

Rhetoric constructs. Even Hell's Angels and the Ku Klux Klan are part of civil society



To what extent are new regions built with the help of rhetoric? And how sustainable are such constructs? Can the same rhetoric be used regardless of region, regardless of geographic location?

These are hardly matters that have short or clear-cut answers, but they become more tangible in interviews with political scientist Marta Reuter. She has used large project The Baltic Sea Area Studies: Northern Dimension of Europe (BaltSeaNet) to examine the emergence of a transnational, intercultural civil society in the Baltic region.

When we meet for our interview, Marta Reuter is fully occupied with preparing "a conference paper" for a conference in Amsterdam on organizational research.

It was Marta Reuter's interest in social issues and politics that led her to study political science. Her Master's thesis was on global civil society, and her Ph. D. thesis was entitled *Networking a Region into Existence? Dynamics of Civil Society Regionalization in the Baltic Sea Area*.

Her research qualifications can be seen as a kind of illustration of her topic: her mentor, Professor Bernd Henningsen at Berlin's Humboldt University, was also the director of the project – a network in itself, including a dozen major universities.

During the period she herself re-

searches, the years between 2000 and 2004, the enthusiasm for various civil society networks and the so-called NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that had characterized the early 1990s has diminished.

"In the early 1990s there was enormous enthusiasm, a force in the political liberation in the East that created an explosion of cooperation. And one may at least suspect that there was a certain charm in the novelty of it, as well as networking for the sake of networking."

NGOs were fashionable in the early 1990s, Marta Reuter points out. The NGO concept has also produced a kind of "NGO-speak", its own language. It is not always appropriate, but it is used, nonetheless, in all sorts of work contexts. Marta Reuter has followed the national committees that organize NGO conferences around the Baltic Sea, and made note of how much time and energy is spent on solemn declarations that are sent to, for example, the Council of the Baltic Sea States – declarations that make abstract, unrealistic demands, which create what could be called a liturgy. It is inevitable that subsequent declarations express disappointment that the Council has not fulfilled the demands.

"As an outside observer, one does run the risk of becoming a little cyni-

cal. But that risk is counterbalanced by one's being able to see that there is, at the same time, honest commitment, real enthusiasm and a lot of energy in this regional cooperation."

During the first years, regional cooperation was fueled not only by enthusiasm and rhetoric, but by interest from traditional political centers as well, which brought with it resources. Political interest has cooled, as well.

"When the politicians' interests move further east, the NGOs' focus also moves: towards Moldova, towards Belarus."

And NGOs are, despite their name,



Marta Reuter. A young historian, well-known in several academic circles around the Baltic.

not disengaged from the traditional political sphere. Rather, they are to some extent dependent on its goodwill as well as on its resources. This is at least how it is in Europe, to say nothing of Sweden.

The research on civil society is marked by a far-reaching debate over where the border between civil society and politics actually runs.

"In the United States, nonprofit organizations often like to point out that they have no association with traditional political echelons. Their websites proclaim: 'We receive no contributions from the government'."

This is an attitude that makes little sense, particularly from a Nordic perspective. In the Nordic nations, subsidies from the popularly elected establishment are taken for granted. They are not felt to be inconsistent with the concept of the NGOs' influence and opportunities to affect outcomes.

LSU, The National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations, for example, sees itself as a political force to be reckoned with, not least because its representatives regularly meet with whoever is currently Minister of Youth. Other networks, in Estonia, Poland and Germany, work under entirely different conditions. There is still a curtain – in terms of differences in membership numbers and in resources – between East and West. Much of the rhetoric is about "bridging" the gap between East and West, but according to Marta Reuter, the NGO networks' own construction widens the gap. The Nordic contingency, with its plentiful resources, takes on a big-brother role. The West takes initiatives, knows what to do, while in the formerly Communist countries there is a fear of contact which affects the will to organize at all, to build associations.

Marta Reuter speaks of a mixture of idealism and brotherhood on the one side, and, on the other, of strategic calculation.

"The most surprising aspect was, still, probably, the difficulty, the unwillingness to rise above nationality. Everybody is markedly anchored in his or her national environment, and it is difficult to escape national thinking because the networks are built up on the basis of representativity and national quotas. One could instead, for example, have organized in accordance to areas of interest rather than nationality."

"Democracy" is being discussed a good deal by NGO researchers: NGOs are, of course, not elected by the people.

"Within the large Nordic organizations such as LSU, one is accustomed to working regularly and closely on 'internal' democracy. This is less natural to other, smaller, organizations, and if the organizations have existed for less than one or two years it also makes little sense."

Much of the research on civil society has had a staunchly normative perspective, i.e., the point of departure has been that a strong civil society is good for democracy and development. This is based on the example of "good" organizations, such as the Red Cross and Amnesty International, and ignores the fact that Hell's Angels, the Ku Klux Klan and various sects are also part of civil society.

"In the Swedish public debate, the right-wing think tank Timbro monopolized the concept of civil society itself during the early 1900s."

"Civil society" has tended to imply good, warm service providers, in contrast to the cold, impersonal state. Today, the view of civil society is more nuanced. One is, for example, aware of the fact that pre-genocide Rwanda had a very strong civil society.

Marta Reuter is among the researchers who have collaborated in a forthcoming follow-up to the book *Civil samhälls kontrast offentlig sektor* [Civil society versus public sector], which was published by SNS's Publishing House in 1995. The historian Lars Trädgårdh is the editor of both books.

"In every nation, there is a lively debate on the state, the business sector and the third force, civil society. One speaks, often, of a global civil society, but the phenomenon is transnational rather than global. My chapter of the book discusses civil society's transnationalization and how this interacts with parallel processes in other social spheres."

She is convinced that the coming years will prove exciting for those in Sweden who are doing research on civil society, and mentions Ersta-Sköndal College and a "strong little research environment oriented towards research on the voluntary sector" at the Stockholm School of Business.

Marta Reuter's personal experience makes it possible for her to compare

the conditions of postgraduate students in Sweden and Germany.

"Generally, one can say that in Germany much depends on finding an advisor – there is not the same institutional structure as there is in Sweden. The majority of the German postgraduate students do not become researchers. One wishes to take a doctorate because it furthers some other career."

For her own part, she is very happy at Södertörn University, and to have returned to Sweden. After her NGO research, she will be involved in two projects. One of these is concerned with policy processes in the regulation of chemicals on the EU level. The other is a major investigation of populism, where she looks at how various EU-hostile parties view and talk about Europe.

"What I find exciting is the similarity in the point of departure, regardless of the speaker's nationality – that 'we in this country' are special. But the dissimilarities, as well – that Poles can describe EU as a social-liberal project, a threat against 'all that is sacred', such as the church and nuclear family, while the Swedish EU-skeptic views EU as reactionary and neo-liberal."

Once again: rhetoric as building blocks for a set of attitudes. And Marta Reuter notes with interest how the EU Commission likewise tries to establish "a European identity" by means of rhetoric and with the aid of symbols and symbolic language that bring to mind the nation-building projects of the nineteenth century.

For these reasons, Marta Reuter hopes that her own research on the Baltic area and EU will contribute to an illumination of the influence of language, that is, of rhetoric:

"The view of the geographical space, or rather the geographical-political space, and how it is constructed with the aid of rhetoric, can become more nuanced."

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Heritage. Impressions of Swedishness

At a CBES seminar on September 22, Ralph Tuchtenhagen, professor of eastern and northern European history at Hamburg University, gave a talk entitled "Between 'Deluge' and 'Good Old Days'". What he was referring to are the attitudes that were characteristic of the memories of the Swedish presence in the eastern and southern parts of the Baltic region.

Memory studies research can be described as a subdivision of the history of mentalities. Since Pierre Nora launched the project *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984–1992) about how France's iconic national monuments, museums, and festivals have been used, reused and misused, the concept of "lieu de mémoire" and its English counterpart, "memory site", have gained currency throughout the world, but have yet to take hold in the Nordic countries. Professor Tuchtenhagen would like to remedy this.

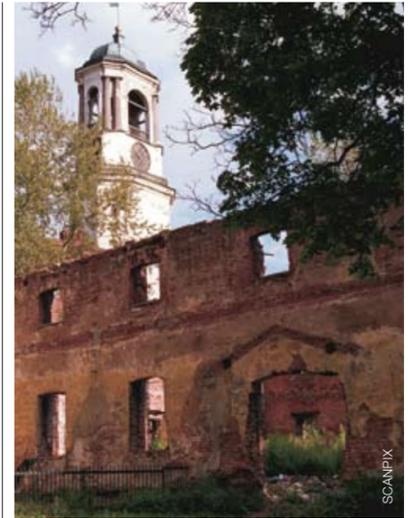
In his inventory of sites linked to Sweden, he went through some of the most common forms of "memory sites", which need not be specific sites, but can be individuals, or artistic works. These can be categorized as *national, regional, or local*, but also as *social*.

In Finland, the presence of a Swedish-speaking upper class has prevented the emergence of a national memory image, even if there are "memory sites" in Helsinki, Vyborg (which is now Russian) and Turku.

In Estonia, there is a widespread positive image, often linked to Swedish kings, who have taken on mythical proportions. It should be noted that this view rarely withstands the light of archival research.

In Latvia, unlike in the countries to the north, no Swedish minority remains, and it is difficult to find evidence of memory sites, with the possible exception of the Swedish gate in Riga. Here, a part of the "Good Old Days" perspective emanates from the contrast with the German and Russian/Soviet eras.

In Lithuania, positive associations can be found (the Treaty of Kedainiai of 1655, between Karl X Gustav and the Protestant magnates of the Radziwiłł family), but the memory of Sweden is nonetheless overwhelmingly negative, since it is linked to Lithuania's loss of status as a major European power.



The ruins of the Vyborg Old Cathedral.

In Poland, this tendency is even stronger. For example, the siege of the monastery of Jasna Góra in 1655 became, even then, emblematic of Potop Swedzki ("The Swedish Deluge"). This image was further fueled by Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *Potop* (1886), and was renewed by the movie of the same name (1974). This "memory site" thus contributed to the still vigorous national victim myth, where Serb war criminals can be represented as "tame lambs" compared with the terrible Swedes.

In Germany, the memory image is quite different – partly characterized by "jovial exoticism" ("Der Alte Schwede" bars), and partly by thoughts of faith-based solidarity and enlightened administration.

Historical memory tends to take on a different form if one shifts focus. Professor Max Engman pointed out that in Finland one does not speak of the "Good Old Days" but of the "Old Days", and that Swedishness can be said to have "nostrified", to have merged with Finns' own national memory identity.

Increasing awareness of the masks of the past – and of what lies behind them – has the potential to make a vital contribution to the long trek towards European integration.

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