

Out of the Shadow of Linnaeus: acknowledging their existence and seeking to challenge, racist practices in Swedish educational settings ¹

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Abstract

This paper suggests that a major shift is needed in the perceptions of educational policy-makers and teachers in Sweden, away from a focus on immigrants to recognition of racism as part of Swedish society and of everyday life in schools. It is only then that practices can be developed to overcome or at least ameliorate the current situation. The paper begins with a brief outline of theoretical frameworks which contribute to greater understanding, and provide more powerful explanations, of ethnic patterns and behaviours that confront us. This is followed by an examination of the Swedish context, in the form of a recent government enquiry into structural discrimination, to which we contributed. We end with a deconstruction of the main arguments and debates raised in the enquiry.

Carolus Linnaeus (also known Carl von Linné) is the most noted scientist in Sweden. He was botanist, physician and zoologist who created a classification system for plants and animals, and establish conventions for the naming of living organisms that became universally accepted in the scientific world. However, what is less celebrated in Sweden is that Linnaeus was also a pioneer in defining the concept of *race* as applied to humans. In *Homo Sapiens* he proposed four taxa or categories: *Americanus*, *Asiaticus*, *Africanus*, and *Europeanus*., based on place of origin at first, and later skin color. Each 'race' was ascribed with characteristics that were endemic to individuals belonging to it: Native Americans as reddish, stubborn, and easily angered; Africans, as black, relaxed and negligent; Asians, as sallow, avaricious, and easily distracted; while Europeans were depicted as white, gentle, and inventive. Over time, this classification was used by many European countries to validate their conquering or subjugation of members of the "lower" races. In particular the invented concept of race was used to enforce slavery, particularly in the new world European colonies, and also as a basis for ethnic cleansing in 1930s Europe. Before Linnaeus, 'race' had been used to distinguish between different nationalities; afterwards Europeans felt able to identify themselves as 'white'. The silence about Linnaeus' legacy on 'race', we want to argue, is paralleled by Sweden's silence regarding the racialisation of Swedish society, historically and today (Pred, 2000, SOU 2005:41).

Theoretical starting point

Despite its international reputation as a country imbued with human rights and social justice, Sweden seems to have a blind spot regarding its own internal practices concerning 'race' and ethnicity. This is despite strong government rhetoric of antiracism. In seeking to understand why antiracism largely remains at this rhetorical level, we draw on a number of recent theoretical developments. These include *critical race theory*, which is used as an umbrella concept for a number of social features relating to race and ethnicity in educational settings (Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2003) and *post-race theory*, which argues that 'race' is a fiction which can only be given substance through the illusion of performance (Nayak, 2006). Critical race theory has been important to our analysis of racism and antiracism in Sweden in two particular ways: in its conception of racism as normal, mundane and everyday, and in the value given to counter-storytelling which

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aims to give a voice to the marginalised and peripheral, and therefore most insightful, social groups. Post-race theory brings us back to the problem of language in defining and shaping social existence. Nayak (2006: 415) reiterates, as many previously, that ‘race’ is a discursive creation rather than a thing or actuality, and as such is continually deployed by people who should know better.

If it is an arbitrary sign used to divide up the human population, with no distinguishing genetic differences of any consequence, why do social constructionists continue to deploy the term at the same time as they refute its existence? It is these questions that have led some authors to consider whether race has become ‘a word too much’.

Thus Nayak terms the idea of race an *absent presence*, in the sense (we interpret) that whereas race has no existence, some basis for argument has been found in the identification of racial identity as stable and knowable. Nayak argues that if racial identity is ‘something we can assert but never accomplish’ (p418), then the production of race as a proper object is in itself a mundane form of violence. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, he suggests that ‘race’ like gender, is a performance, encoded and produced in everyday practice. Rather than criticise post-race theorising for ‘apolitical racelessness’ and rejection of structural inequalities (p421), Nayak argues, more orthodox thinkers should share its aim of developing a critical understanding of how we ‘do’ race as a means of informing us with strategies and techniques of how to undo it. Similarly, in Sweden, in seeking to understand how young people make sense of and use racialised categories, Trondheim (2006) identifies a way of speaking or ‘grammar’, which is used as a common language for talking about racialisation. Its characteristics are immediacy, embodiment, and spatial situatedness. It is reductive and generalised, unstable, partially self-deciphering and partially truthful, and employing reproductive logic.

Thus, the grammar’s *actual realness* is created and recreated on a daily basis through the *unintendedness* uncovered in the analysis above [grammar characteristics]. In other words: *the epistemological search for truthfulness contained in the dilemmas of personal anxiety is not sufficient to change, at the grammar’s collective level, the actual realness of meaning production because that which is socially productive for the individual in terms of his/her own actions unintentionally recreates the grammar in society* (Trondheim, 2006: 444, original emphasis)

The Enquiry (or Investigation)

Following criticism of a previous government enquiry for not addressing racism in Sweden more directly, a new governmental enquiry (involving about one hundred researchers in all) was initiated in April 2004, to identify and explore power, integration and discrimination and their supporting mechanisms in Swedish society. The aim was to illuminate structural discrimination and how it is practiced in different areas of Swedish society, including education. Two years later, *The Dilemma of Education Democratic Ideas and the Praxis of Othering* was published, which focused on education specifically. This part of the enquiry (SOU 2006:40) comprised ten studies, carried out by thirteen researchers from areas such as teacher education, pedagogy, anthropology and social science, mainly using qualitative research methods.

The overall message of the new enquiry is that the problem for education comes from two opposing strands; on the one hand, there is a declared democratic ideal of social solidarity irrespective of gender, class and ethnicity, which, however cannot operate in practice, because of discriminatory and excluding practices. Further, it is argued, excluding and discriminatory practices are the result of Swedish ‘narcissism’, western centrism, and the notion of “West and the rest”. This is evident in schoolbooks, classroom relations, schools and higher education, recruitment and employment practices, and discourses where Christian-centrism positions other religions as belonging to the “other”, as immigrant religions. Further, publicly agreed social values (värdegrund), attitudes and working methods of teachers and other school employees are saturated with images of ‘us’ and ‘them’, exacerbated by physical segregation (housing and education) of immigrants and minorities. A brief overview of each research study is provided below.

- ***School texts.*** Kamali (2006) questions how ‘we’ is defined in schoolbooks and related to ‘the other’. In history books, for example, the creation of a Swedish national “us” is associated with a superior “western” community which is modern, democratic and humane. The difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is sustained by histories which interpret racism, slavery, colonialism and holocausts through the lens of the modern, humane ‘us’ and the inhumane injustice of ‘them’. Books on religion express what is termed Christian centrism, where Christianity is produced as “our” religion, in opposition to Islam and other religions. In summary, school texts produce an imagined target group that is Western, Swedish, white and Christian..
- ***What makes a good teacher?*** This is explored by Dance (2006) from the point of view of students in Sweden and the USA. It was found in both countries that cultural stereotypes provide an obstacle to learning and to the development of good relations between students and teachers. Such stereotypes also exclude students from access to important social capital.
- ***Students’ self image.*** Runfors (2006) argues that teachers have a central role in the development of students’ self image. In exploring how publicly agreed social values (värdegrund) are inserted into everyday school life by teachers, Runfors shows that teachers’ have visions of ‘freedom’ which at the same time generate perceptions of ‘non-freedom’ associated with students with a foreign background. These students are thus described as constrained by their backgrounds, by their cultures and by their families. Like Kamali (2006), Runfors sees social values as shaped by ethnocentric beliefs about European and Swedish identity, and teachers’ interpretation of social values as contributing to cultural hierarchy and segregation in schools.
- ***Multiculturalism.*** James (2006) questions the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ and how it contributes to increased racialisation in schools, despite efforts to the contrary. It is argued that young people from minority backgrounds become the target of racialised profiling through the use of the body as a central sign of ‘othering’. For instance, ‘positive’ stereotypes expressed by teachers, such as black boys being good at basket ball, and Asian students, in mathematics, have substantial influence on students’ self image. Teachers believe that what they are doing is positive: however, the outcome is stereotyping where the body of the student is seen as a relevant marker for the future. Multiculturalism of this kind

thus fails to challenge wider patterns of institutional discrimination against minority students.

- ***Study and vocational guidance.*** Adults are viewed as important gate-keepers by Sawyer (2006), in her research on how imaginations surrounding ‘race’ and ethnicity among study and vocational guidance advisors (SYO) influence students’ opportunities to extend their education. She found that most study and vocational advisors employ culturally racist expressions in dealing with students with a foreign background. For example, they claim that such students have over-ambitious and unrealistic goals in relation to the labour market, due to their “problematic” families and gender relations i.e. patriarchal fathers. Sawyer argues that these discourses legitimise the practice in study and vocational guidance, of ‘cooling-down’ students’ ambitions and dreams for the future.
- ***Teacher language.*** Granstedt (2006) focuses on how teachers understand and describe “the multicultural school?” and on the language they employ when addressing students with foreign backgrounds. The study shows that teachers differentiate between the normal “us” and abnormal “them”, where ‘they’ are the problem (due to culture, difficult families etc.). In operationalising ‘interpretive repertoires’ teachers are seen to normalise everyday schooling as white and Swedish, thus avoiding having to reflect on racism or their own positions of power inside and outside the school.
- ***Teachers’ perspectives.*** Dahl and Lundgren (2006) show how publicly agreed social values (värdegrund) are produced within schooling and what this means for teachers. Drawing on teacher focus group discussion, it is argued that teachers lack clear guidelines on how to work with ‘good’ values. As a result they draw on common-sense discourses and intuition to legitimise what is right and wrong. Dahl and Lundgren (2006) argue that ‘common sense’ and intuition are problematic, not least because they are imbued with racist beliefs which produce students *either* as Swedes *or* immigrants.
- ***Educational policy, research and practice.*** Reporting on an overview of educational policy, research and development projects, Hällgren, Granstedt and Weiner (2006) focus in particular on how multiculturalism and racism have been constructed in these areas. One theme is the centrality of the term ‘immigrant student’ and how its meaning has changed over time. Another is the continuing policy and research emphasis on the language and values of incomers, which relegates the impact of discrimination, racism and power relations to background factors.
- ***Higher education.*** Mechanisms of exclusion and ethnic reproduction in higher education are the focus of study of Saxonberg and Sawyer (2006), in particular concerning importance of social capital to the reproduction of “race”/ethnic/difference and conformity/similarity/likeness. They argue that internal recruitment (of students and staff) results in existing meritocratic (or equality) guidelines being ‘stretched’ to benefit ‘ethnic’ Swedes.
- ***Appeal mechanisms in higher education.*** Andersson (2006) explores the extent to which discrimination occurs in the practice of the Higher Education Board of

Appeals (BAHE), and shows that appeals from non-Europeans are 4.5 times more likely to be rejected. The 28 discrimination cases scrutinised in the study were all rejected, often without any reasons given. Andersson (2006) maintains that BAHE's practice is inadequate, in that it disregards particular circumstances and fails to carry out investigations effectively.

Building on these studies, the enquiry offers suggestions for development and change in Swedish education. It is argued, for example, that one reason for the lack of research is denial of the problem, that is, of how 'us' and 'them' infiltrates Swedish society and affects individual chances to succeed. The following suggestions are offered in the area of education:

- Continuing to challenge the *silence* around racism and unequal power relations
- *Social values* (värdegrunden), to be revised and more directly connected to anti-racism and away from stereotyped imaginaries about 'us' and 'them'. What is needed is a clearly stated aim that schools must combat racist and discriminatory beliefs, as well as the ideas of Christian centrism.
- *School texts* to be subjected to continuous review with the aim of eradicating selective descriptions of Swedes and stereotyped images of the 'other'. Additional histories are also needed, of minorities and immigrants, racism, slavery, and holocausts etc.
- Teachers and school staff, to be made aware of how they themselves (as well as students) contribute to discriminatory beliefs and practices in schools, through, for example, *targeted professional development*.
- Arbitrariness and subjectivity in *grading* and *assessment* of students to be problematised as contributing to structural discrimination, and systems revised where they are seen to do this.
- *Contact persons* to be established in each school, whom minority and immigrant students and families can contact, and who can speak on their behalf, if necessary.
- Better and more open *recruitment practices* to be developed in higher education, which take into account gender, class and ethnicity, and which decrease the influence of existing informal networks.
- A new *research* centre to be established with as its main task, to investigate the mechanisms behind structural discrimination

Interpretation

The overall argument of the enquiry is that *Swedish society is threaded through with discrimination and that a new perspective is needed* so that people with a foreign background are no longer seen as the only problem group. This is a departure from the position of the previous enquiry, and has already attracted criticism from politicians with their eye on a forthcoming and finely-balanced general election. For example, the current Minister of Integration expressed disagreement with the evidence and conclusions of the enquiry, and called for more evidence on the existence of structural discrimination, while Göran Persson, the Prime Minister, similarly expressed doubts about the extent of structural discrimination in Sweden.

Denial of racism is a key point taken up in this and other recent Swedish government enquiries (e.g. SOU 2005:41). From a critical race perspective this denial is an example of how racism is interlaced and 'normal' and thus becomes *invisible* (and thus deniable). As argued in the inquiry, the actions of teachers and other school staff and the pedagogical legacy they inherit, reproduce established social hierarchies that we see in society as a whole. Since

teachers are in an important power position, they tend to have monopoly over ‘the truth’ and can therefore produce their worldview as the only legitimate view. They simultaneously render illegitimate alternative understandings by, for instance, ignoring or ridiculing racist or discriminatory incidents when they occur. This contributes to mundane or everyday racism, also termed symbolic violence in the enquiry.

The enquiry further stresses that researchers are trapped in scientific discourses and categorisations purporting to give the “true” definition of the world. However, the terms they commonly use such as ‘students with a foreign background’ or ‘ethnic Swede’ are neither neutral nor capable of equalising power relations. As Nayak argues, ‘race’ and ideas of race, ethnicity and ‘foreignness’ are discursive creations, which people who ‘should know better’ (politicians, teachers) should be aware of, and take responsibility for. Researchers and academics also need to acknowledge their similar role as gate-keepers. Thus, the mixed messages of politicians, researchers and teachers as encoders and producers of ‘race’ discourses, together with their shared role as gate-keepers, provide a sense of the complexity with which we are confronted, in seeking to challenge racism in Sweden at present; and how conditions for the development of such work are largely dependent on those with the power to classify.

Concluding comments

We conclude with an attempt at deconstructing, ‘pulling apart’ or looking under the set of texts and discourses that constitute the enquiry and its relationship with the state, teachers etc. We note first that this educational enquiry and the outcomes of the research it commissioned, constitute a major departure from previous enquiries and reports on education which positioned immigrants as the problem, and as deviant to ‘normal’ Swedish society. Well-funded in terms of its ability to shape the research agenda, the enquiry places much emphasis on the monocultural nature of Swedish policy-making and practice, and the existence of structural discrimination within the Swedish state and in everyday life. It is therefore to be welcomed for taking the arguments forward on education, and for providing new areas of research and theorising.

The publication of the education part of the enquiry was well publicised, although its impact to date is difficult to ascertain, particularly among educators to whom, one would imagine, it is principally targeted. As we have seen, social democratic politicians who have previously offered rhetorical support for antiracism, have sought to distance themselves from the findings of the enquiry, possibly because they do not wish to admit the widespread existence of racism in Sweden in this general election period, when they may well be blamed for their failure to address such an important issue. It is frequently the case that when politicians want to put things on hold, they arrange for a commission or enquiry, often in the hope that this will be enough to keep their critics at bay. Is this what will happen to this enquiry, or will there be moves (post-election?) to accept its message to some extent at least, or fulfil some of its recommendations?

As indicated in the work of Nayak and Trondheim mentioned earlier, the language used in enquiry suggests the *absent presence* of the concept of ‘race’, and the attempt not to essentialise difference. However a paradox occurs in terms of terminology. On the one hand, by referring to all non-national minorities as ‘immigrants’ or ‘having a foreign background’ it is suggested that the fictionality of the term ‘race’ is recognised, and also the impossibility of ‘fixing’ racial identity(ies) as stable and knowable. On the other hand, the ‘othering’ of minorities seems unavoidable, whether or not they are born in Sweden, if it is assumed that

minority cultural or ethnic status, being an 'immigrant' and 'having a foreign background' are synonymous, and un-Swedish.

One question in the analysis of policy-formulation of which this enquiry is an example, is which voices are present and which are absent. Our perception is that the power within the enquiry has remained with the lead researchers, who had a clear idea, when they were commissioning participants and contributors, on what was wanted in terms of outcomes and analysis. The fact that the enquiry was specifically into 'structural discrimination' denied, we suggest, the possibility of more fluid (e.g. poststructural) or professionally-based (e.g. from the viewpoint of teachers, analysis and critique, and made it difficult to portray (at least for us as researchers) more complex or nuanced phenomena and relationships.

In terms of the recommendations made, while mostly laudable, the scrutiny of school texts or in-service training for teachers, for example, are hardly ground-breaking or potentially transformative of the educational system, and to some extent, seem incongruent with the more politicised discourse of the enquiry as a whole.

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