Populism and the Mistrust of Foreigners
– A Reality to Reckon With

Right-wing populist parties are making headway in one European country after another – including Sweden in connection with the recent election successes of Sverigedemokraterna [The Sweden Democrats]. It is time to address the challenge that this presence presents. Attempting to ignore these parties by either regarding them as a transient phenomenon or as something far removed from our shores is not a sustainable alternative. Right-wing populist parties are already so well established in the European political arena that a continued democratic and civil societal development in Sweden demands an immediate discussion as to how these parties can best be addressed.
1. An Introduction to the Research Domain

1.1 An Unsolved Problem: Sweden as a Dual Exception

One problem in the study *Populism och missnöjespartier i Norden* (Fryklund & Peterson 1981) [Populism and Parties of Discontent in Scandinavia] remained unsolved. This is where the authors discuss why no form of political party of discontent had developed in Sweden during the first part of the 1970s that could be compared with the Fremskridtsparti [Progress Party] in Denmark (Mogens Glistrup), the Fremskrittsparti [Progress Party] in Norway (Anders Lange) and the Landsbygdsparti [Finnish Rural Party] in Finland (Veikko Vennamo). At the beginning of the 1980s, Fryklund & Peterson tried to address this question by
analysing the counterproductive factors or blockages which could have rendered Swedish society immune to populism. At that time their use of the concept “populism” to describe these parties was met by strong opposition both within the research and political community.

In the 1980s it became increasingly obvious that the character of these counterproductive factors had either significantly changed or ceased to work in the same way as before. It was possible to discern that a number of “blockages” were about to be removed. In the apparently peculiar interplay between structural changes and politically active actors, it was possible to distinguish how old financial, political and social antagonisms developed and gained new forms of expression at the same time as new opposition forces appeared.

Throughout the 1980s it was possible to follow a political process in terms of time and space; a process
that first in the 1988 and then in the 1991 elections resulted in the appearance of two completely new parties on Sweden’s political stage: an ideologically left-wing oriented Green Party, and an ideologically right-wing oriented New Democracy Party. Fryklund & Peterson dubbed the elections of 1991 with the dual symbolic term of System Vote\(^1\) in order to characterise what they were basically about and to reflect the systematic changes of the 1980s that preceded the 1991 elections. The System Vote was at one and the same time a popular uprising of discontent against the political Establishment or System.

Prior to this, Fryklund & Peterson had, through studies of the political development taking place in the neighbouring Nordic countries as background experience, emphasised the importance of studying

\(^1\) This denotes that people can decide to vote in two ways: a) they vote for the party and/or politician they prefer; and b) take a stand as to which political system they wish to see developed in Sweden in the future.
those aspects of societal development that can help to explain the continued successes of populist parties. They saw a connection between these successes and the marked rise of New Liberal and similar ideas that ultimately emanate from the ideology of simple commodity production. The perspective had thus widened from the confines of the seemingly periphery parties and movements on the political system’s fringe to include central issues both in terms of the societal development of the Nordic countries and social scientific theory.

Given that the populist parties of the Nordic countries were close to extinction at the end of the 1970s, they experienced a second wave of popularity during the 1980s and a third in the 1990s. These parties had sniffed out what was of concern to the rank and file and used a new organising principle as a pivot for their social criticism – the refugee issue. During the first formative period of the latter part of the 1960s
and beginning of the 1970s, the populist system’s uprising had been correspondingly formulated, although at that time on the basis of issues of taxation.

The populist parties have served as some kind of storm petrel – their fundamentalist New Liberalism (tied up with the taxation revolt) was brushed aside by all the political camps at the beginning of the 1970s yet heralded the right-wing wave of the 1980s, their adoption of anti-refugee and xenophobic tendencies was regarded as grotesque at the beginning of the 1980s yet heralded continual climb-downs in the officially promoted refugee policy.

It is possible to establish that these parties’ successes are connected to what might be termed a political system crisis – questions appear on the political agenda that are very difficult for the traditional political system and the traditional parties to deal with. This is often due to the considerable
distance between the experiences of the popular rank and file and the politicians’ handling of the dilemmas that result from these issues. This is especially the case when it comes to dealing with the refugee issue, which is surrounded by ethical positions and standpoints and moral dilemmas.² What we might refer to as a misfit between official pronouncements and practically experienced reality results; a political vacuum that can be filled by political entrepreneurs with a sense of what is stirring among the rank and file.

Today in Sweden, some 17 years later in 2007, we can observe a similar situation to that at the beginning of the 1980s if we substitute Europe for Scandinavia and Sweden and the Nordic countries are regarded as a subset of Europe. New Democracy has disappeared from the political scene in Sweden and has not been replaced by any other populist party.

² Fryklund & Peterson in Andersson (ed.) 1996.
The Sweden Democrats have made their presence known through gaining some 50 seats on local councils throughout Sweden (mainly in Skåne/Scania), although they can hardly be said to have assumed New Democracy’s populist mantle. New Democracy had already been eradicated before the elections of 1994 in that Count Ian Wachtmeister, part of the populist twin-leadership of the Count and the Valet, decided to wind up his New Democracy political project. It had obviously proved impossible to further the project with only “the Valet” Bert Karlsson at the helm, which perhaps says something about how difficult it is for a populist party to match existing parliamentary successes in Sweden. It required a co-leadership to “break through the confines” of the Swedish system – one (Ian Wachtmeister) to mobilise the New Liberal moderates and the other (Bert Karlsson) to mobilise the anti-refugee Social Democrats and discontented
non-political/apolitical groups for the populist project. The 1994 elections might therefore be regarded as the Penitent Poll. The voting majority announced that it regretted its vote for a new System three years earlier, but too late (!), at the same time as it voted out populism in the form of New Democracy as a political alternative. When, in the elections of 1998, the voting majority realised this the reaction was one of resignation. In this sense if would be appropriate to call the elections of 1998 the Poll of Dejection; this was followed by normal elections and normal polling behaviour in 2002.

Among our Nordic neighbours, Denmark’s Glistrup’s Fremskridtsparti [Progress Party] has been succeeded by Pia Kjærgaard’s Dansk Folkeparti [Danish People’s Party] (formed in 1995 and gaining its breakthrough in the Danish parliamentary elections of 2001), that reaped both parliamentary – as the indispensable support and balance-of-power party for
the present and the former Conservative government – and non-parliamentary victories – in terms of popular opinion where mistrust of foreigners had gained a strong foothold. In Norway, Carl I. Hagen’s Fremskrittsparti [Progress Party] continues to enjoy successes in that it is still one of Norway’s largest parties. After the elections of September 2005, the Fremskrittsparti [Progress Party] became the second largest party with a poll of 22 percent and 37 seats in the Norwegian Parliament. In Finland, the former Landsbygdsparti [Finnish Rural Party] had played out its political role and had not been replaced by anything similar. On the other hand, the successful development of populist parties in Scandinavia during the 1980s and 1990s continued in other European countries, with Sweden as something of the exception that confirms the rule. This does not mean, however, that populist ideas and the organising issues around which populism weaves its social criticism do
not influence the prevailing policies. The affect can be just as strong but assume other forms of expression within the framework of the established political system and the prevailing policies.

How should this development be perceived and explained? And why is it that as we approach the second half of the 21st century there is no right-wing populist party in Sweden, even though it can be observed that in many European countries, and notably in our immediate neighbours of Denmark and Norway, populism continues to grow and reap new victories?

With these two questions as points of departure it will be interesting to look at developments in Sweden from a comparative European perspective with respect to populism and its history.
1.2 Populism in Western Europe

The history of populism in Western Europe goes back some 40 years, depending on the starting date used. Here we start in the middle of the 1960s in France, when Poujadism [Poujade’s Party] challenged the political establishment with a popular tax revolt emanating from the then large circle of small business people and entrepreneurs in French society. In Finland it was Veikko Vennamo’s Landsbygdsparti [Rural Party] that spearheaded a popular rising of rural people. This mainly concerned the conditions of the “forgotten people” in Finnish society, to which Vennamo directed his populist appeal. Somewhere here, in the two different countries of France and Finland, the populist questioning of the established political system that developed in Western Europe after the Second World War has its roots.
How is it then, considering this historical background, that the dominating attitude has been, and still is, to either make excuses for or disregard (“just a fad”) populism’s presence and growth on Western Europe’s political stage? This is not just the case for the established political parties and politicians but also, to a greater or lesser extent, the world of research and social scientists (such as political scientists, sociologists and historians). After having “vacuum-cleaned” the research domain we have good reason to suggest that only in the last ten years has populism been seriously taken up as an ideological and political phenomenon in academic literature and journals, and only by a small group of social scientists. The absence of established politicians in public discussions and debates is, on the other hand, noticeable. But it would appear that “the ostrich-like habit of hiding one’s head in the sand” does not produce the desirable result of either
preventing or minimising populism’s presence in politics. Quite the reverse. In discussions with Swedish politicians at the European Parliament in Brussels during our visit in spring 2005 the responses to our questions on the recommended approach(es) in relation to the right-wing populist parties were, with one or two exceptions, that it was better to isolate them politically and ignore their ideas and proposals both in Parliament and outside it – and treat them as if they didn’t exist. Responses to our interview questions only served to reinforce the image that had already been confirmed in previous encounters with politicians and by politicians’ statements to the press.

1.3 Populism as an Empirical Reality in Europe

In their introduction to the book *Democracies and the Populist Challenges* (an anthology of articles written by scholars of populism, 2002), researchers Yves
Mény and Yves Surel pose a number of fundamental questions: Are the populist parties/movements really a threat to the democratic institutions or is it just a temporary and recurring question of adjustment or regulation (of the political system in Western Europe)? How should these new populist social movements, actors and organisations be classified? Should those changes that take place within party systems be analysed as mere adjustments in the market or as deeper political, ideological and institutional realignments? Answers to these questions have become more urgent and complex through the emergence, or rather re-emergence, of the concept of populism as an empirical reality and an academic problem. Previously central studies of the concept of populism, such as Ghita Ionescus & Ernest Gellner’s *Populism and its Meanings and National Characteristics* (1969), Margaret Canovan’s *Populism* (1981) and
Fryklund’s & Peterson’s first study, *Populism och missnöjespartier i Norden* (1981) [Populism and Parties of Discontent in Scandinavia], had tried to establish what populism actually was and whether it was possible to unite on a common definition. The studies came to the conclusion that the different phenomena and situations that populism tried to capture could hardly be embraced in one definition. But, as Mény and Surel point out, the political landscape has changed.³ Populism has returned both as an empirical reality and as a matter of academic importance. The word “rebirth” reflects the situation. When compared to previous studies of populism, the difference is that now it is not so much about charismatic leading figures in the Third World, but rather that the concept of populism has increasingly come to represent situations that are central to Western European development. To an increasing

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extent, populism has come to be associated with European politicians, parties and movements in an increasing number of countries, which has meant that the new impulses are much closer to the North American tradition of populism than was previously the case in the Third-World studies. In Europe the concept of populism has more and more come to be used for political phenomena that don’t fit into the traditional political system. Populism is used as a label for unusual political events and forms of expression and for challengers who question the basis of Western democracy, institutions, values and rules. In this way populism has come to be regarded as a potential threat to representative democracy.

1.4 Populism as an Ideal Type

In his book *Populism* (Taggart 2000), the British scholar Paul Taggart defines populism in the light of his research into other scholars’ definitions and
perspectives and their shortcomings. It is particularly interesting to see how he tries to define populism in general, because in his previous book, *The New Populism and the New Politics* (Taggart 1996), he analysed Scandinavian populism in connection with a brief period as guest professor in Sweden. He can thus be said to have an inside and outside perspective of societal development in the Nordic countries. Taggart begins by observing that “populism is a difficult, hard-to-grasp concept. It lacks distinguishing features that make it more apprehensible”.

Taggart then argues from what the historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin, has called populism’s Cinderella complex – how difficult or impossible it is to find the foot (among all the kinds of populism) that fits the shoe (that of general populism). The different examples of populism more or less fit the general definition, but never

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4 Taggart 2000:2.
completely. In order to attack this problem Taggart constructs a general populism concept, characterised by six key themes that, in the spirit of Max Weber, he regards as ideal types. Weber’s ideal types are understood as something that is not quite found in reality (in that one or some key themes are missing) but that serves as a yardstick against which (the populist) reality can be measured, i.e. the different populist cases can be understood and compared with the general concept of populism. Populism regarded as an ideal type can, according to Taggart, help us to acquire a general and deeper understanding of populism.

Taggart’s six key themes that characterise populism are:

- Populists are hostile to representative politics.
- Populists identify themselves with an idealised “heartland” within the society they love.
• Populism is an ideology that lacks basic values.
• Populism is a powerful reaction to an experienced extreme crisis.
• Populism contains fundamental dilemmas that make it self-limiting.
• Populism is a chameleon that assumes the colours and hues of its surroundings.

Taggart neatly summarises his six themes as follows: populism is a reaction to ideas, institutions and practices of representative policies that support an implicit or explicit heartland as a response to an experienced crisis but that lacks universal basic values and is like a chameleon that assumes the attributes of its surroundings and reflects something temporary. Populism is a temporary, anti-political, heartless, chameleon-like embracing of the heartland standing before an experienced crisis.
Taggart also points out that populism doesn’t just arise in many different places and eras but also in different forms. It can be a movement, a party, a leader or an idea, but is usually a combination of several of these; although seldom all at the same time.

1.5 Populism as a Dual Articulation of Popularism and the Petite Bourgeoisie

Fryklund & Peterson’s perspective is somewhat different to that of Taggart. They define populism as a combination of popularism and the so-called petite bourgeoisie. The populist appeal consists of a twofold articulation of popularism and the petite bourgeoisie. The point of departure is that of the small business person’s and the entrepreneur’s world picture and perspective of societal development. The popular consists of a set of non-class bound ideological elements, their anchorage in the nation’s
historical traditions and the ways in which different classes use these elements in their striving for popular legitimacy. The popular is promoted by ideas, ways of thinking and courses of action that are based on people’s working and everyday realities. These can be developed around themes that concern, for example, the nation, culture, religion, morality, democracy, work, family, the environment and social communities. A successful populist appeal presupposes that the entrepreneur’s world picture can be formulated as a credible interpretation of populist ideas, i.e. that it also appeals to groups from other classes and strata (workers and civil servants). But this also presupposes a political situation where the populist appeal can compete in credibility with the established parties’ popular appeal, or rather where the electors’ confidence in these wavers – a situation that is related to a crisis of the political System. Populism makes an appearance as a popular political
and ideological phenomenon, which means that the popular becomes the decisive element in the populist appeal’s dual articulation, where We (the People) are set against Them (the powers-that-be, the Establishment, the Elite). The populist appeal is interwoven with an organising issue (such as taxation, refugees, etc) that must be of the kind (have that character) that it can be exploited for widespread criticism of many other social contexts. The basis of populism lies in a reaction to an experienced or actual threat to the simple commodity production’s position in societal development. Simple commodity production includes the production of both goods and services within the framework of what is usually referred to as a small business. There are several reasons for differentiating this type of production from the dominating capitalistic production. Small business enterprise is not, in the main, based on an expansion of activities and profit maximisation but
rather on maintaining one’s independence, creating one’s own existence (reproduction) and one’s own system. The small business entrepreneur can be likened to a worker that is fully involved in the production, but differs from the worker in that (s)he is also the owner.

1.6 Two Definitions of Populism with Several Interfaces

It might appear as though Fryklund & Peterson’s definition of populism is quite different to Taggart’s suggestion of regarding populism as a Weber ideal type. It is possible, however, to demonstrate several clear interfaces as well as a few differences in their ways of defining populism. Some of the similarities are as follows:

- That from all the different forms of expression of populism it ought to be possible to find a general
definition that can be used as an ideal type model or yardstick in studies of individual cases.

- That the different expressions of populism never completely accord with the general model or ideal type of populism.

- That the variations in different kinds of populism are determined by the social contexts, i.e. that populism is chameleon-like in character.

- That populism can assume reactionary as well as progressive forms of expression and can be both democratic and autocratic in nature.

- That populism’s strong appeal to people is based on a determined apprehension or rather conception of who or which people should be
included and who or which people should be excluded, i.e. those with a different ethnic, national, cultural and religious background to the majority of the inhabitants.

• That populism is a powerful reaction to what we call a system crisis, whether experienced or actual, and where the crisis is concerned with a process of transition or transformation of a more fundamental character from one societal situation to another.

• That populism’s apprehension of democracy is different to that of the representative view of democracy and that populist critique is formulated as popular appeals with direct democratic points of departure, in a situation where there is a significant gulf between the politically elected representatives’ officially
experienced reality and the experienced reality of ordinary people.

- That populism has an inbuilt dilemma in that its manifestation possibilities have arisen through actual participation in the parliamentary elections and licensed by representation in the political system that is being distanced.

When it comes to the differences, the most important is that as well as the popular, Fryklund & Peterson’s definition of populism also includes a content-related determination of the populist ideology that was rooted in simple commodity production (and service production) and the class-based connection to the urban and rural petite bourgeoisie. In this sense their definition does not accord with Taggart’s apprehension that populism lacks fundamental values. It also implies that there are limits as to what
chameleon-like populism is like with regard to both content and appearance. The petite bourgeoisie world picture determines the framework of the populist appeal’s content and appearance, although at the same time it must be acknowledged that the degrees of freedom are considerable, because the petite bourgeoisie is the class that unites wage-earning with ownership, is more popular in character and has the potential to mobilise groups from other classes and strata that extend way beyond their own members.

1.7 Right-, Centre- and Left-wing Populism

It is possible to talk about right-, centre- and left-wing populism within the frame of a holistic populist ideological structure. This is quite simply about different positions on the political right-left scale of populism as a whole. We can illustrate this schematically (Figure 1) by combining a right-left scale for populism in relation to the market economy.
This should then be regarded as being analytically separate from the classic classification of politics as a scale from right to left, and that is determined by the capitalistic viewpoint of positive (right) to negative (left). This approach presupposes that capitalism is not mixed up with the free market economy as an analytical concept.

Our point of departure is that right-wing populism’s main target is the state and public sectors, and that its greatest problem is how it should relate to the free market economy. When it comes to left-wing populism the opposite is the case: the main problem being how to relate to the state and public sectors while its main target is the free market economy. If we also make a tripartite division and include centre-populism, we find ourselves somewhere in the middle. It directs itself to both left and right, whether feebly or forcibly, and advocates a form of regulated market economy. In comparison to its left-wing
counterpart, right-wing populism has a more positive attitude to the free market economy and a more negative approach to the state and public sectors. In comparison to right-wing populism, centre-populism is in the middle of the scale with a less positive attitude to the free market economy and less negative attitude to the state/public sector. Just as we divide political ideologies into conservatism, liberalism and socialism (and even talk about “right-wing” and “left-wing” within these categories, such as New Liberalism as opposed to Social Liberalism) from the point of view of focus on the free market economy, we can also divide populism into right-wing, centre and left-wing populism.

Figure 1. Populism and populist parties’ placement on a political right-left scale and their focus on the market economy.
In the study that follows the central focus is on the third wave of populism in Europe, which is dominated by right-wing populism. This does not
exclude a change in the future picture and the possibility of left-wing and centre-populism making a further appearance (as the first and second waves) on the political scene with other, new populist appeals.

2. Right-wing populist parties in Sweden and Europe – a real threat to democracy?

2.1 Right-wing populist parties – a transient phenomenon?
In recent decades parties that can be described as right-wing populist have become increasingly prominent in Europe. Examples of this include the *Front National* in France, the *Dansk Folkeparti* in Denmark, *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium, *Lega Nord* in Italy and the *Fremskrittsparti* in Norway. These are parties that in one way or another make use of a rhetoric coloured by ethnic-national welfare chauvinism and criticism of representative democracy in order to get their political ideals across
to a wider public. Moreover, they make use of language that is characterised by an explicit mistrust of foreigners that in some cases is little more than an expression of xenophobia and racism.

If we look more closely at the Swedish context, we find that the party known as Sverigedemokraterna made considerable progress in the 2006 General Election and attracted considerable support among the electorate in many Swedish municipalities. Although the party has not yet achieved national representation, it is clear that Sverigedemokraterna are here to stay. As the same thing is also happening in other countries, it gives us reason to look more closely at this European development. Sweden finds itself today in a European context – a context where right-wing populist parties have made great forward strides in recent decades and have become more prominent and influential. The existence of right-wing populist parties can no longer be regarded as a
transient phenomenon, but rather that such parties will become an increasingly significant feature of the European political scene for a long time to come. The challenge facing Swedish society is thus how to deal with the presence of these parties – irrespective of whether they act within a Swedish national context or not. It is therefore important that a discussion about how to respond to right-wing populist parties and their views and opinions is initiated within the political system framework. Regardless of whether Sverigedemokraterna are represented at the national level in Sweden or not, the fact remains that right-wing populist parties constitute a constant and definite part of today’s European political scene – something that also either directly or indirectly affects Sweden’s political agenda. Our report, *Populism och främlingsmisstro: Sverige i Europa* [Populism and the Mistrust of Foreigners: Sweden in Europe] clearly illustrates that
as Sweden is a part of Europe, the European debate can also have repercussions for the Swedish political climate – as a member of the EU Sweden can be compelled to align with issues discussed and debates undertaken in connection with European collaborations.

Does the right-wing populist parties’ presence on the European political stage constitute a definite danger to European democracies, or is their presence nothing more than a transient phenomenon? There are scholars who maintain that these parties do not constitute any real threat to democracy (in comparison with the national socialist and fascist parties established in the 1920s and the decades that followed). But the presence of right-wing populist parties on the political scene does mean that many of the European democracies are faced with enormous challenges. There is a definite trend that shows that parties with a right-wing populist profile have been
increasing in strength in Europe since the end of the 1990s. 1999-2000 can be regarded as a turning point when it comes to these parties’ participation on the political scene. It was during these years that the *Front National* made great strides in France and Jean-Marie Le Pen challenged Chirac for the presidency. During the same period the *FPÖ* made such progress in Austria that it became the governing power. The *Dansk Folkeparti* also made great inroads in Denmark to the extent that it played a decisive political role in the Danish Parliament, the Folketing. In 1999 many of the right-wing populist parties in Europe also gained successes in the European parliamentary elections, and there is no sign of such successes abating. In the present electoral period (2004–2009) the right-wing populist parties have increased their representation in the European Parliament – despite the general trend of all parties losing seats as a result of the EU’s expansion. In
general it appears that this trend will also be reflected in the national parliaments. In the Danish General Election of 2005 and the recent election in November 2007, the *Dansk Folkeparti* increased its electoral support further. The same pattern could also be observed in Norway’s recent parliamentary elections, where the *Fremskrittsparti* did well and gained a key position as the leading opposition party in the new parliament, the Storting. In the most recent general election in Sweden, in September 2006, *Sverigedemokraterna* won close to 3 percent of the national votes and considerably increased their seats on local councils.

We consider that we are well past the point where right-wing populist party successes can be regarded as a transient phenomenon. There is absolutely no doubt that these parties are here to stay – which means that it is imperative to carefully consider how
these parties should be addressed within the democratic system.

2.2 The Strategic Question – how to address the right-wing populist parties within the democratic system? A moral dilemma.

The question is therefore how Western democracies ought to react and act when right-wing populist parties not only make their appearance but also firmly establish themselves on the political stage. Should these parties be invited to actively participate in the democratic system so that their arguments can thereby be addressed and challenged? Or is it better to marginalise and isolate them and in this way exclude them from participation in the democratic process? This issue is naturally problematic, because it is essentially about political parties that have been democratically elected by an electoral group that have asserted their rights as citizens to participate and vote in a free election. The moral dilemma is that it is
about parties that use the basic foundation of democracy, the free election, to promote politics that aim towards excluding certain social groups from the right to a full and absolute participation in the society they live in and belong to. Attempts are made to bar these parties from participation, but at the same time as the right-wing populist parties have to a certain extent been marginalised, the traditionally established parties have chosen to take up parts of the right-wing populist parties’ rhetoric and adopt some of the issues that these parties have put forward. In other words, the actual party might have been successfully isolated, but not its rhetoric and policies. This will continue to be problematic, because it implicitly legitimises the perspectives and political opinions put forward by the right-wing political parties – and for which they are now excluded from active participation. In the long-run this can continue to negatively affect the degree of tolerance (in relation
to, for example, immigrants or other individuals that do not “fit in” with national and cultural patterns and norms) within the European democracies, which in turn can lead to the liberal element of the European democracies being negatively affected in favour of more conservative and exclusive perspectives. The real challenge to the European democracies does not lie in the presence and existence of right-wing populist parties but rather in the way in which the European democracies choose to react to this presence. The appearance of right-wing populist parties within the liberal democracies in Europe can be regarded as a clear indication that something within the democratic structure is not working as it should. Liberalism implies that every individual is ascribed similar rights and possibilities, and that the degree of tolerance of dissidence is high. What happens when right-wing populist parties enter the political orbit is that they question the liberal
perspective and demand that the level of tolerance is lowered through the creation of a society that only includes those individuals that “really belong” and exclude those that are not regarded as belonging to the national, ethnic or cultural community.

But couldn’t the right-wing populist parties’ entry into the political orbit be seen as an expression of the degree of liberalism within the European democracies? Tolerance of dissidence is an implicit part of liberalism. But this view becomes problematic when such dissidence is aimed at denying certain individual’s rights, and when it stands for a view where not all individuals are regarded as being equal.

There are scholars (such as Margaret Canovan) who argue that populism (and thereby right-wing populism) in different forms is an inevitable effect of the liberal democratic system and thus something that will always occur. From this perspective, populism, and right-wing populism as a part of this, will be a
natural part of the democratic system. But we maintain that this approach also puts demands on the democratic system to act when it comes to parties that wish to exclude individuals from participating in society or limiting certain social groupings’ civil rights. Democratic institutions must not only clearly indicate what can be accepted and tolerated when it comes to political perspectives, but above all make it quite clear what cannot be accepted.

Populist parties are here to stay! For more than four decades now this type of party has been performing on the European political stage. Populism cannot thus be dismissed as a transient phenomenon. Today’s situation illustrates that in the recent decade many of the European right-wing populist parties have undergone a successful consolidation phase and, furthermore, have increased their influence on the political agenda. Despite the fact that Sweden does not currently have a right-wing populist party that has
successfully broken through the national electoral barrier, we cannot brush aside the family of right-wing parties and its influence on the European political agenda. Sweden is part of Europe – a Europe where right-wing populist parties are now a frequently occurring element in political systems. With this in mind it is therefore important that Sweden develops an approach to what is happening in the European arena. One way of creating such an approach is to initiate and maintain an active, critical and public debate in Swedish society about what the right-wing populist parties’ presence means and how this can be best be addressed.

2.3 An active, critical and public debate – on “the collaboration problem” in understanding detestable political reaction and the ethical dimension

This won’t be an easy debate – much depends on the debate addressing parties whose policies and
ideologies build on the recognition (and use) of exclusive mechanisms against certain population groups. For decades the prevailing strategy of the political establishment in Europe has been to try to marginalise these parties from social debates. But such marginalisation has instead been revealed as counter-productive and not very effective or successful – over the years the populist parties have instead increased their positions. In several cases the political establishment’s strategy has achieved the opposite effect so that right-wing populist parties have, in a clever rhetorical way, sometimes been successful in exploiting this strategy in its populist appeal to people, by accusing the establishment of being undemocratic and for ignoring the electoral support that the parties de facto obtained in free elections. As the marginalisation strategy has not altogether worked, wouldn’t it perhaps be more constructive to initiate a debate with the right-wing
populist parties and in this way address their arguments?
This naturally brings consequences that the political establishment and society at large ought to be aware of, namely, that right-wing populist parties are given space to ventilate their opinions in the social debate and utilise media attention that results in a propagation of their right-wing populist rhetoric, policies and ideology. A moral dilemma appears at this very intersection, where both we as researchers and politicians that choose to address these parties unintentionally risk legitimatising the parties’ ideology and rhetoric. This is where the balancing act becomes difficult between as researchers wanting to create an understanding of and mediate knowledge about a political phenomenon that is here to stay for the foreseeable future, and remaining silent about a phenomenon that we regard as objectionable and that we cannot sympathise with. Other researchers have
formulated this dilemma in terms of “the problem of collaboration – how far can one be expected to go in an attempt to understand detestable reactions?” Questions that can be linked to refugees, immigrants and their position in the Swedish society are highly charged and often provoke reactions among ordinary people in a way that creates clear-cut dichotomies in the form of “bad” and “good” debaters. But “the challenge […] to find explicit criteria in order to reach the optimal balance between the sharp focus of impersonal analysis and rationality and the management of the emotional elements and the ethical dimension that surrounds the refugee issue”.5 This type of dilemma is sometimes described as “social sciences’ genetic engineering” – questions that facilitate the difficult balance between an unethical silence and an ethical position. The content

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5 Fryklund & Peterson in Andersson (ed.) 1996:82.
of this argument is that we cannot neglect to conduct research on issues that revolve around social sciences’ genetic engineering in fear of legitimising expressions that we in actual fact are opposed to. In the same way we can’t avoid pursuing an open public discussion about the presence, and above all the consequences, of right-wing populist manifestations inside and beyond Sweden’s borders. Swedish society and its institutions have a central role to play here. It’s about daring to address the right-wing populist parties’ argumentation within the framework of the democratic system, and learning to find the delicate balance between objectively addressing their arguments and giving political legitimacy to parties that could be prepared to jeopardise fundamental principles of equality in order to recreate a society of the past.
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