Foreword

by David Cooperman

A few years ago a Swedish TV crew was in Minnesota filming a program for Swedish television about third- and fourth-generation Swedish-Americans in small towns. "They're more Swedish than real Swedes!" said a director when asked about his impressions of the Minnesotans, astonished at what seemed a clearer reflection of his own image. Many Swedish visitors to Swedish-American centers in Chicago or Minneapolis also consider attitudes and values among third- and fourth-generation urban Swedish-Americans as variations on Swedish character themes rather than as "real" American traits.

What, then, is a *real* Swede? (Is there a *real* Swede?) Do native Swedes share a unique set of character traits that make reference to "Swedish national character" reasonable? And what are the elements of that set—behaviors? attitudes? values? beliefs? norms? All of the foregoing? How can one distinguish real from not-so-real Swedish character? These are some of the major questions Åke Daun considers in *Swedish Mentality*. The Swedish edition, published in 1989, was widely read and discussed and Daun was referred to as the "guru" of Swedish character—a trait he denied, as a typical Swede would.

In many European societies, concern about national identities and values has been increasing as a result of the advent of the European Union and because of increasing crossnational interaction and acculturation. No doubt the reception of American fastfood, of Hollywood film and television entertainment, of Euro-Disney productions, not to mention the appearance of Americanisms in non-English languages, provoked apprehension about preserving native identities while implying more basic questions about national character. In day-to-day business and government transactions, the recognition that cross-cultural misunderstandings prevent rational decisions has given rise to a growth industry for cultural and national character translators and trouble-shooters.

Such questions are also the focus of research by scholarly specialists in European humanities and literature. For example, a multi-volume work on the history of Danish identity has recently been published, including an article entitled, "What Is Danish Identity?" Certainly one source of Norwegian resistance to entering the European Union stems from concern with preserving a Norwegian way of life. After narrowly approving of entry into the European Union, Swedish public opinion reflected increasing suspicion about its impact on Swedish institutions, on national distinctiveness. Following publication in Sweden of *Swedish Mentality*, Daun wrote several essays with the general title, *Den europeiska identiteten* (1992) (The European identity), in which he explored the relation between separate national identities and a developing contemporary transnational European culture. More recently, he has collaborated with other Swedish scholars to consider changing patterns of Swedish values, attitudes, and relationships as immigration patterns become more diverse and create a multicultural character in the land. These themes were initially the subject of articles Daun published in the early 1980s. Over the years they have been analyzed in varied contexts, both cultural and situational, with increasing sensitivity to their subtle multiple dimensions. Daun's approach and method have always been comparative, but in contrasting combinations. The Swedish-language edition of this book was subtitled *A Comparative Perspective*. But a comparative perspective of what? Its own scholarly identity requires commentary.

The term "mentality" itself is intended to be problematic. Some scholars might identify this book as part of the genre of "national character studies." Other terms that come to mind are "national identity" or "national personality structure." Each term recalls a different orientation and can be traced to different canonical writings. And each embodies different problems of analysis and apparent weaknesses. This volume necessarily includes observations on Swedish character, identity, and personality traits without, however, attempting to follow in the traditions or current lines of character or identity research. "Mentality" avoids the pitfalls of the more traditional studies, although English-language readers might find it slightly amorphous. Possible synonymous constructions might be "Swedish mind-sets," or "Images of Swedishness," but these are just as open in meaning. The conceptual and historical differences de-

noted by these variant labels help to locate the contribution and hence to understand the significance of this volume.

References to custom and character differences among peoples are found extensively in classical writings, including the Bible. Aristotle and Tacitus, among others, conjectured systematically on collective character traits of societal groups, but the referents were, variously, city-states, tribes, regional populations, or religiously differentiated societies and language groups. Singular character traits were attributed to all alleged "others," despite the fact that the peoples referred to were constituted by one, a few, or many types of social organization. Montesquieu's *On the Spirit of the Laws* (1748) includes a systematic account of finite sets of collective character traits per group that he claimed to have observed in his travels in Europe and the Near East. His speculation on the reasons for any unique set included a large number of geographical, climatic, and situational factors, often alleging one "root" cause. Thus, the peoples of northern Europe were able to secure themselves against Roman power with "an admirable wisdom," despite the absence of art and education, and almost without laws, because of the rough texture of the northern climate (vol. 1, book XIV, chap. III). The idea of the nation, etymologically a homogeneous common ancestral group, had even in early usage been extended to mean populations that shared a common ruling dynasty. The rise of democracies, constitutional monarchies, modern nation-state societies, and multinational constitutional monarchies, along with ever-changing national boundaries and increased transnational population movements, made any attempt to attribute unique character qualities to most European societies highly questionable. Yet, of course by the late eighteenth century, along with the universalist values of the Enlightenment, the presence of myths of origin, ideologies, and norms centering on the particularistic idea of "race" served to justify a spirited conception of distinct birth-related, politically organized collectives with allegedly objectively discernible traits. The Nordic societies located on the geographic periphery of northern Europe, with fewer instances of boundary-regime-migration-language ambiguities than most other European societies, appeared to exemplify the concept of racial, and hence character, distinctiveness, so long as a few exceptions were overlooked, such as the *Same*, the intricate Norwegian dialect and regional schisms, the residues of Danish influence in

Skåne, the Swedish-Finns in Ostro-Bothnia, and the small Jewish migrant populations. Nonetheless, “national character” analysis was used generally, if uncritically, by scholars, diplomats, and journalists. Ernest Barker, the English political philosopher, published a systematic, historical account of the idea of national character (1927) that appeared to justify its usage as a nontechnical, political-historical term. For others, such as Hamilton Fyfe (*The Illusion of National Character*, 1940), its usage in international affairs or in ordinary discourse was inherently deceptive and always mischievous.

The experience of the Second World War, especially the authoritarian, dominance-submissive, and rigid traits observed in German and Japanese behavior, revived interest in the possibility that “national character” had scientific merit. Under the rubric “basic personality type,” and with the help of psychoanalytic anthropology, unqualified constructions of distinct, developmental “cultural” character trends became fashionable. Too often the line between national stereotypes and alleged national character or basic personality type was blurred. The old, persistent problems of fitting societies with multiple groupings and variations by ethnicity, religion, and social class into a standard characterological model were obvious. Methodological critiques were followed by the construction of more refined conceptions of national character by some scholars and by the gradual decline of the currency of the term. Some anthropologists, such as Anthony F. C. Wallace, developed concepts and models of personality-culture interactions that in principle accounted for universal, cognitive, and personality development processes while explaining how cultural-personality differences among societies may be understood. These constructions were not intended to yield valid accounts of unique sets of cultural character attributes, but they represent more sensitive abstractions that offered promise of resolving the ambiguities and avoiding the pitfalls of the older national-character formulations.

In *National Character and National Stereotypes: A Trend Report Prepared of the International Union of Scientific Psychology* (Amsterdam, 1960), the Dutch psychologists H. C. J. Duijker and N. H. Frijda assessed the advances in national-character research and the progress made in resolving the problems implicit in the concept. They precisely laid out programs for crossnational research to be undertaken at several levels and emphasized the need for cross-

national comparative research. Since then, although quantitative techniques and concepts such as modal personality type have been employed to tease out patterns of attitudinal and behavioral themes and variations within cultures, no "breakthrough" of the kind hoped for in 1960 has occurred. The subject appears to have been reduced to a large number of more confined questions, at least as far as ethnographers and cultural psychologists are concerned.

Among humanities and literature scholars, especially those concerned with postmodernist themes, the analysis of collective values has tended to be rephrased and reprocessed along questions of identity. This concept lends itself to highly qualitative or interpretive approaches, emphasizing subjective accounts whereby individuals identify with categorical others, such as gender, class, racial/ethnic group, and immigrant population. Classical sociology and ethnographic reports abounded with case studies aimed at depth understanding of personal-identity development in the context of group identification. Character "traits," a discrete set of distinct behaviors, are critically avoided on grounds that individuals as well as groups are depicted as static, out-of-scale mosaics rather than as complex, self-constructed persons or groupings that require not objectified explanations but meaningful understanding.

Scandinavian identity studies have certainly kept pace with the large numbers of similar publications in the English language, but typical of such research, total societies are not the units of analysis chosen. For example, recent works have appeared on the impact on *Same* identity in the past two centuries of Lutheran church education. *Judisk identitet* (Jewish identity), a collection of essays by Swedish-Jewish scholars, reflects on specific qualities and identification questions in Jewish life. Lars Gustafsson's short but insightful essay moves from the task of undertaking a Jewish identity to the critical intellectual process of finding one's self through identification.

Daun's ethnographic publications, beginning with his published dissertation on Swedish suburban life, have included, in Clifford Geertz's terms, thick descriptions of the specific cultural contexts of personal lives. His academic concerns with social character and related identities have for some time focused on the problems involved in describing and explaining Swedishness when Sweden itself becomes less homogeneous and more multicultural. When Gustav Sundbärg wrote *Det Svenska Folklynnet* (The Swedish national

character) in 1911, he could assume with few exceptions that he was referring to a coherent, ancestrally bonded population. The explicit aphoristic stereotypes, of Swedes and, mostly pejoratively, of Danes recalled an ethnically unidimensional condition in which the tide of out-migration was viewed as a danger to the continuity of “real” Swedishness. By the end of the twentieth century, immigration waves have made Sweden a far different society. What, then, is a “real Swede”? The question itself may be questioned in the light of this book. If so, Åke Daun may well have succeeded in bringing to both academics and readers interested in more than aphoristic generalizations an awareness of the skills and understanding needed to advance our knowledge.

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