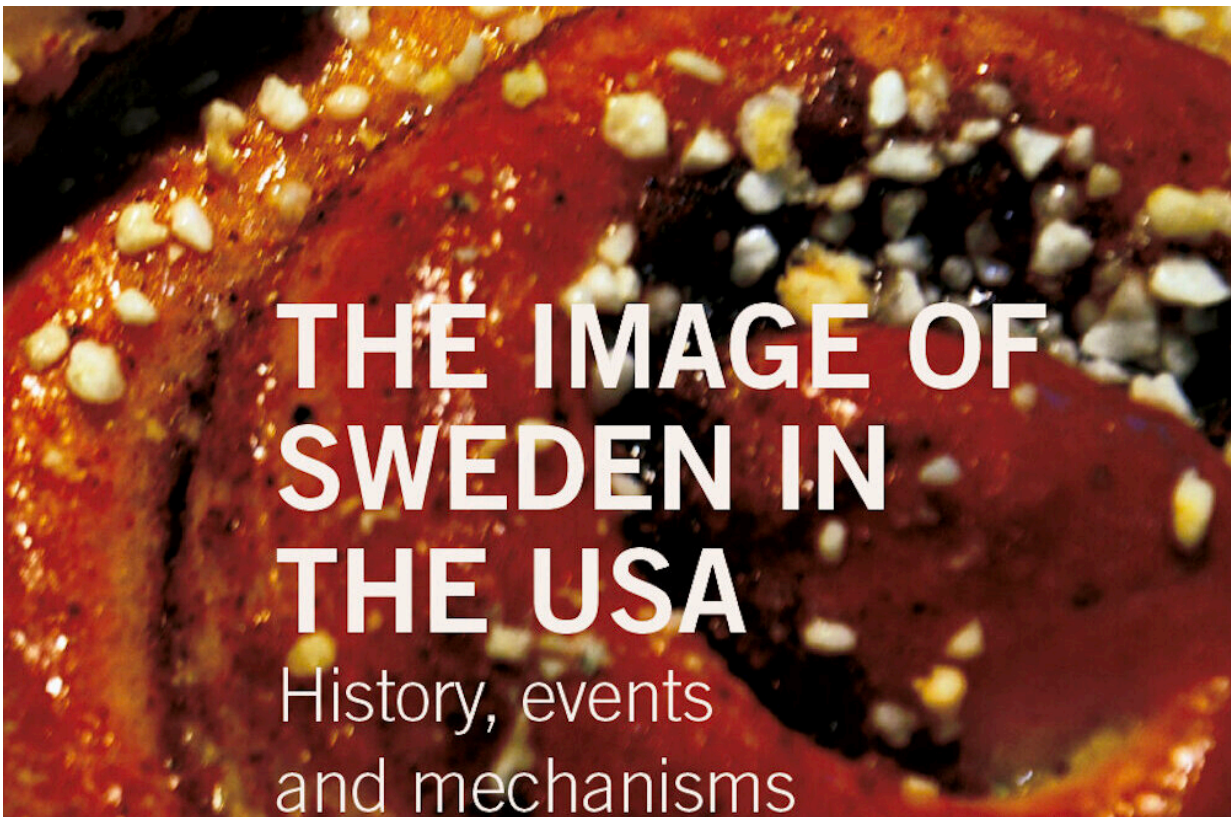


# Sweden seen through the eyes of the US: Changing perceptions?

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The Image of Sweden in the U.S.: History, events and mechanisms. Credit: Carl Marklund, Samtidshistoriska institutet

Sweden has long had a strong symbolic value in US politics, representing a utopia that has chosen a golden middle way between capitalism and socialism. However, the tone has not always been positive and this image has been criticized. In a [new report](#), Carl Marklund, researcher at the School of Historical and Contemporary Studies, investigates how the Swedish policy of neutrality and global events have affected the perception of Sweden in the US.

"There are many reasons why a particular [perception](#) of Sweden exists in the US, and one of them is the idea of Sweden as a peaceful country with an excellent welfare system. There has been a fascination with the Swedish model, how capital and the workers' movement have been able to reach agreement. But this perception has been destabilized, something that has developed over a long period," he says.

## **Changing perceptions about Sweden**

In *The Image of Sweden in the United States—History, Events and Mechanisms*, Marklund examines research in this field on the basis of the increasing debate about how Sweden is perceived—a debate in which a negative tone now occurs more frequently. Sweden is facing major challenges to its [security policy](#), so taking a look back at history can nuance and add substance to this discussion.

"The image of Sweden has been unstable for a long time. It is influenced by how Sweden acts, but also due to campaigns from Russian troll farms and Islamist groups. Perceptions are changing now that Sweden has left neutrality behind and applied for NATO membership, and nor is the welfare system as robust as it was," he says.

## An idealized image

From some perspectives, the image that developed over the twentieth century was very idealized. Its foundation was laid in the 1930s and 40s, when the Swedish "Folkhemmet" (people's home) was established.

Would building a world-leading, competitive society even be possible with such a comprehensive welfare system? This was particularly questioned by the traditional right wing. The image of Sweden also changed at the end of the 1990s, when it implemented numerous reforms to the welfare system.

"Obviously, what was actually done can be discussed, but it nonetheless had an impact on perceptions of Sweden. The biggest differences from before are the contemporary discussions about criminality, problems with integration and multiculturalism. In some places, Sweden is still regarded as a [role model](#), but more and more foreign observers seem to agree with the somewhat self-critical view of society that has emerged here over the past few years," says Marklund.

## Rewarding role

Historically, Sweden and the US have strong cultural ties, particularly because of the many Swedes who emigrated there in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the image has sometimes been positive, and occasionally negative. Sweden's role as a successful example has been rewarding, Marklund says.

"Over time, different values have affected the image of Sweden and, in exceptional cases, this has been due to a specific event. Examples include the recent disinformation campaigns about [social services](#) taking children from their parents and, similarly, the 1980s term 'barngulag' (children's gulag) that was coined in association with similar accusations.

"However, then—and now—the fundamentally positive picture outweighs the negative. When a country is described as a utopia, it is also tempting to try to find the phenomena that contradict this image, to slaughter the holy Dalecarlian horse, as it were," he concludes.

**More information:** Report: [The Image of Sweden in the USA: History, events and mechanisms](#)

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