

Proposal

Smorgasbook—What an American Can Learn by Living in Sweden

You don't think your way into a new kind of living
You live your way into a new kind of thinking.

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Smorgasbook—What an American Can Learn by Living in Sweden is a short and easy read with anecdotes and analysis that go beyond myths, statistics, and stereotypes. It takes readers on a journey to discover a truer—and often very funny—version of Sweden, while learning about America in the process. Modest Swedes don't do a good job describing their country. They cover their successes with statistics and footnotes. The simple questions that Americans want answers to are not addressed. What does it feel like to go to the doctor when the government provides the health care? How did the Swedes manage to get such a generous family leave policy? What is it like to spend a day with the king?

Smorgasbook is long on stories and metaphors and short on numbers. Readers will remember and understand the free axes left for picnickers to chop wood and the unattended rowboats connecting islands for the convenience of hikers rather than international rankings of social trust. My training as a sociologist helps me explain strange Swedish customs like watching Donald Duck cartoons on Christmas Eve day—a crackerjack example of the intergenerational transmission of norms. *Smorgasbook* draws on more than two decades dividing my time between Sweden and America to answer the simple question: “Is Sweden as really as good as it sounds?”

Smorgasbook—is not a comprehensive analysis of Swedish society, but like a good smorgasbord a taste of this and a taste of that rather than a five course dinner on Sweden. Each chapter has enough to entertain the reader before moving on to the next bit. Nor is it a memoir, Sweden is the topic, not Heberlein. But since it is based on my experiences I do appear throughout the book. I first visited Sweden in 1988 and lived for a sabbatical year with my wife in 1995-96. We began dividing our time between Stockholm and Madison WI, where we were University of Wisconsin professors, in 2004 when she became a chaired professor at Stockholm University and I began teaching a couple hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle.

I have been working on *Smorgasbook* for the last several years. Articles based on my in progress chapters have been well received in the US media. *Vox* published my chapter on taxes. It generated over 800,000 page views, was acknowledged in the *New York Times*, and was reprinted in America and in Sweden (in Swedish). According to *The Times*, it also showed up on Trump Junior's mother-in-law's Facebook page. *Sweden may have the answer to America's gun problem*, also published in *VOX*, got over 600,000 page views. My experience at the Nobel Prize ceremonies led to *Six Things You Need to Know to Survive the*

Nobel Prize Banquet for Fodor's web magazine. My op-ed pieces on violence in Sweden have appeared in *Capital Times*, *The Wisconsin State Journal* and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. I have appeared on Wisconsin Public Radio and Radio Sweden to help explain Sweden to an American audience. The Swedes themselves are interested in what I have to say; my tax article was translated and published in a Swedish newspaper, *Arbetet*. I have published several articles in *Nordstjernen*, The Swedish Newspaper of America. So far, I have not had submissions from the book chapters rejected.

This small country on the northern edge of Europe attracts attention because of its great and almost unbelievable social successes—economic growth with low inequality, accessible health care for all at lower cost than we pay in America, free college, and more than a year of paid leave for parents. Many wonder—is this really true and if it is how can we get this in the United States? Our political debate today about single payer health care, tax cuts for the rich, and income inequality can surely be informed by learning more about Sweden.

Books on Sweden are popular. Ten publishers came out the past year with lifestyle books using the Swedish word *Lagom* in the title (one was issued in 17 languages). These short books feature pictures, recipes, cartoons and aphorisms to help readers live like Swedes. Besides the *Lagom* books there was *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning* and *A Scandinavian Mom's Secrets for Raising Healthy, Resilient and Confident Kids*. On the heavyweight side there are two 400-page footnoted books, Michael Booth's *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: The Truth behind the Nordic Miracle* and Anu Partanen's *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life*. Each sold more than 20,000 copies.

The problem with the *Lagom* and specific topic books is that they don't cover the wonder of Sweden. Nor do they give a feel for Sweden's complexity and challenges as they ignore issues like immigration, racism and taxes. Booth's and Partanen's books give insight into the Nordic countries in general while glossing over Sweden. Partanen is a Finn—who reports on living in America from a Nordic perspective and Booth is a Brit living in Denmark. Both drown in statistics, analysis and conversations with experts rather than stories and lessons. In 200 pages (80,000 words), my book deals more with everyday life and experiences. The book is full of stories about mistakes as my American expectations cause me to stumble, fumble and then recover, learning something about both Swedish and American cultures in the process. *Smorgasbook* is funny and easy to read.

At a presentation to a group of well-educated Americans, I once passed out a blank map of Europe and discovered that a quarter of my audience could not find Sweden. But they thought they knew a lot about it. That's because stereotypes (IKEA, socialism, high taxes) are easy. Living and experiencing a place—and truly understanding it—is hard. Like everyone, my ideas about Sweden were once based on a statistic here and a stereotype there, and were heavily shaped by my American viewpoint. It took me years of actually paying taxes in Sweden to understand why I hated my US taxes but loved my Swedish taxes. I found that my income tax bills were the same or less in the "high tax" country and Sweden levied no property taxes. Swedish taxes are easy to pay with 4 page form that comes already filled out. Socialism? I found way more government bureaucracy in America while discovering how Sweden cleverly uses markets to stimulate competition and create great deals for consumers.

Labor unions work with rather than against companies to create better products and embrace the future. In spite of its pacific face, Sweden has a lively gun culture. Hunting is popular; even in urban Stockholm, you can hear shooting on firing ranges.

For the past 9 months I have concentrated on the book rather than publishing chapters or essays, saving them for when I had the book under contract. I currently have review drafts of 12 chapters available. Last April I attended the Stockholm Writers Festival where I pitched to an editor from Norton. Based on her suggestions I have revised my proposal and organized five beta reviews from a library reading group in California. I am now making revisions to my chapters based on those reviews. I am far enough along in the book to seek an agent or publisher while there is still flexibility to revise existing chapters and include new chapters on topics that might help sell or market the book. The publisher of *Nordstjernen* published two of my articles and has solicited *Discovering* for their small list. Subscribers to that paper -- Swedish- Americans or people who have a lot of interest in Sweden -- are *not* my market. I want to reach the great many Americans who, like me when I first visited, know little about Sweden. I think the sales of Partanen and Booth and the *Lagom* books show there is a good market and I am looking for an agent/publisher who can help my book reach that market.

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Chapter Summaries

Preface: *The Party that Never Was* ^{completed}

Our first week in Sweden we invited everyone in our apartment building to a party. No one showed up. But that was a good thing because when I went out that Saturday morning to get wine and beer I discovered all of the liquor stores in country were closed for the whole weekend—so I had nothing to serve. Luckily my mistakes canceled out that day. The process of figuring out why this happened is a template for the rest of this book as I discover Sweden one mistake at a time. I introduce myself, describe how I came to live in Sweden, and explain what I am trying (and not trying) to do with this book.

Chapter 1. *Welcome to Sweden: Please Enjoy this Complimentary Ax* ^{completed}

This chapter is about living in a society with high levels of trust. At fire pits in public forests, I often find a stack of split wood and an ax. No one threatens other hikers with the ax or chops up picnic tables. Nor does anyone steal the ax. When forest trails continue to nearby islands, I'll find a small rowboat tied near the trail to take me there. Again, no one sinks the boat or steals the oars. And everyone returns the second boat to the starting point. Likewise, when buying our apartment, we bid with simple text messages. The closing statement is only two pages and takes five minutes to complete. This high level of trust holds Sweden together and makes things simple and efficient. By trusting people to do the right thing, Sweden doesn't need as many rules, checks, and lawyers.

Chapter 2. *Nature 25/7* ^{completed}

It's hard to think about Sweden (and most Nordic countries) without thinking about nature. Nature is accessible and part of everyday life for most Swedes. Stockholm, for instance, is one-third water, one-third green space, and one-third buildings and infrastructure. Central Stockholm is an island of buildings surrounded by Eco Park—five times larger than New York's Central Park—and waters of the Baltic Sea and Lake Mälaren. More important than nature's presence is the Swedes' access to it. People have time to enjoy nature. Schools close in a rotation so people can get to the mountains to ski. "No Trespassing" signs don't exist. The public has the right (by tradition and constitution) to walk in, camp one night, build a fire, and gather berries and mushrooms on private lands! Cheap and regular public transit takes you to islands, forests and mountains.

Chapter 3. *There's No Prize Like the Nobel Prize* ^{completed}

More people have heard of the Nobel Prizes than can find Sweden on a map. This century-old institution makes the Swedes arbiters of good science. For several days each fall, the prizes put Sweden on the front pages of newspapers worldwide. The Nobel Prize dinner in Stockholm celebrates science, literature, and Sweden's monarchy. It sets the Swedish standard for formal entertainment. After watching the Nobel Prize ceremony on TV, I fell in love with the dream of attending. Ten years later, I got my wish and spent an evening at the ball and, of course, made several mistakes. In this chapter I provide tips on surviving, and enjoying, the Nobel Prize banquet, should you ever be invited. I discuss the Nobel Prize's history, the Prize winners' experiences in Stockholm, and how Sweden's values keep the country from capitalizing on the Nobel Prize's brand. From my Fodors article <https://www.fodors.com/news/author/thomas-heberlein>

Chapter 4. *Families on Tracks* ^{completed}

Children are Sweden's collective wealth. They're not just MY kids, but OUR kids. When I arrived in Sweden for a sabbatical year in 1995 the United States was debating whether a new mother taking leave from work *without pay* should lose her job. Meanwhile, Sweden was debating whether parents (both mothers and fathers) should receive 75 or 85 percent pay for a year off to care for newborns. On the street I discovered that nearly every stairway going into a public building or down into the Stockholm subway has stainless steel tracks. I couldn't figure out what these were for until I began pushing two month old Arthur Lars O'Brien in his buggy. As a walker I found these tracks bothersome, because I had to carefully step between them when I met someone going up the stairs. As a part-time buggy-pusher I appreciated this small assist from the Swedes. These tracks are just a start. Swedish buses accommodate baby buggies and dip low enough to let carriages (as well as wheel chairs) roll aboard. The baby and buggy-pusher ride free. Low-cost daycare is available for all children from one year of age. Playgrounds dot central Stockholm. Families receive monthly government checks for each child. The institutional as well as the physical tracks make the tough job of parenting easier in Sweden.

Chapter 5. *Falling in Love with Taxes: One 15-Minute Form at a Time* ^{completed}

High taxes are one of the myths about Sweden. By living here we learned our income taxes were about the same as in the United States, and we pay no property tax! Filling out Sweden's tax form takes 15 minutes. Sweden devotes a higher proportion of its GDP to taxes than we do in the United States through imbedded sales taxes (like we do for gasoline) and various payroll taxes which we as taxpayers never see. In return Swedes get free what Americans pay for: healthcare, college and convenient daycare. This chapter expands on an article I wrote for *Vox. First Person*. <http://www.vox.com/2016/4/8/11380356/swedish-taxes-love> (839,000 individual page views)

Chapter 6. *I Pledge Allegiance to the King* ^{completed}

It's fun living in a fairytale land of kings, queens, princes, and princesses. Like most Swedes I watched a royal wedding on TV, attended the king's birthday celebration, and put queen stamps on letters home. Unlike most Swedes I got to spend a day with the king himself for which I was ill prepared; of course, mistakes were made. I did learn something about the

man and the challenges of his job. This chapter describes the advantages of having a monarch, and Swedish views of the monarchy. I am surprised to realize I've become a bit of a royalist.

Chapter 7. *My Medicine is Socialist* ^{completed}

Sweden spends fewer tax dollars per capita than the US to provide health care that is free to everyone. So it must be awful, right? It turns out it is fast (my doctor's office is a 10 minute walk), efficient (I rarely have long waits), friendly (my doctor comes into the waiting room to greet me), and effective. On most health indicators, moreover, Swedes are better off than Americans. The US cobbled-together public/private health system has more of what Americans expect of socialized medicine (bureaucracy). "When you look at the numbers and walk into the clinics, it's not surprising that some Americans are looking to Sweden for health-care solutions."

Chapter 8. *The Nanny State Here And There* ^{completed}

Sweden is supposedly socialist, but it's far more capitalist than Americans imagine. The government forces companies to compete, which often gives consumers more choices at lower prices. On the flip side America is far more socialist than I realized. The U.S. National Forest Service, the University of Wisconsin (where I worked for 30 years), and hunting and fishing opportunities provided by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources are all socialist systems compared to similar institutions in Sweden. That knowledge made me understand some good things about the "evils of socialism" in America, and triggered some second thoughts about markets in Sweden—like having to rent my office at the university while a government-owned corporation profited.

Chapter 9. *Lars, Get Your Thermos. Billy, Get Your Gun* ^{to be redrafted from published article}

If you told a Swede he could go hunting but take only his gun or his thermos, not both, he would struggle with the choice. An American hunter would laugh. Hunting and wildlife management/stewardship are more privately controlled than in the United States, where it's mostly government-run. US hunting strongly reflects our values of competition and individuality, Swedish hunting the values of cooperation, equality, efficiency and animal welfare: the different cultural values of Sweden and the United States spawn different hunting practices. An earlier version of this chapter, "The Gun, the Dog and the Thermos: Culture and Hunting in Sweden and the United States," was published in *Sweden and America*. 13: 24-29

Chapter 10 *Toys R Us in the Temple of Labor* ^{to be drafted}

When we first arrived in Sweden people from many walks of life were eager to tell us about Toys R Us. This international company refused to hire union labor because Toys R Us does not allow unions. Then, union labor refused to unload the boats and union labor would not drive the trucks to deliver the toys to stores. In spite of this, Toys R Us somehow got the goods to the stores and opened. What proved to be the final straw was that the Swedes, 90% of whom work under collective (union) agreements, would not shop there. So Toys R us

makes an exception and hires union workers in Sweden. I don't know if the story is entirely true, but I do know that the Swedes tell this story as a way of presenting Sweden to newcomers. Unions in Sweden work hand and hand with capital to try to make the best products more efficiently to try to anticipate change and embrace it together. By law unions are represented on company boards. There is no need to have a minimum wage in Sweden (or other Nordic countries) because strong unions can negotiate their own wages—the government doesn't have to get in the way of two equally powerful forces. The prime minister of the last few years had been head of the largest labor union in the country. Imagine that. This experience leads me to reconsider my negative attitudes toward unions in the US as I join the professors' union in Sweden.

Chapter 11. ***Hunting for Responsibility: Sweden's Answer to America's Gun Problem*** ^{to be redrafted from a published article}

We can learn something from the Swedes by shifting our discussion from gun-owner rights to gun-owner responsibilities. Sweden takes guns seriously, but also has a vibrant hunting and shooting-sports culture. Only responsible people can have guns. I make some suggestions for U.S. hunters. America will never be Sweden, obviously, but there things we can easily do consistent with our American gun culture to promote responsible gun ownership. This chapter expands on my “Sweden May Have the Answer to America's Gun Problems.” *Vox*. Aug. 8, 2016.

Chapter 12. ***Please Pass the Heartbreak*** ^{completed}

Author Bill Bryson describes eating in Sweden as a series of heartbreaks. This chapter explores Bryson's thesis of bad food and high prices (the heartbreaks), and reports on my efforts to find an American hamburger and anything resembling Mexican food. It ends with advice about bargains that result from immigration streams (forever the source of good international food), and some hidden dining places so beautiful and unexpected they will break your heart (in a good way).

Chapter 13. ***Skip this Chapter—it's about Sex and Alcohol*** ^{working draft available}

As one guidebook notes: “Americans treat alcohol like Swedes treat sex and vice-versa.” Liquor in Sweden is hard to come by. It's sold only in special stores and on certain days. It's not available in gas stations or grocery stores. Sweden's liquor stores often advertise drinking water, which is the Swedish version of “Just say no.” Meanwhile, my Swedish friends think it's reasonable for 15-year-olds (the age of sexual consent) to host their crushes overnight upstairs! Schools think it's smart to have condoms available at high-school dances. Why? Because teenagers have sex. Unplanned births among Sweden's teenagers are almost zero. But binge drinking among adults? That's more of a problem. Many Swedes hide their liquor bottles when heading to recycling sites, and joke that they don't know where to find the liquor store.

Chapter 14 ***Lagom and Swedish Pride*** ^{to be drafted}

Swedes are modest by reputation, but beneath that appearance burns special pride. Olympic gold is a big deal in Sweden, and even expatriates like me feel proud when watching

Charlotte Kalla overcome a 23-second deficit to win the cross-country skiing relay. At brunch one day Swedish friends discussed which animal best described our compatriots. I think Americans resemble young Labrador retrievers. We're always happy and eager to please, but sometimes jump up on people with our muddy paws. The Swedes? They're Siamese cats peeking out from behind the curtains. *Lagom* is a special Swedish word that is gaining worldwide attention. *Lagom* is where the Swedes hide their pride and head toward middle ground. Not too much and not too little. Don't stand out. It turns out things are much more complex. The behavior of Swedes is a combination of control and release. This chapter considers the concept and contradictions of *lagom*.

Chapter 15. *Immigrants in the Snow* ^{completed}

Although millions left Sweden in the 19th century, the country has seen substantial immigration since the late 1940s. Today, America starts wars and Sweden takes the refugees. During our war in Iraq, more Iraqi immigrants settled in one small town outside Stockholm than in the entire United States. The Swedes give them food, shelter and healthcare, but racism and social structures hinder assimilation. Immigrants bring much with them. As in America, many immigrants work harder than the natives to survive, and send money home. They're simply glad and grateful to live in peace, with opportunities to advance. Delivering a bed uphill in the snow is nothing.

Chapter 16 *Insider Insights for Outsiders* ^{five interviews completed—chapter yet to be drafted}

When I describe what it's like to live in Sweden my American listeners get wide-eyed. At first they don't believe any society gives everyone five weeks of vacation, nearly free but efficient healthcare, access to nature without a car, and 80 percent pay to care for newborns. Once convinced I'm not lying, they ask the hard question: "How do they do that?" As an outsider, I can't totally answer that question. So, I've been interviewing Swedish friends and colleagues to ask "How did Sweden get to be Sweden? How do you explain this country to your American friends?" This chapter helps me and my reader understand the possibilities for America.

Chapter 17. *Perfection Has Its Limits: Swedish Struggles* ^{to be drafted}

Sweden isn't perfect, of course. Swedes can't keep ice and snow off their streets, and so they suffer hundreds of broken arms, legs and shoulders every winter. Other injuries and an occasional death occurs when roofs shed ice. Graffiti is skyrocketing in Stockholm. In fact, although I live in a beautiful section of town, all the new "decorating" makes me feel as if I'm living under a Los Angeles viaduct. Begging on the streets is also up, rising from almost zero to the point where beggars now stake out regular posts on busy streets. In this "almost nearly perfect" society, I wonder why Sweden can't solve such problems. More dangerous issues are less visible, such as the decline in trust and a lost sense of community and the pressures of increased diversity. Today twenty percent of the Swedish population was born outside the country. Twice as many as when I first arrived. There is also continued pressure to adopt American values which is probably the greatest threat to the future of Sweden.

Chapter 18. *Lagom is a Team Sport* ^{to be drafted}

When I first started learning Swedish only two Swedish words that were part of the English language—*smorgasbord* and *ombudsman*. Today *Ikea*, *fika* and *lagom* are getting their noses under the tent. There have been spate of self-help books with *lagom* in the title. The idea seems to be if you walk in the woods, breath deeply and make kanelbullar you will be lagom. But it doesn't work that way lagom depends on other people. It is a relational concept. You can't be lagom on your own depends on others. To achieve what the Swedes have done, we must think like a community, and that is the substance of this particular smorgasbord.

<https://dces.wisc.edu/people/emeritus-faculty/thomas-heberlein/>