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Report on the Swedish round table

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The third national round table in the Ford Foundation funded project 'Voices for the *Res Publica*: The Common Good in Europe' was held in Sweden in September 2007, under the auspices of the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) and the Stockholm-based publishing house and foundation, *Natur och Kultur*. The purpose of the round table, as defined in the project's manifesto, was to bring together a carefully chosen group of opinion-formers and academics to foster a frank and in-depth 'off the record' exchange of views on the conflicts, underlying fears and deep defensive reflexes that exist within each minority or majority group; in other words, those factors which had led to a weakened common public space.

It is, of course, very difficult for the person who conceived the entire project, and planned the round table programme to write an 'objective' report on the round table's outcome. I trust that my non-Swedish astigmatism will compensate for my deep involvement in the very shape of the project. I can only hope this will contribute to a more detached reading of the proceedings. I hope the Swedish participants will feel challenged by this summary, much as I was throughout the entire two days of debates. Nevertheless, when reading what follows, please bear in mind this personal *caveat*.

Summarizing a two-day round table with such a diverse group of participants inevitably implies confronting several risks. The first is that of generalizing on the basis of what a given number of individuals present said, when other participants in their place might have raised different issues or addressed the same issues in a different manner. The second risk is that of 'essentializing', i.e., attributing a given person's comments to his or her ethnic background, religious affiliation, age or gender. Each individual is, of course, a sum of different experiences and identities, which at times clash or reinforce each other in defining that person's outlook. Essentializing is a particularly dangerous proposition, especially for a project which seeks to build a new *res publica* on a wide set of intertwined multiple identities.

Yet, it is impossible not to generalize at some level if one is to use the round tables as a starting point for further *res publica* debates. In the pages that follow, I have referred to given group identities (such as Christian, lay, Jewish and Muslim, conservative or progressive) only when what was being said stood out for having been said by a member of a given group who clearly invoked his or her belonging to a given identity while grappling with the issue at stake. Similarly, I felt it was worth reporting when only members of a given group took stands on a given issue, while others who belonged to other groups did not jump into the debate. Lastly, I refer to 'generations' when there was a clearly defined cluster of statements cutting across identities by persons of the same age group.

Preliminary remarks on the round table

The round table included nineteen Swedish participants, one of whom lived in France, a British representative of the JPR and myself, with a more continental and French perspective. The Swedish participants constituted a diverse group in terms of their professional activities (academics, journalists, inter-cultural dialogue as well as youth and education specialists, self-employed business people and consultants, a municipal mayor, a member of the Swedish parliament, a top-level state functionary, a European activist, and a person from the theatre world. They were also diverse in terms of backgrounds. There were varied Christian, Jewish, and Muslim voices and also a strong atheist one, in addition to the usual variety of lay voices. Politically, there were classical Swedish social democrats, but also more conservative representatives and a few older (1968 generation) radicals. The majority of the participants were in their early 30s and 40s, with a few in their mid-fifties and early 60s.

Several aspects of Swedish society gave a unique quality to the round table debates. First, Sweden may have a relatively small population, but it is a huge country. The round table participants were specifically chosen to reflect geographical differences, so that there were voices from the rural great North, as well as from the more industrialized South, and above all from smaller provincial

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towns, well beyond cosmopolitan and multicultural Stockholm. Their points of view were quite refreshing compared to the prevalent 'big city' positions, and gave greater depth to the round table.

Secondly, in Western Europe, one has grown accustomed to think in terms of 'old' rooted national populations and then of a large group qualified as 'immigrants', whose different national and ethnic origins seem to matter less than their relatively poor status as new arrivals. Sweden in this context, offers an important third category: that of immigrants who arrived in the country as political refugees, and are therefore far better educated than those moved by economic need alone. This openness to political refugees still makes Sweden stand out among Europe's countries. It is calculated that Sweden will receive around 20,000 refugees from Iraq this year alone—not a small feat in the Western world as a whole, including America. It is therefore important to stress that three of the round table participants were first generation refugees (one from Poland, one from former Yugoslavia, another from Iran) and two others were the children of such refugees (one from Central Europe during the war, one from Poland immediately after the war, both of Jewish origin). Their experiences, but also their understanding of the fundamental values underpinning a *res publica*, coloured the debates of the round table in ways that were quite different from those of more 'conventional' immigrants, prevalent in countries such as the UK or France.

Thirdly, Swedish postwar society has had a long tradition of adopted foreign children who looked very different from their adoptive parents. It has also had a far longer tradition of single mothers, who have had children with fathers from different racial origins. Two people with such backgrounds were also present in the roundtable, and were thus able to convey the complexity of a visually different non-immigrant 'old' Swedish belonging.

A comment on the round table dynamics. The Swedish participants were a bit more formal in their interactions than their British equivalents, who were far more used to such an exercise. The Swedes were, in effect, asked to interact with persons coming from widely different social and geographic backgrounds and identities from their own, so that there was a collective sense of discovery and a concomitant relativization of one's own identity inside the same Swedish house. As the British participant to the round table commented, some of the Swedish debates reminded him of similar debates that had occurred fifteen years earlier in Britain. But this was not to imply that Sweden was just a latecomer to the same evolutionary process—with any implication that it lagged behind the UK while remaining ahead of France. On the contrary. The Swedish participants, not having to rethink, unlike the British, old multicultural models, whose outcome proved not to be as positive as predicted, admitted to far less 'confusion' than their British peers. As a result, heavy identities clashed more frequently, thus ensuring that the dividing lines of the Swedish round table were clearer in what remained (unlike the Polish round table) a serene atmosphere.

Participants to the round table seemed to agree on two points. The first was that Sweden as a whole was much more open to multiple identities today than in its previous village-dominated, homogeneous past, but that there were *res publica* limits to such an openness (and of course the positive or negative nature of these limits shifted depending on whether one spoke as an insider or as an outsider). If the majority of the participants of the British round table agreed that the UK would 'muddle through' with an upwardly positive 'time line', most of the participants of the Swedish round table felt that society as a whole had to work hard to make sure such a 'time line' did indeed move upwards. On this front, what was most striking to an outsider was the degree to which the participants present, perhaps echoing Sweden as a whole, defined their country on the issue of the *res publica* with a national nemesis in mind: Denmark. Their neighbours' growing intolerance, populism, right-wing extremism, terrorism, and lost cohesion acted both as a 'wake up call' for the Swedes, and also as a reassurance of sorts, that 'it could not happen here', if only because Sweden was historically different and could also learn from Denmark's negative example.

The second point of agreement among the participants was the ongoing importance of the Swedish state as a defining actor of Swedish identity and

as the fountainhead of necessary reforms and changed mentalities. On this front, the Swedish round table seemed to prefigure the (upcoming) French round table, thus differentiating itself from the British round table where the state was hardly, if ever, mentioned. But with a fundamental difference with respect to France. In Sweden the state (never the constitutional monarchy) was invoked with a matter-of-factness and ease that showed to what a degree it literally was an important familial presence in daily life, rather than an absent father or distant foe.

Finally, the Swedish round table confirmed what had emerged in the preceding two round tables as well: the near total absence of Europe as a positive reference, as an ideal, or as a possible source of *res publica* solutions in what is becoming, vis-à-vis the threats and fears of globalization, a tendency to turn inward into an increasingly nation-bound context.

Keeping these points in mind, one can now turn to the six major topics which dominated the two-day round table. These were: 1) the issue of 'Swedishness'; 2) the status of minorities; 3) the role of the state; 4) the relevance of religion; 5) the importance of the law; 6) what constituted the necessary bases for a *res publica* ideal.

The Swedishness debate

This debate occupied a central role in the two-day round table. At stake was the issue of whether one should define 'Swedishness' and whether there were specific Swedish values that had to be respected in any building of a new *res publica.* All participants agreed that it was becoming increasingly difficult to determine the opposite, namely what was 'un-Swedish', in terms of identities and values, and that such a situation was preferable to a past when the term 'un-Swedish' implied clear-cut differences. They also agreed that no political party sought to use 'Swedishness' as a deliberate political slogan, unlike in Denmark, and there was a collective rejoicing over the fact that no 'old Swedish' group demanded such a definition in Sweden. One participant stressed that literature was an important vehicle for this widening of horizons, with a growing presence of 'others', be they old minorities or recent immigrants, in essays and novels.

Opinions diverged widely; however, over the issue of whether there were specific Swedish values that had to be respected in the building of a *res publica,* and if so, what these values might be.

All participants evoked the metaphor of a necessary 'glue' to hold the country together. For some the 'glue' lay in a combined allegiance to the state and to national sports teams. For others the glue was to be found in 'shared norms and values best incarnated in the Swedish constitution', or in the Swedish tradition of 'freedom and modernity'. For still others, the 'glue' could only emerge through group interaction, with any definition best suspended in favour of blurred lines which each individual or group could cross to be both 'in' and 'out' of 'Swedishness' in function of specific needs. Some referred to the theatre and literature as a new glue. Others stressed the need to build local level and regional arenas where different types of people could meet to discuss shared daily problems as a vital first step, before people could begin to think in national terms.

One participant stressed the complex cultural values that were inherent in any reference to 'Swedishness', including those of village closeness and closedness, and the continued existence of enclaves. She suggested that a distinction be made between ethnic belonging and nationality by coining another term for citizenship, that of 'Swedlander'. No one followed her on that point. One immigrant voice argued that coining new terms would not change the social reality, but simply shift it from one word to another, not unlike calling street sweepers 'surface technicians'. In his view, the very core of the notion of 'Swedishness' had to be changed, to become far more culturally neutral. As the child of Muslim immigrants, what counted most for him was that Sweden should no longer exclude 20 per cent of its population which came from non-Swedish backgrounds. He also felt there was a fundamental contradiction within the Swedish state, when it tried to both promote a policy of diversity, while seeking to inculcate national unity.

Others felt that behind this tension lay a question of timing rather than essence. In the past 'Swedish-

ness' had developed as a way of promoting unity among very different agricultural and urban populations. Today, instead the challenge was to use 'Swedishness' as a way of promoting diversity in a society in which culture was no longer homogeneous since it was no longer insular. One 'Swedish-Swedish' participant of mixed racial origins commented on the fact that there had been very little local opposition when she wore the regional folklore costume and sang a national song in a public celebration. Another participant, a refugee from a Muslim country, stressed that Swedish culture itself was an open house full of other foreign influences, including those coming from classical Islam, so that it made no sense to set up cultural 'barriers'.

Yet another participant, a former refugee involved in political life, felt that the notion of 'Swedishness' was really a code word for 'class'. Social categories remained crucial. Immigrants who worked and who were educated passed as Swedes, whereas those who were on welfare or unemployed were seen as 'foreign'. This was contested by an immigrant of Turkish origin, who stressed that, even when they played by all the Swedish rules, Muslims still remained 'alien', whereas an American was not perceived as an immigrant, and no one contested his right to remain an American in Sweden. Another participant, who had been an Iranian refugee, even claimed that being Swedish and being Muslim were incompatible categories, to which a Jewish participant,in order to relativize these tensions in a longer time frame, replied that the same had been true for a long time with respect to the Jews. Finally, one participant quipped that 'old Swedes', which the round table agreed on calling 'Swedish-Swedes', defined who was an immigrant, whereas the immigrants could not define who was a Swede.

In this debate, there were no clear winners or losers. The upholders of 'Swedishness' were sufficiently refined to define it as a receptacle which should be filled only with positive traits that could be adopted by all, while discarding bad traits that should be forfeited by all (for instance the old Swedish tendency toward eugenics). While the opponents of the concept stressed that too blunt a definition of 'Swedishness' as an ethnic culture could paradoxically reinforce some minorities in their understanding of themselves as 'separate' (for instance because they did not drink or eat certain foods, or enjoy the sauna), prodding them to turn inwards in a defensive and at times even aggressive mode. However, if 'Swedishness' were defined in more universal and egalitarian terms, then such a definition could actually be of use to newly arrived immigrants who would have a set of maps devoid of all ethnic content with which to orient themselves in the society.

The debate ended with a general consensus that 'Swedishness' could be applied as a value from the bottom up and with the understanding that it had to encompass new groups who were not objects but actors of their own future, and who had to be brought into a national setting whose values transcended simple democracy and human rights, because as one participant bluntly put it 'Sweden was not Italy'.

The status of minorities

The presence of very different types of Swedes at the round table allowed this session to cover more than just Muslim integration in Western societies, all the more so that since the 1990s Sweden had four established and recognized national minorities: Finns, Suomis, Roma, and Jews.

A participant from the Swedish 'great North' highlighted the very tense and difficult relations that existed between the Swedish majority and the Suomi minority over fishing and grazing rights and access to minerals in the land attributed to the Suomi minority. She evoked issues of village wars and the destruction of agricultural lands by moose that moved to the coastal areas, since they could no longer find food in the higher lands because of global warming. This exotic reference to minority tensions opened up the debate to the very many types of minorities to be found in Swedish society. One participant stressed that poor white Swedish of old working-class stock had now become a social minority which had every right to be listened to, and that it was wrong to associate their grievances with unpalatable extreme right-wing groups. Another participant asked whether one should not think of the elderly and the handicapped as another minority.

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Most participants concurred that the category of 'national minority' was a complex and unsatisfactory one, since it lumped together very different groups. Jews and Roma simply could not be compared in terms of cultural or social status, and the big question remained, of course, whether Muslims should strive to obtain, or would ever be granted, such an official minority status, defined as a proven two century-old presence in Sweden. A politician with a Muslim background eagerly sought such a status with its attendant financial packages and cultural payoffs, on the grounds that Muslims were very much victims of discrimination, whether in the courts, in the labour market, or even in restaurants (where they did not drink alcohol). He further stressed that on the sensitive issue of Mosque building, the state and local communities refused to pay such religious places out of their own money, arguing that the Muslims themselves should foot the bill, while at the same time fearing, that if they were to do so, it would surely be with the help of foreign countries. This Catch 22 situation could only be solved, according to him, by having the Muslims become an official minority.

A younger Muslim voice disagreed and argued for the elimination of all official minorities on the ground that such status 'labelled' people and flattened out their multiple identities, while also encouraging the non-democratic tendency of the state to seek out one 'official voice per minority.' The question then would arise of 'who' actually represented the minority group, and with what criteria. He argued that there was no such a group as *'Muslims in Sweden'* and that it was dangerous to create one at a time of growing youth alienation, since it could spark off the creation of a violent sub-community. Speaking in his own name, he added that, while his parents knew Pakistan and its traditions intimately, he, as a second-generation immigrant, did not. So that it was artificial for him to be defined by a previous identity which he barely knew. He was rebutted by the politician who had been the leader of a Muslim youth group, who stated that as long as the leaders of such groups were elected according to Swedish by-laws, no one could question their representative value. To which the younger Muslim replied that if such persons spoke uniquely in terms of their small association it was all right, but that the tendency was for such leaders to take on far more symbolic power in the name of a larger constituency. On this count, he was seconded by a non-Muslim social scientist who stressed that of all groups in Swedish society, the Muslims were the only ones who wanted to become one highly unified group, a local *Umma* of sorts. Such essentialism could only lead to further internal tensions. Another non-Muslim commentator, stressed, on the other hand, that it was normal for some kind of Muslim representation to exist within the country because the state needed to have visible interlocutors from groups that were discriminated against, persons who could then command some form of moral authority within their community.

The debate then focused on the problems of a 'we' versus 'they' vision of society fixed along majority-minority lines. The same young Muslim voice stressed that such a dichotomy could only lead to a national *cul de sac* at a time when there was little visible progress for Muslims within Swedish society. The only definitions that mattered were those that were sufficiently dynamic to allow all citizens to move in between ever more blurred 'we' and 'they' categories in function of given aspects of their multiple identities. He stressed that there was no way that old Swedes and new (mainly Muslim) immigrants would ever integrate to the point of disappearing into a new type of Swedish person. What mattered was to define 'we' and 'they' in such ways that they became shared and porous pronouns. Denmark was again pointed to as the villain, since it was a society, in the words of one social psychologist, that expected 'real Danes' to drink beer and swim naked, thus permanently excluding Muslims with their own traditions and cultural values.

The blurred identity line seemed to gather general approval especially when 'old' Swedish voices stressed the degree to which Northern and Southern Swedes very much engaged in their own 'we' versus 'they' definitions, further compounded by city versus countryside divisions. Muslims were not the only ones who were in the minority. The same could apply to Suomis, Kurds and Jews, and even, until recently, to Catholics. Interestingly enough, the debate over minorities was enlarged by some of the participants to include both women and homosexuals, on the ground that these two groups had managed to win rights for themselves and to

redefine the notion of 'Swedishness' beyond that of the heterosexual male. They did so by pooling their strengths and transcending their own internal divisions and different life goals. The assumption was that if they could do it, so could Muslims in the long run.

This optimistic message drew forth passionate rebuttals, which were based on a clearly stated (given the off the record setting) fear of Muslim violence and terrorism. This explicit fear kindled its own debate. Some stressed, in a conciliatory manner, that given the local but also global situation, Swedish Muslims (again unlike their Danish equivalents) were surprisingly peaceful. Others stressed instead that Sweden was succumbing to a Muslim separatism, a community living with its own codes and references that had no desire to integrate. An academic with Muslim roots wondered whether Muslim diasporas were not less advanced toward an enlightened Islam than some of the Muslim countries where progress was apparent. He also stressed that Muslims were the greatest victims of Islamic terrorism and that much of the fear expressed in Europe did not take this element into account, worrying only about European deaths. A Jewish participant stressed that if Muslims were keen on following the Jewish example of keeping a successful specific identity, then they had to adapt, like the Jews, and assimilate into many of the wider values of Swedish society.

In an equally candid manner, some participants around the table felt that too much attention was being placed on the 'Muslim question'. Some felt that 'Islamophobia' was only a subset of a far more prevalent xenophobia, which encompassed Jews as well as many other 'others', including Suomis and Finns. Others stressed that there were not really that many Muslims in Swedish society and one should not fall into negative fantasies. Still others blamed the media for creating a culture of fear by confusing terrorists with the religion. One Muslim voice stressed that Swedes were quick to say 'what is wrong with Islam?' with regard to terrorism, but no one asked 'what is wrong with Western democracy?' with respect to the war in Iraq. A few voices said that terrorists were as much the creation of the alienation they experienced in Western societies as of the precepts of a violent fundamentalist Islam.

One participant directly asked the younger Muslim voice why he expressed such immigrant bitterness: after all, he had succeeded. There was no secret 'in' place where elites plotted to keep Muslims out. Women were also 'out'. Education and jobs were open to all. To which two Muslim voices replied that while there were a few 'lucky ones', there were many more left out, not to mention the women who could not find jobs because they were wearing the *hijab*, and that even when Muslims had good jobs, they continued to lack the proper 'presence' for their new status. The debate was surprisingly frank, as though neither side had learned the British version of political correctness which simply provided non-conflictual language with which to avoid tackling certain questions so as to better defend one's own community interests.

The state

As an outsider with some passing knowledge of Swedish politics, I had assumed the group would concentrate above all on the impact of the declining welfare state and the current political turn away from social democracy. In reality, there was very little nostalgia for the old social democratic past. References to the welfare state were made in terms of its weaknesses and inabilities to tackle the new problems confronting both Swedish society and above all the future Swedish *res publica.*

One participant stressed that there had long been a myth of the Swedish Welfare State as an actor trusted to 'fix things' thanks to its social engineers. The idea was that these specialists would allow citizens a maximum of equality that would then free them to pursue their own individualism. This individualism was best defined as a refusal to be bogged down by family responsibilities or local community needs, both of which were judged to be, until now, the responsibility of the state in a 'modern' age. For one participant there was always something supremely self-interested in the welfare state, since one received compensations for loss of work in function of how much one had earned. For another, the welfare state had arisen in Sweden because the country had had no colonial entangle-

ments... and therefore a highly homogeneous population.

The group concurred that the very premises of such a welfare state were now gone. The population was growing older, the state had less money, and needs were skyrocketing. This meant that Swedes had to realize they could not just pursue individualism as the supreme personal value, but had to develop new bonds, which implied a fully-fledged integration of the country's immigrants. Put simply, older Swedes would increasingly need to be taken care of—given the demographics - by Kurds, Iraqis and other immigrants. On this count, one participant stressed that it was less an issue of transmitting to them Swedish 'values', than of having Swedes learn the 'immigrant values' of family unity and collective responsibility for its weaker members. Such a Swedish-immigrant give and take would be a perfect example of two-way integration.

A leading commentator stressed that this decline of the welfare state also implied a full reassessment of how one became 'Swedish'. In the past 'Swedishness' was defined as being 'modern, progressive and individualistic'. But such modernity implied one gave up older skills, cultural belonging and historical identities. As another commentator stressed, modernity itself was now under question, not unlike the symbol of Volvo that had been sold to a foreign car manufacturer. Individualism was no longer possible, and the very progressivism based on an ever-expanding modernity was increasingly contested. As a result one had to rethink the state's role in a fully democratic setting. One former refugee stressed that the state should, above all, promote equality, freedom of speech, justice and protection against violence. Another added that the welfare state was incompatible with political pluralism, since it assumed it had the 'one and only' solution. Another participant stressed that the welfare state had destroyed civil society, without which one could not have a functioning pluralist democracy, for one risked being left 'naked' vis-à-vis a state that was increasingly less committed to intervene.

One had the impression (as an outsider) that the group was progressively lifting the social democratic 'veil' of, in the words of one participant, the 'galloping rationality' that had covered Swedishness and the Swedish state for so long. It was now possible to rediscover the more fundamental traits that bound the country together. On this front, the discussion turned, rather surprisingly (again for an outsider) to the topic of religion.

Religion

One participant kicked off the debate by claiming that Sweden had been defined historically in religious terms as a non-Catholic state and that the Lutheran religion was so thoroughly integrated into the national mythology as to have become invisible...but it remained there nevertheless. He further stressed that the welfare state had its roots in this religious subsoil. Another participant agreed and stated that for centuries, Swedish citizens could not leave a given Church except to enter into another, in what remained a closed religious and political context. There simply was no secular alternative available, for knowledge, reason and belief went hand-in-hand. This led mainstream Swedes according to one Jewish participant, further corroborated by the Muslims present, to think that both Judaism and Islam were qualitatively different from Lutheran/Swedishness....to which one participant also added Catholicism.

The round table then discussed the triangle between secularism, religion and democracy, agreeing that the latter two belonged to very different spheres. For one Muslim voice, the decline of the Church could only be problematic for Islam, for it weakened the very idea of religion as an actor in the body politic. For the majority of the non-immigrant Swedish participants, the issue of religion transcended the question of faith. Perhaps because of the inroads made by Islam, perhaps because the social democratic veil had been lifted, religion in Sweden had once again become a national cultural issue, in what one participant called the 'hugging of religion' (to be compared to the ecologists' 'hugging' trees by chaining themselves to them in order to protect them from destruction). There was also a consensus over the fact that many non-religious people still believed that religion was 'important', and wanted it to play a role, as an ultimate reference against existential loneliness. One participant even spoke of 'reverential atheists'. A participant interested in theological matters stressed the

important role religion had played in Sweden in creating a community of values and feelings. In her view, this sense of community could be transposed to other religious groups beyond Lutherans, in what she called the 'silence with respect to finality', a stance that went against all religious intolerance and excluded any specific opportunistic demands of any given religious group. Another participant close to the Swedish church stressed that for Swedes religion was an internal spiritual emotion that did not manifest itself externally. The round table seemed to accept such a reading of the 'secular' space in Sweden in the past, as essentially a non-visible religious space protected by the veil of social democracy—a veil that Sweden's new immigrants, mainly Muslim, had helped to lift, even if one participant expressed surprise that religion had played such an important role in the discussions.

Only one person argued militantly for the incompatibility of religion and democracy. Among the others there seemed to be a consensus that Swedishness, democracy, pluralism and religion could enrich each other, provided they did not encroach on individual rights and on a growing explicit secular space. Significantly in this context, the issue of religious schools (called 'free schools') was barely touched upon—as though (this is my impression) no one had really given it much thought in political terms until now, although there was the feeling that it was an important and complex issue, whose repercussions were still not fully visible in society.

The law

If religion was the hidden side of the classical Swedish state, the law was very much its visible, and in many ways, more important, underpinning. On this topic, the group chose the 'high road' by discussing fundamental (one would even be tempted to call them, Hobbesian) issues of state power, duties and responsibilities, not so much in making daily life easier for its citizens, as in providing the necessary universal norms of security and equality. Some participants conceded that many problems in Swedish society, especially those linked to immigrants, could be explained in part by the poor implementation or even disregard of already existing good laws (for instance, allowing the building of mosques).

The group as a whole preferred to dwell on a loftier plane centred on the types of laws which should underpin the *res publica*. There was total agreement that all laws should be universal and none case-specific. *Sharia* law was 'naturally' out of the question, but so was 'playing creatively with the law' (as suggested by the British participant when it came to accommodating specific group needs). British multiculturalism is said to have begun when the Sikhs won the right to be exempted from wearing compulsory motorcycle helmets, because of their turbans. There was no similar sympathy for such an initiative in Sweden, even if the country had possessed the more flexible type of British common law rather than the more rigid continental European civil law tradition. One participant simply stated: 'if one wears a turban, then one can't ride a motorcycle'. There was also zero tolerance for bigamy (for the Muslims) or the right to carry a knife (for the Sikhs). On this count, the round table definitively sounded more 'French' than 'British.'

The question of culturally bound laws that needed to be changed given the transformations of Swedish society evoked far more understanding and even sympathy. One participant, in asking 'who should write the law?' referred specifically to Sweden's sixty year-old ban on Jewish ritual slaughtering, the result of Swedish traditions rather than of any rational law. In his opinion this was an example of laws that could be taken off the books to make the life of different types of Swedes simpler, without in any way destroying the precept of the universal validity of the law. Another example, the law calling for a mandatory closing of stores on Sunday, could also be changed to read that every store had to have 'one day of closing'. The participants agreed that legislation had to evolve to distinguish between habit law and 'The Law.' A Muslim participant gave another example of traditions that became laws that should be amended: the fact that high school commencement ceremonies were still held in churches, a habit that no longer reflected the identity of all Swedes.

The most interesting part of the debate took place over the issue of uniforms. A participant from the great North with a military background stated that she would feel immensely uncomfortable if someone wore a turban with a police symbol on it. She

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wondered whether there should not be limits as to who could attend the schools that prepared the law enforcers and soldiers of a country. If one wanted to wear a turban or a *hijab*, then one had to accept that certain careers were not open to you. No one countered this statement in the round table. There seemed to be an agreement that in order for such officers to do their jobs properly, their appearance had to be physically neutral. Wearing an identifying symbol could only invalidate such neutrality. One Muslim voice made a plea for the *hijab*, not in the service of the state, but in private business, for instance in the uniform of an airline hostess. Another Muslim wondered how one could hide the 'defining' colour of a black person to make him/her appear 'neutral', or questioned the fact that policewomen wore skirts, only to be told that they were only allowed to wear them on formal dress occasions, never on the job, and that the issue was about 'neutral values' and not skin colour.

This entire debate would have been unthinkable in the UK but not in France, or for that matter in the US. At any rate, it seemed clear from the round table that most of the participants agreed that religious identity politics had no place inside the founding pillars of the state.

Building the *res publica*

The Swedish round table was the first to have actually devoted an entire session to the issue of 'how' to build a future *res publica*. The metaphor used to convey such a task was that of a common bus heading toward the same destination. The general conclusion was that Sweden was such a bus. Very few were opposed to the general direction of the trip. Even fewer insisted that the bus be an old Volvo, in the sense that no one was actively arguing for a 'majority society'. The laws of passenger safety within the bus were accepted, as well as those for open and equal seating with no privileged seats for any specific type of citizen. Given adherence to these lowest of common denominators, and the acceptance of a final destination of equality, freedom and individual rights, the rest could be negotiable. One participant stressed that during the recently created National Day, a young Kurdish woman, who shared none of the old Swedish customs, defined 'Swedishness' as support for the Constitution, simply because this austere legal document was what protected her best from her father, brothers and cousins.

Two participants disagreed with this search for a *res publica.* They felt that people were more easily united by common tasks at the local level, or global challenges such as climate change rather than by shared minimum values. One stressed that today's youth had lost faith in the political arena, and that on many counts 'Sweden' was no longer the best working framework with which to tackle these issues, either because it was too big with respect to local challenges, or because it was too small in a European framework. The other claimed that in a global world, the nation state was becoming increasingly irrelevant. People were connected beyond borders and mobile phones between diasporas and countries of origin, united more than by dint of living with others in the same physical neighbourhood.

Most of the round table disagreed with these readings. There was a shared feeling that the *res publica* had to be strengthened precisely in those areas where the state still counted: law, rights, equality, all of which still remained within national purview. It was important to define *res publica* parameters, and only when these were established could one determine the fine tuning of the commonweal by political and social choice. What remained to be seen was the level of solidarity the society was willing to uphold in terms of risk sharing and providing of safety nets. The round table participants agreed that the lines between 'us' and 'them' had to be blurred to avoid barriers and divides. And it was important to stress that such lines could also be simply socio-economic and not only ethnic. Only one participant was pessimistic about breaking up the new Muslim 'islands' to be found particularly in Southern Sweden near Mälmo, where immigrants could lead their daily lives without knowing a single word of Swedish, and where, according to him, new generations were growing up with no Swedish language skills and no desire to integrate.

From the other end of the spectrum, others living deep in Sweden's provinces stressed the need to expose children growing in what were still extremely homogeneous areas to the possibility of meeting

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those who looked 'different' or had different religions, in order to counter the rise of extreme right-wing xenophobia. Furthermore, in an ever more global and varied world, such 'Swedish-Swedish' children risked becoming the 'backward' future citizens of a vibrant and diverse country.

There was also much discussion about how to make people connect with one another within the *res publica:* via mixed housing and mixed schooling as places where minorities could meet Swedish-Swedes, via new neighbourhood fora, exchanges, even religious exchanges, via rejuvenated libraries, and what one participant called the creation of 'mini *res publicae*' at the local level.

The round table ended with a discussion about another highly significant metaphor, that of the nation as a 'safe harbour' against the tumultuous waters of the outside world. The reference was quoted, initially disparagingly, by one participant as a dangerous right-wing demand both against immigrants and the impact of globalization. To which other participants replied that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with such a metaphor, that it was precisely the *res publica*'s task to build such a 'safe harbour' for all of its citizens and legal residents. All the more so that a safe harbour could only be achieved through a social redistribution which could only be national, not European. There was agreement that under no circumstances should the right-wing parties be allowed to monopolize the concept, and even the fact that right-wing Danes used it was no reason to scorn it.

Sweden as a 'safe harbour' held together by a strong state. By lifting the social democratic 'veil', the round table restored old values in a new, open and diverse guise. The guidelines it sketched for a Swedish *res publica* combined the power of tradition, culture, and innovation with a willingness to relativize the past. They are well worth pondering in other national contexts.

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http://www.jpr.org.uk/common-good-in-europe/downloads/round_table_sweden_programme.pdf

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