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Swedish exceptionalism and the Sars-CoV2 pandemic crisis: Representations of crisis and national identity in the public sphere

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Abstract

In abstaining from law-enforced virus containment measures, the Swedish response to the severe respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 pandemic crisis stood out as radically different compared to other European nations. The present study aims to provide an understanding of the deviant Swedish crisis strategy and to do so from a cultural perspective by illustrating how the crisis and national self-identification were interpreted and contested in the public sphere. Drawing on a content analysis of claims made by politicians, scientific experts, public intellectuals, journalists, and editors, I illustrate how crisis response was associated with collective, national identity and how this identity was said to enable an exceptional crisis response. This association, I argue, gave rise to the stigmatization of dissident voices that were accused of undermining social order. Responding to a call by crisis researchers, the present study serves as an attempt to bring social and cultural factors back into the center of crisis research.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19, crisis, cultural sociology, group identity, national identity, pandemic, Sars-CoV2, Sweden

INTRODUCTION

In the initial stage of the severe respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (Sars-CoV2) pandemic, the Swedish crises response stood out as radically different compared to other European nations that promptly utilized law-enforced national quarantines to contain the virus. Except for prohibiting gatherings of more than 500 individuals[1] (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020), Sweden did not enforce legal measures, but relied on the voluntary compliance of citizens to follow public guidelines, for example, to socially distance and increase hand hygiene, amongst others. The right to freedom of movement that is enshrined in the Swedish constitution (Regeringsformen 2:8, 2021) posed limitations on the Swedish crisis response. Particularly, it affected the initial pace with which the Swedish government was able to utilize law-enforced containment measures. Nevertheless, the Swedish crisis response sparked global wonder and became a debated topic in the major global news outlets during the Sars-CoV2 pandemic.

The present study aims to provide an understanding of the deviant Swedish crisis response and to do so from a cultural perspective—a perspective that has been pushed to the side in much crisis literature in recent years (Quarantelli et al., 2017). A cultural perspective can be achieved by looking into the deliberations and contestations over the crisis that takes place in the public sphere (Alexander & Smith, 2001). Specifically, the study focuses on claims from the public debate made by politicians, public intellectuals, editors and journalists, and scientists, since such figures have more influence and ability to set the agenda than regular citizens (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Baden, 2018). Moreover, the public debate (mediated by national news outlets) is an important source[2] for politicians in crafting policy suggestions and political strategy (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Sunay, 2012).

The study departs from the premise that policymakers' perception of a crisis determines decision-making and crisis management (Hermann & Dayton, 2009; Hermann & Sakiev, 2006). Their deliberations, however, originate in larger social structures and cultural frameworks and take as a point of departure the character of the social system whose core values and norms are reactivated by the crisis (Wildavsky, 1988). Therefore, it is important to understand how a crisis is experienced and represented by a national group is the self-identification of that same national group. Thus, the present study draws on a content analysis of claims regarding both crisis representations and national identifications (Eisenstadt & Giesen, 1995) made by public characters and found in the three most distributed newspapers in Sweden (Svenska Dagbladet, Expressen, and Aftonbladet).

Focusing on how influential public figures represented the crisis and the Swedish national character, I illustrate how crisis response was associated with collective, national identity, and how this identity was construed as enabling crisis response, which in turn gave rise to a certain threat perception and assessment. Specifically, influential figures in the public sphere utilized social stigmatization tactics in sanctioning dissident voices that challenged the Swedish government's crisis response. For example, as I illustrate, critics of the government's crisis response were deemed "wreckers of social order" and associated with "conspiracy theories, populism, authoritarianism, and Russian propaganda."

I use the following theoretical section to first classify the Sars-CoV2 pandemic crisis in Sweden as a case of transboundary crisis (Ansell et al., 2010) and second to explain why it has utility to understand the crisis response of Swedish decision makers in light of the mediatized public debate and in relations to collective self-identifications, that is, ideas of "who we are." That is followed by an outline of how

collective identifications can be analyzed by studying how ideas become sacred within a group, and how these ideas are related to the behavior of groups in general and nation-states more specifically (Carls, 2019; Durkheim, 1954). Lastly, the theoretical section explains how concerns over an honorable national identity can serve as motivation for crisis response and override neorealist or materialist issues such as security concerns and the maximization of resources (Lebow, 2016).

THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Crisis, ambiguity, and inaction

Centering "crisis" as the main concept in description and analysis, Boin et al. (2017) define a crisis as an urgent threat to the core functions of a social system. A crisis, thus, occurs when policymakers perceive a serious threat to the basic values of their organization or institution (Stern, 2003; Boin et al., 2005; Boin & Rhinard, 2008). Being inherently conditioned upon human perception, the nature of the crisis is "what people make of" them and to some extent "in the eye of the beholder" (Boin et al., 2005, p. 138). Due to the perceived threat to the social system, immediate action to stop (further) damage is correspondingly perceived as acutely needed (Bundy et al., 2017). Crisis, thus, oftentimes involves a process of transformation within nations, because old systems can no longer be maintained without change (Venette, 2003).

However, contrary to this somehow intuitive understanding—that immediate action is required to stop escalation—Weic (1988) argues that crisis situations are sometimes initially prone to inaction. That is because sorting out a crisis as it unfolds often requires action that simultaneously generates the raw material that is used for sensemaking and affects the unfolding crisis itself. There is as such a delicate tradeoff between dangerous action that produces understanding and safe inaction that produces confusion and ambiguity. Ambiguity is of course a major hallmark of all disasters and crises (Turner, 1978) due to the nonroutine nature of crisis tasks and the increased complexity of organizational structure (Quarantelli & Dynes, 1976). Ambiguity, however, is more pervasive in "transboundary" crises that transcend different societal and geographical boundaries disrupting the social fabric of different social systems (Ansell et al., 2010), as is the case of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. A transboundary threat can spread very fast, and this quick spread is accompanied by a very quick if not almost simultaneous global awareness of the risk because of mass media attention (Quarantelli et al., 2017).

Mediatized representations and societal perceptions of crisis

How crisis is represented in media is an important factor in how crisis is perceived by policymakers and their advisors. As Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) point out, media consciousness, media management, and open communications are effective in sensitizing policymakers to the understanding that exists in the nonroutine administration that crisis impose. Critically, policymakers' perception of a crisis determines the nature of the decision-making process and how they eventually manage the crisis (Hermann & Dayton, 2009; Hermann & Sakiev, 2006). However, policymakers and their advisors do not exist in a vacuum, but are located in a specific social context that, in turn, influences them. In this light, mediatized public debate is one of the main sources

of political decision-making (Dearing & Rogers, 1996), as decisions makers, their advisors, and press consultants orient themselves through national news by meticulously monitoring the national media landscape and public debate. As such, mediatized crisis representation is an important source[2] for politicians in decision-making processes (Sunay, 2012).

Mediatized and societal representations of crisis are intimately related to self-understanding. Because mediatized and societal representations of crisis originate in larger social structures and cultural frameworks, they are based on the character of the social system whose core values and norms are reactivated by a crisis (Wildavsky, 1988). Thus, crucial to understand how a crisis is experienced and represented by a national group is therefore the self-identification of that same national group. Indeed, it is often the case concerning crisis responses, a wide range of myths exist in civil society about the roles, capacities, and capabilities of the collective (Kapucu & Alpaslan, 2011, p. 3). As such, crisis depends on, reveals, and sometimes challenges collective identifications of "who we are." Certainly, ever since humans started to live in stable communities, crisis requiring group reaction has been central to the human experience. Interpretations of the earliest crisis are attested to in oral traditions, in legends and myths, and folk songs and religious accounts from various cultures and subcultures around the world (Quarantelli et al., 2007).

It is mostly in historical studies, however, that scholarly attention is given to societal interpretations of crisis (Quarantelli et al., 2017). A recent example is de Graaf et al. (2021), who studied how historically embedded resources of citizens were mobilized to live with and to a certain extent accepting the Sars-CoV2 virus. Overall, the social science literature on crisis has been mostly focused on the perspective of the decision-makers in societies, and little scholarly attention seems to have been given to interpretations of crisis found in the public sphere. The present case study serves as an attempt to expand the focus from policymakers to include the larger culture—captured in the shared ideas over "who we are and how can we cope with crisis"—that exists in the mediatized societal debate.

National identity during times of crisis

In the context of nations, collective identification can be seen as a function of social actors' cognitive, moral, and emotional connections with a nation (Huddy, 2016). National identification affects both a collective orientation of action and also the field of opportunities and constraints in which action takes place (Melucci, 1989). Thus, at the same time, national identification represents a reference by which costs and benefits are defined and a framework within which preferences are constructed. In providing Durkheim's "glue" of national solidarity and a collective national "conscience," national identity is a motivational factor for various modes of national behavior, for example, policy (Bloom, 1990, p. 130; Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 284). During times of crisis, the national identity of a population tends to become strengthened. During wars, for example, this tendency is manifested as "a rally around the flag" (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2008), that is, an increased short-run popular support of a country's government. That is because a group that perceives itself as threatened, will usually strengthen itself by acting with more force and less tolerance toward group members who express dissident viewpoints (Cohn, 1975, p. ix; Simonsen, 2020).

Collective identifications are often latent, taken as the natural order of things, as sacred and/or as self-evident. They are socially constructed, notably through processes of social boundary drawing, that establish a demarcation between categories such as inside and outside, member and nonmember, culture and nature, civilization and barbary, and reason and irrationality. Constructing boundaries and demarcating realms presuppose symbolic codes of distinction, which enable the recognition of difference in a fluid and chaotic world (de Saussure, 1983, p. 113; Durkheim, 1954, p. 37). In societies, codes of distinction refer to some basic givens of social and cultural life. The distinction between "we and others" is a constitutive element of all codes related to social identity. This basic distinction is reinforced by and related to other basic codes of distinction. In that sense, collective identities combine and interfuse the "us and them" distinction with other distinctions like sacred and profane, for example. These codes are key in the construction of collective identifications, in that they enable the construction of identity at an intersubjective level. Studying national identification, therefore, involves a study of the cultural codes of which it consists. By departing from Durkheim's concept of the "conscience collective" and Weber's notion of "Gemeinschaftsglauben," Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995) have established a typology of codes for the construction of collective identification.

For the present study, the "cultural" code is of most relevance. Through cultural codes, collective identification is construed by reference to the Sacred. Cultural codes assume an eternal realm of the sacred and sublime (by reference to for instance God, Reason, or Justice) as a principle for the distinction between categories. This code is cultural in the sense that it is tied to assumptions of universalism, and as such, links the collective identifications to the transcendental realm. The cultural construction of collective identity involves, thus, privileged access to the sacred, a divine mission, and a particular representation of universal reason and progress. This code tends to devaluate past experiences and to open up the future for utopian orientations (Eisenstadt & Giesen, 1995, p. 82).

National identity as behavioral motivation

For example, a particular salient code for the cultural construction of national identification in contemporary, democratic nations is captured in the Durkheimian notion of "the cult of the individual." That code is illustrative of how, in particular, democratic values are tied to the Sacred, and it implies that Western, democratic nations never really became secular after the passing of Christianity. Rather, Western nations remained religious in their symbolic practices, even though God as the sacred ideal was discarded. Central to this argument is the role of collectivity in Durkheim's sociology of religion. When members of a group join together and perform rituals, they experience high degrees of emotional energy, which Durkheim refers to as collective effervescence. Collective effervescence is a key component of religion because it binds together its adherents. Through such processes, groups tend to project their emotional energy onto an external entity thereby sacralizing it. By sacralizing an ideal, for example, both moral and epistemic authority is ascribed to the sacred ideal. The ideal is, in other words, taken as being normatively good and ontologically true and, accordingly, perceived as absolute, authoritative, and obligatory.

Sacred entities—physical or nonphysical—tend to become symbols of the group. It is through symbols the group becomes self-conscious. Sacred ideals can become institutionalized in education, law, or less formal ways depending on the group, and they are reinforced by social institutions through systems of positive and negative

sanctioning. Providing structure and existential certainty to adherents, sacred ideals play a critical role in the collective identity of their group (Kinnvall, 2004; Wellman & Tokuno, 2004; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). In being taken as absolute and obligatory, sacred ideals also command allegiance for its adherents, and herein lies a political dimension: they can dominate the public, the symbolic sphere of society, and, importantly, an ability to inform group actions (Carls, 2019).

Constructing an authoritative regime of ontological truth and an obligatory moral code, Durkheim argues, is not exclusive to self-declared religious nations, but it applies also to contemporary democracies that self-identify as secular. Liberal, democratic societies, as the Swedish, can broadly be characterized as revolving around two grand discourses: liberty and repression, which are mediated by the binary codes of "pure and impure" (Alexander, 2006, pp. 54–55). This binary logic governs social relationships and institutions, and it manifests in classifications such as active/passive, autonomous/dependent, and rational/irrational. Actors who are perceived as impure become "polluted" by the discourse of repression (Alexander & Smith, 2001). Sacralizing the rational and autonomous individual and rallying around human rights and modern science can in this light be seen as providing the foundations for secular, Western nation's decision-making in various contexts including crisis (Carls, 2019).

However, intimately related to national identity is international comparison, comparisons to others can thus simultaneously serve as an important foundation for decision-making and behavior. International comparisons on various parameters are an indistinguishable part of national identity: nations and their members understand themselves by comparing themselves with other populations and establishing hierarchies (Lebow, 2008, p. 64). National populations obtain a self-esteem boost and a pleasant experience of pride and honor by comparing themselves to nations perceived as beneath them in the social hierarchy, and a similar self-esteem boost occurs if nations perceived to be placed socially higher get brought down (Tajfel & John, 1979). National honor can in this light be seen as the acceptable or outstanding performance of socially determined roles; thus, an honorable national identity is intimately connected to how a nation understands itself in relation to other nations (Wendt, 1994).

There are occasions where an honorable identity has served as the main motivation for nations' behavior during crisis in contrast to materialist or realist motivations that are related to the maximization of resources—either financial or territorial—and security goals (Starr, 2006; Stigler & Becker, 1977; Waltz, 1988). Nations whose leaders are exclusively motivated by preserving an honorable identity, that is of course extreme cases, will prefer an honorable death over dishonor, and material survival, then, becomes a secondary goal. In such cases, physical security and even survival will be risked or even killed for avoiding dishonor of identity (Lebow, 2008). For example, accepting war under unfavorable circumstances or building military infrastructure that needlessly provokes conflict with another state indicates that honor is not infrequently pursued at a significant cost to security (Perkins, 1962). Striving for an honorable identity can also be financially expensive for nations: colonies, national airlines, and space exploration, for example, often do not have any economic gains. In this way, concerns over honor can in some cases come to override materialistic concerns (economy and territorial resources) as well as realist (security) and neorealist (risk assessment and capabilities) ones. As such, national leaders who are motivated by preserving an honorable identity might engage in biased threat assessment during times of crisis, which can, in turn, affect how they respond to crisis (Lebow, 2016, pp. 62–63).

METHOD

To understand shared representations of national identity and crisis, the present study focuses on news articles, op-eds, and editorials that were extracted from the three most distributed Swedish newspapers Aftonbladet, Expressen, and Dagens Nyheter in the time period March 1, 2020–June 1, 2020 based on a keyword search ("corona") in the database retriever that yielded 2362 items. First, headlines were manually searched to discard irrelevant items, such as news articles without direct statements from relevant public figures and politicians (e.g., the Swedish Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, and the Minister of Health and Social Affairs, scientists with expertise in infectious diseases, and public intellectuals, including journalists and editors and health authorities). A smaller amount of online newspaper articles from mainstream Swedish news sites (e.g., Sveriges Television and Svenska Dagbladet, amongst others) were added to the sample based on the criterion of relevance in accordance with a purposeful sampling approach (Emmel, 2013). These sources were added as they contained statements that better illustrated the ideas and perceptions of crisis and national identity that were present in the public debate in the initial stage of the crisis.

On that basis, the sample was reduced to 241 items that were, first, manually searched for direct statements and divided into two categories corresponding to the two main foci of the study: claims about Swedish group characteristics and the nature and extent of the Sars-CoV2 pandemic crisis. Representations of crisis and national identity were then analyzed from a discourse analytical perspective. Collective identification is in this perspective theorized as "conceptual structures comprising beliefs and knowledge, norms and values, attitudes and expectations as well as emotions, and as being reinforced and negotiated in discourse" (Koller, 2012, p. 19). In focusing on collective identification, the most relevant analytical approach for our purpose is social actor representation (van Leeuwen, 1996) because it includes group evaluations. This tool is useful for extracting the qualities that are associated with specific groups, and determining to what extent their actions are represented as causally affecting other groups and social processes. It includes beliefs and/or knowledge about them, the attitudes toward, and expectations of them that ensue from beliefs and/or knowledge. The extraction of textual representations of claims regarding Swedish national identity led me to identify how national identifications were culturally constructed during the crisis, that is, how particular and contingent ideals were universalized and thereby sacralized in public discourse, and how national identity is understood in relation to other nations during the crises (Eisenstadt & Giesen, 1995).

An exhaustive account of the public debate during the Sars-CoV2 pandemic crisis is beyond the scope of this paper; thus, choosing the items for the final sample was done following a purposeful sampling method (Emmel, 2013). As evident from the examples in the empirical section, however, the focus is on public figures that are arguably influential in the public debate. In that sense, the sample does not claim to be representative of the entirety of the Swedish population—those representations can be found in polling data—but the empirical section does reflect the main, official narrative of Swedish authorities during the initial stage of the crisis. The empirical section provides direct quotes found in the sample that has been translated from Swedish to English by the author. These have been chosen because they reflect the official narrative in a clear and comprehensive way. But before the insights from the Swedish debate are outlined, a brief description of Sweden and its crises response will be provided.

The case of Sweden

As one of the world's wealthiest countries, Sweden has a high standard of living and has one of the best health care sectors in the world.[3] Like its neighbors in Scandinavia and Northern Europe in general, Sweden can be classified as a democratic nation-state that subscribes to liberal principles of government and international law. Since 2014, Stefan Löven has been the prime minister and leader of the Social Democratic government in Sweden. Within the Swedish population there exists high levels of social trust (Adman, 2020), as well as general trust in and feelings of responsibility toward the national authorities (Helsingen et al., 2020). This loyalty can be understood by the words of the Social Democratic politician, Nils Karleby, "Do your duty. Demand your right." (Föreningen Socialistisk Debatt, 1972). In practice, that means Swedish citizens expect high-quality welfare institutions in an offer of responsible obedience to the law.

Central to the Swedish self-understanding is their role as "exceptional" (Granberg et al., 2021) that is, "an international role model for a tolerant, egalitarian, multicultural welfare state, which extended substantial citizenship, welfare, and labor rights to all within its borders, including immigrants" (Schierup & Ålund, 2011, p. 45), and as "representing a multicultural model as concerns immigrant integration, with few or no integration demands" (Borevi, 2015, p. 1495). The notion of being exceptional as a humanistic world power can be traced back to the Swedish Prime Minister, Per-Albin Hansson from the Social Democrats, who in Dagens Nyheter on April 4, 1945, expressed his ambitions for Sweden to become a form of "world-conscience" (Dagens Nyheter, 1945). The statement came in the aftermath of the Second World War, where Sweden—in spite of declaring itself politically and militarily neutral—obtained considerable economic benefits through its trade agreements with Nazi Germany. For example, in April 1939, Sweden formally confirmed to the German government that the supplies of iron Germany so desperately needed would continue to be supplied (Kent, 2008, p. 232). Also, in Sweden's policies toward the Nazi occupation of Norway in March 1940, German military forces were permitted to use Swedish railways to cross the country and receive supplies. This greatly facilitated the Nazi war effort and was only stopped in 1943 (Kent, 2008, p. 233). As a consequence of such economic benefit of the trade agreements with Nazi Germany, Sweden's economy was strengthened after the war (Karlsson, 1995). As a defense from criticism of the Swedish trade agreements with Nazi Germany, and as an attempt to claim the success as a result of Swedish endeavor, Per-Albin Hanson attempted to portray Sweden's sudden wealth as stemming from "exceptional" social democratic policies and not by trade agreements with Nazi Germany.

The self-image as an exceptional international role model with citizens that are responsible and loyal toward state institutions, as we shall see in the following section, was central in representations in mass media of the Sars-CoV2 pandemic and the Swedish crisis response. Indeed, the Swedish response was deviant compared to a global perspective. Where other nations enforced national quarantines and other containments measures such as the closing of schools, workplaces, entertainment centers, and national borders, the Swedish government, in contrast, refrained from instating law-enforced containment measures except for a ban on gatherings of more than 50 individuals (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020).

Individual's statutory freedom including freedom of movement is enshrined in the Swedish constitution (Regeringsformen 2:8, 2021), and that circumstance did have consequences for the initial pace with which the Swedish government was able to enforce quarantines and national lockdowns. Nevertheless, that it took the Swedish

government ten months to pass legislation that allowed for preventive measures—on January 8, 2021, a temporary COVID-19 Act entered into force (Library of Congress, 2021)—might indicate that the crisis and consequently its response was interpreted and understood differently by the Swedish population. Acting within the framework of the Swedish constitution, Anders Tegnell Sweden's chief epidemiologist overseeing the government's Sars-CoV2 response, advised the government to allow the virus to spread slowly through the population to mitigate the pressure on the healthcare system and eventually obtain herd immunity (Ekblom, 2020). So, instead of law-enforced measures, the Swedish national Health Authorities published advice and guidelines to the population and relied on their voluntary compliance.

Constructions of national identity in the Swedish public debate

Elite social actors, such as policymakers and journalists who are participating in public discourse culturally, construct a national Swedish identity by sacralizing certain ideals. Specifically, trust and responsibleness ("tillitsfullhet" and "ansvarlighet") were key ideals in the cultural construction of national identity during the pandemic crisis, where responsibility is ascribed to Sweden's inhabitants and its crisis response. Trust is explicitly associated with responsibility and represented as that which defines, comprises, and enables responsibleness. The Swedish population's trust in authorities is taken as ontologically true, and responsibleness has, accordingly, expanded from being a merely normative value, to now also an ontological truth. In this way, responsibleness is taken as universal and, thus, sacralized in the cultural construction of collective identification. An example of how Swedish social actors construes responsibility as sacred can be found in a speech to the Swedish population on the pandemic crisis held by PM Stefan Löfven on the 22nd of March 2020. The speech relies heavily on normative prescriptions, and moral appeals to behave responsible directed to the population, and there was an emphasis on "sacrifice" and "duty":

> The only way to deal with this crisis is to face it as a society where everyone takes responsibility for themselves, for each other, and for our country. [...] No person is alone in facing this crisis, but every person has a heavy responsibility. Everyone. [...] You are many who live up to your responsibility towards your fellow human beings. I am certain that every person in Sweden will take upon themselves their individual responsibility. [...] For your fellow human beings, for our society, and for Sweden (Expressen, 2020).

Prescribing individuals to act responsible, "For your fellow human beings, for our society and for Sweden," illustrates the perception that, to be recognized as part of the collective, members of the population ought to show responsibility because then you are able to "be proud of your particular role." Löfven similarly presented the responsibleness of the Swedish population as an ontological fact by asserting two ontological claims in this excerpt from his speech. In the first claim, Löfven assumes the Swedish population is intrinsically able to act responsibly, for example, Sweden should "face the crisis as a society where everyone takes responsibility." In the second, Löfven asserts that responsibility is the "only" way for Sweden to respond to the crisis. This reasoning, thus, alters the epistemological status of responsibleness: it expands from being a merely normative prescription to include an ontological dimension, and thus presents responsibleness as a descriptive, ontological fact about

the character of the Swedish collective. By transforming responsibleness from a normative category to an ontological, the ideal was universalized: it changed from being taken as local and particular ideal, relative to time and place, to instead being presented as universal. Thereby responsibleness was sacralized as a universal truth, and as such central in the cultural construction of collective identification during the pandemic crisis.

Contributing to this collective identification with responsibleness in the Swedish civil sphere is the notion of "social trust"; responsibleness was intimately related to social trust. Specifically, social trust is treated as an ontological fact about the Swedish collective that enables responsibleness. For instance, in Expressen, the novelist and public intellectual, Jonas Gardell, represents Sweden as "[…] an engineering country with high trust in rationality and science. That's why we like to listen to our experts and follow their advice. So far, we have no more sick or dead individuals than in other countries" (Gardell, 2020). The inhabitants of Sweden, Gardell asserts, trust authorities and comply with their directives, and that is presented as the underlying explanation of the Swedish crisis response.

According to the popular reporter on Aftonbladet Peter Kadhammar, there is no need in Sweden for "police in the streets, fences, or an authorized person who stretches out his hand: papers please!" According to Kadhammer, that is because: "We trust each other. When Tegnell recommends that we keep distance and sneeze into the arm fold, then we try to do it. Löfven says that no one should leave the country. No one doubts his honest ambition. […] I live in an exotic country. Rare. Cool" (Kadhammar, 2020). Here we see subtly the identification as being different from other countries—as an exception to the rule. As the editor of the literature section and functioning cultural director of Expressen formulated it, the Swedish crisis response is what "makes Sweden, in April 2020, the freest country on the planet" (Liljestrand, 2020). Compared to other nations during the pandemic, "Sweden remains open and is relying upon the citizens' trust and voluntary obedience as sufficient in stopping the spread of the virus. It is extreme. In a global perspective, it is unique." As the Swedish physician and bacteriologist, Agnes Wold asserted: "We have probably chosen a better way than Norway. We have in Sweden […] a slightly more scientific approach" (Løkeland-Stai, 2020). As these quotes illustrate, the Swedish difference compared to other nations has overtly positive connotations, as it is tied to notions of rationality and freedom. At times this positive self-categorization results in an attitude of superiority manifested in somehow presumptuous claims or assumptions. For instance, the former state epidemiologist, Johan Giesecke, who was also a consultant for the Swedish health authorities and the World Health Organization (WHO) during the pandemic crises, stated that only Sweden's crises response is right and "all other countries are wrong" (Grundberg Wolodarski, 2020).

In an extensive background article published in Dagens Nyheter, Swedish FM, Ann Linde, is asked directly to explain Sweden's "exceptional" crisis response compared to other countries. "I think one of the most positive things in our society is that we have trust. We still have a lot of trust in each other but also in the authorities and the politicians. […] Citizens trust that we try to make the best decisions and then citizens follow the decisions and take personal responsibility" (Dagens Nyheter, 2020a). Referring to social trust and responsibility in the explanation for why Sweden is "exceptional" to other countries, explicitly and directly links collective identification with crisis response. Other populations, Ann Linde implies, have less trust in their national authorities and are therefore less responsible compared to the Swedish population. Other populations need harder containment measures, according to the researcher in biological and cultural evolution at Stockholm University Patrik Lindenfors:

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It would be a mistake by the government agencies not to take into account the characteristics of the citizens they are dealing with when designing their policies. If you want to achieve specific goals, the decisions must of course be adapted to the population […] In countries with traditionally more rebellious populations, decision-makers should take into account that citizens are expected to violate regulations. In countries where there is a tradition of more harsh treatment, the authorities should accordingly act more resolutely to highlight the seriousness of the situation (Lindenfors, 2020).

Other countries with "rebellious populations" that inhibit less trust and responsibleness need "more resolute" measures, the author asserts. These "resolute" measures, which refer to law-enforced containment methods, are presented as leading to "irritation" and "anger," which in turn explain why international actors criticize Sweden's crisis response, as the following quote by the journalist at Aftonbladet, Wolfgang Hansson, illustrates:

The irritation and anger over that Sweden have taken a more voluntary path is partly because no one wants to be held trapped while seeing that people in other countries can move freely if they agree to observe the physical distance, work from home, reduce their social contacts and so on. Because that's what this is all about; is it possible to reduce the spread of infection enough without taking draconian measures? (Hansson, 2020a).

Because other populations are not complying voluntarily with the guidelines of their health authorities, the author argues, political leaders in other nations are forced to apply "draconian measures" that is, law-enforced containment measures. That results in resentfulness that manifests as envy of and criticism toward Sweden. A reporter utilized the same explanation to reject American president Donald Trump's criticism of the Swedish crisis response, and he further asserted that Sweden—in and of itself—represents a threat to the Trump administration (Hansson, 2020b). In exemplifying a relaxed crisis response, which leaves it up to citizens' voluntary compliance, Hansson asserted, Sweden delegitimized the crisis strategy of the Trump administration. As such, key public figures equated criticism of the Swedish crisis response with criticism of Sweden itself. The Swedish Foreign Minister stated that Trump's criticism was based on "false" information and called it "bad" for Sweden (Svensson, 2020) again directly equating criticism of the Swedish crisis response with criticism of Sweden itself. Another example that explicitly illustrates this association between Sweden's identity and its crisis response is from an op-ed in Expressen where the editor of the literature section and functioning cultural director asserts that the "Swedish national character is embodied" in the epidemiologist and spokesperson of the Swedish Health Authority, Anders Tegnell (Liljestrand, 2020). During the crisis, his primary task was to explain the Swedish crisis response in national and international news broadcasts and at press conferences. He can, as such, be seen as a symbol of the Swedish crisis response. Consequently, this quote establishes a direct link between Sweden's crisis response and Sweden's "national soul," that is, its collective identification with responsibleness.

Representations of crisis: science as a threat to national identity

Responsibleness as a prerequisite for the Swedish crisis response gave rise to a specific perception and assessment of threats, which the present section illustrates. Specifically, the pandemic crisis—or rather, scientists and scientific evidence informing on the crisis, was treated as a threat to Sweden's identity. Consequently, information stemming from the scientific and medical community that could potentially shed critical light on the Swedish crisis response was hidden to the public or delegitimized. Actors criticizing the crisis response were similarly delegitimized by being deemed socially "impure."

On February 28, 2020, the Swedish government characterized the emergency preparedness for the Covid-19 crisis as good: "When I listen to both the Public Health Authority, which is an expert authority on infection protection, and on the National Board of Health, which also coordinates health care, I get the picture that we have good preparedness, both based on the situation today but also in considering […] potential future situations" (Skagerström Lindau, 2021) said the Minister of Health and Social Affairs Lena Hallengren. Also in February, state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell from the Swedish Health Authority characterized the emergency preparedness as such (Aftonbladet, 2020). In May 2020, however, national media reported from protocols from internal meetings held in February 2020 between the Swedish health authorities and infection control physicians, and a national situation report by the National Board of Health and the Ministry of Health and Welfare, that the Swedish crisis preparedness was uncertain and risky (Öhman & Rosén, 2020). For Swedish municipalities, which, among other things, are responsible for eldercare, no emergency response interventions had been made. There was a general lack of knowledge of how to respond if the virus would spread more extensively and also a lack of protective equipment for health care staff. The situation report documented how regions only had protective equipment in stock for 1400 care days, that is, approximately a hundred patients. In addition, some regions already reported a lack of protective equipment on a meeting with the Swedish health authorities on February 27. In the report, it was noted that it was not yet known whether more protective equipment could be purchased from other suppliers.

Initially, the Swedish work environment authorities had advised health workers to wear visors and facemasks when near Covid-19 patients. As the virus spread during March, however, that was changed. On April 11, the Swedish Work Environment Authority, the Public Health Authority, the National Board of Health and Welfare, and Care Inspection published a joint statement where they toned down the importance of facemasks and emphasized that it would not be perceived as a general requirement, thereby changing their initial demand (SvT, 2020a). Instead of admitting potential flaws in emergency preparedness, national authorities, thus, risked the health of care workers, and as such treated them as secondary to preserving self-image. A Swedish union leader called the Work Environment Authority "pathetic" and their behavior a "scandal" and reported the authority to the Justice Ombudsman (SvT, 2020b).

Throughout March 2020 criticism of the government policies started to emerge, and at the beginning of April, a petition had been signed by 2300 doctors and scientific researchers including professor and chair of the Nobel Foundation, Carl-Henrik Heldin. In the petition, they criticized the Swedish government and called on the government to impose more strict containment measures. Johan Von Schreeb, Professor of global emergency medicine at the Karolinska Institute, responded to criticism of the Swedish

government's crisis response: "Alternative facts, rumors, gossip and conspiracy theories are raised to a level of truth by politicians and debaters. Serious researchers are facing 'the thinkers of Google', not infrequently they have obscure ideological purposes in their back pockets. Knowledge is facing populism" (von Schreeb, 2020). This quote illustrates how criticism and information that potentially shed critical light on the Swedish government's crisis response is equated with "alternative facts and conspiracy theories" put forth by actors with "obscure ideological purposes." By equating criticism of the government's crisis response with "populism," or associating it with Russian propaganda news sites (Malm, 2020), for example, criticism of the government's crisis response, was delegitimized.

A tool in the delegitimization of criticism was the stigmatization of dissident voices. Instead of responding to arguments and focusing on the critique in itself, the defenders of the government's crisis response directed their attention towards the motives and the character traits of the critics. For instance, taking measures "that leads to further closure of society" is presented as a way for political leaders to appear as "strong leaders," as a chief physician and senior professor at Linköping University wrote in an op-ed in Dagens Nyheter (2020b). "Strong leaders" but also references to George Orwell, "Freedom is slavery" (Hakelius, 2020) are both attempts to associate containment measures harder than the Swedish government's, with totalitarian leadership, an association that is also made more explicitly at times (Gardell, 2020). Critics of the Swedish crisis response who argued for law-enforced containment measures are, thus, implicitly deemed authoritarian. The public intellectual and writer Johan Hakelius compared law-enforced containment measures to how "[...] Ivan Pavlov treated his conditioned dogs. Centimeters. Sharpen the tone. Policy. Stimuli and response. When the state rings the bell, we must comply. [...] Mask on. Mask off. One step left. One step right. FRONT!" (Hakelius, 2020). Furthermore, containment measures are characterized as something "populist parties" support because populist parties are "hardly concerned by the limitations of civil rights" (Johansson Heinö, 2020). Harder measures, such as law-enforced quarantines are presented as "hysteria" (Ludvigsson, 2020). Reports that show that the pandemic crisis might have substantial consequences for public health are referred to as "horror" scenarios. For example, the infectious physician and professor of infectious medicine at Karolinska Institute, Anders Björkman, writes:

> Policymakers who want to limit the health consequences of the pandemic and at the same time protect the society and its economy need both short and long-term forecasts. Unfortunately, forecasts have so far consisted of frightening horror scenarios. [...] Those who spread false scenarios misuse and undermine the trust in expertise [...] (Björkman, 2020).

In the example, scientific reports indicating that the spread of Sars-CoV2 has substantial consequences for public health, Björkman represents as "undermining trust in expertise." Correspondingly, actors who bring out such information, Björkman implies, are undermining the Swedish population's trust in the Swedish Health Authority. The representation rests on the assumption that criticism of authorities is only legitimate if it contributes to social benefit, reflecting an instrumental view of citizens. Their value is based on whether they abide by government orders, and criticism is treated as a social disorder. Government policies—referred to as "social order"—are prioritized higher than citizens' rights to criticize and discuss their government and its

policies. This view is evident in an op-ed by Victor Malm the editor of the culture section at Expressen:

> The criticism against Anders Tegnell and the Public Health Authority is becoming increasingly loud and "infected." Gårdagens Aktuellt offered an unusual clinical study of a classic "wrecker." On a video link were Lena Einhorn, a long-time virologist but now a writer. Weeks of accumulated frustration was poured out and on a background of the pine panels and silver curtains of her home, she did her absolute best to scold state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell […] Big gestures, harsh words, a kind of aggressive, nervous energy that flowed through the box (Malm, 2020).

Not only are the home decor choices of the virologist who criticized the Swedish crisis response ridiculed but she is also herself referred to as a "wrecker" (in Swedish "haverist") of social trust. This term was central in the stigmatization of actors who questioned the government's crisis response, whose criticism was characterized as "errors, opportunism, lies" (Frändén, 2020). Ultimately, because these actors represent a threat to social trust, their criticism "is a failure for democracy" (Frändén, 2020). To utter critique of the authorities is presented as undermining social trust in them, and therefore, criticism is presented as socially irresponsible. Since social trust and responsibility have been sacralized, being irresponsible warrants stigmatization, as the examples illustrate.

DISCUSSION

Focusing on the case of the Swedish crisis response to the Sars-CoV2 pandemic crises, the present study has illustrated how influential public figures represented the crisis response as an expression of the Swedish national identity as "exceptionally responsible." Specifically, during the initial outbreak of the pandemic, Sweden's collective identifications were culturally constructed by universalizing particular and contingent ideals that, consequently, obtained a sacred status (Eisenstadt & Giesen, 1995). Moreover, national identity was presented as enabling the Swedish responses to the crises, and consequently, criticizing the Swedish crisis response was treated as equal to criticizing Sweden itself. Because national identity obtained status as sacred, an ontological regime of truth and an obligatory moral code was created (Durkheim, 1954), through which the crisis was represented through binaries of good and evil, that is, through inherently religious categories. In that sense, Sweden's self-identification as exceptionally rational and responsible compared to other countries came to override the crisis in and of itself. Specifically, associating identity with crisis response gave rise to specific threat perception and assessment in that concerns over threats stemming from the pandemic focused on the Swedish identity as exceptional rather than virus containment. Scientific knowledge was, in other words, represented as a threat to Swedish collective identity. Critics of the Swedish crisis response were discredited, delegitimized, and stigmatized because they threatened to undermine the Swedish self-image as exceptionally rational and responsible, that is, the Sacred itself. Such extreme intolerance toward voices that dissent from the official government representation might indicate that social processes in the context of crisis often reflect the protection of power interests and the status quo (O'Flynn et al., 2014) oftentimes due to the occurrence of extreme

concurrence-seeking within small groups of policymakers and their advisors, that is, "groupthink" (Janis, 1972; 't Hart, 1994). Understanding the dynamics of groupthink in larger groups of influential public figures during crisis comprises a promising venue for future research.

A crisis always occurs in some kind of social setting or system that differs in social structures and cultural frameworks. Quarantelli and colleagues (2017) point out that there has been a bias in disaster and crisis research toward focusing on specific agents and specific events. That has resulted in a shift of focus away from the social to instead the geophysical, climatological, or physical phenomena, which is hardly the territory of social scientists. The focus should rather be on the social aspects of those phenomena, and thus, the social setting of these phenomena should be put back to the center of analysis. The 2004 Southeast Asia tsunami serves as an illustrative example of how the crisis impacted different social systems and involved social actors from outside those systems. This resulted in cultural clashes on to handle the dead between Western European organizations who came into look mostly for bodies of their tourist citizens, and local groups who had different beliefs and values with respect to dead bodies. This example, provided by Quarantelli and colleagues (2017), underscores the need to look at the current social settings as well as certain cultural frameworks that influence crises. The present case study has served as an attempt to expand the focus to include such a cultural framework—conceptualized as ideas over "who we are and how we can cope with crisis"—that can be found in the public debate.

The present study is of course subject to limitations. First, an exhaustive account of all the aspects of the social system and cultural framework in Sweden is beyond the scope of this paper. Because crisis reactivates the core values and norms of social and political order (Wildavsky, 1988), the present study has instead selectively discussed self-identification since that appeared as particularly important with regard to Swedish exceptionalism relative to its European neighbors. Second, human societies differ with regard to their cultural frameworks, that is, in their beliefs, norms, and values. Focusing on these cross-cultural differences does not imply that there are no universal principles of crisis behavior. There is a considerable amount of evidence that supports this notion, and many aspects of the Sars-CoV2 crisis response were indeed roughly the same in many societies. However, consistent with the crisis and disaster researchers who have pointed out that studies in these areas have neglected the social and historical context (e.g., Oliver-Smith, 1994; Quarantelli et al., 2017), the present study rests on the assertion that societal and cultural differences are critical for understanding crisis response, as Turner (1978) also pointed out more than 40 years ago.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

[1] At the end of March, the number was lowered to 50.

[2] Another important source is, of course, evidence-based research, but that is beside the point of this paper.

[3] However, the Swedish health care system does have one of the lowest numbers of acute care hospital beds of all EU countries (WHO, 2017).

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