



When Myth-Building Meets Nation-Branding: Fabricating the “Swedish Educational Model” in French Media Discourse (1964–2019)

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Abstract • The educational reforms carried out in Sweden have aroused persistent interest in the French public debate. This paper focuses on the evolution of the media’s portrayal of an alleged Swedish “educational model,” by highlighting cross-national influences over an extended time horizon. The origin of a stereotype is addressed from the point of view of the interaction between the Swedish branding of its own model and the demand, on the part of French elites, for a handy reform paradigm. Two crucial phases of idealisation are identified. At first, the popularity of the Swedish experiment in education coincides with the idealisation of Sweden as a laboratory for social reform. Since 2010, TV reporting has focused on both the resistance of this myth and the diversity of its possible uses. The expansion of market-oriented principles in educational culture is stigmatised as a “betrayal” of values associated with the Swedish reform experience (pupil autonomy, inclusiveness, anti-authoritarianism), while other players—such as international ranking organisations—intervene in shaping the media image.

Keywords • nation-branding, cultural diplomacy, school reform, national identity, educational transfer

Introduction

Since the end of the last century, Sweden’s status as the epitome of social utopia in the developed world has been the subject of increasingly sophisticated investigations. Travel writing has provided a self-evident empirical field; echoes of the country’s “success story” emerge in distinct times and contexts, as do its sedimentations in terms of cultural stereotypes, and misunderstandings.¹ From the end of the 1980s, the synergy between ethnography, cultural history and political science led Swedish research towards a reflexive insight: iconisation on a global scale could be understood in terms of its relevance for the *nation’s* self-image, if not as a motivating force behind the development of the welfare state.² The social contract that matured in the 1930s—a (democratic) “socialism in one country”—came to the fore as the source of a new form of collective pride. This belief in the nation’s exceptionalism proved to be a tool for the analysis of distinct policy developments: both the consensus behind

1 Kurt Almqvist and Kaj Glans, eds., *The Swedish Success Story?* (Stockholm: Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2004). An extensive bibliography explores the consecration of Sweden as a model for the world. Early examples include Göran Svensson, “Utländska bilder av Sverige,” in *Sverige, vardag och struktur*, ed. Ulf Himmelstrand and Göran Svensson (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1988) and Arne Ruth, “Det moderna Sveriges myter,” in *Svenska krusbär*, ed. Björn Linnell and Mikael Löfgren (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1995).

2 One of the first investigations of this kind is by Jonas Frykman, *Modärna tider* (Malmö: Liber, 1985).

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the proactive immigration policies of the 1970s and the reluctant acceptance of EU membership in the 1990s can be understood against this background.³

A more recent field of research is less concerned with the psychosocial impact of the image of Sweden (*Sverigebild*) than with the way it is negotiated and exploited in transnational arenas. In other words, the nation-branding practices with which domestic public authorities address the public abroad (political leaders, economic actors, media etc.) to enhance the country's reputation. This scholarly field brought fresh insights into the mechanisms by which a nation grows into an icon: a dynamics in which any clear-cut boundaries between one side's "reality" and the other side's stereotype become blurred.⁴ Prevailing national mythologies emerge as a result of a symbolic bargaining, tying the subject and object of idealisation together. The process often benefits both sides, on top of which it can be relayed back "to sender," as Marklund and Petersen put it.⁵

Although self-gratifying narratives increasingly appear to be a response to exogenous triggers, the way myth-providers and myth-users communicate and interconnect is rarely assessed. The purpose of this article is to bring out fully the interplay that makes national icons both powerful and ephemeral, i.e. their dependency on a *demand* for exemplarity. To do so, I chose to isolate a limited area of success in generating exceptionality through dynamic confrontation: the sphere of educational reform policies—in the fields of compulsory and secondary education. I intend to focus on how the iconic status of the Swedish school took shape in French public discourse, thereby enhancing our understanding of the path through which an international narrative of progressive Sweden was transformed into an influence tool. Thus far, the role played by Swedish welfare idealisation in the Latin world in making a successful "brand" has been neglected.⁶ A. M. Hellenes has highlighted how this silence relies on an implied assumption: modern Swedish identity-making would appear to be the product of a *Sonderweg*, rather than of intensified exchanges. This has discouraged any further scrutiny of clusters of intellectual interconnections.⁷ It is worth considering how self-gratifying images of social progress resonated with the expectations of the surrounding world. How they adjusted to the mirror image their targets reflected back.

3 See Bo Stråth, *Folkhemmet mot Europa* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1993); Urban Lundberg and Mattias Tydén, eds., *Sverigebilder: Det nationellas betydelse i politik och vardag* (Stockholm: Institutet för Framtidsstudier, 2008).

4 See Nikolas Glover, *National Relations: Public Diplomacy, National Identity and the Swedish Institute, 1945–1970* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011) and Carl Marklund, "The Nordic Model on the Global Market of Ideas: The Welfare State as Scandinavia's Best Brand," *Geopolitics* 22 (2017), 623–39.

5 Carl Marklund and Klaus Petersen, "Return to Sender: American Images of the Nordic Welfare States and Nordic Welfare State Branding," *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* 43 (2013), 244–56. On the way the xenostereotypes and the autostereotypes influence each other, see Kazimierz Musiał, *Tracing Roots of the Scandinavian Model* (Florence and Berlin: European University Institute and Humboldt Universität, 1998), 14 and ff.

6 The few exceptions have focused on the genesis of the Swedish myth in France, rather than on the role of transnational networking, or the connection with a public diplomacy agenda. See Yohann Aucante, "Den 'svenska modellen' i fransk samhällskunskap: En översikt," in *Médiations interculturelles entre la France et la Suède*, ed. Mickaëlle Cedergren and Sylvien Briens (Stockholm: SUP, 2015) and Gilles Vergnon, *Le modèle suédois* (Rennes: PUR, 2015).

7 Andreas Mørkved Hellenes, "Fabricating Sweden: Studies of Swedish Public Diplomacy in France from the 1930s to the 1990s" (PhD diss., Sciences PO, 2019), 29.

In many ways, the vision behind the establishment of a comprehensive compulsory school (*grundskola*, 1962) may be regarded as a step towards reframing the Swedish self-image into the epitome of a progressive ethos. Moulding the new generations in accordance with the requirements of a democratic, technology-run society was the rationale behind the overhaul of the curricula: a self-correcting dynamics that was meant to be “permanent.”⁸ On the one hand, the main pillars of this reform wave—pupil empowerment, anti-elitism, a combination of rational planning and equality—were homologous with the normative ground of the “Swedish model” at its height. On the other hand, its symbolic relationship with the surrounding world experienced an inversion. For a long time, the inspiration for the Swedish experiment in democratic schooling had come from abroad. The “school of the future” that emerged from the debates among progressive reformers in the mid-1940s was the product of an opening-up of internal debate to foreign input.⁹ Up until 1933, progressive Austrian and German pedagogies encouraged the alignment of school life and discourse with the principles of democracy; in the midst of the Second World War, visits to the USA by cosmopolitan Swedish social scientists reinforced the ideal of school as an arena for democratic citizenship and rational workforce selection.¹⁰

The post-war period would lead to a reversal of the direction of this interchange. By the late 1950s, the fast pace of reform created a concrete opportunity to showcase an original achievement to the rest of the world. It provided the first example of a State-run educational reform that was underpinned by large-scale testing into suitable instructional formats, the impact of class homogeneity on achievement, and the relationships between acquired knowledge and long-term skills.¹¹ The “control room” of the reforms—the National Board for Schools (*Skolöverstyrelsen*, hereinafter SÖ)—took over the role of disseminator of good practices. A stream of study visits from abroad, both from Capitalist and Socialist countries, prompted it to expand its competence in external communication.¹² From then on, Sweden changed from being an importer of educational innovations—with a focus on universal provision and socially inclusive approaches—to become a leading *exporter* of the same.¹³ In the following two decades, new reform areas—from mother tongue education for the children of immigrants to gender-awareness instruction—would validate this image. Consequently, the exchange flow with France can be approached as a subfield within the overall process, making the Swedish experience of school reform an international benchmark.¹⁴

8 A “school for citizenship” (*medborgarskola*), as it was defined in late 1940s pre-legislative reports.

9 *Den framtida skolan* (Stockholm: ABE, 1944).

10 See Ester Hermansson, *I amerikanska skolor* (Stockholm: Svensk Lärartidnings Förlag, 1940) and Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, *Kontakt med Amerika* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1941). For an analysis of these influences, see Gunnar Richardson, *Drömmen om en ny skola* (Stockholm: Liber, 1983).

11 Ulf Sandström, *Det föränderliga samhällets skolpolitik* (Stockholm: SISTER, 2001).

12 In the 1960s, school reform emerged as a key area of the cultural exchanges between Sweden and the GDR. Birgitta Almgren, *Inte bara Stasi: Relationer Sverige-DDR 1949–1990* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2009).

13 Torsten Husén, “The Swedish School Reform – Exemplary Both Ways,” *Comparative Education* 25 (1989), 345–55.

14 In recent times, transnational assessment bodies have acknowledged Sweden’s role as a forerunner, see *Improving Schools in Sweden, an OECD Perspective* (Paris: OECD, 2015). The extent to which this has factually influenced local policy strategies largely remains to be assessed.

An analysis of these parallel influence flows calls for a cross examination, based on a few principles that I would like to clarify further. The primary research area that I intend to assess concerns the interlink between the emergence of a successful reform field in Sweden and the processes of self-assertion of the nation in the global arena. To what extent has this area of reform played a decisive role in the good-will campaign towards France that was so accurately reported in A. Mørkved Hellenes' recent study?¹⁵ The second aim, drawing on the analyses of the dynamic dimension of cultural lending by Werner and Zimmermann, revolves around the complicated relationship that develops between a nation built as a "model" and another that draws inspiration from it.¹⁶ It aims to bring to light cross-influences, transfer channels and transfer "promoters" within media and academic circles. To achieve this goal, the scope of the present article is confined to two critical junctures in the internationalisation of Swedish educational policy: the end of the 1960s and the late 2010s. I will approach them through the way Swedish reforms were incorporated in the French domestic public debate. Such a focus calls for a cross-use of a variety of empirical sources. On the one hand, I focused on how the reform of compulsory education was "discovered" in French media, through an exhaustive census of public service broadcasts in the video archive of French television (INAtHèque database). On the other hand, by browsing the archives of relevant Swedish State boards, I tried to determine how, at peak times, this popularity was monitored and managed from Stockholm.¹⁷

"Swedish school" on the front page in Gaullist France

The French intelligentsia's interest in Scandinavian educational experiences is far from a recent phenomenon. From the 19th century onwards, French intellectuals have been intrigued by the way in which the spheres of education and praxis intertwine in Scandinavian cultures: from the status of educational crafts (*slöjd*) and home economics in schools, to the trade unions' commitment to retraining and re-skilling.¹⁸ The late 1950s move towards comprehensive schooling reactivates this Nordic "tropism" within a new frame. Swedish reform records seem to foreshadow a general trend towards mass education and systematic coordination between pedagogical scholarship and policy-making. A laboratory for reform ideas and, even more so, a call to self-assessment.

In a general way, the visibility of Swedish schools in the French media follows a parallel path to that of the "invention" of the Swedish life-style as a source of national self-questioning. The role of audiovisual media and news reports in this process has

15 Mørkved Hellenes (2019), 29.

16 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity," *History and Theory* 45 (2006), 30–50.

17 The empirical basis of this article is provided by printed and archive sources from the National Board of Education, the Swedish Institute (Svenska Institutets arkiv, SI) and the Information Commission (Upplysningsberedningen), established in 1963 and converted in 1966 into a permanent body: the Council for Information about Sweden Abroad (*Kollegiet för Sverigeinformation i utlandet*, hereinafter KSU).

18 On the representation of education in French travellers' texts of the late 19th century, see Vincent Fournier, *L'utopie ambiguë: la Suède et la Norvège chez les voyageurs et essayistes français (1882–1914)* (Clermont-Ferrand: Adosa, 1989). See also Serge de Chessin, *Les clefs de la Suède* (Paris: Hachette, 1935) and Emmanuel Mounier, "Notes scandinaves," *Esprit* 164, 1950.

thus far passed unnoticed. Nonetheless, a sharp shift in the tone of TV coverage of Sweden—from anecdotal curiosity to a focus on social conditions and Welfare benefits—can be observed in the first half of the decade. The number of TV reports focusing on the Swedish social landscape broadcast by the two existing public channels jumps from zero in the 1950s to a dozen between 1964 and 1971. This process culminates in 1969, when four long reports on Swedish society were broadcast. An analysis of the content of this output shows a growing emphasis on the features of the educational system. In nearly all of these examples, the Swedish school provides evidence of the impact of the Welfare State's expansion on citizens' identity and on the notion of communality. Within a few years, its transformation would become an object of interest in itself. In the autumn of 1969, a long report followed by a studio debate on Swedish educational reform trends inaugurated a series on topical global social issues.¹⁹

The place of young people in Swedish society was the main theme of “La Suède,” hosted by the political journalist Roger Louis.²⁰ This programme was the first social documentary on life in Sweden to be broadcast by the state network. In it, we learn that foreign languages are taught at an early age in Sweden: disseminating the know-how that a changing world will require is a recognised priority. The daily life of a middle-school class emerges in the form of a French lesson for a class of beginners; pupils appear intent on singing in chorus a recent hit by the pop singer, Françoise Hardy: if the content does not sound quite so “scholastic”—emphasises the commentary—this is what the pupils' delegates asked for. This fleeting reference to the breakthrough of democratic values in a learning context exemplifies a feature that would be expanded upon in later programmes: the high status and the general acceptance of practical, autonomous schooling. A commitment to equality permeates a set of observations that would elicit the same astonishment throughout the sample: the pupils' relationship with their teachers, addressed informally as “du,” and the minor role of assessment and marks. But the most provocative feature is the way democratic decision-making is consciously incorporated into daily training practices. As for educational content, the only subject matter discussed in the 1964 report revolves around education in social behaviour and relationships. The footage dwells on technical laboratories, cooking and typing classes: modern life has made its appearance in school since the latter (and through it, society as a whole) has started to address today's children as tomorrow's citizens. From an early age, the school system is keen to ensure its pupils are integrated by familiarising them with emerging skills and progressive social values. And not only in the public sphere: in the three longest reports between 1964 and 1970, interviews with pupils and teachers focus on sex education—“an issue that surprises us, us French!”—and resonate with popular clichés.²¹ Rather than on teaching content, the focus is on the confidence with which young people seem allowed to share their feelings with an adult, and receive guidance on intimate topics.

19 J-E. Jannesson, *Suède, école nouvelle*, “Arguments,” broadcast on October 29, 1969 on PREMIERE CHAINE.

20 R. Louis, *La Suède*, broadcast on January 31, 1964 on PREMIERE CHAINE.

21 See Carl Marklund, “A Hot Love and Cold People: Sexual Liberalism as Political Escapism in Radical Sweden,” *NORDEUROPAforum*, no. 1 (2009).

Since its very first mention, the Swedish school is essentially identified, on the one hand, with the anticipation of a future centred on a self-conscious, inhibition-free youth and, on the other, as a successful experiment in society's ability to domesticate its contact with adult life: i.e. canalising the emancipation from authority through a systematic acculturation to responsibility in all domains of life, in an over-technologised new world that is at once promising and threatening.²² The vision of a radical schooling in individualism would increasingly dominate the picture. In "The Swedish Paradise," the Social Democratic culture of compromise stands out didactically as an alternative to France's political impasse.²³ As school observations have shown, this alternative presupposes a training in social skills, provided from an early age. All school-life scenes—such as pupils acting as guides for the class during nature study visits, taking the floor on simulated radio programmes, exchanging letters without adult supervision—are the epitome of a life-style favouring conscious participation rather than blind obedience.²⁴ The skills cultivated in the schoolroom anticipate the horizontal roles that will be required both in the workplace and for interpersonal relationships.²⁵

The footage provides a condensed illustration of a society that combines inner cohesion with the absence of any obvious hierarchies. Its identity is outlined by daily routines and social interaction rather than professional duties, with a focus on kitchens and gyms, or on various forms of internships through which high-school students get an early taste of working life. In other words, the emphasis is on spaces and features that the French viewer is unlikely to find particularly "scholastic." In the short period between 1964 and the end of the decade, this oppositional *topos* is rapidly expanded—as is its rhetorical function—well beyond pedagogical thinking. It foreshadows new tools for social training and cultural consensus, in the context of the intergenerational and social unrest that preceded the explosion of May 1968.

Behind the concept-transfer: Hidden threads and connections

Both outcomes—the focus on Sweden as a benchmark of successful modernity and its framing through a supposed "educational model"—can be investigated from their exogenous or internal factors; let's try to shed some light on their joint action. In 1964, the creation of the ORTF (*Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française*) marks a step towards the professionalisation of the French broadcasting sector and greater autonomy of information. The new set-up broadens the scope for social investigation and international comparisons in public service, albeit within the limits set by political control and the growing tension between the Gaullist establishment and the student movement. Some of the presenters (G. Demoy, R. Louis) were sympathetic towards the latter: their reported surprise at the absence of any open conflict

22 A bomb shelter is one of the school facilities described in *La Suède*. Pupils' training to prepare for atomic attacks is also featured in *La Suède s'enterre*, broadcast on March 4, 1966 on PREMIERE CHAINE.

23 G. Demoy, *Le paradis suédois*, "Régie 4," broadcast on June 10, 1969 on DEUXIEME CHAINE.

24 *Suède, école nouvelle* (2019).

25 The links between participation at school and in working life are outlined in an interview with the newly elected Prime Minister, Olof Palme (*Contrat de progrès: la Suède*, broadcast on December 4, 1969 on PREMIERE CHAINE).

between ideologies and generations in the Swedish school environment is probably a sign of this.²⁶

Another source of interest is the accentuation of the pace of educational reform in Sweden, associated with its increasingly political dimension.²⁷ The Swedish school as observed from France was one in which change was in full swing: the aspect that all French reporters emphasised most—the high status of practical teaching and citizenship education—was a key factor not only in the birth of the *grundskola*, but also in the 1969 overhaul of the curriculum and the 1970s reform of the high school. Directly linked to the radicalisation of social democratic educational ideology and its growing connection with family politics, these reforms aimed to tackle pupils' sociocultural handicaps and bridge the perceived gap between school and everyday experience. Childcare, introduction to parenthood and gender equality were thus promoted as teaching subjects. Nevertheless, the chronology of recent reforms goes unmentioned, or is only vaguely hinted at.

French documentaries depict, almost didactically, the dual aim of a modern educational mission as provided for in the 1962 curriculum: education to self-determination and education to communal values.²⁸ The same applies to the revised curriculum's (*Lgr 69*) emphasis on *useful* content, social training, group-work and school democracy. But instead of emerging as unfinished, controversial political constructs, these features strengthen the exotic undertones of the reports.²⁹ The classic interview focusing on sex education in a 1969 broadcast can serve as an example. A passing reference is made to the controversial book *Living Together*, which was at the time subject to calls for censorship because of its matter-of-fact, non-conformist character.³⁰ But neither this conflict nor the work of the then-ongoing national inquiry into the scope and content of sex education was mentioned; indeed, sex education was simply depicted as proof of a miraculous harmony between social adjustment and personal fulfilment. The architects of the reforms as well as school officials typically have no voice in the early reports. The virtues of the system seem to stem from a natural fondness for organisation and social harmony. A recurring remark substantiates this supposed "cultural" pattern: surprisingly, a well-ordered life and inner comfort ("quiet") are the supreme ideals that the new Swedish generation cherishes the most.³¹

The lack of context is of a piece with the reports' impressionistic approach, but it undoubtedly serves a rhetorical purpose—which may account for the survival of the cliché over time and the swing of the political pendulum. Swedish "new" schools tell of a world where youth is at the helm.³² Promoted as a symbol of an impending cultural

26 Roger Louis was among the politically "unreliable" TV journalists fired in the aftermath of 1968.

27 One of the main threads of the Social Democratic Party Congress in 1969 was that the social-levelling aim of the *grundskola* had not been met. The solution was seen to lie in toning down the theoretical dimension of the curricula and developing a public-run *kindergarten*.

28 See the public inquiry stating the goals of the new system ("The purposes of schools in a changing society," *Grundskolan*, SOU 1961:30, 143 ff.).

29 The Comprehensive school system did not cover the whole population until 1972.

30 Katarina Apelqvist-Larsson, *Leva tillsammans* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1968).

31 *La Suède*, 1964. More provocatively, the "boredom" of a self-satisfied Swedish youth is a leitmotiv in the interviews in *Le paradis suédois* and *Suède. Ecole nouvelle* (1969).

32 Until the studio panel organised in 1969, the adult element remains marginal in the presentations.

revolution, school-life helps to sketch a “global” image of society, as Glover puts it.³³ Rather than a school, it is a realised utopia, detached from politics, and for which the only legitimate doubt is a philosophical one: where will this lead? Is the happiness of the Swedes *authentic*? Its supposed in-built “culturality” would make Swedish education, even for a distant future, both seductive and inappropriate as a model.

From exotism to mimetism?

It would be naïve to consider the crystallisation of a Swedish educational “icon” as the product of random field observations. Through the metaphors contained in the reports, a set of underlying normative projections comes to the surface. I will attempt to enucleate its content, before focusing on some specific icon-promoters. The image of a smooth tool of social adjustment conveyed to the French TV public runs in tandem with the emergence of a Swedish tropism in public debate: “*la suédomanie*” (Swedomania).³⁴ Scholarly investigations of this trend reveal a striking homology with the picture we have just encountered.³⁵ The residual question concerns their mutual relationship. Did the *suédomanie* of the 1960s lead to the rise of a correlative “educational model” with the same egalitarian undertones? To what extent, conversely, did the observation of Swedish school politics help to shape the idea of Swedish exemplariness, while retaining a certain autonomy from its ebbs and flows?

In terms of social expectations, the Swedish narrative of the well-balanced compromise resulting from expert scrutiny is clearly the antithesis of the French political climate under De Gaulle, and a fascination for this approach filters through to the Gaullist circle itself.³⁶ The popularity of Swedish decision-making culture had been fuelled since 1967 in the wake of an essay by the Editor-in-Chief of the popular weekly magazine *L'Express*, exploring potential ways out from the tension between the demands for social emancipation and industrial modernisation.³⁷ The turbulence surrounding the country at the dawn of May 68 would confirm his diagnosis. Between 1968 and 1970, a stream of reports published in magazines and national newspapers consolidated the strategic function of Swedish reformism: to embody a non-revolutionary response to the crisis in advanced industrial societies.³⁸ The electoral campaign following De Gaulle’s resignation would confirm this interest on the part of France’s political establishment. In June, Pompidou, De Gaulle’s

33 Nikolas Glover, “A Total Image Deconstructed,” in *Histories of Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding in the Nordic and Baltic Countries*, ed. Louis Clerc, Nikolas Glover, and Paul Jordan (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2015).

34 This term was coined by a French politician to pinpoint the political and media establishment’s fascination with Swedish social achievements. It was instantly taken up by Swedish institutions concerned with the country’s reputation abroad. See “Suédomanie, en myt?” *Aktuellt om Sveriged-information* 2 (1972).

35 Aucante (2015); Vergnon (2015); Mørkved Hellenes (2019), 190–98.

36 One of De Gaulle’s later inter-classist catchwords (*la participation*) resonates with his personal interest in Swedish reform politics, as highlighted in a letter from ambassador G. Hägglöf, 26.3.1968, FI a:76, Upplysningsberedningen, Riksarkivet (RA).

37 In his widely-circulation pamphlet dedicated to the economic fate of Europe in an American-dominated world, Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, *Le Défi américain* (Paris: Denoël, 1967) had pointed to the “Swedish model” as a recipe that the French political elite should have followed.

38 Special issues or series of articles dedicated to Swedish politics appear in newspapers of mixed political tendencies (*Le Figaro*, *L’Humanité*, *Les Echos*) and in popular magazines (*Paris-Match*, *La revue française*).

Prime Minister and successor president, praised Sweden as his own social ideal; three other candidates would also quote it as a source of inspiration for their own programmes.³⁹ The flexibility of its educational system, in particular, was praised as a remedy to the recurring crisis of capitalism and the social exclusion it creates.⁴⁰

The inner contrast between doctrinarism and pragmatism in education was already a *topos* in the media's portrayal of Swedish schools. After 1968, the parallel between "school model" and "social model" becomes explicit, as does the contrast with the tempestuous French situation, ranging from extenuating industrial disputes to generational conflict. The fact that this narrative lends itself to opposing demonstrations does not diminish its appeal. Traces of it pop up in the way in which the school is analysed in the TV report "the Swedish paradise" by the socially-committed film-maker, G. Demoy, broadcast in June 1969. From the outset, Sweden is portrayed as the country "that our politicians, economists and trade unionists like to take as an example."⁴¹ The underlying question was one that would remain the same in the following decades: did the model really live up to expectations? The school system provides an ideal verification tool. The answer is provided in the form of a meeting with a vocational retraining course for adults, and with a compulsory school affected by the recent reform of the curriculum: the introduction of *Lgr 69*. The link between a visible integrative utopia and possible reform strategies has become clearer, with the latter calling to overcome the boundary between practice and literature and the hierarchies of traditional values that steered the system. Testimonies gathered from pupils and teachers would only serve to confirm it: teaching had become more in tune with real life and the personal dimension. Sexual education was once again raised as an example.

The format of the 1969 report makes it particularly revealing of the public's expectations; the report from Sweden was followed by an in-depth conversation between an audience of young French adults and two guests—an industrial representative and a student—in a live connection from Stockholm. Echoes of the anti-authoritarian revolt in French society are constantly in the background. Are there any pupils' unions? Is Swedish youth also rebelling?—are among the questions from the audience. The answer, which filters from the information provided by the guests, suggests that in Sweden there are fewer reasons to regard the institutions as an enemy. Educational innovations such as the recent suppression of the *studentexamen* (Swedish Baccalaureate) open a window on a utopian future dominated by the idealism and spontaneity of a new generation.

Throughout all the broadcasts, different demonstration schemes coexist. On the one hand, the reports essentialise the diversity of the two educational approaches. The Swedish rejection of any kind of selection is set against a competitive, elitist school. On the other hand, after 1968, there is a tendency to show that the French reform agenda is heading in the same direction. This is a likely explanation for the increasing number of documentaries once Jacques Chaban-Delmas had been sworn

39 Revealingly, Pompidou confided his feelings to *L'Express*, the magazine most committed to pro-Swedish PR.

40 One of the candidates in the 1969 elections, the reformist socialist Michel Rocard, referred in his campaign to the achievements of the Swedish system of lifelong learning.

41 *Le paradis suédois* (1969).

in as Pompidou's Prime Minister (June 1969). Despite its unusual features, the Swedish example now plays the role of legitimising the stated intention to overhaul the national education system, as well as the good intentions of its conceptors. The title of a TV programme ("Progress contract") directly takes up a Chaban slogan in favour of a social ceasefire. To test its feasibility, the report analyses the Swedish practice of trade union involvement, along with the broader idea of participation from an early age, which is proudly outlined by the newly-elected Prime Minister (and former Education Minister), Olof Palme.

Policy lending and comparisons were the primary focus of that year's TV reports.⁴² The format of the programmes is altered: more airtime is given over to studio debates and the nature of the reforms and their transferability are subjected to a more in-depth analysis. The question is now directly addressed with the help of Swedish experts, interacting in fluent French and familiar with the expectations of their hosts. The new narrative style permeates the first documentary entirely devoted to Swedish educational experiences, "Sweden, a new school." It was produced after the presidential elections and in collaboration with the Swedish Embassy. On this occasion, the link with the guidelines for the ongoing reform of primary-school curricula in France and the exemplary status of the Swedish experience emerges from the format of the broadcast itself. This takes the form of three long reports interspersed with in-studio conversations between the journalist and two experts: one Swedish (a national education inspector) and the other French. The context is now clearly outlined: it is that of the voluntaristic turn of the 1969 curriculum: education in gender equality, an increase in practical subjects such as parenting skills and domestic science, and removing the last traces of separate educational pathways within compulsory schooling. Despite the abundance of technical elements, the Swedish example did not come from the content of the reforms but from much more intangible qualities: the "spirit" highlighted by the above-mentioned documentaries. It is the long scenes filmed in the classroom and the physical attitude of the Swedish pupils that serve as an example.⁴³ The directive role of adults and teachers seems marginal and the role of active methods is underlined.

The studio-recorded section served to rationalise all these impressions and translate them into basic principles. The Swedish expert proudly rattles them off: the social utility of study, the need to constantly update content, and self-education and self-evaluation, which are at the heart of the compulsory school reform but would also soon inspire the reorganisation of high schools and universities. Faced with these perspectives, the French representative openly placed himself in the role of willing pupil. As he points out, the primary school reform project launched in August by the new Education Minister, Olivier Guichard, follows the same track with its move away from centralism, increased responsiveness to the needs of individual pupils, and less "academic" contents and methods.⁴⁴ The supposed consensus

42 "The admiration for Sweden has made way for imitation"—notes the press review on global *Sverigebild*, issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Sverige i utländsk press* (Stockholm: Utrikesdepartementet, 1969).

43 "Look at these faces," the off-screen commentary exhorts from the opening frames.

44 In primary teaching, the humanities would be embedded within an interdisciplinary "awakening" subject: a reform that brings to mind the notion of "social orientation subjects" in Swedish curricula (from 1962 to the 1980s).

is somewhat undermined by the general tone of the presentations. Some signs of concern emerged from a long interview with a group of Swedish high-school teachers: French-language teachers, since, in this case too, the interviews were conducted without interpreters. The psychological impact of the issue of autonomy and democratisation on the teaching profession comes to light: as these first-hand observers explain, when teaching focuses on the individual pupil and the role of the teacher-judge is abandoned, the teacher is placed under an unprecedented psychological burden.

A final rhetorical thread falls outside the scope both of idealisation and comparison. It articulates a vague anxiety over the consequences of the path Swedish reformers appear to be pursuing undaunted, which involves a dismissive approach towards the aura of the school-institution and the disillusionment of the adult world. Some of the remarks by J.-E. Jannesson, the presenter of “Sweden, a new school,” hint at this cultural distress: “It is as if the family did not exist [...] You are busy creating a new people [...]” Indeed, all these questions revolve around the moral legacy of the Welfare State as such. They could be likened to broader, ambivalent narratives of Swedish success and its psychosocial corollaries. But child welfare and school life will lastingly provide the scenario in which such issues can be articulated.

The mail archives of the Information Council (KSU) bear witness to the growing unease of Paris-based officials with the media’s new approach to *suédomanie*: sarcastic press reviews of “Sweden, a new school” make them afraid that excessive sympathy might turn into its opposite; a diagnosis that proved to be prophetic.⁴⁵ The end of 1969—the peak of *suédomanie*—is also when media interest in Swedish society begins to decline: the critical and self-critical hints contained in the latest reports anticipate a downward trend, which will be followed by total indifference in the second half of the 1970s.⁴⁶ However, for reasons I will attempt to investigate, interest in the school system takes other forms, spreads to the educated classes and will resurface with equal force.

School narratives as a branding tool

The search for the specific origins of the French media’s focus on Swedish education provided me with an insight: this popularity was gaining ground in parallel with the launch of a systematic branding campaign for Swedish social achievements. In his study of the genesis of the Swedish Institute (SI), Glover outlines the advent, in the 1960s, of new tools and rhetorics of state-run cultural diplomacy.⁴⁷ How does the new Swedish “educational model” fit into this picture? A study of cross-influences should see this as a relevant question. It calls for a different kind of source material, as well as recent literature on Swedish information and propaganda targeting a French audience. The aim is to bring out specific iconisation agents that anticipate the target’s expectations, fuel the demand and channel it into certain directions. Our attention should in fact be focused on two areas: on the one hand, the way French interest was monitored in Sweden thanks to the upgrading of the public-service branches in

45 Letter by D.M. Winter (Paris Committee spokesman) to the Foreign Ministry on November 5, 1969.

46 In “Contrat de progrès,” a female activist brings up the recent wildcat strikes in the Port of Gothenburg as an example of the existence of pockets of discontent among workers.

47 Glover (2011).

charge of the *Sverigebild*; and on the other hand, the role of the 1960s educational reforms in shaping an attractive image of Swedish social reformism.

The launch of a specific “French action” (*Sverigeaktionen i Frankrike*) by the Information Council in 1963 provides a test-case of the relevance, within a specific context, of a coordinated approach to information about Sweden. The convergence of three factors works as a trigger: interest on the part of business circles to strengthen their positions in France; the business-like marketing of a country treated as a product; and a switch in focus towards social content and pilot reforms.⁴⁸ The Council’s initiative drew on the findings of a poll on the *image* of Sweden in France carried out by an advertising company. The test bench for the so-called “Paris Committee,” created to coordinate opinion-building initiatives, was the organisation of a state visit to France by the King of Sweden (28–30 May 1963) and Prime Minister Erlander. These high-level exchanges coincided with two major exhibitions dedicated to Sweden.

A strategy designed to shape a positive image of the country through advertisements and reports in important news outlets is clearly outlined in the minutes of the Paris Committee. Its articulation with a general policy trend would emerge in the years to come. At first, the information provided concerned “generalist” actions based on visits by Swedish celebrities, the promotion of industrial products and advertisements in the biggest news outlets.⁴⁹ But it soon evolved into more focused initiatives, targeting journalists interested in Sweden and intellectuals sympathetic to the country’s social achievements, as well as sociologists and civil servants from De Gaulle’s *commissariat au plan*.⁵⁰

A trend well highlighted by Glover is confirmed by the study by Mørkved Hellenes: in the second half of the 1960s, the branding focus is on best practice in family and social reforms. This aspect plays a particular role in the relationship with France, driven by the presence of responsive journalists and politicians included in official visits, and finally by the outbreak of interest in the French public debate. It is easy to see that the new focus of school policy (often in connection with family policy) plays an increasing role both in the demand for information from France and in the supply of documentation, to such an extent that it gains a place in the “global” country narrative, as articulated by the cultural PR-agency in charge of study exchanges, the Swedish Institute. An early example is the study-visit programme called “Knowledge of Sweden,” then “Living in Sweden.”⁵¹ The initiative was aimed at middle-ranking French public servants and advertised in *Le Monde* and other newspapers. Beginning in 1964, a specific space was reserved for education and for the recently adopted reforms, which were presented to the French guests in an introductory speech by a senior official followed by a documentary film.

An enhanced synergy between different branches of State administration—nation-branding agencies and national sectorial agencies—acted as a trigger here.

48 See Glover (2015).

49 Protokoll 10/01/1963 and 21/10/1963, Kommittén för Sverigeaktionen i Frankrike, Upplysningsberedningen, RA.

50 *Ibid.*, protokoll, 7/11/1963. The broadcast *La Suède* was produced in the aftermath of the King’s visit to Paris.

51 Pariskontoret, F III – 26, 1969, Svenska Institutet, RA.

Quantity and quality of the information output were underpinned by a greater emphasis on dissemination and self-promotion on the part of the National Board of Education. Disseminators were often administrative or scientific leaders of ongoing reform projects; features of the reform projects involving a social relevance—civic education, vocational orientation in school, etc.—were replicated from one publication to another.⁵² The material then reached the SI—which coordinates dissemination—and was conveyed in the form of brochures.⁵³ A first wave of broad publications in French was edited, both in France and in Sweden, in connection with the country's first wave of popularity, linked to the visit of Sweden's head of state and the "action" of 1963–1964.⁵⁴

This pre-organisation of information flows was, in part, the result of the professionalisation of the nation branding process described by Glover and Mørkved Hellenes; this might suggest that the school that was so admired in France was, essentially, one of the tools that the Swedish political system was using to create an *interesting* narrative about itself for the outside world. Nevertheless, to point out the coincidence between two paths of iconisation is not the same as explaining them. Image circulation is not a one-way street, nor does it take place in the abstract; what interests me most is the way *different* channels of imitation and conceptual borrowing relate to each other. At this stage of exchange expansion thematic choices are conditioned both by a political input and by the feed-back of Swedish diplomats on the ground, sensitive to the target's responsiveness. These are the premises of a hybridisation: unwittingly, Swedish diplomats and press officers, academic institutions from the two countries, and French policymakers in search of proven examples created a common narrative.

The first revision of the comprehensive school curricula in 1969 marks a turning point, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. From that year onwards, the layout of the foreign-language information sheets produced by SÖ became more sophisticated⁵⁵. A summary of the first *grundskola* curriculum had been published in French in 1964 and a 1969 redraft resulted in a multilingual, fully-illustrated booklet presenting the salient innovations of the new curriculum.⁵⁶ The iconography features images of students at work in front of industrial machines, engaged in the shooting of a film or busy in a fully-equipped laundry. Exactly the same choices find echoes in French TV reporting of the time. Thematic leaflets were published to reflect both the general intentions of the system and specific priority reform areas: vocational guidance (PRYO), education for the disabled, sex education.⁵⁷ Most of the leaflets released by SI ("Actualités suédoises" series) on educational matters—a standard

52 *Informationsblad* 1965–1972, Skolöverstyrelsen, RA.

53 *Upplysningsmaterial på främmande språk*, SI. Over the years, technical data sheets (*faktablad*) disseminated through the diplomatic representations had delivered information on the school system in scattered and generic form. Production of the data sheets increased sharply towards the end of the 1960s. *Informationsblad*, BIC:1, 1965–1968, Skolöverstyrelsen, RA.

54 See Bengt Hultin, *L'école nouvelle en Suède* (Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen, 1964) and *L'Enseignement en Suède*, Notes et études documentaires, n° 3044 (Paris: La Documentation française, 1963).

55 Bib 1, 2, 3, Skolöverstyrelsen, RA.

56 Hultin (1964) and SÖ, *Voici l'école de base* (Stockholm: Liber, 1971).

57 *Informationsblad*, BIC:2, 1969, Skolöverstyrelsen, RA.

information source for foreign media—were in fact re-editions of SÖ publications.⁵⁸ In the ensuing years, they would report methodically on reorganisation projects (SIA-reform, 1974–1976 and the new Nursery School, *förskola*, launched in 1975) or specific curricula reviews, namely religion instruction and sex education. Values such as equality and integration were foregrounded: the focus shifts from organisation of the system or statistics towards ideology and opinion-building. The focus on technical analysis within SÖ shows that modernising the style of these campaigns was becoming a strategic dimension of the school reforms—a task which required the assistance of private consultants.⁵⁹ Thus, while the nation-building branch was the messenger, the message itself was being processed within the reform branch—all the while occupying a growing place in the national self-image.⁶⁰

At this stage, the role played by Sweden as the object of the French debate undergoes a quality shift: the context was no longer that of a passive response to an act of goodwill towards the country and its products but of an internal push towards the *imitation* of a societal project.⁶¹

SI-arranged information tours now become a preparation for the transfer; school officials and teachers are increasingly targeted. Both the crew of “The Swedish paradise” and the author of the first monograph on education in Sweden had been part of such initiatives.⁶² According to the scheme expertly illustrated by Marklund and Petersen in their essay *Return to Sender*, the debate that had taken hold in France and the increasing expectations from the target audience steer, to a certain extent, the branding actions. The French *Sverigebild* trend was conscientiously monitored both by the press reviews of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by the Information Council. The upward trend represents not only a success indicator, but a concrete spur to strengthen and focus the communication.⁶³ Unsurprisingly, the budget estimations of the information campaign for France for 1970 put the emphasis on education issues.

The strategic alliance between the educational and nation-branding branches confers a more programmatic character on the information material designed for a French audience; some of the topics highlighted are both a picture of the current political agenda and a call for comparison.⁶⁴ At the same time, the increase of the bulk of information available for circulation prompted a synergy with French media

58 *Upplysningsmaterial på främmande språk*, Evi:96, SI.

59 *Informationsfunktionens roll i SÖs reformarbete* (report dated 12.6.1970). Konsult Kollegiet AB. The State reform bureaucracy’s increasing focus on external communication was also a consequence of its assumption of new responsibilities for awareness-raising campaigns targeting immigrant populations.

60 Senior officials, including SÖ’s general director, often feature among the authors of French summaries of the latest reforms. See Jonas Orring, *L’école en Suède: un aperçu sur l’enseignement primaire et secondaire* (Stockholm. SÖ-förlaget, 1968).

61 Letter by G. Hägglöf on 26.3.1968, FI a:76, KSU, RA.

62 Furthermore, a study visit for eight French journalists specialising in education was arranged from 20 to 26.4.1969 by the press service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—in cooperation with SÖ.

63 Initially, the Council’s minutes record the request for more funds for information in France, due to a peak in spontaneous interest; later, they would acknowledge that the demand for exhibitions and conferences had become “too great to be met.” Protokoll, 21.10.1969 and 8.4.1970, KSU, RA.

64 *The principle of objectivity in religious education, Environmental education, Sex roles studies...* *Informationsblad*, BIC: 3 1970–1972, Skolöverstyrelsen, RA.

actors. A synergy, or a role-play: a new type of cultural mediator—largely young, dual-nationality authors—operate within the Board, tasked both with debunking mythical constructions and substantiating them. One of the new contributors was R. Weber, a 29-year-old journalist who, in 1970, wrote a short pamphlet for the SI on *Gender Role Retraining in Swedish Schools*. This was soon followed by *A Showcase of the Swedish School System* and *Learning to Become a Swede* (1971), on immigrant education.⁶⁵ At the end of the day, French journalists (namely, press correspondents in Sweden) helped nation branding bodies to complete the work: transforming an ambivalent object of fascination, the Swedish school, into an all-round “model.”⁶⁶ At the end of 1969, National PR-agents noted that the infatuation for Sweden in France was so intense that it could not be ascribed to their efforts. At the same time, it was becoming a handy tool to target them.⁶⁷ Both sides of the picture, diplomatic branding and mythologisation, had come closer and closer to each other.

Influence networks and international expertise

A further, partially independent influencing factor can be observed: the international networking of the Swedish reform architects. Torsten Husén, the academic mind behind the move to the comprehensive school system, soon developed into an agent of conceptual transfer: a prolific, widely translated ambassador of a success story.⁶⁸ The way it intertwines with the emergence of a national educational “brand” deserves close scrutiny.

Since the late 1950s, Husén was the main architect of the first body for evidence-based comparisons of national educational systems: the Stockholm-based IEA.⁶⁹ There is a striking coincidence between the launching of the *grundskola* and the release of the first IEA pilot study on pupils’ achievements, in 1962.⁷⁰ The Swedish comprehensive school—a pioneer institution, inspired by the synergy between policymakers, research and business—became the laboratory of future, large-scale assessment. As early as 1961, the records of Swedish researchers in the field of longitudinal follow-up of pupils’ performance led the OECD to organise a conference in Stockholm on a related topic: the best exploitation of talent through the school system.⁷¹ Husén himself took part in it. That same year, the OECD conducted its country review of the Swedish education system. A year later, Husén would visit France

65 *La rééducation du rôle des sexes (sic) dans les écoles suédoises; Une vitrine du système scolaire suédois; Apprendre à devenir suédois.*

66 Stockholm correspondent M. Salzer praised the high school’s “reform of the reforms” in an article based on an interview with T. Husén (*La réforme des réformes*); see also “Swedish School System in Transition” (*L’école suédoise en période de transition*, SI, “Actualités suédoises”), published on March 25, 1974.

67 Protokoll, 1.12.1969, Kommittén för Sverigeaktionen i Frankrike, Upplysningsberedningen, RA. Linked to this are the budget proposals for the Frankrikeprogram 1970/1971. They envisage the release in France of a multi-volume book on various aspects of current social affairs in Sweden.

68 See Torsten Husén, *An Incurable Academic: Memoirs of a Professor* (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1983).

69 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, founded in 1958. The secretariat was moved to Stockholm in 1969. From 1970, Husén also chaired the newly-created International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), based in Paris.

70 Joakim Landahl, “De-Scandalisation and International Assessments: The Reception of IEA Surveys in Sweden During the 1970s,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 5 (2018), 566–76.

71 “Ability and Educational Opportunity,” Kungälv, 1961.

on his first academic mission to the country.⁷² Some of his students would follow in his footsteps, allowing the first experiences in the field of transnational comparison of the performance of education systems to draw inspiration from Swedish know-how. A Swedish conceptual toolbox would continue to influence the agenda of the international promoters of educational innovation: UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and above all the OECD. After having been tested in Sweden, key-words such as “recurring education,” “competences” or “e-skills” were incorporated into a “doxa” of educational modernity.⁷³

The “permanent reform” machinery put in place in preparation for the creation of the *grundskola* triggered an internationalisation dynamic, punctuated by institution and network building and individual study visits. It was not simply a question of marketing Swedish achievements abroad; these scholarly exchanges provided a qualitatively different kind of exemplarity compared to the message conveyed by cultural diplomacy channels. They did not promote a political agenda, but a view of education. The message came across as matter-of-fact: the performance of educational systems was suitable for comparison, and solutions tested in a given context could be measured and generalised. The ideological context of the 1960s—the rise of Sweden as a “leading nation” in the area of social modernisation—was conducive: the international career strategies of Swedish experts would benefit from the country’s growing reputation.⁷⁴ At the same time, test scores consolidated the status of Swedish experiences as quality benchmarks.

To sum up, the French public would be confronted with a twofold seductive input: records of successful reform-making, and the availability of a new generation of experts who were entitled to provide advice and guidance. In the ensuing explosion of conferences and symposia, they were acclaimed as representatives of the education of the future, thereby crediting Sweden with specific expertise in certain areas of school modernisation: equality and social integration through education, civics and sex education.⁷⁵

The global consequence of these converging actions can be summarised as follows: the creation of a doxa, and the stabilization of a social image. Recent research helps us discern how this process unfolded. Mørkved Hellenes has singled out a concrete legacy of the strategies of cultural diplomacy targeting France: the creation of a Swedish cultural centre in Paris in 1971.⁷⁶ During the early years of the cultural centre’s programming, the changing status of the child in society played a limited, but subtle role; events and exhibitions with a focus on children’s life and

72 Husén (1983) recalls that, all through the 1960s, he was involved in the country reviews that the OECD produced on three countries: the United States, Germany and France itself.

73 Torsten Husén, “Lifelong Learning in the ‘Educative Society,’” *International* 17 (1968), 87–99. Through his assignments at the OECD’s Centre for Research and Innovation in Education in the 1990s, and the latter’s role in the elaboration of “PISA” rankings, the Swedish scholar and senior civil servant Ulf P. Lundgren, paved the way for promoting this concept as a standard tool for international testing of educational achievement. Ulf P. Lundgren, “Pisa as a Political Instrument,” in *Pisa Under Examination*, ed. M. A. Pereyra et al. (Rotterdam: Sense, 2011), 15–30.

74 Landahl (2018), 569.

75 Often, the proceedings of the conferences held abroad by these experts feature in the Board’s external communication output. See T. Husén’s report on “Education in the Year 2000,” 1.11.1971, *Informationsblad*, BIC: 3 1970–1972, *Skolöverstyrelsen*, RA.

76 Mørkved Hellenes (2019).

school practices clearly appealed to the curiosity of the educated public.⁷⁷ The correspondence records of the centre also reveal a keen interest on the part of French high-school teachers, public servants and journalists, along with requests for further information.⁷⁸ New media channels then follow suit. In the early 1970s, a paperback collection (*La Suède en question*) was released, in cooperation with SI, to provide the French public with a picture of the most salient features of the Swedish approach to social organisation. The school reform was the subject of a separate volume; like Servan-Schreiber, the author was a journalist at *L'Express*.⁷⁹ Academic interest in French–Swedish comparisons also develops rapidly: making *this* particular school relevant for French topical debate had become a conditioned reflex, ready to operate whenever the internal political climate required it.⁸⁰

The Swedish school's comeback in French media coverage (2010–2019): From model to *anti-model*?

It is in its translation to television that the iconisation process reaches its zenith. cursory glimpses of life in Sweden are elevated to the status of an in-depth report, generally leaving image-exporters and transfer agents concealed behind the scenes. Both lessons and warnings from the “model” are displayed in a categorical manner. It has been all the more puzzling to recognize the same pattern in French media discourse produced 50 years later—in the era of laboratory teaching, e-learning and virtual classrooms.

An examination of the archives of French state radio and television and the databases of generalist press articles from 1945 to the present day shows that the focus on Swedish education policies of the late 1960s was followed by a gradual decline in media coverage, which has been interrupted by a reawakening of attention in the last 8–10 years.⁸¹ As in the past, French attention to the state of Swedish education is being stimulated by the vigour of the internal debate in Sweden. In the background are the controversies resulting from the organisational reforms promoted since 1989, in particular the municipalisation of administrative and pedagogical responsibilities, and the partial deregulation of the curricula: but in this case, the impact has clearly been a delayed one. A recent example is the controversy within the Social Democratic government over the effects of opening up the education system to the market, which contributed to the central role played by the school system in the campaign for

77 I refer in particular to the touring exhibitions *Make Way for the Children!* (“Place aux enfants”) and *Children in Town* (“Les enfants en ville”), held between 1976 and 1978. F 2:4, Pariskontoret, Svenska Institutet, RA. In the case of the latter exhibition, the content was provided by the newly-created Play Environment Council (*Lekmiljörådet*); it replicated previous promotion campaigns run in Sweden.

78 The airing of *Sweden, a new school* provoked “several hundred” requests for information at the Swedish Embassy.

79 Serge Richard, *Ecole nouvelle, société nouvelle* (Paris: Seghers, 1971).

80 Although no specific studies were produced, the *Revue française de pédagogie* dedicates ample space to the reporting of experiences and reviews of Swedish expertise in different areas, through the section “A travers l'actualité pédagogique” (Exploring current pedagogical trends).

81 I have only been able to find one reference to the Swedish school system in TV programming since the early 1970s; this was from May 1979 and refers to the law prohibiting corporal punishment. This silence would be broken only in the 1990s by a few sporadic flashes of information. The same pattern applies to radio broadcasting.

the Swedish general election of 9 September 2018. By drawing attention to the way school companies in Sweden are allowed to generate profits, several French media surveys have addressed the boom in private education, the commercial logic governing competition between schools for the enrolment of children and the transformation of teachers into service providers.⁸² The prevailing mood is one of outrage: press articles and TV surveys portray a system that has become irresponsible, where schools and kindergartens listed on the stock exchange have bent their teaching to fit the logic of advertising, and they then transfer their failures onto the shoulders of pupils. This narrative has quickly developed into a cliché: as a matter of fact, the education situation had been described along the same lines during elections in Sweden four years earlier, when a TV report by the Franco–German channel ARTE claimed in 2014 that the school system in Sweden was “going off the rails.”⁸³

The drastic nature of the French criticism, particularly on the left of the political spectrum, is not surprising in light of the special regime (*l'exception culturelle*) that France claims for the cultural goods sector in international negotiations, when faced with the pressure of market forces. But there are also other explanations for the dramatic tone: the denunciation of the alleged commercial intoxication of the Swedish school system reveals a hidden anticipation: the persistence of a utopian outlook, rooted in a narrative tradition. In fact, many reports show frustration with the fact that Sweden “is not what we believed,” that is, a system where equality and equal opportunities are a flagship.⁸⁴ This bewilderment has provided grounds for criticism: this could possibly explain why the “failure” of the system has been repeatedly addressed on state radio, television and in the press with a substantially uniform approach and tone on the part of the various commentators.⁸⁵ A successful myth-building exercise is now at odds with its objective: the existence of a positive bias among foreign observers becomes an aggravating factor or, to quote Marklund, a “trap.”⁸⁶

As is often the case with conceptual transfer, the debate that had developed in Sweden years earlier was resurrected in France and transformed into a one-sided message about Sweden’s “new” neoliberal course in education. Since 2008, the Swedish government and school authorities have launched several assessments of the unforeseen effects of the transfer of management responsibilities from central government to the municipalities.⁸⁷ These assessments led to increased supervision by the central authorities of, for example, the opening of private schools and teacher certification; but the protracted controversy in Sweden has progressively transferred it into the French intellectual arena, where similar issues were emerging. The debate no longer focuses on the “foundation” of a model, but on its alleged “demolition.” To this can be added a controversy in domestic policy in France: the polemical use of

82 Violet Goarant, “Privatisation de l'école, le fiasco suédois,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, September, 2018.

83 *Suède: Les dérives du système scolaire* broadcast on September 7, 2014 on ARTE.

84 Beginning in 2013, the country's fall from first place to last in the PISA surveys is constantly mentioned.

85 *Education: l'anti-modèle suédois* broadcast on September 8, 2018 on FRANCE-CULTURE.

86 Carl Marklund, “A Swedish Norden or a Nordic Sweden?” in *Communicating the North*, ed. Jonas Harvard and Peter Stadius (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).

87 SOU 2007:28, *Tydliga mål och kunskapskrav i grundskola*, and Proposition 2007/2008:50, *Statens skolinspektion*, Riksdagshandlingar.

the “failure” of a system against its *laudatores*. The evils concerning the deregulation of public education correspond, in fact, to reform guidelines that have also been envisaged in France, by boasting of the “lesson from Sweden,” from the spreading of a market approach to schools to the concept of educational vouchers (*cheque éducation*).⁸⁸ In fact, going back a decade, we can see that the new Swedish approach to education was welcomed by the French political and media establishment; a welcome that was also extended to other measures designed to open up the labour market and the management of public services. References to Sweden in the so-called Attali Report on Growth (2008) and earlier praise on the part of both Conservative Prime Minister François Fillon and the Socialist presidential candidate Ségolène Royal are indicative of a consensus.⁸⁹ Following this type of narrative, Sweden is extolled as in the past as a laboratory of future trends. The polemical tone with which reporters have recently denounced deregulation can then be interpreted as the revolt of one stereotype (ethical and normative) against another, focused on flexibility and market adjustment. But neither of the two are new.⁹⁰

For this reason, the difference in tone between the two periods—the shift from admiration to criticism—is perhaps apparent. One could say that the attention that reporters have been paying to the current crisis originates from the long pre-existing habit of attributing to Sweden both exemplariness and exoticism in the areas of childhood and education. The trend in the media coverage of the issue in the years 2010–2017 shows that the echoes of election campaigns have only reactivated a search for confirmation that operates, in the French debate, as a conditioned reflex. In other words, the Swedish school acts as a symbol of “something” more important than the content of empirical assessment in itself. Comparing the sample of articles and broadcasts I have collated, the very term “educational model” provides the most frequent and telling topos. No reporter is able to forgo it, regardless of the thesis to be proved: popping up in both critical and supportive contexts, the label is used as a descriptive term.⁹¹ Very often, in the case of Sweden, images and stories of real life and school alternate, as if the latter had to epitomise, once again, the country’s destiny as a whole.

Domestic uses of late utopian narratives in education: from anti-authoritarian school to equal parenthood

As was the case in the 1960s, interest for Swedish situations is largely conditioned by the outbreak of intricate controversies in the French social arena: the connection is clear in the case of the bans on the *burka* (2010) and corporal punishment

88 Decision No. 6 of the Attali Report (“allowing parents to freely choose the place where their children go to school [...]”), see footnote 89.

89 I refer to the Committee on the Liberation of Growth, created by President Nicolas Sarkozy and chaired by Jacques Attali, a former advisor to François Mitterrand. In the final report, Sweden is cited 24 times (*300 décisions pour changer la France. Rapport de la Commission pour la libération de la croissance française* (Paris: La documentation française, 2008)).

90 In the first decade of the new millennium, both in the French and international perception, the contents of the “Nordic myth” shifted from praise for the welfare state to praise for the system’s responsiveness in the face of crises. See Marklund (2017).

91 The expression is found in the titles or subtitles of many articles and programmes (*Le modèle éducatif suédois*, broadcast on April 18, 2012 on FRANCE 3) and in the text of the other reports cited.

(2019).⁹² The focus on schools' integrative performance is then, once again, a metaphor: the implied issues are still authority vs. liberation, changing gender roles, *l'enfant roi* (child-as-king).⁹³ Rather than on actual reforms, reports will focus on the climate of Swedish debate, current rules and everyday life. These themes have been developed in particular by the television network ARTE, which is particularly keen to identify pan-European trends. Compared to the 1960s, the identity of the mediators has changed: they are dual-national journalists, cosmopolitans, inclined to frame the comparison in a pan-European perspective. However, this does not diminish the role attributed to Sweden: that of embodying—in fields such as children's rights—the most radical approach. A source of admiration and a source of fear at one and the same time; a paradigm of a communication gap. The Swedish education myth—in a globalised Europe—lives on as an instrument of competitive identification between the two countries. A teleological approach brings together almost all the subjects of the TV reports focusing on Swedish education, such as the advent of non-selective schooling and the pupils' seizure of power: for French state television (2010), Sweden is simply a country “without the *baccalauréat* and without marks,” a description that was already news 20 years earlier.⁹⁴ In 2012, *Soir 3* news referred to the Swedish “educational model” in the beginning of a sketch about a child-centred society.⁹⁵ In contrast to France, the “difficulties” facing pupils are not the focus of the Swedish educational institution's concerns: schools are committed to promoting the well-being of pupils, without recourse to competition or grades, and all intellectual activities take place in a pleasant environment. Another report, from the multicultural Stockholm suburb of Kista, reveals that “equality for everybody” is the school principal's motto.⁹⁶

In addition to liberal assessment methods, other aspects of the Swedish school system are praised as examples of an emphasis on autonomy. In reporting how Swedish schools teach gender equality as a subject of instruction or how the niqab and cultural differences are accepted without drama, journalists do not take a stance. They let the “facts” speak for themselves. Sweden seems to be entrusted with the mission of demonstrating what the egalitarian schools of tomorrow will look like. This conclusion (a new version of an old topos) also applies to contexts where the concept of a “model” appears in an analogous, but reversed, way. In the evening news on the France 2 TV channel, the triumph of an omnipotent tyrannical child at school and then in the family is pilloried.⁹⁷ In this sense, too, Sweden would prove to be a forerunner: the methods used by its schools show how the country would be at the mercy of total domination by children and are evidence, according to the reporter, of the bankruptcy of the entire social design: “the Swedish educational model is shattered.”⁹⁸

92 *En Suède, ils acceptent le voile*, “Avenue de l'Europe,” broadcast on March 13, 2010 on FRANCE 3 and *Suède. Éducation zéro violence*, broadcast on November 29, 2019 on FRANCE 5.

93 *L'enfant roi suédois*, broadcast on November 12, 2013 on FRANCE 2.

94 *Système scolaire en Suède: pas de bac pas de notation*, broadcast on June 14, 2010 on FRANCE 3. *Suède sans bac*, “Le Journal de 20H,” broadcast on June 4, 1991 on ANTENNE 2.

95 *Le modèle éducatif suédois* (2012).

96 *En Suède ils acceptent le voile* (2010).

97 *L'enfant roi suédois* (2013).

98 *Ibid.*

Conclusion: From national stereotypes to international benchmarks?

The analysis of these two distinct outbreaks of media fascination for educational innovation in Sweden leads us to a series of interrelated reflections. The most striking one concerns the enduring stability of the image that had crystallized since the 1960s TV reports: Swedish school-life proved to be an inexhaustible source of good practices, rhetorical variations on the theme “inclusive, non-selective education, with respect for each learner’s uniqueness.”⁹⁹ This narrative is deeply intertwined with the imaginary construction of Sweden as a social utopia; at least in the French context, it has been a cornerstone of it. Both contingent reasons (the connection with the introduction of the *grundskola*) and the keen demand, among French educational stakeholders, for ways out of the generational impasse of May 1968, boosted the process. A virtuous circle was created between supply and demand, making school innovation—from nursery school to adult retraining—a crucial area of the State-run branding campaigns.

This successful invention has left a lasting mark. In contemporary TV reporting, school narratives are repackaged in a natural way with edifying tales around migrant integration, the rejection of violence in society, or gender equality.¹⁰⁰ Inevitably, this made the visibility of Swedish schools’ performances highly dependent on the reputation of the social machinery as a whole. In our sample, the occurrence of TV reports matches quite accurately the ebb and flow of the “model.” The impact peak (1968–1969) overlaps with the unanimous global consensus toward the “third way,” while the sharp trend reversal of the early 1970s is mirrored by the hasty dismissal of Swedish schools as a media topic. The end of the Social Democratic hegemony and the growing criticism of Welfare in the 1980s would confirm the trend, making Swedish schools “invisible” for a time. The resumption in the 2010s (three to four TV reports per year, up to the end of the decade) echoes the attempts of the Reinfeldt government to restore the Nordic myth as a flexible response to the world economic crisis. In this phase, the Swedish references in educational policy resurface after a long silence, but now for different reasons: the ability to meet new challenges such as decentralisation, multiculturalism, IT literacy, etc. The abrupt switch to a gloomy appraisal, around 2014, stems from different causes: the demoralising impact of the 2012 “PISA shock” and the media coverage of the failure of integration politics. The refugee crisis of 2015 poses a stark challenge to Swedish society’s ability to cope with cultural difference, both in technical and in ideological terms; the Swedish school system is then unanimously treated as an “antimodel” in French media coverage.

That said, the picture is perhaps more nuanced than it might appear. A complex interweaving of inward expectations and outward actions have merged to make the Swedish reference appealing. While the unconscious image has proved stable in attributing certain qualities to the Nordic educational culture (as the obsessive use of the term “model” demonstrates), the media relevance of the Swedish example

99 In turn, such a high expectation may explain the blatant disappointment that punctuates the new cliché of the Swedish “counter-model,” in the aftermath of the 2012 Swedish “PISA shock.”

100 The link between education and sexuality is the most constant feature, from the 1960s to the present day. The commitment of Swedish Nursery schools to dismantling gender stereotypes is a recurring topic in the latest TV report (*Il, elle, hen. La pédagogie neutre en Suède*, broadcast by ARTE on February 7, 2014; *C’est quoi ton genre?* “Regards,” broadcast by ARTE on February 26, 2019).

has been more shaky. The periods in which the Swedish school system makes news in France are those in which the Swedish debate on schools has been most lively. The personal commitment of the Social Democratic leadership, from Erlander to Palme, to educational policy and pedagogical expertise, has been an influential element in the outreach of domestic reform experiences. In the first stage, Swedish-run branding, backed up by the French reformers' positive interest in the same issues, has had a direct impact on the image filtered by the media, whereas the 2010s are more dominated by French societal issues (commodification of education, "burka ban" and corporal punishment ban) in which Sweden offers easy insights. Curiosity for a completely different world dominated the documentaries of the 1960s and their dreamy speculations. In the 2010s, it seems clear to everyone—producers and audience alike—what "that" world stands for: that is, the extreme outcome of familiar cultural trends. Conventional narratives of exemplarity and exaggeration, against a backdrop of substantially common concerns: "Did Sweden go too far?"¹⁰¹

Carl Marklund has shown how, since the 1990s, the rhetoric around welfare had become "less Swedish and more Nordic."¹⁰² To some extent, the school system constitutes an exception: French media rhetorics persist in delivering a "total," essentialised image of the country, identifying a national culture with an idea.¹⁰³ The programme titles ("The Country of Parity," "The Country where spanking is forbidden") allude to this.¹⁰⁴

The tenacity of this *national-educational* myth, provides proof of its relative autonomy, which seems to stem from the successful effort of the Swedish reform elite to be acknowledged internationally as a reference, converting Swedish reform aims—in the words of a senior OECD official, Andreas Schleicher—into the "gold standard" of educational reform.¹⁰⁵ An activism that is, after all, material proof of the intention behind the Swedish reform to mean something to the world. In the early 2000s, U. P. Lundgren was the perfect illustration of a reformer who transferred his experience as a promoter of an ideological shift in national reform practices into an international arena. In this respect, a new feature, which is particularly evident in the final phase examined, clearly separates the two outbreaks of icon-making. The authoritative voice, which calls to criticism or to self-assessment, no longer refers to daring experiments or cultural leanings: the yardstick is now *transnational*. In addition to the echo of Sweden's self-criticism about the outcomes of the deregulatory trend of the 1990s, the main source of media attention lies in PISA surveys, press releases from the OECD (namely its Paris-based Centre for Educational Research and Innovation), and comments on both by French pedagogical experts. All of the media reports I have examined take it for granted that the PISA surveys provide evidence of a crisis: a 2014 report by ARTE links the growing privatisation of schools with the fact that Sweden dropped to a level "below the OECD average" in the 2012 PISA

101 This was the subtitle of *L'enfant roi suédois*, broadcast in 2013.

102 Marklund (2016), 6.

103 See Glover (2015)

104 *Le pays de la parité: au pays de la fessée interdite* (a "rose-tinted world," according to the presenter).

105 A. Schleicher, "How to return to the "gold standard" for education," *OECD Education and Skills Today*, April 3, 2017, <https://oecdeditoday.com/how-to-return-to-the-gold-standard-for-education/> (accessed November 30, 2020).

survey.¹⁰⁶ Four years later, *Le Monde diplomatique* refers to the 2015 PISA findings to note a “sharp decline in science and mathematics” compared to 2000.¹⁰⁷ In 2018, the state radio channel France-Culture quotes, once again, PISA 2015 findings, that it describes as an “electric shock” for Sweden.¹⁰⁸ Here, France seems to have followed the general tendency to attach more and more credit to international comparative assessments, which have largely replaced specific “models” in education, according to the “comparative turn” noted by K. Martens, and the growing importance attributed to numerical data in the assessment of results.¹⁰⁹ But what makes the whole thing intriguing is that even this refocusing on *objective* criteria was triggered by influential *Swedish* institutional players, and allowed to amplify a reputation. In other words: the “educational model” that the French media continues to yearn for lives on, but as a concept. A quality benchmark that even Sweden is now urged to live up to, by a demanding audience.

106 *Les dérives*, 2014.

107 *Le fiasco*, 2018.

108 See footnote 85.

109 Martens (2007); Sotiria Grek, “Governing by Numbers: the PISA ‘Effect’ in Europe,” *Journal of Education Policy* 24 (2009), 23–37.

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