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The Case of Sven Olov Lindholm

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Ideological reorientation as a learning process. The case of Sven Olov Lindholm.

I am currently working on a project focusing on the ideological conversion of two Swedish, interwar era politicians: Nils Flyg and Sven Olov Lindholm. During the interwar era, they were both leaders of various Swedish political parties; in the case of Flyg the Swedish Communist Party, and later on the Socialist Party; in the case of Lindholm the National Socialist Worker's Party. Both men were, in other words, influential politicians located at the outer edges of the ideological landscape.

During the span of their lifetimes, however, Flyg as well as Lindholm made remarkable ideological transitions. From the end of the thirties and onwards, the former communist leader Flyg gradually embraced German Nazism. Lindholm on the other hand stepped down from his leadership after the war, became a left-wing political activist who did not hesitate to identify himself as a communist. At least superficially, this is strikingly symmetric: The communist leader becomes a Nazi, and the Nazi leader becomes a communist. Based on these biographical case studies, I will dissect tensions as well as overlapping themes between communism and National Socialism. In the monograph I am writing I will also try to analyze the mirror-image renegadism of these prominent figures as an ideological learning process.¹

An important point of departure in my project is the hermeneutic idea that our perceptions of the past, our historical experiences, will provide us as human beings with orientation for the future. Historical events, like in this case the Holocaust, are subject to moral evaluation and based on the outcome of this evaluation the historical events will provide us with orientation for the future. How history is interpreted will guide our way, retrospective moralization will lead up to ideological conclusions for the future. An important aspect though, is that our perceptions of the past are continuously revised. Consequently, our ideological conclusions

¹ In the monograph I also intend to compare this Swedish situation with similar cases of "renegadism" in other countries. There are many examples. Oswald Mosley, the Labour politician who founded *The British Union of Fascist*, and Jacques Doriot, the French communist who later embraced German Nazism are two rather well-known cases. A more recent example of a transitional process in the field of communism and Nazism is the founder of the German *Rote Armee Fraktion* Horst Mahler, who after his imprisonment in the seventies became a member of *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*. In a Scandinavian context the five Norwegian Marxists who became prominent collaborators can be mentioned. See Jean-Paul Brunet, *Jacques Doriot – du communisme au fascisme* (Balland 1986), Dan S. White, *Lost Comrades – Socialists of the front generation* (London 1992), Andrea Tauber, *Hauptsache extrem: Horst Mahlers politische ideologien - ein wechselspiel von links- und rechtsextremismus* (Hamburg 2014), Øystein Sørensen, *Fra Marx til Quisling. Fra Marx til Quisling: fem sosialisters vei til NS* (Oslo 1983). Concerning Nils Flyg, see Håkan Blomqvist, *Gåtan Nils Flyg och Nazismen* (Stockholm 1999), and Torbjörn Nilsson, "Från internationell socialism till nationell folkgemenskap. Socialistiska partiet 1938-45" in *Historisk Tidskrift*, 1985:1.

may also change. To quote the German hermeneutic theorist Reinhart Koselleck when speaking about the Nazi seizure of power, “the events of 1933 have occurred once and for all, but our experiences from them are continuously revised”.²

In this paper I will focus on one of the men mentioned above, Sven Olov Lindholm, the Nazi leader who later defined himself as a communist. Since he is not well known internationally, a brief biographical sketch is motivated. He was born in 1903, joined the Swedish armed forces in 1920, and entered politics in the twenties as a protest against Swedish disarmament (his own regiment was affected by this decision by the Swedish parliament in 1925). On a conceptual level, he started his political career as a “fascist” and one of the leading figures in *Sveriges Fascistiska Kamporganisation* (SFKO). After attending the Nuremberg rally in 1929, where he got to meet Adolf Hitler as well as Julius Streicher, Gregor Strasser and Gottfried Feder, he and the greater part of the fascist organization redefined themselves as “National Socialists” and were incorporated in the existing National Socialist movement of Sweden led by Birger Furugård. In the new party that was formed, *Sveriges Nationalsocialistiska Parti* (SNSP), Lindholm became editor-in-chief of the party newspaper. Already at an early stage, however, traits of ideological division could be seen in SNSP. While Furugård’s relation to the German party was utterly servile, Lindholm advocated a more independent course. Lindholm also fought against what he thought was a bourgeoisie tendency in the party, and stated that the socialism of National Socialism was to be regarded as a firm ideological base and not as mere tactics. As a consequence of personal and ideological tensions, Lindholm arranged a coup aiming to dismiss Furugård from his leadership. When this coup in January 1933 failed, he founded a new party, *Nationalsocialistiska Arbetarpartiet* (NSAP). NSAP became the leading National Socialist party of Sweden during the thirties, counted by votes and deputy seats (local). It was renamed *Svensk Socialistisk Samling* (SSS) in 1938, and is sometimes denoted as a “left-wing” Nazi alternative, in contrast to more outspoken upper class nationalist groups. Lindholm was in the lead of the party until the end.

² I elaborate on this hermeneutic theme of altering experiences and how they will form different expectations in my thesis from 2013, *Dystopiernas seger. Totalitarism som orienteringspunkt i efterkrigstidens svenska idédebatt* (Höör 2013). A short English version is Johan Stenfeldt “The Dystopian Trilemma. The Guiding potential of the Nazi-Communist Equalization and Strategies used when Questioning it” in Klas-Göran Karlsson, Johan Stenfeldt & Ulf Zander, *Perspectives on the Entangled History of Communism and Nazism. A COMNAZ analysis* (Lanham 2015). Concerning Koselleck, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the semantics of historical time* (New York 2004).

After the peak in the election in 1936, the party gradually lingered out of its days but was not dissolved until 1950. Lindholm, who prior to his political engagement served as a non-commissioned officer in the artillery, started a new career as a stockroom worker and manager. He married his second wife Vera (his first wife Kersti died in leukemia in 1941), became a father, and tried to cope with a more “normal” everyday life. In the sixties, however, he experienced a second political awakening. The newborn radicalism of Sven Olov Lindholm becomes evident in the later versions of his political pamphlet *Döm ingen ohörd* in the end of the sixties, and was based on themes frequently expressed by the new left of the sixties and seventies: global adjustment of wealth, environmentalism and a strong criticism of the American “imperialist aggression” in Vietnam. He fought against nuclear power, and became a member of the Swedish peace movement. Several times, he declared that he now defined himself as a communist, and that he voted for the Swedish communist party. Owing to political disagreement he also divorced his wife Vera, a life-long Nazi of German heritage. She later married Göran Assar Oredsson, and together they became leading figures in the nationalist environment of postwar Sweden. (She is still alive, 89 years old, and frequently prosecuted for incitement to racial hatred).³

In this paper I will, quite briefly, identify a number of frequent themes, or core concepts, in Lindholm’s writings from the thirties and forties, and then see what are left of these ideas during the sixties, seventies and eighties. After doing so, I will discuss the altering view on Nazi oppression and the Holocaust as a propelling force behind the thematic changes that can be observed.⁴

³ Parts of this biographical sketch can be found in Helene Löw, *Nazismen i Sverige 1924-1979: pionjärerna, partierna, propaganda* (Stockholm 2004). Concerning the postwar era and his second political awakening, nothing has been published. Information gathered from his own notes in the National Archives of Sweden, and his pamphlet *Döm ingen ohörd* (first edition 1945, second edition 1967, third edition 1968). See also Victor Lundberg, *En idé större än döden: en fascistisk arbetarrörelse i Sverige 1933-1945* (Möklinta 2014).

⁴ Concerning core themes/core concepts: The ideological conversion of Sven Olov Lindholm will in the monograph be analyzed along lines inspired by the political theorist Michael Freeden. Freeden’s basic idea is that an ideology can be seen as a semantic field containing a number of essentially contestable concepts. Some are core concepts fundamental to the ideology, whereas some concepts are peripheral showing what is of no importance at all. Since all concepts are essentially contestable, Freeden also suggests a category of adjacent concepts, which contribute to the definition of the core concepts. In liberalism, for example, “liberty” is a core concept, “free market” is adjacent, whereas “nation” is peripheral. “Liberty” may be regarded as a core concept in socialism as well, but is supported by other adjacent concepts, thus providing a new meaning for the core concept. Freeden’s approach is useful in this particular case for two reasons. The first reason is that it provides a way of analyzing the inner logic of an ideology. Concepts are not seen as independent entities that can be ticked off a list, but as interdependent parts of a more or less coherent body of ideas. The second reason is that it provides a tool for analyzing ideological change. Concepts may “travel” from core to periphery or the other way around, gradually transforming an ideology into something quite different. When studying ideological conversion, as in this case, this is a very useful approach. See Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and political theory: a conceptual approach* (Oxford 1998).

There will not be much time for empirical examples of evidence, but the results rely on thorough reading of Lindholm's personal archives (with diaries and correspondence), pamphlets and printed speeches, and all articles from the party press signed by him.⁵ The sources are extensive and diverse. I will in the following identify five core concepts.

The first, and probably least surprising core theme in the early writings of Lindholm is Anti-Semitism. After attending the Nuremberg rally of 1929, where he and a number of Swedish fascists were invited, this becomes an irrefutable core value. Democracy as is labeled as a Jewish phenomenon, Marxism is labeled as a Jewish phenomenon and capitalism is labeled as a Jewish phenomenon. At an early stage these anti-Semitic subsets mix together, seemingly uncoherent, but in the early thirties and onwards a more clear-cut ideological analysis is formed, where the three mentioned Jewish phenomena are put in a more coherent framework. The starting point is now that democracy is a threat to national solidarity and unity, since different groups of interest are put in conflict and the majority will undo the minority. This, in turn, means that the problem of democracy is basically the same as the problem of the class struggle of Marxism: it threatens to tear the nation apart. Karl Marx was Jewish, but the Jewishness of Marxism is not the main problem according to Lindholm. The main problem is that wide-spread social conflict within the nation will pave the way for the international Jewish capitalist exploiter. In this sense, the Jewish capitalist is the most prominent anti-Semitic stereotype, and it tends to incorporate other aspects of antisemitism.

This also reveals traits of the second core theme, anti-capitalism. "The Jewish question cannot be degraded to a matter of population policy. It is the Jewish financial *power* (...) that needs to be stopped", he writes in an article in November 1939.⁶ From this and other articles a clear tendency is exposed, where "Jews" are defined as a social category of bankers and industrialists, strikingly similar to the bourgeoisie in Marxist theory. In the same way, "the worker" is conceptually defined as Swedish or Scandinavian. This means that the perspective of racial conflict tends to merge with a perspective of social conflict. This reveals a strikingly Marxist trait in an outspoken anti-Marxist ideology.⁷ The Marxist trait is also confirmed from

⁵ The first articles in this row was published in *Spöknippet* (1926-1930), the mouthpiece of SFKO, in 1926, but articles from *Nationalsocialisten* (1930), *Vår Kamp* (1930-33), *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten* (1933-1938), *Den Svenske Folksocialisten* (1939-1950), and *Nationell Socialism* (1935-38) have also been included. List at the end of this paper.

⁶ Sven Olov Lindholm, "Nationella partier" in *Den Svenske Folksocialisten* 25/11 1939.

⁷ A great example of these tendencies is Sven Olov Lindholm, "Arbetaren. Den kommande tidens gestalt" in *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten* 25/1 1933. This was the first article Lindholm published as a leader of his own party NSAP in 1933, after the attempt to dismiss Birger Furugård from his leadership in SNSP. This article was republished several times during the thirties and forties. It was published in the "theoretical" mouthpiece of the

what is at the heart of the conflict: the values produced in productive labor by the worker, values threatened to be exploited by Jewish capitalists, i.e. what Marx should call “surplus value”.⁸ Bearing in mind the second political awakening of Lindholm in the sixties, this is of course worthy of note.

The third, perhaps not that obvious core value, is anti-imperialism. This theme is entered from two different angles. The first uses nationalism as a point of departure, stating that national freedom can never be obtained under pressure of imperial predominance. The second angle may be seen as a consequence of opposing capitalism. The Jewish aspiration for world power is in this case regarded as a consequence of the dynamics of capitalism: the need of profit (or exploiting the surplus values) will hunt big business around the globe, leading up to imperialism as a movement. When this argument is stripped of its anti-Semitic aspect or veneer, it looks strikingly similar to what Lenin stated in his work *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* from 1916.⁹

This theme of imperialism is also closely interconnected with the fourth core theme: the view on Nazi Germany as a welfare state, a workers state. “Hitler has given socialism to the masses” Lindholm states multiple times in the party press and the domestic welfare policies in Germany are held in high esteem.¹⁰ In Lindholm’s thought, Hitler’s socialist policies have provoked a reaction from Jewish capitalists, who regarded these policies as a threat to their interests. As a consequence, agents of Jewish capitalism like the League of Nations or the governments in capitalist countries like Great Britain have turned their imperialist weapons against the progressive welfare state of Nazi Germany.¹¹ (To a great extent, this is a mirror image of what was proclaimed by the Comintern in Moscow during the thirties, stating that the socialist policies of the Soviet Union provoked an imperialist reaction from fascist states, outspoken or not, in Europe). When it comes to Nazi oppression, like the Holocaust, this is usually referred to as lies from the Jewish press, i.e. basically a position of neglect or denial.

The fifth core theme in Lindholm’s writings from his time as a Nazi leader, the last theme, is anti-materialism. This theme may also be labeled as an all-embracing criticism of modernity, where frequent critical remarks are made about the kind of “progress” that has done nothing

party, *Nationell Socialism*, as well. Consequently, this is an article that may be regarded as a very important ideological document.

⁸ Karl Marx, *Theories of surplus value* (1861-63).

⁹ Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism: a popular outline* (Beijing 1969).

¹⁰ Sven Olov Lindholm, ”SSS intet Quislingparti” i *Den Svenske Folksocialisten* 28/9 1940, Sven Olov Lindholm ”Tre till finalen” i *Den Svenske Folksocialisten* 20/3 1941.

¹¹ Sven Olov Lindholm, ”Judarna vill krig!” in *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten* 2/10 1935.

but turned people into egocentric, lazy, indolent, pleasure-seeking creatures with no ambition but to fill their pockets and homes with different kinds of material goods. The plutocracy of the contemporary society is criticized once again, and the culture of the machines is said to reduce every human into a factor of production. The urban culture is opposed, and the role model for the new, reborn, idealist and authentic human is instead the farmer – or at least a man who knows how to cultivate the soil instead of exploiting it. Some of these ideas may be seen as traditional conservatism, but parts can also be noted in the broad new left of the sixties (as in the growing environmental movement or in the criticism of the one-dimensional man of modern materialist society).¹²

All in all, this brief exposition reveals a rather clear and coherent idea of what National Socialism in Lindholm's thought is about. The different themes are, at least the four first mentioned, seemingly interdependent links in a chain of logic (a fact that of course has nothing to do with truth or empirical evidence, the inner logic may yet be obtained). The starting point, or first link, is the idea of a racial-social conflict between Swedish workers and Jewish capitalists and a distinction between productive labor (by Swedes) and unearned incomes (by Jews). With a marked focus on the surplus value of production, combined with the social aspect of racial conflict, key elements of Marxist thought are in place. It would be fair to assume that these elements provided the tool for a smooth ideological transition.

So what, then, is left of the different themes after his second political awakening in the sixties? I would say: Parts, but not very much. The core value of anti-Semitism tends to disappear quite quickly after the end of the war. In fact, Lindholm hardly acknowledges that there was any anti-Semitism in the party, but when he does, he is once again eager to emphasize that the financial power of Jews was the key element and the reason why Jews as a group were opposed. Anti-capitalism is still an important feature of the ideological message, but tends now to focus on global adjustment of wealth as a vital necessity for mankind rather than on the conflict between racial/social groups. Anti-capitalism tends to merge with anti-materialism, forming a broad vision of anti-consumerism as the only way of saving the planet. The consequence of this is that the surplus value of production is no longer focused since production is not necessarily a good thing (production always means exploitation of resources, of which we should be very careful, Lindholm says). Combined with a sudden lack of an anti-Semitic agenda, this means that the outspoken perspective of racial/social

¹² Cf Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional man: studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* (London 1964).

conflict gradually is fading. The special version of ethnic class-struggle proclaimed by Lindholm no longer exists. This leaves us with the fascinating paradox that the Marxist traits of Lindholm's thought tends to fade away during his way to the left part of the ideological spectrum. The same thing applies to the idea of anti-imperialism. The version of anti-imperialism that during the thirties departs from the idea of imperialism as an inherent aspect of (Jewish) capitalism is no longer obvious. The second angle of this theme – that every nation is fundamentally inviolable, and shall not be exposed to imperialist aggression – is however frequent. Especially this is the case during the early seventies, when Lindholm sympathizes with the *Front National pour la Libération du Sud Viêt Nam*, or Vietcong, and defines it as a movement for National liberation (in the same way he regard the Nazi movement he was in charge of as a kind of National liberation movement).¹³

The most important aspect in this particular case though, is the altering position on the worker's state of Nazi Germany, it's oppression and the Holocaust. The altering view on Nazi Germany seems, as said, to be a propelling force behind the ideological reorientation, and leads up to a transformative process in three steps. To remind you of Koselleck and the hermeneutic perspective: historical experiences are continuously revised, and the revision will form a different ideological conclusion.

During the first phase, the emancipatory achievements of Hitler's socialism are praised, and reports about oppression are neglected or denied, usually referred to as lies from the Jewish press. Somewhat later, this position is combined with an idea that may be regarded as relativist, stating that crimes have been committed by the allies as well. In one of his pamphlets, he states that

*We know that acts of violence are inevitable during war, and have been committed by both sides. We do not intend to defend the possible terror that has occurred in the German concentration camps, but we know that the descriptions are heavily exaggerated and often false. We know the lies about our Swedish struggle for freedom that the public are continuously exposed to here at home – and of course it is much easier to fabricate 'acts of violence' to the Swedish public, facts they cannot verify!*¹⁴

¹³ Sven Olov Lindholm in an interview 1971, Lars Holmström "Han var ledare för Sveriges nazister" in *Aftonbladet* 6/6 1971. See also Lindholm's notes, "Soldatliv och politik 2", p. 110f.

¹⁴ Sven Olov Lindholm, *Döm ingen ohörd!* (Stockholm 1945), p. 8.

All in all, this is a position of relativism and denial. During a second phase this is somewhat modified. Relativism is still an important feature, and the domestic policies of Hitler are still praised, but the oppression within the Nazi system (at least parts of it) is acknowledged. The most important fact is now, however, that Hitler's name is cleared from any suspicion. In an obituary notice in the party newspaper in May 1945, Lindholm describes the developments in Nazi Germany since the seizure of power. Hitler is still idealized, but

There were many minor officials, who tore down the achievements of Hitler, politically as well as morally. Especially during the war this has been noted, and the enemies have used these abuses in their war-time propaganda against National Socialism as an idea quite skillfully.¹⁵

Two aspects seem to be of great importance here. Firstly, the fact that Lindholm interprets the events during the war along the lines of functionalism, stating that the bureaucratic structure of the Nazi state was far too complex for Hitler to control and that Hitler in this sense may be denoted as a "weak dictator" to paraphrase the functionalist historian Hans Mommsen.¹⁶ In this sense Hitler's responsibility, in Lindholm's thought, may be regarded as limited or non-existent. Secondly, that Lindholm draws a distinct line between the atrocities of the Nazi state and the National Socialist idea, which in his thought is something quite different. The intentionalist idea of a straight line between the ambition of Hitler and the gas chambers of Auschwitz is clearly opposed. The distinction between the ideas of Nazism and the practice of Nazism (a kind of "derailment" in Lindholm's thought) also exposes a life-long ambition to find the "true" socialism, a sustainable radicalism; an idea that is not contaminated by the experiences of the idea put in practice.

In the third phase of his ideological reorientation the high esteem of Hitler's socialism as well as the functionalist interpretation of the atrocities during the thirties and forties are gone. The oppression of the Nazi state is now said to be intentional, Hitler the responsible political leader (even though a few positive remarks about the welfare policies are still made), and as a consequence Lindholm now tries to identify the moment where the "derailment" of National Socialism began. Now he points at 1934 and the killings of the left wing of the Party, including Gregor Strasser, as a defining moment (in contrast to what is stated in the party

¹⁵ Sven Olov Lindholm, "Hitler är död" i *Den Svenske Folksocialisten* 4/5 1945.

¹⁶ In this case quote from Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship* (London 2000), p. 70.

press in 1934, where Hitler is said to have “crushed the reaction” in the party).¹⁷ He states that he has abandoned his “turbid thoughts about Jews” and he wants to warn his young contemporaries about the perils of racial persecution.¹⁸

To summarize, this reveals a learning process, or a process of ideological reorientation, where a revised political agenda is obtained from a revised interpretation of a number of historical events during the Nazi era. This process consists of three steps; denial and relativism, then functionalism and finally intentionalism. When the crimes of the Nazi era are said to be intentional and consciously instigated, there is no rational core in National Socialism any longer and a new ideological identity must be formed. A crucial aspect here is that Lindholm during this third phase has turned his back against anti-Semitism, which previously served as a cornerstone in his perspective of conflict. This means that his version of ethnical class-struggle cannot bridge the gap to a new, less contaminated socialist position. Since Lindholm is eager to find a “true” socialism, or idealist socialism, he now looks at the left side of the ideological spectrum. There, in the new left of the sixties and seventies, he finds a new ideological abode. Key positions in this new ideological environment were in many ways similar to the anti-materialist criticism of modernity he articulated in the thirties. Lindholm was quite conscious about this. In writings from the eighties he states that “to a certain degree we were predecessors to what during the 1960s became radical, anti-capitalist environmental movements struggling for decentralization, pro-agriculture politics and a more humble way of life”.¹⁹ This was a new left that, at least in parts, had turned its back against the materialism of Marxism. An interesting aspect is that in the same way Lindholm identified continuities in his ideological reorientation and had some doubt if it was actually a reorientation at all, the perspective of people in his new ideological abode was that he had done a complete ideological makeover. “The Nazi leader who *relearned*” is the heading of his last interview in the left-wing newspaper *Ny Dag*, closely connected to the Swedish communist party.²⁰ This may illustrate an important fact: that to be accepted in a new ideological environment the reorientation must be regarded as complete, whereas the historical agent who is actually in the process of reorientation is more likely to point at the continuities. The opposite would, from the left-wing perspective, have been to accept the idea that the communism of the seventies

¹⁷ Sven Olov Lindholm, *Döm ingen ohörd* (Lund 1968), p. 9, 12, 21. Cf. “Hitler krossar reaktionen! Stark förtrytelse i världspressen!” in *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten* 12/7 1934.

¹⁸ Sven Olov Lindholm in interview, Ingemar Svensson “Nazistledare lärde om nu är han fredskämpe”, in *Ny Dag*, no. 7, 1984.

¹⁹ Sven Olov Lindholm, manuscript used in interview at the National Archives of Sweden 1981, p. 74.

²⁰ Ingemar Svensson “Nazistledare lärde om nu är han fredskämpe”, in *Ny Dag*, no. 7, 1984.

was a little bit more like Nazism than the communism of the thirties. This was of course out of the question. Existentially, it may be harder to acknowledge the transformation of your own deep rooted ideological identity, than the transformation of your (former) opponent.

All in all, this means that the ideological reorientation of Lindholm partly consists of an altering view on Nazi oppression, but also a striking continuity when it comes to anti-materialism. When it comes to anti-materialism, we may speak of a reorientation from the left side of the ideological spectra instead. When speaking of ideological conversion as a learning process this reveals an important fact: that ideological reorientation (or what superficially looks like one) may contain great continuities, and what in fact has changed is the ideological environment. Going back to my project, I hope that my second case study about the communist leader Nils Flyg who during the thirties embraced German Nazism, will provide new insights in how different radical ideological positions have been formed during the 20th century, how historical events have been reevaluated for ideological purposes, and how different agents have provoked each other to new ideological positions, leading up to a complex, entangled view on the field of political radicalism.

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