

SIXTEEN

Being a Good Swede: National Identity as a Cultural Battleground

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BEING NATIONAL

One night I was following a couple of detectives through the seediest streets of New York. Behind the bar in a dance hall I found a girl from Dalecarlia in folk costume. I went up and talked to her. The dialect revealed that she was of the true kind.

“You shouldn’t wear this dress here,” I told her.

“Why not?” said Brita. “There isn’t a finer dress in the whole world.”

“That’s why,” I said. “It’s a national costume, which tells the world that Dalecarlia is the home of manly courage and female virtue. That’s precisely why it is too good for a place like this.”

And when I left, Dalecarlia-Brita sat crying with the apron over her head.

This confrontation with a Swedish immigrant in New York is described by Cecilia Milow (1904; my translation), member of the Swedish Society for Temperance and Popular Education, in a report from visits to Swedish immigrants in the United States at the beginning of this century. Her pamphlet was titled *Do You Love Your Country?* and was part of a drive for moral rearmament which swept over Sweden as people in the thousands voted with their feet and left for North America.

Mass migration from Sweden resulted in an intensive public debate. Pamphlets, social surveys, and government papers were produced, in order to come to terms with this drain on Swedish human resources. To a great extent the debate came to center around the lack of national loyalty as a major cause of the migration. A new patriotic consciousness among the masses was needed. It was during this period that epithets like “traitor to your country” were frequently heard, and it was also this period that produced the long-lived myth about Swedes being bad patriots.

It is this role of “the national” as a contested terrain, where solidarity with the state is affirmed or rejected and where competing versions of na-