

The purpose of nationalism was to create obedient citizens

Someone once created Sweden, drew a line on a map, sewed a flag, wrote a song. It wasn't even that long ago. But someone wants us to forget. Helena Lindblom, editor and member of Ful, wants to revisit the circumstances under which the European nation states were created, and the traditions they derive from.

In the spring of 2014, many of us were shocked and devastated to see Nazis and fascists take seats in the European Parliament and gain real political power over the laws of the European Union. The two representatives of the Swedish Democrats that Sweden sent to the Parliament will be in good company with nationalist extremists that, just like SD, want to protect the "national identity". But even SD seems to have a hard time defining what exactly it is that they want to preserve. They either make vague references to "Swedish values" or say that it's about traditions – "ancient artefacts like Christmas Eve or Midsummer" as a Swedish Democrat once put it.

But where does the notion that some values and traditions are typically defining of Sweden come from? The answer lies in the making of the nation state that began to take place around the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, as a very purposeful and politically driven project. During the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century, science and reason began to be preferred to superstition and faith. This became a problem for rulers that had earlier united their kingdoms around religion. They needed a new way to create loyalty among the people.

The idea of a *Volk*, kept together by common traditions and a common *Volksgeist*, was introduced by the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte in 1808. This was largely a reaction to the French nationalist identity that had begun to form as a result of the French revolution, around two decades earlier. The French may have liberty, equality, and fraternity, but the Germans had *soul* (geist), according to Fichte. The German language was emphasized as a sign of German kinship, since it was the one thing shared by the divided German states. Later on, Fichte became a great inspiration for Hitler and the Nazi ideology that combined the thought of a *Volk* with archaeological findings, linguistic research, skull measuring, and a great deal of imagination to form the myth of the Aryan race and it's especially noble origins.

French nationalism focussed on citizenship rather than a common origin. The revolution brought new rights to the people as citizens, but at the same time it became important to draw an outer line beyond which these rights should not apply, and the national border became that line. Only those approved by and loyal to the French state gained access to the new rights, excluding not only those living outside the borders of France, but also women, the legally incapacitated and the poor.

The nationalist project, however, was not restricted to France and Germany. At the same time as the states of Europe colonized big parts of the world, they worked hard at strengthening the brand of their nation as well as the idea of white supremacy that was intended to motivate colonialism and slavery. An interest in culture and anthropology developed, dialects were studied, old

folklore tales were told again, and common traditions, flags and national anthems were created. In Sweden, the National Museum and the folk museum Skansen were founded and it became fashionable to dress in what is now known as the Swedish national costume, a festive dress that was rarely used in the peasant society.

The nationalist project was initiated by rulers who were frightened that socialist and liberal ideologies would challenge the power of the state. It was important to make people believe that they were just that – a *people* – and that they, as such, should have more in common with each other than with other human beings. The first prime minister of Italy, Count Cavour, expressed this quite directly: "We have made Italy, now we must make Italians."

Just like in Germany, where a common language was seen as the greatest unifying factor for a *Volk*, language became one of the most important components in the national community. But since language never let itself be restricted by imaginary national borders, the creation of the monolingual state demanded massive effort. Minority languages were often banned in official contexts, for example in schools, which led to fateful consequences for children who could neither follow teachers nor communicate with other children between classes. Language is still seen as something that defines a nation. Swedish Folkpartiet suggested language tests as a condition for Swedish citizenship as late as 2012. Language tests are becoming increasingly common within Europe, and are adopted by countries like Norway, Denmark and Great Britain.

The traditional festivities that the Swedish Democrats talk about have been around much longer than Sweden as a nation state, and are celebrated far beyond the Swedish borders. However, they were once chosen and deliberately used as building blocks in the creation of the Swedish nation state by rulers who wanted to create a feeling of a national community that in the long run was going to produce obedient citizens. And the idea of "Swedish values" that must be protected from those outside of the Swedish national borders links to the idea of citizenship that developed during the French revolution, where some rights should only be available to those who are legally approved by the state. With nationalism, things like health care and education become civil rights, not human rights.

Ideas about human races and nations belong to a way of thinking in terms of difference, which has always had the same goal – to exclude some in order to include others. This way of thinking has created made-up communities, leading to discrimination and even genocide. When the UN and UNESCO were founded after the Second World War, they publicly declared that there is no scientific evidence for the existence of separate human races. Instead, they proposed that we speak of different "ethnic groups". However, that euphemism is problematic, since it is often used to make racist arguments sound more acceptable. When SD claims that it is not a racist party, but rather doesn't want to mix different ethnic groups or cultures, this connects to the racist idea that different ethnicities or cultures – some "better" than others – are something that is rooted in our bodies, that is constant and essentially determined and determining for a human being.

A nation is an imagined community, as political scientist Benedict Anderson puts it. He writes that the idea of the nation is built upon the human ability to identify through family or friendship relations, an ability that is abstracted and broadened to include an entire nation. So, if we have this ability to widen our circle of affinity, why must it stop at the national border?

Someone once created Sweden, drew a line on a map, sewed a flag, wrote a song. Someone went to Dalarna and chose a costume that was to stand for Sweden, someone sprinkled a piece of land with statues to emphasise a made-up common history. It wasn't even that long ago. But someone wants us to forget. Because if we remember that the *nation* Sweden once didn't exist, if we realize that the borders could be anywhere or not at all, how could we then be able to live with ourselves standing on the border deciding who is allowed to enter and who is not?