Left has no grasp of reality", i.e., they were naive.

Assumptions of naivety

In September the Social Democrats put forward a motion in the Municipal Board to investigate the radical-nationalist milieu in Centreville, and Gunilla came back from the meeting in a huff. "There are, like, twenty-five Islamists for every nationalist", she exclaimed. "And in a city where the criminals feel like they own the town… where you've got ethnic groups fighting with each other, we're supposed to examine nationalism; people need to know this". She thought resources would be better spent on countering Islamism. When Mats talked about the same motion on another occasion, he thought that the Social Democrats had put it forward to appease their Left party friends, who were believed to naively embrace multiculturalism and, with their purportedly skewed priorities, shun any association with the Right. In other words, Mats appeared to believe that there was something hidden going on – the motion was understood not in terms of simply different perspectives or priorities, but as something more sinister: a hidden deal between the power hungry Social Democrats and the naive, not-quite-grasping-reality Left Party.

The notion that the political left did not grasp "reality" was indeed a recurring theme. Hampus put this succinctly one day when he had just read something in an "alternative" newspaper. I do not recall exactly what it was, but considering what was usually quoted to me, it was presumably either about benefit fraud or a violent crime committed by immigrants. Not knowing quite what to say, I commented: "That… sucks." Hampus grinned and said: "Welcome to reality!"

That made stop in my tracks. It occurred to me that Hampus perceived an almost ontological chasm between himself and his political opponents. What he perceived as "reality" was what, in his mind, it seemed, the Left could not – or would not – grasp. This sentiment was occasionally echoed by Gunilla, as well. It was approaching lunchtime one October day, and I popped my head into Gunilla's office to ask if she was getting lunch. Not taking her eyes off the screen, she said she might have a lunch box in the freezer and added, unprompted, that she was working on motions about benefit fraud. "And, listen" – she scrolled down her document and quoted an article – "'it's commonly known that about half of all asylum seekers have multiple identities'. It's completely mad!" I sauntered up to her desk, quizzical. "We're so kind and dumb, we're draining this country", she continued.

Her assertion that "we [Sweden] are so kind and dumb" is noteworthy. Again, like Hampus, she was implicitly accusing the government of not understanding reality. However, she traced this lack of understanding to kindness. The ruling Left wanted to help so badly, so the argument goes, but they went about it the wrong way – their kindness blinded them to the "real" issues, to which only SD were privy; particularly excessive immigration and ensuing issues with unemployment, crime, national cohesion, and gender equality.

Hampus's, Gunilla's, and other SD representatives' repeated references to the Left as naive often came across like an infantilisation of their political opponents, presenting them as not really having grasped reality. They were like children, in that sense, and the SD were "the grown-ups in the room", as Johan put it. Making small talk before a casual meeting with Mats and his political secretaries in City Hall, Johan told his colleagues and myself about a debate-article suite taking place in his municipality. Apparently, the old Alliance parties had voted for an SD proposal, and the Left Party had written a debate article condemning the Alliance parties for thereby legitimising the SD. Johan complained that the Left party was attacking the SD with falsehoods and petty lies. "It's so silly [*tramsigt*], it's so incredibly silly right now", Mats commented, voice seeping with frustration. Johan smiled wearily at me and said: "We're the grown-ups in the room".

My interlocutors thus understood their own party as "the voice of reality" (which, incidentally, is in fact the slogan for the SD Women's association [*verklighetens röst*]). Other political parties were believed to not understand, or not care about, what were *really* the principal issues facing the nation. I distinctly got the impression that my interlocutors felt that the SD was special; chosen, almost.

Gunilla made this quite clear one day. The afternoon sun was peering through the blinds in her office and she was squinting at the computer screen as she checked the name of the podcast she had just recommended to me. In the latest episode, an EU parliamentarian from the SD was the guest, and Gunilla felt validated by what the MEP had said; something about the lack of societal security brought about by "mass immigration".

"It's a little 'we told you so'… No-one dares to say this except for us. I just kind of got it confirmed, that I'm on the right path." She smiled. "Politics is a bit like religion, don't you think? It's a little 'Jesus will save me'…" She laughed. "No, but…" She trailed off.

In part, she was clearly joking. Nonetheless, her invocation of "the right path" and "politics [being] a bit like religion" is striking. Peter Hervik suggests that neo-nationalists can be approached as "devoted actors" – people who are willing to make costly sacrifices to defend certain sacred values, in this case "the secular nation" (2021, 101). This seemed to be true for

Gunilla, as well. She, like many of her SD colleagues, regularly recounted deteriorating relationships with friends and family because of her political engagement. Some members told me that they, or someone they knew, had lost their jobs or struggled to find new ones because of their affiliation with the SD. Despite painful sacrifices, in other words, my interlocutors were still determined to do what they felt was their duty: defend "the nation" through activism in the SD; the only party who "really" understood the issues faced by the nation. This might be understood as a reinforcement of the antagonistic frontier outlined in Laclau's theory – the more my interlocutors' demands for strengthening and defending the nation were denied or ignored, the more entrenched the frontier between the SD and the deniers of those demands became. More on this later.

Suspicion of bias

Not only state institutions or political parties were mistrusted, but also the media, maybe even more so. On several occasions, I was reminded by my interlocutors of a poll that showed that a majority of Scandinavian journalists were left-wing-sympathisers.

One windy August day, Gunilla, Mats and I were going out to lunch with a visiting SD member of Parliament (MP), Karl. On our way to lunch, weaving between buses and pedestrians, I explained my research project to Karl and mentioned that I was particularly interested in public trust, especially in the media. Mats, walking beside us, said that he was all for public service media but he wanted to cut about 90% of it. He wanted "news, not play- and dance programs… and I love sports, but maybe public service should just report on the game, and you should pay to watch it." A few beats later, he added: "free and independent media only works when you let it be free… state TV is what they had in the Soviet Union and the DDR."

Karl and Mats agreed that public service was fine as long as it only reported impartial, independent news. Karl mentioned imbalance in journalists' political sympathies, referring to a poll that came out recently that showed that a majority of reporters were left-wing sympathisers. "Then they're not impartial", he concluded grimly. As an example, he told me that the right-of-centre KD [*Kristdemokraterna*, the Christian Democrats] were given much less coverage time than what was given to the leftist party Fi [*Feministiskt Initiativ*, Feminist Initiative] before the last election. This was despite the fact that the latter were below the 4%-bar of received votes and thus were not even represented in Parliament.

A little while later, digging into our hearty, traditional Swedish lunches, the discussion turned to the USA and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Mats, increasingly irritated

by his own story, related how a white guy tried to help his trans friend but got beaten up by BLM. "Where do you read about that in Sweden? Nowhere! Not a single paragraph!" He fumed that "it just doesn't fit into the narrative", referring to what he regarded as the hegemonic narrative in Swedish media's reporting, which, in his view, always represented the BLM in a positive light. Karl nodded gravely, and they agreed that they just wanted balanced news where both sides of the story are given equal and impartial coverage.

Mats's references to "*the* narrative" and his assertion that "state-TV is what they had in the [authoritarian] DDR" indicates a view that free speech is compromised and opinions dictated by the state. Furthermore, Mats's and Karl's comments shed light on how they do not feel represented by "the narrative"; they do not feel that the way they perceive reality is being treated on an equal basis with competing political views of reality. This reveals a fundamental, ontological disagreement over the nature of reality and truth, and the power inherent in the ability of what they believed to be "the elite", i.e., the detested Left, to set the agenda.

Anders, another MP whom I talked to earlier that year about public service media, on the other hand, expressed concern over the diminishing public trust in the media. His suggested course of action nonetheless ended up in the same place. He said that it is mostly the older generation that listens to and watches public service media; the younger generation trusts it less and less, and: "If you don't do anything about it now it's just going to get worse". That is why the SD invited representatives from SVT and UR (the state TV-channel and radio station) to Parliament for a hearing, he explained – to ensure objectivity so that more people will trust their services more. "So really, you want to strengthen trust in public service?" I asked, a little surprised. He nodded.

In fact, Anders is rather typical in his support for public service media. Several SD representatives, when asked, said that they were not after dismantling public service media or feeding public mistrust; rather the opposite. However, more casual comments and discussions revealed a deep-seated, wide-ranging, and seemingly antagonistic mistrust. I became aware of this during a lecture on the party's communication plan for aspiring SD-politicians. There were about 20 people in the large room, many of them hurriedly taking notes between sips of coffee while Annika and Jens (regional representative for the SD) held a presentation. The topic was on how to handle journalists and the media, and Mats, having raised his hand, was saying: "Journalists aren't out enemies, it's super important to remember that". Benjamin, Annika's stand-in on her district committee, raised his hand. "I'm thinking journalists who make their money by twisting the truth and lying-" he started. Mats shot in "Absolutely", and Benjamin continued: "-aren't they the enemy of the people?" Mats replied thoughtfully: "I think it's a

situation where we have to see the media as a means to reach out. Then, of course, there will always be particular journalists you don't like. We won't be judged in the same way as other parties, you have to be aware of that… we don't get away with the same things but they're still not our enemies."

Benjamin, still rather new as a politician, formulated his mistrust in more polarised terms ("enemy of the people") than Mats, who was a political veteran of ten years and well-versed in diplomatic discourse. Nevertheless, Mats's assertion that the SD will not "get away with the same things [as other parties]" and his agreement that there are journalists who "make their money by twisting the truth and lying", indicate that his relationship to journalists was still rather antagonistic and he did not trust their objectivity.

Another event, where the SD representatives in City Hall discussed an article about Gunilla, may illustrate this antagonism further. I was about to leave City Hall for the day when I heard Gunilla opening the door to her office down the hall and spluttering about the call she just received from a journalist at a leftist, anti-racist journal. She thought she handled herself quite well in the interview under the circumstances but was angry that the journalist had wanted to smear her and dug up articles she had shared years ago on social media by apparently extreme-right sources. She thought, and the others agreed, that it was just another attempt by the Left to make something out of nothing and discredit the party.

The next day was an unusually sunny Thursday, and with a visiting Annika we all decided to go out for lunch. Sitting crouched under a low ceiling in a nearby Thai restaurant the conversation drifted between weekend plans to music taste and good bars, and we bonded over bars we liked and disliked and we laughed at each other's bad taste in music. Suddenly, Gunilla got a notification and whipped out her phone, exclaiming that the article was out; the article being the one she was interviewed for on the phone the previous day. We all dug up our phones and skimmed the article, which claimed the material she had shared was anti-Semitic and homophobic. Gunilla seemed shaken but repeated that she was not worried and everyone agreed that the whole thing was just nonsense. They stressed that if you actually read the articles she had shared it was really nothing to fuss about, but that the sources themselves were in fact questionable. On the way back to City Hall, they all joked in sarcastic tones about the leftist media. "I'm an Islamophobe, it says so in the local paper", Thomas said ironically, and "everything to the right of that journal is right-wing extreme, isn't it", Hampus chimed in, rolling his eyes. Mats joked that he did not want Gunilla to walk beside him because he did not want to be seen in a picture with her. Gunilla laughed along with the jokes but said, albeit chirpily, that she already felt bad and that they should stop it.

The article was referred to by my interlocutors as "troll activity", the "death rattles of the Left; the only way to get rid of us is to smear us", and "making something out of nothing". Such comments point to the perception that, since the journal had a well-known leftist slant, the article was politically motivated and thus should be understood as a desperate attack, rather than a legitimate critique. Indeed, such comments were quite common. "[The journal] is hunting faults with us", Annika said once during an Open House at the party office. "That's one of their main goals. No-one hunts others as much as they hunt us… it's a leftist organisation. But it was founded to audit politicians and others."

"That's opinion registration", Gunilla said (in reference to Annika's suggestion that the journal "hunts faults" with them).

"Kind of Stasi!" one member added.

Another member raised his hand and said: "The bigger we get, the more excited [the media] will get and try to look at everything we do. They'll get even more desperate to find something to try and smear us with, even more desperate, even uglier".

The media was, in other words, believed to be biased against the SD. As shown in the ethnographic vignette in the beginning of this chapter, Mats explained the media's purported smear-campaign of the SD with three factors; that they get clicks if they write scandals about them, the fact that the party cannot shake off its past (i.e., their Nazi roots), and third, other parties' fear of losing power and means to the SD.

However, just as other political parties were perceived as naive, so was the media, on occasion. During a lecture for members by visiting MP Anders, he talked about the state of the country and the increase of criminal activity, and said: "Not everything is about covering things up, even if that's probably a big part of it. A lot of it's probably about the fact that you can't believe it's really like this; you can't see what it's really like." It was unspecified if the comment was directed at the media or the government, but as it is the media's job to investigate and hold the government accountable, it is regardless a condemnation of the media's capabilities. In contrast, the SD is celebrated as the voice of reason; the only ones who can see the world for what it really is.

Above, I have highlighted some of the ways the SD representatives I studied mistrust the media and state and municipal institutions. Now, let us turn to a consideration of how we might understand this mistrust.

Establishing trustworthiness

We have seen that in SD's worldview, officials, other political parties, and mainstream and public service media were understood as biased and naive. They were believed to be corrupt and afraid of losing their own power and means to the SD, representing the Swedish people, as opposed to the elite, dominated by the Left. But there was also, crucially, a difference in degree of (mis)trust.

Gunilla often lamented a particular mainstream newspaper for being left-leaning and biased against the SD, but one day texted me the link to a debate article she had written and gotten published in that paper. She commented: "nice preamble he [the journalist] wrote considering that [the journalist] from [the paper] doesn't like us. But as responsible for publishing debate articles he's neutral and professional". The paragraph in question was simply an excerpt from her debate article. On another occasion, Jens commended a report from a university, of which my interlocutors were usually critical, saying: "We had a presentation by the SOM-institute, they do very good surveys of what people think about different things". Furthermore, Hampus, usually so suspicious of official statistics, was looking over some numbers from the city management's office regarding a motion to increase the wages of health care personnel during the covid-19 pandemic. He commented: "these numbers can't be *that* off."

Clearly, then, mistrust, while pervasive, was not applied equally in every situation or in equal amounts. Some actors and sources, even if they were generally dismissed as untrustworthy, were in certain situations nonetheless trusted to a larger extent than in others. How are we to understand these variations?

Mistrust has by some scholars been viewed as a reduction of complexity (Hardin in Mühlfried 2019), but as Mühlfried argues and as we can see in the above examples, it clearly entails a whole lot of work – each situation was evaluated separately. I add to his theory the suggestion that, for the SD, the decisive axis that decided someone's or something's trustworthiness was its perceived proximity to one's own political standpoint. In Laclau's terms, we might say that the clearer the source's or the actor's position in regards to the antagonistic frontier ("with" or "against" "us, the people"), the easier to evaluate its trustworthiness, or lack thereof.

Nonetheless, a caveat is called for in order to account for occasions where normally mistrusted actors were (to an extent) trusted anyway. Here, I suggest that perceived transparency lessened but did not entirely remove mistrust. In other words, for the SD, the

closer a source or an actor was perceived to be to their own position on the political spectrum, the more it was trusted, with perceived transparency as a mitigating factor. I return to this shortly.

Below, I will illustrate this argument further, transitioning from the subject of *mistrusted* to *trusted* sources, and discuss the ambivalence experienced by the SD representatives I studied when a source *felt* trustworthy to them, but they were told it was racist and thus not to be trusted. Drawing on Laclau and Mühlfried, I will then suggest that such ambivalence may be a strategy on the SD's part, and that their mistrust is both overt and covert, and an expression of antagonism.

As we have seen, my interlocutors were quick to dismiss the journal that first published the articles about Gunilla, as well as most mainstream and public service news outlets. Crucially, the stated reason for this dismissal was often explicitly that these sources were perceived as left-leaning, and thus either naive or afraid of losing their own power, and so had incentives to work against the SD, because the party was growing rapidly. The swiftness with which the journal that published the article about Gunilla was dismissed suggests that more or less radical mistrust (the idea that an actor or a source could not be trusted, period) was at work. Gunilla had barely hung up the phone with the reporter before complaining about his bias. The journal was perceived as being on the opposite side of the political spectrum, and there was seemingly no way it could be trusted, period.

As we have also seen, however, this was not always the case. Most of the time, sources and actors were evaluated continuously and separately in different situations. For example, the journalist that Gunilla trusted with her debate article worked for a moderately leftist newspaper; the university from which the report that Jens trusted came from was believed to be infused with neo-Marxists; and the city management's office was thought to be saturated with corrupt officials. In terms of my argument, all those actors were perceived as being on the opposite end of the political spectrum from the SD. Why, then, were these sources trusted anyway in these particular circumstances?

A tentative answer might be that it was not so much the sources that were trusted, but the particular materials – the debate article, the report, the numbers. It might be suggested that those specific products resulted from fairly transparent processes: the journalist could not have changed anything in the debate article without consulting its authors, and both the university and the city management's office published long methodological sections. Additionally, it could be argued that the statements my interlocutors made when declaring their trust still did not throw caution to the wind. Gunilla specified the particular instance in which the journalist

was neutral and professional (arguably minimal requirements for a reporter), Jens also specified the institute's good work on specifically "report[s] about what people think about different things", and Hampus's emphasis on how the numbers could not be "*that* off" suggests a lingering suspicion that they may still be *somewhat* off. Trust and mistrust can, as Mühlfried reminds us, exist simultaneously, on different levels.

Nonetheless, the field of explicitly *trustworthy sources* was rather thin, ambiguous, and disputed. Most of my interlocutors read both mainstream media and Swedish "alternative media", which was believed to be more impartial and report both sides of the issues. However, these "alternative" sources were subject to a great deal of uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence. For instance, a fairly common complaint was that many of these alternative sources had similar names – e.g., *Nya Tider, Fria Tider, Samtiden* – but their profiles and contents were different, and some of them were "OK" – that is, trustworthy – and others were not, for various reasons that seemed opaque and arbitrary to many of my interlocutors.

One September evening in City Hall, the SD politicians had just finished a meeting with the SD's Municipal Council representatives about the upcoming MC meeting. People were milling about clearing cups and plates and talking amongst themselves. I was just finishing writing a fieldnote and when I looked up I noticed Gunilla and Jens discussing news sites, with Annika offering the occasional comment.

Gunilla suggested the party board should make a list with approved news sites.

"'Samtiden' is ours [i.e., funded by or run by SD sympathisers]", Annika said.

"Are you sure? I haven't heard that", Gunilla mused, and added: "This is really bloody tricky when you don't know for sure."

They listed some names of "alternative" news sites: *Nyheter24, Samtiden, Nya Tider, Fria Tider*, discussing which ones were and were not "okay".

"I really want people to have clear lists so that they don't make the same mistake I did", Gunilla said.

Jens googled Samtiden and informed us that it was founded in 1948 "so it's probably not ours".

Gunilla, still on her "mistake", exclaimed: "I didn't have any bloody idea that *Nya Tider* was a Nazi paper, I had no idea!"

The "mistake" Gunilla referred to was the subject of the article about her, having shared material from extreme-right sources. Gunilla's desire to have "clear lists" of approved sites was an indication that she herself did not feel confident to judge which sites were acceptable; that is, not having an affinity with right-wing extremism.

This becomes even more interesting when we consider an event only a few weeks later, during the aforementioned lecture on the communication plan with prospective SD-politicians. Having told the audience about her experiences surrounding the article about her, Gunilla concluded her brief lecture by mournfully saying: "From what I know today, I barely dare share anything except regular newspapers, because they [alternative media, e.g., *Nya Tider/Fria Tider/Samtiden*] all sound so alike… so if you're not sure, just please, don't [share]."

Annika took over, soberly summarising: "So, what Gunilla did wrong here: she shared stuff by senders she didn't know. Some people want a list, but you can't do that, you can't give a list of 'this is OK and this isn't', it fluctuates."

Mats, the same night, expressed something similar when he said: "I'm never going to tell you what is and isn't okay [to share on social media], because you kind of have to sense that yourselves. But you share mass media, that's what you do as an SD-representative. Then of course you can *think* that *Expressen* is a goddamn shit paper… I'll never come and say 'you can't think this or that'."

Nevertheless, when a member asked: "Is Ingrid Carlqvist okay [to share material from]?", Gunilla shook her head[3]. "It's not okay, you'll be kicked out head-first if you end up in a commission or something and they find it, so I'm afraid not." Evidently, then, there was still an element of top-down decision-making; of saying "this is OK and this is not".

These examples show us the uncertainty many of my interlocutors experienced regarding "alternative media" – as a rule, they trusted such sources more than mainstream media, in so far as they believed the "alternative" sources to be more impartial. However, some of those same news sites were labelled "racist", "right-wing extreme", "anti-Semitic" by both the party leadership and non-SD commentators. That meant that members felt they *should not* trust such sources – but still felt that they *were* the most trustworthy, compared to the mainstream. The problem was that to my informants the trustworthiness of sources often seemed arbitrary, and I often spotted them reading one or more of the sources deemed unacceptable.

Annika had one such discussion at the party office with two female members during a meeting about church politics. They were going over how to reach out with their messages in the media, and the discussion turned to "OK" and "not OK" sources. "I have to say, I read *Nya*

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[3] Ingrid Carlqvist is a controversial journalist and author, popular in radical right-circles. She has made numerous Islamophobic and antisemitic remarks on Twitter and in interviews (Poohl 2021).

Tider every week and that's one of the most entertaining things I do", one of the women said, smiling.

"Well, reading it is one thing, but contributing is another. The party board has decided it's racist", Annika said.

"It's not racist, I don't think", the woman countered, looking a little hurt.

Mats probably summarised it the most clearly when he, during a lecture for members, said: "…it's so easy to see something in your feed that you think sounds pretty sensible but turns out to be from a bad source."

Mistrust and antagonism

Following the idea that the closer a source is perceived to be to one's own political position, the more it can be trusted, then it would follow that "alternative media" should be trusted the most by my interlocutors. To an extent, that seems to be the case – the content of articles by such sites was usually uncontroversial. In Mats's words above, it "sounds pretty sensible". However, the party board as well as non-SD-commentators judge those sites as "racist" – while still not offering any "clear lists", only the occasional hint, of which sources were and were not acceptable, as "it fluctuates".

Glancing back at Laclau (2005), we might consider if this is not a more or less conscious strategy on behalf of the party: too narrow boundaries around the common identity, and some demands will not be included in the chain of equivalence; too loose, and they will have nothing around which to unite and the chain of equivalence will dissolve. In our terms this means that if it had been too clear what sources were and were not acceptable and thus trustworthy, some members might have felt excluded, but if it had been too vague, they might have lost their sense of belonging or purpose.

Furthermore, keeping Laclau in mind, we might understand mistrust as a response to those that are believed not to have one's best interests at heart; in this case, "the elite", on the other side of the antagonistic frontier. In fact, such theories have indeed been put forward (Hardin in Ystanes 2011), about how only those whose interests are perceived as being incapsulated in one's own may be trusted. However, I believe that while this may be an illuminating model for understanding the mistrust among the SD, it is not a sufficient one, for a few reasons. First, the alternative is not between two absolutes; trust *or* mistrust, encapsulating someone's interests in one's own *or* not. As Mühlfried shows, there are many grey areas – actors may be trusted in certain situations but not in others; that is, trust is

conditional, and trust and mistrust may co-exist simultaneously. We have seen this in how, for example, Gunilla generally mistrusts a newspaper and its journalists, but "as responsible for publishing debate articles he [a journalist] is neutral and professional". Second, in my interlocutors' own explanations, they often mistrust actors not because they believe them to not have their best interests at heart, but because they believe those actors to be naive and incompetent.

Finally, such an implicitly dichotomic understanding of trust *or* mistrust fails to account for the amount of work that my interlocutors put into gauging an actor's trustworthiness. Here, Mühlfried's analysis becomes particularly helpful. His notion that mistrust works on two levels, one overt and one covert, allows us to see how cost-intensive a mistrustful relationship is, as both levels must be maintained simultaneously. The surface level, the overt, is where interaction takes place, whereas the underground, covert level operates *through* the overt to gather information about the Other and evaluate their trustworthiness. In order for the status quo to be maintained, however, the covert, mistrustful level must not become apparent, because: "If mistrust does come to the surface, it may cause – or manifest – antagonism" (Mühlfried 2019, 43).

For our purposes, "manifest" is the keyword. As we have seen through Laclau's theory on populist reason, antagonism is already present in my interlocutor's relation to those they perceive as denying their demands, and in fact constitutes their party as "the people". Through mistrust, this antagonism becomes manifest and expressed. But does it become overt?

All this mistrust was somewhat surprising to me. I had, naturally, studied up on the SD before entering the field; I had followed articles about them in mainstream media, perused several books, and studied their website. Nonetheless, it took me several weeks in the field to begin to realise the extent of their mistrust. I also noticed that in interviews with reporters or in formal motions to the Municipal Board or Council, the SD representatives never brought up their concerns about the trustworthiness of the media or state/municipal institutions and officials. On social media, on the other hand, it was a different story. I have an abundance of fieldnotes noting examples of tweets and Facebook status updates expressing mistrust of journalists, newspapers, officials, and other political parties. Since those publications were public and open to anyone, this poses an interesting question: as anyone could see those posts and tweets, should the conveyed mistrust be considered overt? Or rather, as neither I nor anyone I know *had* read such publications, should it be considered covert?

The answer, I suspect, may be a little bit of both. My politician interlocutors probably knew that it was best to maintain an appearance of conviviality and not make their antagonistic

mistrust too manifest, in order to further their image of themselves as a political party like any other, while still, somewhat more covertly, maintaining a mistrustful approach. Many members, on the other hand – who usually were more direct in their comments, as well as in their tweets and status updates – may have been less concerned with maintaining the status quo, and may even have desired to make their antagonism apparent, perhaps out of frustration. Mistrust, then, could be considered an expression of an already existing antagonism.

Conclusion

On one of my last days in the field, I was chatting casually with Gunilla in her office. I was leaning on her standing desk, cupping my face in my hands, watching her work. I mentioned that I was leaving them soon, and she asked what I had learned after the months I had spent with them, and if I had changed opinion on anything. I thought for a moment, and then said that it had been striking to me how critical they were of, well, almost everything, and I supposed that it had made me a little more source-critical, too. She smiled and nodded approvingly. "Yes, it's important to be critical", she agreed.

In this chapter, we have seen how a suspicion of corruption and bias among the media, officials, and state and municipal institutions, was expressed in mistrust of the same. Not all actors were mistrusted equally and in every situation, however, showing the conditional nature of mistrust. Furthermore, sources believed to be close to one's own political standpoint were generally trusted to a larger extent – even though a perception of transparency might be a mitigating factor. However, ambivalence set in among my interlocutors regarding sources whose content they thought was uncontroversial, yet the sources themselves were deemed unacceptable and untrustworthy by the party board and mainstream society, for what to SD members and representatives seemed arbitrary reasons. Drawing on Laclau, we might understand this ambivalence as a strategy to maintain a balance between a narrow and loose definition of the boundaries defining "the people", so as to include as many demands as possible while still maintaining group cohesion. Reinforcing group cohesion, the representatives and members I studied directed their mistrust at those on the other side of the antagonistic frontier, in this case the political Left or the "elites", thereby strengthening the division between them. Drawing on Mühlfried allowed us to see the cost-intensive work entailed in gauging an actor's trustworthiness, and that allowing mistrust to come to the fore created or made the already present antagonism manifest and expressed.

In sum, then, we have seen mistrust through a prism of antagonism. However, in their own view, my interlocutors believed their mistrust to be a democratising attitude – "thinking for themselves", giving "the people" a voice, contributing to a plurality of opinions, upsetting the status quo. This is a remarkably similar attitude to Mühlfried's contention that "Democracy cannot exist without trust, but also not without mistrust" (Mühlfried 2019, 8). Adopting the perspective that mistrust serves to "keep[ing] a suspicious eye on the state", it is easy to see why Gunilla commented "it's important to be critical" and why my interlocutors valued independent thinking; for them, as for Mühlfried, mistrust was constructive, and contributed to a better, more equal society.

Having thus far gleaned a better understanding of the construction of the SD as "the people" (chapter 1), and the expression of antagonism through a deep and wide-ranging mistrust (present chapter), the question still remains: why is the populism of the SD expressed particularly in nationalistic and chauvinist terms? Why is the demand for exclusionary nationalism privileged in being the demand under which other demands are subsumed? This will be the subject of the ensuing chapter.

Chapter 3

National Belonging and "The Nation" as Empty Signifier

Introduction

So far in this thesis we have drawn on Laclau's theory on populist reason to better understand how the SD's constitutes itself as "the people", and how this group is constituted through, among other things, antagonism. We have also seen how this antagonism is reflected in high levels of mistrust. It is now time to have a closer look at what I would suggest is the empty signifier around which all other demands coalesce (and which, in turn, constitutes them): "the nation". I argue that the foundational value placed on the nation can be seen through my interlocutors' welfare chauvinism: they believe that immigrants claim welfare that should be reserved for deserving Swedes. This assumption is, as we shall see, generally based on ethnic stereotypes and antagonisms, and is indicative of an exclusionary nationalism. The prevalence of the logic of welfare chauvinism and ethnic boundary making leads me to suggest that in the SD's chain of equivalence, "the nation" serves as an empty signifier, but as a floating signifier in Swedish society at large. A floating signifier is, as we recall from chapter 1, a contested signifier. If an internal antagonistic frontier is not stable, if competing populist projects lay claims on an empty signifier, it is filled with various, contested meaning. It thus becomes a floating signifier.

In this chapter, I will briefly review some theories of nationalism, before turning to an ethnographic account of my interlocutors' welfare chauvinism. I will show how it is based on primarily ethnic understandings of belonging, framed in nationalist terms, and discuss how the symbol of nationalism encompasses – and constitutes – other demands. I will argue that "the nation" acts as an empty signifier in crystallising the SD's identification with "the people". The vast majority of my interlocutors' demands were filtered through the lens of "the nation", deciding which demands could be incorporated into the chain of equivalence that constitutes the SD, as well as shaping those demands.

Nationalism in anthropology

Definitions of the concept of nationalism are both numerous and vague. Some scholars call it an ideology (Smith 2001, 9), others view it more akin to kinship or religion (Anderson 2016, 5), yet others are reluctant to define it at all and prefer to classify core elements (Dryzek, Honig,

and Phillips 2008). In this brief overview, I will outline Benedict Anderson's (2016) and Ernest Gellner's (2010) ideas on the emergence of the idea of the nation, and consider ethnic and civic strands of nationalism and how they are conceptualised today.

Let us start with the emergence of the idea of the nation. Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, arguably two of the most prominent authors on nationalism, both agree that the nation can be understood as an *imagined community*, and a fairly recent one at that (despite nationalist claims that the nation is an ancient, primordial entity). It is an imagined community because most people will never hear about or meet most of their fellow countrymen, but the community – while imagined – is not any less real because of it (Anderson 2016, 6). Anderson further argues that certain ideas had to die out for the idea of the nation to take hold. For instance, religious explanations for the human condition lost much of their potency as religion became less institutionally entrenched in the 19th century. Additionally, where previously history was imagined as the will of God, people began viewing "history as an endless chain of cause and effect" (Anderson 2016, 23). Finally, the idea of the nation became popularised primarily through print-capitalism; as vernacular languages took the place of Latin and the printing press was invented, literacy in the population increased and people began reading about people like themselves in their own language.

Gellner (2010), on the other hand, suggests that nationalism came about through the industrial revolution and the education system. He argues that industrial society is, as opposed to agrarian societies, constantly changing and mobile – occupations are rarely passed from parents to their children, and people often change careers or jobs several times in their lifetimes. A consequence of this is that education must be standardised; a mobile work market requires that people share literacy and idioms that can be transmitted from one field to another without much loss. A standardised and general education ensures this. Specialisation occurs in the later educational stage. This standardised and general base education can only be managed by the state, which has a vested interest in producing productive citizens. Importantly, such an education, so intimately tied to the state, also took place within, and reproduced, a national culture.

Moreover, it has been common to differentiate between two strands of nationalism: civic and ethnic (Zubrzycki 2002). The civic strand is often attributed to Enlightenment ideas and views national belonging as a contractual, liberal idea for which origin, religion, ethnicity etc., are irrelevant. The ethnic strand, however, usually attributed to Johann Gottfried Herder, is more concerned with genealogy and race, the "blood and soil"-ideology that was taken to its extreme, xenophobic, genocidal logic by the Nazis.

These strands are perhaps best understood as ideal types, and it would presumably be difficult to find any of them in a pure form in today's political landscape. While a civic nationalism could be potentially inclusive, scholars of nationalism rather tend to focus on exclusionary, radical forms (again, ideal types) of nationalism and distinguish between cultural, ethnic, and racial nationalism (Fardan 2020). All are exclusionary, but not necessarily ethnic or racial. Briefly, *racial* nationalism builds on the idea that "race" is the fundamental criterion for national belonging, much like the Nazis' ideology. It usually considers Jews as the ultimate enemy. *Ethnic* nationalism holds that ethnicity and "race", understood as inherent, hierarchically defined biological differences, are important aspects of identity, but it aspires to separateness rather than purity: all ethnicities have equal value, but should exist and develop separately. Finally, *cultural* nationalism is arguably the most mainstream and least radical strand. It is exclusionary on cultural rather than ethnic or racial grounds, which means that in theory, foreigners can be fully accepted into national belonging if they give up their old culture and adopt the natives'. Cultural nationalism as a rule holds more pro-Israel views, but is highly sceptical of Islam and Muslims (Fardan 2020). While my aim is not to attempt to define the SD, I believe it is fair to say that they belong roughly somewhere between ethnic and cultural nationalism, as I will seek to illustrate below.

Another, somewhat related, concept in need of clarification is *welfare chauvinism*. Political scientist Cas Mudde has defined it thus: "The main distinctive feature of the socio-economic policy of all [extreme-right] parties is *welfare chauvinism*: that is, they believe that the fruits of the national economy should first and foremost (if not exclusively) come to the benefit of their 'own people'… also that the state should protect certain sectors of the 'native economy' against foreign competition" (2000, 174-175). Leaving aside the question of whether the SD is "extreme-right", their politics is quite clearly welfare chauvinist, as I will demonstrate below.

Welfare chauvinism

Annika was talking to me about healthcare one day, and said: "At some point citizenship has to be prioritised in health care". She explained how immigrants get much more free health care than Swedes. "Dental care, for example… Where a Swede might pay eleven out of thirty thousand kronor, an immigrant might only have to pay fifty kronor."

A similar sentiment was repeated often and by more or less all of my interlocutors. It was commonly believed that immigrants' purported inability (or unwillingness) to pay their

own way was grounded in their desire to "get everything for free". That is why the SD wanted the Swedish government to implement stricter measures and "demand something in return" – particularly that immigrants should partake in the job market.

Gunilla, among others, returned to this issue regularly. On numerous occasions, she sent me several links from alternative media sites that reported on immigrants who had scammed their welfare office by having multiple fake identities, or claiming benefits for children with a fake disability, or by any number of scams. One day I was hanging out in her office in City Hall, curled up in her armchair and watching her work. In between writing on a motion for the municipal council, she, unprompted, started talking about benefit fraud. She said that Sweden is gullible and naive. "We're a humanitarian superpower, but one day the money's going to run out if we give away too much", she said. She wanted to give benefits to those who have worked for a while, but not the newly arrived. "There can be super high demands on a Swede who gets ill and who's worked and worked, but the money just goes to people who aren't born here." She shook her head. All this cheating, she concluded, punishes people who really do need help. "If we want to protect the good ones we need to remove the bad ones. It's like a bowl of fruit, if you let one bad one stay the rest go bad, too." She thought people would get their act together if they knew they would not get any benefits next year, and compared the "mass immigration" to a coffee filter: you will not get a flow if you keep pouring in too much so it floods.

In Gunilla's comments there are two salient dividing lines: between "Swedes" and those who "aren't born here", and those who "deserve" help and those who cheat. While not entirely explicit, the two fault lines seem to overlap: those who "aren't born here" were invariably the ones she brought up as examples of cheaters. I rarely, if ever, heard examples of "Swedes" who cheated their way to receiving benefits. Gunilla once sighed: "*We* think 'can we have three kids, do we have a house and a good job?' and so on… they [immigrants] don't think like that, 'it'll work out somehow anyway'."

If ethnic membership was usually only implied, an explicit criterion for deserving welfare was the maxim "do your duty, claim your rights", often repeated by Mats. Doing one's duty meant, above all, having a job and paying taxes. This was put concisely by Hampus, who said: "I don't mind people coming here, I mind them coming here and not working." A fairly common topic of conversation was the complaint that (ethnically Swedish) working, middle-class families were moving out of the country's largest cities to neighbouring municipalities, leaving the economically "draining" immigrants to be the burden of the tax-paying inhabitants that were left. Urban municipalities were thus thought to be struggling economically because

of immigrants who allegedly had no interest in working and paying taxes, but wanted to coast on generous welfare benefits. There was, in fact, a rumour going around that I heard repeated with disdain on several occasions, that said that there were brochures circulating in refugee camps, outlining various European countries' welfare policies, and that migrants picked the country with the most generous benefits.

Nonetheless, working and paying taxes – while stated as the most important criterion for deserving access to welfare – was not enough to be considered a full member of the nation, and thus deemed deserving of welfare. Mats made this clear while Johan and I was talking to him in Johan's office one day. Their conversation was originally about how PM Löfvén had said that immigration is connected to criminality (Zangana 2020), but soon turned to a lament about the Social Democrats' integration policies. "For ten years, longer, they've taken away everything Swedish; in Sweden you don't have to greet people, you can have an interpreter for life… what are you supposed to be integrated into?" Mats asked rhetorically, his voice tense with frustration. Jobs are great, he continued, but will not solve the integration issue. "An Iraqi with a web company who just talks to other Iraqis and makes money, that's great, having a job and not being a weight on society, but it's not integration."

Testing the hypothesis that "the problem of immigration" was that immigrants did not work, I asked Gunilla a few days later if immigration would be a problem if the country had infinite money. She looked at me with something resembling pity. "It's about the fact that we haven't made any demands [of immigrants]", she said. "People haven't adapted to Swedish customs, and no amount of money in the world could fix that. We'd end up with parallel societies."

I asked if that was necessarily bad; if we had had infinite money, would it matter? She thought it would. "How then could we still be one country? And people still need to follow Swedish laws, and it'd be super weird if we had some girls who had to wear these cloths and be circumcised, and not others… it's not nice to these girls who've ended up in trouble."

Having a job as an immigrant, then, helped their status in the eyes of the SD, but was clearly not enough to be fully accepted and thus deserve welfare. As evinced in the idea of parallel societies, immigrants were also expected to adopt, or at least conform to, Swedish customs, pointing to cultural nationalism and a drive towards cultural homogeneity.

What, then, does that mean? What does it mean for these SD representatives to be "Swedish"? Who did they consider as belonging to the nation?

Who belongs to the nation?

"Belonging" is a rather vague concept, so let us first attempt to clarify it. "Belonging", writes Yuval-Davis, "is about emotional attachment, about 'feeling at home' and… about feeling 'safe'… Belonging tends to be naturalised and becomes articulated and politicised only when it is threatened in some way" (2006, 2-3). Tine Gammeltoft uses the term to capture "the sense of attachment that people… articulated when describing the ties of mutuality that bound them together with others and into larger social communities" (2014, 31). Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011) introduces a distinction between "belonging with" and "belonging to", where the former refers to "togetherness", i.e., a collective belonging. The latter refers to the individual's relation to a collective. This distinction makes it possible to study not only "group dynamics geared at maintaining the collective status quo", but also "an individual's embeddedness in a collective" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 3). When I use the term "belonging" here, I have both in mind, as my interlocutors' own embeddedness in a (national) collective was implicitly connected to their perception of group dynamics – their idea of "Swedishness" seemed to be defined partly through what they believed it was *not*. I return to this below.

Interestingly, I never heard my interlocutors talk explicitly about belonging, but it was implicitly ever-present. I could glean it in how they talked about, for instance, language learning, cultural practices, or values – in particular how immigrants did not conform to any of those. In an unstructured interview with Mats, for example, he told me that he thought the debate was skewed concerning who is "Swedish"; he said that there are different ethnic and legal definitions. "The Sami are Sami, for instance, otherwise they'd be called Swedes. But of course they can be Swedish *citizens*", he concluded.

In all its brevity, Mats's comment elucidates a central question, always on the tip of my interlocutors' tongues, as it were: who belongs to the nation? Mats here makes a distinction between being a citizen and a "Swede", thereby implying that being a Swedish citizen does not necessarily make one a "Swede".

Similarly, Gunilla once said, apropos health care, that midwives have been receiving an increasing number of threats from new fathers over the past five years. "And that's not Swedish dads", she said. "It's not in our nature to threaten personnel." Or, talking about Swedish citizens who had fought for IS and then returned to Sweden, she said: "Even if it says [in the papers] that they're Swedes, they're not really Swedes."

When she made such comments, she was clearly not referring to Swedish citizenship, especially in the latter example. What, then, made her so sure those people were not "Swedes"?

Legally speaking, anyone with a Swedish citizenship is Swedish. A civic nationalism would have left it at that. Yet, another factor thus clearly mattered for both Mats and Gunilla: ethnicity.

Let us pause briefly here to consider the term "ethnicity", and how it relates to "race", as both are notoriously equivocal concepts. Eriksen (2010) clarifies that ethnicity in anthropology is concerned with relations between people, where social differences are made relevant, a topic to which I return below. However, he notes that "ethnicity", since the mid-eighteenth century, has taken on some racial characteristics so there is some confusion as to how the terms are to be distinguished. Nevertheless, "race" – which Eriksen puts in quotation marks to point out that it is not a scientific term (2010, 5) – refers to purported biological differences which are believed to be linked with personality. This, he points out, has of course been disproven, hence the quotation marks.

To complicate matters further, many scholars have suggested that racism has come to centre more around culture than "race", engendering a "cultural racism". According to Marianne Gullestad, "'culture' now replaces 'race' in the rhetoric of the political right. According to these ideas, discrimination is increasingly justified by the existence of irreconcilable cultural differences rather than by hierarchical 'races'" (2002, 59-60). Certain traits are nonetheless indiscriminately ascribed to entire groups. Insofar as that is a condition of racism, my interlocutors could on occasion be said to make culturally racist remarks, for example Johan's comment about how immigrants need to be taught that "you can't beat your kids, your wife has the same rights as you, you can't push her from a balcony… I'm guessing that there must be some rules that say 'those infidel Europeans, we won't greet them, we'll trick them' – that part of the culture you have to put away. Or raping a girl because she's not wearing a veil, that culture doesn't fit in here."

Mats once tried to specify, when the question arose during an Open House with SD members, that "ethnically Swedish" means being born in Sweden by two Swedish-born parents. The question then arises: could Gunilla in her assertions know for sure that the new fathers who threatened midwives, or the returning IS-fighters, were not "born in Sweden by two Swedish-born parents?" It seems more likely that she made her assumptions based on ethnic stereotypes and, presumably, somatic and linguistic markers – perhaps the names or pictures of the alleged perpetrators in newspaper articles did not "look" or "sound" "Swedish".

Lest it seems like we are approaching biological racism, I should point out that my interlocutors firmly believed that non-European adopted children were still "Swedes". This was never explicitly explained to me, but it came up when Annika and Gunilla were talking about a neo-Nazi group, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). "We're drawing a little in

the same direction", Gunilla said, "but we'd never even dream… they're saying that adopted kids aren't Swedish!" She shook her head incredulously. "Yeah", Annika scoffed, "they're Holocaust deniers."

The contradiction is clear: if a person is "ethnically Swedish" if they are born in Sweden by two Swedish-born parents, like Mats said, then how could adopted non-European children be "Swedish"? Presumably, then, culture plays a large part in my interlocutors' understandings of belonging – adopted children are socialised into "Swedishness" by their adopted parents. Being thought to share the majority culture was, it seemed, a qualification for belonging. The above examples could be interpreted thus: if it is a Swedish cultural norm to avoid conflict, the new fathers who threaten midwives could be believed to ascribe to different cultural norms; and if the values that IS stands for are anathema to Swedish cultural norms, then fighting for IS could only be done by someone culturally alien.

For illustration, when Annika was talking to a new member over coffee at the party office, she said: "What you should distinguish between when talking about immigration is the Western one and the non-Western one. Russians, for instance, have more or less the same attitude to most things… it's still easy to come to Sweden, like, you're polite, you don't steal." She contrasted this with "countries with sharia laws, it's a big difference there… it's not humane, cutting off people's hands or stoning them, women can't drive… coming to Sweden, then, is a really big change."

Recall also Johan's comment above about how immigrants need to be taught that "you can't beat your kids" and so on. Both he and Annika talked about culture, and the process whereby people from "different cultures" are excluded is distinctly ethnic in character; "they" are believed to be different, and these differences are made socially relevant. This, as Eriksen reminds us, is a key feature of the study of ethnicity, which "in social anthropology… simply refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive" (2010, 5).

Moreover, both Johan and Annika insisted on the foreignness of behaviour and norms in "non-Western [immigration]". A link was thus forged between cultural and geographical alienness, in addition to cultural traits being generalised to apply to entire categories of people. For example, talking about a new political party geared towards issues facing immigrants, called Nyans, Mats attempted to be nuanced. "Not all Muslims vote for Nyans, they're not a homogenous group", he said, but shortly after, he asserted: "you don't become like us just because you cross a threshold [i.e., border]."

The examples that Johan and Annika brought up also pointed to particular differences; "they" are what "we" are not, and vice versa. Such stereotypes are typical of ethnic boundary-making where ethnic groups, in a Barthian sense, are defined and indeed created in relation to each other (Eriksen 2010). Two ethnographic vignettes may briefly illustrate this point:

> Annika and I are in the spare room in City Hall chatting. She tells me she doesn't think veils should be allowed in health care, mostly because of hygienic reasons, but adds: "It doesn't matter how much they say they want it, because how do you know if they want to or if they're just brainwashed?"
>
> She's also sceptical towards minarets. Church bells are just sounds, she says, but with minarets "there's someone shouting that God is great, there's only one God, bow down to God." She shrugs and says that just doesn't fit in with Christian and Swedish values.

> We have been handing out fliers, and even though it went faster than expected we are all cold and tired so we go to a nearby café to seek shelter from the biting February cold. I end up next to Gunilla and Emil and when there is a lull in the conversation and the opportunity presents itself I ask what is typically Swedish. They ponder the question for a while and reply "freedom of speech and gender equality." They remember how former Social Democratic party leader Mona Sahlin said that Sweden doesn't have any culture, or former Conservative PM Fredrik Reinfeldt who said that the only Swedish thing is barbarism. They're really annoyed and shake their heads in disgust. I ask if meatballs and Midsummer are typically Swedish. They hum and shrug and say "yeah, I guess" but quickly return to freedom of speech and gender equality.

The two excerpts are, in a sense, mirror images of each other. Annika's belief that Muslim women could well be brainwashed into wanting to wear a veil is mirrored in Gunilla's and Emil's assertion that gender equality is a typically Swedish characteristic. Similarly, Annika's misgivings about what she sees as the submissive attitudes in the minaret's call is mirrored in Gunilla's and Emil's celebration of freedom of speech. "They", in this case unspecified "Muslims", embody the opposite of "our", that is "Swedish", values.

Fredrik Barth's theory about ethnic boundary making helps us make sense of this. Barth's novel idea was that ethnic groups come into being, not through the "cultural stuff" that "makes up" an identity, but through contact with other groups. Ethnic groups become defined in opposition to each other. Without other groups with which to compare themselves, group formation becomes impossible, like "one hand clapping", in Eriksen's (2010, 14) poignant

words. Eriksen, drawing on Barth, describes the tendency of groups to hold stereotypes about other groups and draw attention to (alleged) cultural traits that become socially important as markers of difference. He emphasises that "group identities must always be defined in relation to what they are not" (ibid).

These culturally alien Others, as described by my interlocutors above, are thus constructed as a group that is fundamentally different from "us", and so does not belong to the nation – at least not the way "Swedes" do. Effectively, then, culturally and ethnically alien Others are excluded from belonging to the nation and thus from deserving welfare on par with native "Swedes". In sum, having established that "they" do not belong, the justification is laid for welfare chauvinist policies. This, I would argue, is emblematic of exclusionary nationalism, to which I now turn.

Exclusionary nationalism and empty and floating signifiers

Ethnic boundary-making processes, clearly visible in my interlocutors' discussions of national belonging, underpin their welfare chauvinist policies. It remains to clarify why these sentiments are expressed in particularly nationalist terms, and why the nation is, as I suggest, an empty signifier in the SD's chain of equivalence.

First, as Eriksen argues, what distinguishes nations from other ethnic groups is their relationship to the state (2010, 125). This becomes evident in my interlocutors' insistence on welfare chauvinist policies, which are per definition intimately tied to the state. Second, my interlocutors describe themselves as nationalists, and, relatedly, their welfare chauvinism aims to defend *the nation* and its resources from undeserving, almost exclusively foreign, threats. The belonging which majority ethnicity confers is thus both national and exclusive in character.

Furthermore, I suggest that these ideas as part of a worldview permeate, as well as constitute, all other demands. Take something so far removed – seemingly having nothing to do with immigration – as whether or not to sell off municipally owned properties, a question which arose some months into my fieldwork. This became a window that allowed me to catch a glimpse of how active SD members and representatives saw the state. Classically a Left-Right political question, my interlocutors were at first unsure what to think. Thomas apparently said flat-out "no" to selling any properties, but Mats and Hampus wanted to look into it. Mats was reluctant to sell any properties with a classical-historical value, or any that brought in revenue.

Thomas's reluctance to sell anything and the particularities of what properties Mats wanted to sell are both illustrative of the Left-Right alignment, but also of tensions within the party. From what I could understand, Thomas and a few others tended to fall more to the traditional economic Left and Mats and like-minded others to the Right. They both agreed, however, that classical-historical sites should not be sold but safe-guarded under municipal ownership to ensure the buildings' longevity. They would on several occasions praise the beautiful architecture of 19th century architecture as great feats of Swedish art. There was, in other words, a common clear nationalist, romanticising streak in their argument to not sell off such properties. Immediately, we see how the reasoning revolved around their idea of the nation.

There is, however, yet another layer. While Thomas seemed to prefer state intervention and a regulated market, Mats was usually more liberal. Both leanings, however, reflected an exclusionary nationalist logic. For Thomas and those like-minded, a strong state would protect the national majority from harmful, external threats, such as resource-draining immigrants and foreign, encroaching businesses. During a different conversation, Alexander shrugged and said: "That's what capitalism is, some win, some lose." An indication of Alexander's economically leftist leanings, listeners laughed and told him to: "Stop being a *sosse* [slang for Social Democrat]!".

The liberal camp, however, reasoned that the key to making life better for people was to create more jobs, so it should be made easier for companies to hire workers by, among other things, lowering the payroll tax. This also meant a smaller, less interventionist state, and, naturally, lower benefits. The implication was that everybody should take care of themselves, and if one could not, it was one's own fault and one did not deserve help. This quite obviously excluded immigrants who did not know the language, and had no money or papers, from being considered deserving of help; they were just a drain on the inefficient welfare-state. Both Thomas's and Mats's approaches were, in other words, based on an exclusionary nationalist logic – for Thomas, the state was a bulwark against foreign (economic) threats, for Mats, the market would eliminate the same threats. For both, the common underlying goal was to protect the nation and its resources.

In essence, then, as bluntly put by Hampus: "The immigration question affects every other question". The exclusionary nationalist logic permeates even questions so seemingly far removed as whether or not to sell off local municipal properties. This is precisely the role of the empty signifier in Laclau's chain of equivalence.

As we recall from chapter 1, an empty signifier is effectively deprived of any a priori meaning – the link between signifier and signified is severed, and requires radical investment to be filled with meaning. An empty signifier comes to represent "the people" as a totality, even though it is *not*, since there must be a constitutive outside of which to make demands.

A floating signifier, on the other hand, has some reference to a signified (Moraes 2014) but is the site of contestation where competing projects try to fix its meaning (Laclau 2005, 131) and it can be part of various and competing projects simultaneously. As Laclau himself points out, however, the empty and floating dimensions often overlap and the distinction is primarily analytical (2005, 133).

I would argue that there is such competition between different political actors in Sweden as to what the nation means. All agree that it is a geographically and politically bounded entity, but there is a hegemonic struggle concerning what that means in practice, hence, more in the order of a floating than an empty signifier. Mainstream political parties pursue more inclusive (civic) visions of the nation than the SD, whose nationalism, as we have seen, is of the more excluding kind. I suggest, then, that "the nation" is a symbol around which the SD crystallises its identity, as well as constituting it. The nation, I argue, acts as an empty signifier for the SD, but as a floating signifier in society at large. As shown in the examples above, almost every political stance they take seems to come back to this nationalist vision. The SD, as "the people", tries to fix the meaning of the nation, which binds together the chain of equivalence which also constitutes them as "the people". Other demands, for instance concerns about security and crime or religion, are subsumed under the nationalist umbrella and take on a decidedly nationalist character. The SD considers crime to be a primarily "imported problem", committed mostly by immigrants, who are discursively produced as threats to the nation. Leftist parties, on the other hand, have traditionally (in Sweden, at least) viewed crime as more determined by socio-economic factors.

A few concluding words may be said about the relationship between nationalism and populism. It has been noted (see Anastasiou 2019) that populist movements are often nationalist, and nationalist movements are often populist. This is not a given since, as Laclau points out, any political group may employ a populist logic. However, the extent to which nationalist and populist movements converge is notable. Michaelangelo Anastasiou (2019) suggests that "under particular historical conditions of possibility, nationalism and populism may come to co-constitute one another" (2019, 331). He notes that as populism in scholarly work is often viewed through a European lens, with focus on radical Right-wing parties, populism is commonly "reduced to what is conceived to be its universal characteristic, or its

essence: nationalism" (Anastasiou 2019, 333). However, he argues that populism and nationalism differ in their discursive architecture: populism is structured around an intra-communal "up/down"-axis, distinguishing between "the people" and "the elite". Nationalism, on the other hand, is structured around an "in/out"-axis, separating nationals from non-nationals. Populism is thus structured around the signifier "the people", and nationalism around "the nation" (Anastasiou 2019, 334). This is primarily an analytical distinction, because Anastasiou then suggests that in practice, effective populist nationalisms establish a metaphorical likeness between the two. In other words, "the nation" and "the people" function as metaphorical replacements for each other – the nation "*is*" the people, and vice versa. Indeed, they come to co-constitute one another as internal and external enemies are symbolically associated with each other: "For example, the 'threat' of the immigrant (external enemy) cannot acquire political efficacy without reference to the immigration policies of the European Union (external enemy), which are endorsed by the national political establishment (internal enemy), for the benefit of 'the elite' (internal enemy)" (Anastasiou 2019, 340). Moreover, Anastasiou suggests, populism exists in an already existing hegemonic nationalist landscape. Even political projects that promote inclusivity and discourage nationalism thus cannot avoid making references to "the nation" (Anastasiou 2019, 338).

Following Anastasiou, we could postulate that the SD is primarily a nationalist movement, as their demands are aggregated under the empty signifier "the nation". However, as he points out, in actual practice nationalism and populism co-constitute each other. Consequently, the link between nationalism and populism is established.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined some anthropological ideas about how the idea of the nation came into being and dominant strands in scholarly work concerning nationalism. We have seen how the SD's welfare chauvinism is intimately tied to ideas about the state, the nation, culture, and ethnicity. In essence, my interlocutors hold that welfare should be received based on national belonging, which in turn is based primarily on conforming to "Swedish norms". I have tried to show how "the nation" operates as an empty signifier through examining how essentially all demands, heterogenous as they are, are subsumed under a nationalist umbrella, which also in turn shapes the SD's demands. Finally, I considered how nationalism and populism co-constitute one another through establishing a symbolic equivalence between "the nation" and "the people".

Nations do not, however, exist in a vacuum, but are a part of an increasingly globalised, neoliberal world characterised by transnational flows of capital, ideas, and people. In the next chapter, I therefore turn to an exploration of the SD's entanglements with neoliberalism and globalisation.

Chapter 4

Neoliberalism and nationalism

Introduction

> We're in a large room in City Hall and Mats has just finished presenting the SD's budget suggestion for the municipality for the coming year to two journalists. Annika is fiddling with the camera she used to film the presentation, Gunilla, Johan, Thomas and Hampus are chatting nearby, and Mats is talking to the journalists while they are packing up and preparing to leave.
>
> "Unofficially", Mats says, almost conspiratorially, to them, "I can say that if we were in a conservative coalition, we'd be the guarantee that they didn't stray too far to the right, we care about the welfare. And the same if we'd work with the Social Democrats [S]; I wouldn't mind, we're closer to S than the Centre Party or the Liberals here in the city… but we're the guarantee in Swedish politics that no-one goes too far to the left or the right."

Ideologically, the SD is usually labelled "far-right" or "extreme right" (Widfeldt 2015). How come, then, that Mats does not want to "stray too far to the right", or that he feels they are "closer to S than the Centre Party or the Liberals"? What is the "right" in "far-right" (Joppke 2021b)?

In previous chapters, we have examined various aspects of the SD's particular brand of populism. I have suggested that "the nation" as an empty signifier crystallises the party's identity – however, it is still unclear where the SD fits in on the classical political left-right continuum. In this final chapter, I will broaden my focus to consider how the SD interacts with global neoliberal ideas. In order to lay the analytical foundation for this chapter, I will start by briefly reviewing anthropological approaches to neoliberalism. This will be followed by an examination of the SD's entanglements with the political Right, neoliberalism and globalisation, and "responsibilization" of individuals. I will then turn to an investigation of different immigration logics, how my interlocutors relate to neoliberalism, and their views on the matter. Finally, I will contextualise my study in a comparative discussion about neoliberal nationalism in Hungary. It will be argued that my interlocutors' relationship to neoliberalism is complex and fraught with tensions as they both embrace and oppose various aspects of neoliberalism. For instance, I will suggest that the SD's welfare chauvinism may be considered

as underpinned by a neoliberal logic, while their insistence on ethnopluralism may be understood as nationalist.

What is neoliberalism?

In an overview of anthropological approaches to neoliberalism, Matheiu Hilgers (2010) points out that there is no universally accepted definition of the term "neoliberalism". However, anthropologists

> apply the term to a radicalised form of capitalism, based on deregulation and the restriction of state intervention, and characterised by an opposition to collectivism, a new role for the state, an extreme emphasis on individual responsibility, flexibility, a belief that growth leads to development, and a promotion of freedom as a means to self-realisation that disregards any questioning of the economic and social conditions that make such freedom possible. (2010, 352)

Hilgers furthermore teases out three main approaches to the study of neoliberalism: cultural, systemic, and an approach through governmentality. I draw on all three in this thesis, with an emphasis on the approach through governmentality.

First, a cultural approach is concerned with how wealth is created almost by magic, and links the local (through ethnography) to the global. Hilgers suggests that on a global level, "the transnationalisation of production and capital reproduces and transforms divisions that were formerly internal to states", which impedes any shared sense of belonging (Hilgers 2010, 355). This transnationalisation also makes it difficult to negotiate working conditions, as ties binding enterprises to nation-states are increasingly eroded. Culture-based approaches are useful and precise when examining local and specific groups, but become more general and less effective when they understand and study culture in a broader sense. Second, the systemic approach is more oriented towards functionalism, and focuses on how a system endures in a state of equilibrium. It considers how neoliberalism tends to expand and elevate the penal sector of societies, "so that the state can silence the reverberations caused by the diffusion of social insecurity at lower levels of the hierarchy of class and ethnicity, and appease popular discontent generated by the withering of its traditional economic and social functions" (Wacquant in Hilgers 2010, 356). But to consider neoliberalism as the project of a few omniscient elites to dismantle the working class flirts with conspiracy theories and is too simplified, according to Hilgers. Moreover, he suggests that neoliberalism is a transnational project that originated in

the US, but "has adopted mental categories and dispositions that are not entirely within its control" (2010, 357), meaning it is both intentional and uncontrolled. However, in line with established critiques of functionalism, Hilgers argues that a systemic approach does not fully account for resistance and inconsistencies. Finally, the approach through governmentality obviously relies on a Foucauldian conception of power and self-disciplining. It "leads subjects to perform actions that reinforce their own subjection" (Hilgers 2010, 358). The self is understood and developed as an enterprise, and managed "in accordance with the logic of the market" (ibid). Following a logic of competition, certain sections of the population – the uncompetitive, such as the poor, refugees, certain workers – are as a rule understood as individual failures, whereas the competitive elite receives help and state sanctions. I will elaborate on this below.

Nonetheless, as neoliberalism, in its market-oriented obsession, generally calls for as small a state apparatus as possible (and one whose goal is to optimise capital accumulation), how can we understand not only the continuation, but the flourishing of nation-states? With this brief overview of neoliberalism in mind, I will in the following explore some aspects of the relationship between neoliberalism and nationalism.

The neoliberalism-nationalism nexus

The SD, like all of us, exists in a neoliberal, globalised world with unprecedented flows of ideas, capital, and to an extent, people. They are also, as we have seen in previous chapters, strongly nationalist. However, it is common to claim that (neo)liberalism and nationalism are anathema to each other (Schiering 2021) although, as we shall see, it is much more complex than that. At the same time, nationalist movements have been gaining momentum and influence (Thorleifsson 2019a).

One clue to how the SD understands the relationship between neoliberalism and nationalism might be found in a comment by one of my interlocutors. "Rather Orbán than Macron", Gunilla grimaced over lunch one day, having just read a newspaper article about the French president. "He [Macron] is a globalist. That's scary."

Sociologist Christian Joppke suggests that neoliberalism entails an unprecedented "opening" of the world with these increased flows, that, is, globalisation (2021b). In reaction to this opening force, a closing force responds, namely nationalism. This "open/close" dichotomy is, he argues, one of the most salient dividing lines of politics in our time. As demands for "opening" increase, so do calls for "closing". Gunilla thus preferred the, in her

mind, nationalist Orbán over what she perceived as the neoliberal Macron. The distinction between the two politicians is, however, far less clear-cut. Orbán's platform embraces certain neoliberal policies, too, and Macron's nationalist, but Gunilla seemed to respond to the globalist versus the nationalist aspects.

Interestingly, however, as we saw in the previous chapter, my interlocutors also defended what one might, following Joppke, call "earned citizenship". Immigrants are welcome, they said, if they work and become productive members of the nation and are not a burden on society. In Joppke's view, earned citizenship is a *neoliberal nationalist* sentiment. To untangle this, we must take a closer look at Joppke's conceptualisation of neoliberalism.

He suggests that liberalism and neoliberalism share the exaltation of the individual as the foundation of society. They part ways, however, in their ideas of social justice: liberalism tolerates difference as long as it is for the benefit of those worst off in a given society, whereas neoliberalism does not. For neoliberalism, the market trumps everything, which entails a radical "responsibilization" of individuals – "injustice is exclusively an attribute of the individual and her intentional action", Joppke writes (2021b, 6-7). "Accordingly, poverty and deprivation, insofar as they are the unintended outcome of aggregate market behavior, cannot be subject to justice considerations – they are 'evils' but not 'injustices'". Joppke further points out that "personal responsibility" is "a core tenet" of liberalism, too (2021b, 17), but it is its "punitive and society-exculpating" aspects in neoliberalism that are novel. Society is not responsible for individuals, they are, and the poor are often punished for their own misfortune, which is seen as individual failure.

Earned citizenship is thus neoliberal as it entails "responsibilitized" individuals with an emphasis on work and productivity, according to Joppke. It is also nationalist because in viewing citizenship as a privilege rather than a right, it is "reserved for the select few who thereby upgrade the value of the national community that they join" (Joppke 2021a, 9). At the same time, curiously, "citizenship seems to have lost its nationalist edges" (Joppke 2021b, 158). Liberal and human rights discourses have facilitated access to citizenship and rights have become "less exclusively attached to citizenship" (Joppke 2021b, 159), and rely more on long-term residence. This analysis was made by Joppke in the early years of the new millennium, and he has since revised his argument somewhat. In the last decade, Joppke argues, in a reactive fashion, citizenship under neoliberalism has instead become harder to attain, at least for "undesired" immigrants (2021b, 159). Long-term residence and time passing ("naturalisation") is, under neoliberalism, not the first, but the last step of successful integration and earning citizenship. This is generally true for the least competitive immigrants, the un- or low-skilled,

but less so for the high-skilled (Joppke 2021b). In making citizenship harder to attain, nationalism, as pointed out above, is also prominent. Competitiveness and "responsibilization", coupled with the increasing exclusiveness of national citizenship, engender a neoliberal nationalism.

As much as they welcome productive immigrants, the nationalist SD is nonetheless, I would argue, ethnopluralist (Joppke 2021b): they hold that all cultures are equally valuable, but should exist and develop separately. This could be evinced by a statement made by Mats when we were in his office doing an unstructured interview one day. I had asked about something completely different, but as often happened, he soon found a way to start talking about immigration and integration. He said that he wants to defend cultural diversity: "It'd be stupid boring [*aptråkigt*] if, in a hundred years, everyone was exactly the same all over the world!", he exclaimed. He said he liked that there are different cultures, but he seemed to think and dislike that cultures would become increasingly homogenous if migration and globalisation continue on their current trajectories.

Similarly, Johanna, the leader of Centreville's SD youth chapter, fiercely defended cultural distinctiveness. She and Annika were visiting City Hall one afternoon to record a podcast with Mats. The airline company SAS had released a commercial the day before, which said that more or less everything we consider "typically Scandinavian" has been imported at some point from other parts of the world. My interlocutors were furious about the commercial and Twitter had been blowing up all morning. "They're spitting on Swedish culture", Johanna said indignantly. "I feel offended… but I'm probably not allowed to say that."

Her visceral reaction hints at the affective dimension of nationalism and the pride she took in Swedish cultural distinctiveness. Seen in light of Mats's assertion that cultures should not be the same everywhere, Johanna's comment could be understood as a similar position. Integration, so the argument goes, is the responsibility of the arriving migrant to adapt to the host society, in order to retain the host society's culture without it being muddled, polluted, or distorted too much by other cultural practices or values.

Mats, indeed, put this quite explicitly. As usual in his office, during an unstructured interview, I had asked whether he was afraid of losing "Swedish culture". He thought for a second, and said that in his view, what is generally meant by integration is actually assimilation. "Integration means adapting to each other, but if people come here they should try to become Swedish", he concluded.

A civic, liberal nationalism might frown at this. From such a perspective, it should not matter where a person comes from or what culture they adhere to since through naturalisation

a person would become a citizen regardless. From a purely neoliberal standpoint, it would not matter, either, as long as the prospective citizen could earn their keep. A neoliberal nationalism discriminates not on the basis of categorical exclusions like culture, gender, or religion, but on individual grounds or "in consideration of what the individual *does*, not what she *is*" (Joppke 2021a, 10). Mats's and Johanna's comments, then, in their concern with culture, have some unmistakably ethnopluralist and nationalist overtones, which we touched upon in the previous chapter.

Having considered some entanglements of neoliberalism and nationalism, I now turn to a deeper exploration of the SD's ideological landscape.

Left, right, and centre

We are having lunch at "the Greek" in a busy food court, laughing and reminiscing about youthful escapades. Unprompted, Mats suddenly complains that "It's a pity there isn't a proper right-wing party, economically right-wing. I mean, M [the Moderates] and S [the Social Democrats], it's the same thing, a percentage here and a *karensdag*[4] there. People should get to do whatever they want with their money and the state should be there as a guarantee." He wistfully recalls how neighbours used to help each other out, much more than is the case today. Civil society should take care of people, he argues, and when that fails, that's when the state should come in.

Compare this statement, calling for "a proper right-wing party", with the first in this chapter, where Mats said that the SD is "the guarantee in Swedish politics that no-one goes too far to the left or the right", and that they "care about the welfare". How can these two statements be reconciled?

Obviously, an individual's views are not necessarily always entirely congruent with the party's. Considering that the SD is so often labelled "radical right", however, it merits closer inspection.

My interlocutors came from many different political backgrounds. Some were, before they were SD party members or politicians, members of the Moderates, some the Social Democrats, and some were not politically affiliated at all. One member, who used to be a

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[4] A *karensdag* means that the first day of a worker's sick leave is not paid by their employer. Following days are reimbursed by 80% of one's regular salary. The concept has been debated for a long time – leftist parties want to abolish it, and rightist coalitions want to keep it.

member of the social democratic youth chapter, poignantly said: "It's S that's left the working class, not the working class that's left S. We have the same opinions we've always had."

Mats's and the previous S member's comments both point to a fascinating turn in post-Cold War politics, examined by Joppke. He argues that radical right policies have turned from neoliberalism towards welfare chauvinism. Starting from the very inception of the political terms "left" and "right", Joppke explains that following the French revolution, traditionalist supporters of the monarchy sat to the right of the assembly's president, and progressive Republicans to his left. This spatial metaphor came to represent politics in general in the West, as the "right" stood for order and conservation and became associated with the defence of private property, and "left" stood for change and movement and became associated with redistributive economics. The "right", according to Joppke, is thus inegalitarian, and the "left" egalitarian (2021b, 45).

Curiously, this alignment of the "left" and "right" has changed in certain respects. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, party politics has become more centralised in the middle (Joppke 2021b, 25) – like Mats said, "M and S, it's the same thing". This phenomenon coincided, Joppke argues, with the trend among leftist parties to turn more to a "third way", attempting to clothe social democratic politics in neoliberal garb, thus, he argues, hollowing out the egalitarian impact of redistributive policies. Notably, it was under Democratic President Bill Clinton that the World Trade Organization (WTO) was founded, leading the way to "hyperglobalization". Clinton also, just like he had promised, "end[ed] welfare as we know it" (Joppke 2021b, 26). In Germany, it was the Social Democrats who attempted "add on" neoliberal policies to the existing classic leftist agenda. Between 2003 and 2005, the Social Democratic chancellor reformed the labour market, "thus allowing the 'glittery express train' of neoliberalism to enter town and mess with one of the Continent's oldest and most protective welfare systems" (Joppke 2021b, 28).

In Joppke's view, this "third way" left a vacuum on the political fringes, which radical right parties were quick to exploit. Thus "…'populist radical right parties' mostly shed the 'neoliberal' positions they might have once held in favor of 'welfare chauvinism', thus in effect becoming the new working-class parties" (Joppke 2021b, 46). The "'neoliberal' positions" in question are not named explicitly, but could be implicitly understood as, for instance, frugal positions on social policies, e.g., welfare and benefits.

Joppke's account, while illuminating and useful, could for our purposes benefit from some anthropological nuancing. Is it true that the "right" as a whole "is" inegalitarian, and the left egalitarian? And has the "right" turned completely away from neoliberalism in favour of

welfare chauvinism? The answer to both these questions is surely a tentative "no". There are numerous variations and mutations of neoliberalism which play out in various ways, depending on local, historical, and cultural contexts. Neoliberalism is highly flexible and adaptable (Schiering 2021), a point I return to below.

What, then, is the "right" in "radical right"? Joppke suggests that it is the inegalitarian aspects still at work in these parties' welfare chauvinism. As we saw in the previous chapter, welfare is awarded on a citizenship basis, which in turn is based partly on ethnic, exclusionary nationalist principles.

It is interesting to note that a common complaint among my interlocutors was the notion that other political parties "stole" their motions. Often, it was explained to me, when the SD put forward a motion in the Municipal Board or Council, it was voted down, but then, leading up to the next meeting, an almost identical motion was put forward by another party, maybe with a word or a number changed. This complaint was usually followed by frustrated sighs and they would shake their heads. "It's just because we're SD", they would say. "There's nothing wrong with our ideas, they [other parties] just don't want to be associated with us."

This phenomenon suggests an appropriation by other parties of the SD's policies, which is noteworthy, since the SD has for several years been treated as a political pariah. The cordon sanitaire has, however, been severely weakened since the 2018 election, as noted in chapter 1. Naturally, it must be assumed that whether or not a motion is "stolen" depends at least in part on the motion in question, and there is bound to be some overlap between parties regarding certain issues. Mats also recognised this: "I've learned that it's always been like this", he told me. "Even before we got in [to municipal government], M and S stole each other's ideas all the time. You shouldn't play the victim too much." Again, the dynamic that Mats sketches out, the fact that parties have "always" stolen each other's motions, points to a convergence in the political middle – like he said, "M and S, it's the same thing".

Of course, the relevance and use of the "left-right"-continuum at all is a question in and of itself. I will not delve too deeply into it here as it is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is worth noting that the SD themselves refer to their ideological platform as "social conservatism" with "a nationalist basic outlook" (*grundsyn*) (Aspling 2019). My interlocutors rarely spoke of themselves in terms of "left" or "right", but often referred to other parties in such terms. The continuum is thus clearly relevant for any analysis as it influences real-world positioning. The SD's reluctance to place themselves firmly anywhere on the spectrum is nonetheless of interest. How, then, do they see themselves in relation to other parties, and the political landscape in general? And, as a corollary, how do they relate to neoliberalism, "the common denominator

in the production of inequalities in our contemporary societies" (Hilgers 2010, 360)? Below, I will consider these questions by examining my interlocutors' entanglements with neoliberalism and nationalism.

Populism, neoliberalism, and democracy

Gunilla and I were having lunch on the balcony in City Hall one September afternoon, lapping up the late-summer sun. Looking out on the city skyline, Gunilla started talking about a construction project taking place in the city of which she was critical. She thought that it was being unethically funded with congestion charge revenue, and people in the city had voted against such a tax but it had been implemented anyway. Visibly annoyed, she said that the city was bad at listening to the people, but she proudly proclaimed that "that's what we [the SD] want to do".

In previous chapters we have looked at the SD's populist logic. Laclau has argued that populism is an inherent part of politics and, indeed, democracy (2005, 176). This is because democracy requires a "people", which in turn is constructed through chains of equivalences (see chapter 1). This can be seen in my interlocutors' frequent invocations of "listening to the people", like the one above. In this sense, the SD's populism is at first glance the opposite of neoliberalist, since neoliberalism, according to Joppke, is essentially opposed to democracy, as neoliberalism views democracy as a threat to the market regime (2021b, 11). This is, he argues, because neoliberalism generally favours governance by technocrats and experts, rather than elected democratic representatives. The democratic process, from a neoliberal perspective, may hamper the accumulation of profit. The SD representatives and members I studied, on the other hand, were adamant about the value of democracy, understood as "the people's rule".

In addition, in a neoliberal age, power has increasingly shifted from states to corporations. Looking closer, however, my interlocutors showed certain neoliberal impulses. For example, Annika once compared the SD to the Nordic Resistance Movement (*Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen,* NMR). We were lounging and chatting in her room at the party office, and I had just said that I initially had wanted to study the NMR but decided against it. Annika thought the group was mad: "They're… poop!", she chuckled. Furthermore, she said that they are very left-leaning: "As long as you have a homogenous population, they want 'everything for everyone'." The SD is more right-wing, she mused, since "we are more open to a liberal economic politics". Additionally, as the conversation quite naturally turned to the job market, she argued that the payroll tax should be cut for employers, making it cheaper to hire workers.

She meant that this was better for workers, too, because jobs would become more plentiful and easier to access, which in her view was key to a good life. That would mean that power would shift even more from workers and the state to corporations, as it would remove income, and thus influence from the state and signal that corporations hold the key to a better life. In a sense, this could be interpreted as a symbolic shift away from a populist idea of democracy (as in "the people's" rule), since corporations are democratically unaccountable.

My interlocutors are quite clearly populist nationalist, but also, as we have just seen, with certain neoliberal tendencies. If neoliberalism and populism are anathema to each other, as conventional approaches would have it (see Schiering 2021), how can this ideological conundrum be understood?

Gabór Schiering (2021) suggests that neoliberalism and populism are *not* necessarily opposing forces, but can co-exist and even depend upon one another. Joppke obviously recognises this, too, in his conception of "neoliberal nationalism", but Schiering nuances and elaborates this argument. He points to how, for example, many Brexit-supporters in the UK wished to protect the neoliberal state from EU-regulations, rather than oppose it. He argues that nationalist populism is sometimes used as a *legitimation strategy* – it "appeals to a mass public using a Manichean logic that opposes the virtuous people to corrupt elites and affiliated out-groups" (2021). Neoliberal actors thus rely on (national) populism to mobilise sections of the population that might not gain from globalist, transnational neoliberalism. Crucially, Schiering argues, the balance of power must be taken into account in considering how populism as legitimation strategy is used. So, for instance, neoliberal hegemony is challenged during economic crises, such as in Hungary in the 2000's. When that happens, neoliberalism must adapt. In Hungary, nationalist forces were strong enough to challenge neoliberalism but not overthrow it entirely, which led to a compromise between transnational capital and national capitalists, which still retained core aspects of neoliberalism.

But there is still some tension, populism and neoliberalism are indeed opposed in certain respects. The core of neoliberalism is capital accumulation, irrespective of states, culture, or mobility – as long as something is profitable, little else matters. Nationalism, on the other hand, is intimately tied to a state and is inherently exclusive as it depends on boundaries to other nations. This tension between populism and neoliberalism is indicative of what Joppke (2021b) has called "compensatory" and "constitutive" logics. Both logics are concerned with how state nationalism interacts with neoliberalism. In a "compensatory" logic, the state attempts to compensate for its loss of autonomy in a neoliberal, globalised world, where corporations and transnational actors are increasingly gaining power and influence. In a

spectacular fashion, states perform sovereignty by reinforcing borders and building walls. In a "constitutive" logic, on the other hand, states incorporate neoliberal ideas which may, as we have just seen, even be constitutive of nationalism as such. Joppke shows this co-constitution of neoliberalism and nationalism in the "responsibilization" of individuals. By not being a burden on the collectivity, in this case "the nation", individuals feel an obligation to the nation. This amounts to nationalism, that is, a neoliberal nationalism (2021b, 61).

The SD's populist nationalist tendencies could be attributed to a "compensatory" logic, in that they call for reinforcing national borders and symbolically walling off the nation, in opposition to the globalising "opening" force of neoliberalism. On the other hand, they also apply a "constitutive" logic, visible in particular through the responsbilising "earned citizenship".

This tension between the "compensatory" and "constitutive" logics is, I suggest, at the core of my interlocutors' politics. They appeal to voters who are "the prospective losers [of globalisation] of tomorrow" with their welfare chauvinism, while appealing to the neoliberal elites at the top through facilitating certain transnational flows (of people, ideas, and capital), but not others. Joppke, again, sheds light on this, by exploring the "centaur state".

"Courting the top and fending off the bottom"

In previous chapters, we have seen the ethnopluralist and welfare chauvinist logics at work in SD's rhetoric about immigration. What we have not yet examined is the fact that there are different kinds of immigrations going on, notably high- versus low-skilled immigration. Generally, as will be shown below, high-skilled immigration was encouraged, but low-skilled was discouraged. Following Joppke, I suggest that this followed, at least in part, a neoliberal logic of "responsibilization".

Drawing on Wacquant's sketch of a "centaur state" (referencing the half-horse, half-man creature in Greek mythology), Joppke describes a neoliberal state which is "…exclusive and nationalist at the bottom, yes, but inclusive and cosmopolitan at the top, obsessed with rooting out inequality, alas, not of the economic, but of the ethnic, racial or sexual kinds" (2021a, 7). He does not specify if this "rooting out" takes place at "the top" or "the bottom", but it seems plausible to assume that in terms of culture and identity, it takes place in both, since little else than profit presumably matters in a neoliberal worldview.

This distinction between high- versus low-skilled migration logics becomes clear in the issue closest to the SD's heart: immigration. I noticed this during an Open House in the SD's

party office. About twenty people had come. The air was damp from people's wet umbrellas and raincoats, but the mood was relaxed and friendly, people were sipping coffee, nibbling on pastries and listening to Annika who was standing in the front of the room, talking about an upcoming motion in the Municipal Council. Annika said the model for resource distribution must be remade. "If you have an American engineer in your district, you don't need more money for that", she said. She referred to the fact that (from what I understood) the current model distributes funds (welfare and benefits) based on numbers of immigrants in any given city district, and a highly educated "American engineer" would not need welfare the way an unskilled immigrant might.

An "American engineer" is not only culturally "Western" as opposed to "Muslim", but also, crucially, high-skilled. Annika seemed to believe that such an immigrant would not require welfare ("you don't need more money for that") and would consequently not be a burden on society; they would not need, for instance, unemployment or housing benefits. However, my interlocutors did not seem to think this was the type of immigration that was most common (which, it might be noted, is true (Joppke 2021b, 173)).

This was brought home to me when Jens at one point joked about high-skilled immigration. He was wrapping up a lecture one September evening for party members interested in becoming politicians. People were shuffling about, getting ready to leave, and Jens was encouraging people to come back and bring their friends. He said: "Bring people [to these lectures], we need more…" He chuckled. "…doctors, engineers, the kind of people who usually come [to Sweden]." People laughed. I understood it as a sarcastic reference to a pro-immigration argument, commonly heard from government representatives, about how Sweden needs immigration; "we need doctors and engineers and they should be welcomed", so the argument goes. The sarcastic tone of Jens's comment, which warranted the laughs, suggested that my interlocutors did not believe that was the kind of high-skilled immigration that was most common.

Notably, different valuations of high- versus low-skilled labour were not exclusively applied to immigrants, but my interlocutors also observed it along class dimensions. During an Open House in the SD's party office, I was having coffee with some elderly members around the small kitchen table, waiting for the event to begin. They politely asked about how my research was progressing and I mentioned something in passing about my Norwegian university. One member laughed loudly and joked that I should seek asylum in Norway. "There is no salvation for this country!" he said, teeth flashing in an ironic grin. "Academics and intellectuals have an international market to move around in, but regular workers here are

screwed [*körda*]." The others laughed grimly and nodded their agreement. Not only low-skilled *immigrants*, but also "regular [Swedish] workers" were thus thought to be undesired – "screwed" – by the neoliberal system, but elites ("academics and intellectuals") were believed to prosper under it. Following a neoliberal logic, ethnic low-skilled Swedes, as well as immigrants, seemed to be considered undesirable by this man since they were unproductive. However, as we have seen, the SD generally defended the Swedish ethnic majority on the basis of their national belonging, as opposed to immigrants. It seems that this member did, too, lamenting the lack of opportunities for "regular workers". His comment pointed to a perception that the neoliberal system (in contrast to the SD) did not discriminate based on ethnic or national belonging, but rather class and productivity.

Shedding light on this theme, Hilgers states that under neoliberalism "[s]ome categories of human beings are excluded from citizenship (refugees, illegal migrants, some workers) while others, by contrast, are first class citizens" (2010, 359). "The elite" thus reaps benefits and receives state subventions (such as tax breaks and facilitated paths into citizenship) while the poor are penalised. For instance, he writes that the transnational mobility of domestic workers in Asia is encouraged, but they live under awful conditions and are stripped of many of their rights. Such workers are generally perceived as "dangerous and undesirable" but are, in fact, "indispensable to the functioning of cities with the ambition to become geographical hubs of world capitalism" (Hilgers 2010, 359).

Furthermore, Joppke summarises the difference in approach to high- versus low-skilled immigrants in the phrase "courting the top, fending off the bottom" (2021b), which follows the logic of the "centaur state". "The top", that is the high-skilled, market-savvy, cosmopolitan elite, is not only allowed entry into the country, but actively sought-after. In stark contrast, low- or unskilled immigrants, predominantly subsumed under "family immigration", are considered a burden and are "fended off". This may well be true in European and Western countries, but as Hilgers showed, not necessarily everywhere – in the Asian cities he referred to, low-skilled immigrants were indeed sought after, though treated as second-grade inhabitants.

This low-skilled immigration was nonetheless the type of immigration the SD was primarily concerned with and tried to stave off. My interlocutors were remarkably silent on high-skilled immigration, but often talked about welfare-draining (low- or unskilled) immigration. So far in this thesis we have focused on the chauvinist and ethnic implications in their arguments, but, as Joppke points out: "…if 'immigrants' are resented for not 'contributing' and being a cost factor for society… one might as well qualify the underlying reasoning as 'neoliberal'" (2021b, 102). In other words, my interlocutors' resistance to

immigration could be understood as a neoliberally inspired resistance to unproductive cost factors, i.e., "immigrants". The logic applied to "the bottom" can thus be neoliberal, too, but a peculiarly neoliberal *nationalism*, as opposed to the "open", cosmopolitan neoliberalism at "the top".

Yet, considering another statement by Mats which we examined in the previous chapter - "An Iraqi with a web company who just talks to other Iraqis and makes money, that's great, having a job and not being a weight on society, but it's not integration" – it becomes clear that the neoliberal perspective is insufficient to understand his view of immigration. However, we have considered the cultural and ethnic implications quite extensively already in precious chapters.

Nevertheless, can "the top" not be nationalist, too? Is the "elite" always cosmopolitan? Surely things are not quite that black and white. As noted above, Schiering (2021) points out that the balance of power in a given society must be taken into account. He suggests, as we recall, that nationalist capitalists can co-exist comfortably with transnational capital, as long as core aspects of neoliberalism are retained. Nonetheless, note that the elite adapts *to* nationalist forces, indicating that neoliberal nationalism *becomes* profitable, but was not initially. Perhaps, then, there is indeed some truth to Joppke's analysis, but it might profit from being tempered with more ethnographic data. For instance, by looking at how the SD representatives and members I studied relate to neoliberalism and nationalism in practice, it becomes clear that these concepts are not static and fixed, but flexible, and the ways they are entangled are informed by historical, cultural, and economic circumstances.

Summing up my argument so far, I have tried to show how my interlocutors' relationship to neoliberalism is complex and fraught with tensions. Their resistance to immigration, which is a core tenet of their political platform, relies in part on a neoliberal logic. Welfare chauvinism, the idea that immigrants in particular are a burden on society, could be understood partly as a neoliberal notion. However, their nationalist foundation also resists the "openness" of neoliberal globalisation, promoting strong borders and sovereignty.

In order to explore my argument from a different perspective, I will in this final section juxtapose the SD with the Hungarian right. Hungary, with its strong nationalist right-wing presence, is a particularly revealing field with which to compare the SD. The two countries differ greatly in history, geography, and culture, but as we shall see, there are some striking similarities as well.

Hung(a)ry for more

Continuing with our theme of neoliberalism and immigration, let us consider anthropologist Chris Hann's (2016) effort to understand Hungarian right-wing resistance to migration. He approaches this theme by looking at the region's history. Under socialism, during Hann's fieldwork in the 1970's, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, people in the part of Hungary that he studied were fairly well off. Socialist, loosely organised farms yielded large profits, but at the cost of fulfilling private lives – people rarely had time for anything other than farm work (Hann 2016, 607). Yet, during the economic boom of the 1970's, social inequalities increased. Despite increasing affluence and personal consumption, people generally attributed their successes to their own hard work, and resented the socialist principles and bureaucracies.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the 1990's saw privatisation of collective farms, which wreaked havoc for the agrarian labour sector. While Hann's farmers were relatively spared from the most catastrophic effects, compared to other regions in Hungary, unemployment rose and many chose to migrate to Western Europe in search of work. Where people were generally future-oriented in their household accumulation strategies in the past, "most rural residents have few such options available to them nowadays" (Hann 2016, 603). Hann argues that they thus become "susceptible to neo-nationalism, which builds on earlier forms of populism dating back to pre-socialist generations" (ibid). In light of the refugee crisis of 2015, Hann describes feelings of resentment; as they felt that their own country was struggling to help even its "own people", as so many had to leave the country to find work, so how could it be expected to provide aid and refuge to migrants (2016, 612)? Hann suggests that even if it is easy to condemn Hungary for a "compassion deficit" – the complaint that the nation does "not understand what it means to belong to a solidary community such as the European Union" (2016, 613), three things must be kept in mind. First, most people outside the capital have never had the chance to meet foreigners. This may not excuse their aggressive anti-immigrant posturing, but "it is well established that fear and negative stereotypes are seldom broken down until there is more concrete interactions with the groups in question" (Hann 2016, 614). Second, poverty has undoubtedly increased in rural regions of Hungary. Third, as noted, the country exports large numbers of labourers. Taken together, Hann asks if it really is surprising that the sight of millions of migrants, crossing Hungary's borders on their way to richer European countries and receiving the aid that the rural population has been denied, sparks anger and resentment.

A somewhat similar logic is expressed among the SD. As we have seen, my interlocutors commonly bemoaned how undeserving immigrants were given plentiful benefits, while deserving "Swedes", who had worked and thus contributed to society, struggled. Furthermore, recall Joppke's assertion that the "third way" of many leftist political parties has left a vacuum which the Right has exploited in becoming the new working class parties (Joppke 2021b, 46). It could be argued that, as one of my interlocutors put it, "It's S that's left the working class, not the working class that's left S. We have the same opinions we've always had", suggesting that the SD – like the Social Democrats – reacts to neoliberalism, but the two parties do so in markedly different ways. The Social Democrats have arguably, at least to an extent, abandoned its concern for welfare, and increasingly embraced neoliberal austerity. The SD, on the other hand, have pressed for more welfare, but exclusively for the native population. Just as in Hann's analysis, in other words, my interlocutors responded to neoliberalist policies and their perceived negative effects by turning to "the new working class parties" (Joppke 2021b, 46). This appears to have been a recipe for success, just like Orbán's rise to power and the popular support he enjoys. Hann's interlocutors, however, turned against marginalisation rather than neoliberalism.

Furthermore, as this chapter has argued, my interlocutors employed neoliberal logics, too, for instance in their welfare chauvinism and different immigration logics. Although Sweden has not experienced the kind of economic crisis that Hungary did in the 2000's, the financial crisis of 2008 had a profound and negative impact on the country's economy, albeit not to the same extent as in Hungary. Nonetheless, I would suggest that the resentment that Hann describes also resonated with my interlocutors. It would be much too simplistic to suggest that financial hardship is directly responsible for the rise of the Right, of course, but as a factor I believe it cannot be overlooked. However, a complex process is clearly at work.

Considering the three aspects Hann asks us to keep in mind, further differences come to light. First, my interlocutors, in contrast to Hann's informants, had ample opportunities to meet foreigners. Gunilla had lived abroad for some time, Annika told me she had worked with a number of "Somalis", and there were several Centreville SD party members with an immigrant background. Nonetheless, most of my interlocutors still, as outlined in chapter 3, held many negative stereotypes about immigrants. Second, as far as increased poverty goes, this is trickier to assess. My interlocutors all lived in an urban area and their incomes varied significantly. Some members were unemployed, some on benefits, some had blue-collar jobs, others were rather well-off. It is thus difficult to gauge whether poverty among SD representatives or members as a whole has increased or been affected in any way in the last

decades, as it varies between them. Finally, Sweden has not exported labour even close to the extent that Hungary has. Nevertheless, as we have seen throughout this thesis, my interlocutors still felt that too much welfare was spent on immigrants, when they believed that it should go to the native population. It would seem, then, that the affective reactions were quite similar in some respects for Hann's interlocutors and mine, despite some rather great differences in economic and social policies and circumstances.

Don Kalb (2018), also analysing Hungary and examining "the rise of the Right", sheds some more light on these issues by using Kaisa Ekholm Friedman's and Jonathan Friedman's idea of "double polarization" (Friedman in Kalb 2018). Cultural and social polarizations, they argue, operate in sync. The "ethno-national folk" sees itself as opposed to a cosmopolitan ruling class which, they believe, does not care about the nation as such at all, but embraces all of humanity and the planet. Furthermore, the "folk" is also positioned against a "dangerous class", made up of mostly immigrants and their children. Additionally, they believe that the cosmopolitan elite cares more about the "dangerous class" than its own people, as the elite embraces mobility, migration, and human rights and condemns the illiberal, prejudiced nationals (Kalb 2018, 306). Polarisation thus works on two fronts – the "ethno-national folk" is pitted against the cosmopolitan elite, on one hand, and a "dangerous class" on the other, while the elite and immigrants are believed to be in league with each other. This view nuances the, according to Kalb, simplistic idea that there is a cultural *or* an economic explanation for the rise of the Right (2018, 307).

Again, we see some similarities with the SD. My interlocutors, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, opposed low- and unskilled immigration, following a neoliberal logic of individual "responsibilization" and productivity. At the same time, as discussed in chapter 2, my interlocutors believed that established political parties – which might be understood as "the elite" – did not understand the gravity of the national effects of immigration. The ruling centre-leftist government was thought to naively embrace multiculturalism at the expense of the native population, just like in Kalb's analysis.

Furthermore, Kalb accentuates the illiberal elements of the Hungarian right. Liberalism as a political ideology, according to Kalb, increasingly lost its legitimacy around the turn of the millennium, in parallel with increasing poverty and unemployment, and accusations turned to immigrants and transnational influences. The Hungarian right tends to reject homosexuals, cultural Marxists and liberal elites (Kalb 2018, 308).

Here, at least one important difference between the Hungarian right and the SD emerges. In contrast to this illiberal discourse in Hungary, the SD employs a distinctively

liberal rhetoric in embracing LGBTQ rights, gender equality, and freedom of speech. However, as noted in previous chapters, this rhetoric seems to be deployed usually in order to distinguish "Swedish values" in opposition to the purportedly oppressive Islam.

Just like the populist right in Hungary, then, the SD responds to "threats" from above and below: the purported "dangerous class" (immigrants) from below, and transnational, cosmopolitan elites from above (the SD wants to strengthen "the nation", opposing "EU federalism"). Nonetheless, they must also appeal to the "top" (elites) and the "bottom". "The bottom" here would be represented by, for instance, domestic labourers, like Polish construction workers. The result is the neoliberal nationalism which we have explored above.

This brief comparative discussion leaves us with the insight that despite greatly varying histories, geographies, and cultures, there are some striking similarities between the Hungarian right and the SD. Particularly the affective responses to neoliberal policy effects seem to be similar, albeit expressed in different ways.

In this chapter we have seen that the SD's relationship with neoliberalism is complex and multi-faceted, which I have tried to show in this chapter. Though neoliberalism and nationalism are often perceived as opposing forces in conventional approaches, anthropological studies as well as my own data show that it is far from that simple. A neoliberal logic appears to underpin immigration and citizenship practices and policies (in high- versus low-skilled immigration), just as nationalist populism seems to be a driving force behind certain forms of neoliberalism, as in Hungary.

Conclusion

In its most basic form, this thesis has attempted to understand the SD's populist-nationalist logic and why my interlocutors believed and acted the way they did. I have done this by approaching my field primarily through Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theory on populist reason, but in dialogue with other theories, such as Florian Mühlfried's (2019) conceptualisation of mistrust and Joppke's (2021b) theory concerning neoliberal nationalism. Chapter 1 sketched out a brief history of the SD, as well as Swedish political and administrative organisation, and a somewhat simplified outline of Laclau's theory. I argued that the SD constitutes itself as "the people" through chains of equivalences. By constructing an internal antagonistic frontier against the ruling elite as well as mainstream media, the SD gained a sense of internal cohesion. This was further explored in chapter 2, where empirical data showed my interlocutors' mistrust of state and municipal institutions, other political parties, and the media. I suggested that my interlocutors considered these actors biased and dishonest, partly grounded in their purported naivety, but also hunger for power, and that the further an actor was perceived to be from my interlocutors' viewpoints, the less they could be trusted. I also discussed the ambiguity experienced by my interlocutors in the case of right-wing, "alternative" media, and the difficulty in gauging their trustworthiness. The content could to them seem reasonable, but the sources were deemed unacceptable by party leaders. I suggested that this could potentially be a strategy on the SD's part: if it had been too clear what sources were and were not acceptable and thus trustworthy, some members might have felt excluded, but if it had been too vague, they might have lost their sense of belonging or purpose.

Chapter 3 examined my interlocutors' understanding of nationalism and "the nation", and how it was in part informed by ethnic pluralism and boundary making. I argued that "the nation" as an empty signifier crystallised the SD's identity while simultaneously shaping the party's demands. "The nation" also acted as a floating signifier as its meaning was contested by other political actors as well. In chapter 4, nationalism was further explored through its entanglements with neoliberalism. I suggested that the SD's relationship to neoliberalism is complex and fraught with tensions and they both embraced and contested various aspects of it. While welfare chauvinism could be understood as nationalist and ethnically exclusive, it could also be conceptualised as a neoliberal sentiment, as a neoliberal logic dictates individual responsibility and productivity.

The scope of this essay is limited, which is why some intriguing dimensions have by necessity been left unexplored. For instance, I have not examined in detail the SD's demands for security, or how immigrants come to be associated with criminals. This call for increased security was a common one among my interlocutors, and further research could prove illuminating.

Additionally, the affective dimension, briefly touched upon here and there in this thesis, could have benefitted from a more thorough study and an analysis could have been explored in more detail.

Furthermore, I was unable here to investigate questions of gender. The SD is a male-dominated party, both in representatives and membership base (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014). There have been some studies on the topic (see Mulinari and Neergaard 2014), but these are mostly by scholars from other disciplines, particularly sociologists. Anthropologists, I believe, have an important contribution to make in studying the radical right. Our emic understanding, or view from within, is valuable and instructive in understanding these groups on their own terms, as opposed to etic studies carried out by, for instance, journalists, sociologists, or political scientists. Anthropological fieldwork and analyses may make it possible to build bridges between the seemingly widening chasms and increasing polarisation between political camps and identities visible in contemporary society (Henley 2021).

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