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Racist murder sparks Sweden's Black Lives Matter

by Christian Christensen

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On Oct. 23, 2015, Anton Lundin Pettersson walked into the Kronan School in Trollhattan, Sweden, and murdered a teaching assistant and a student with a sword.

Pettersson was then shot by police and died at the hospital. The attack, the deadliest at a school in Swedish history (and the first in the country since a 1961 shooting in Gothenburg), would go on to be described by politicians and members of the media as an attack on the supposedly Swedish values of openness, tolerance and egalitarianism.

Had this been a killing at another school, at another time, or with another murderer, the common (and perhaps simplistic) notion of collective grief may have passed without comment. But this was a double murder at a school made up primarily of students with immigrant backgrounds at a time of heightened ethnic tension in Sweden committed by a killer with far-right sympathies who purposefully targeted people of color. As a result, many Swedes have challenged the notion of an attack on the national collective: This was not, in fact, an attack on all of Sweden but on a specific section of Sweden singled out because of a racist ideology. In a widely shared opinion piece in the Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet titled “White Hypocrisy,” journalist Martin Aagard wrote that the “white elite” in the country must stop speaking in platitudes and recognize that many nonwhites, “feel hated, and know that the next attack can come from a young boy with rosy cheeks, someone that no one would suspect of committing evil.”

While white Swedes may have felt genuine sadness and outrage over the tragedy, the fact remains that they would never, ever have been the target of Pettersson’s rage just as they will

never, ever be the target of daily racism and racial discrimination. Of course, to express his vehement opposition to multiculturalism Anders Breivik killed 77 in Norway in 2011, with many of his victims being white. But such an expression of racism — whites killing other whites — is rare in comparison to the form of violence committed in Trollhattan. In addition, while Breivik's heinous act was a national trauma, one would be hard-pressed to argue that, even after the killings, white residents in Norway feel their skin color to be a potential target they carry with themselves in perpetuity.

From progressive gender politics to steadfast opposition to the Vietnam War to being the first EU member state to recognize Palestine, Sweden is a country with a strong history of advocating for rights at home and abroad. And, Sweden has also shown an astonishing willingness to take in refugees at a rate that puts almost every other country in Europe to shame.

Sweden is also a country where the ethnic makeup of companies, the parliament, universities (and so on) are not measured; and, it is a country where the word "race" was (in 2014) to be eliminated from all national legislation. On the surface, such policies appear to be admirable attempts to move beyond race as a social construct. But from another perspective, they come off as idealistic, naive and ultimately counterproductive in a country (and a Europe) where discrimination and racism remain entrenched.

The recent spate of arson attacks against refugee housing in Sweden is a testament to this fact, with 20 such incidents in 2015 alone.

Trollhattan represents a pivotal moment in contemporary Swedish history. All countries experience singular events that trigger deep national introspection. The killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, would also be one such event. This could have been just another police shooting, but the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement illustrated the complex social layers to be found underneath the Brown killing: racism, police violence, a biased justice system, inadequate media coverage and so on. What makes the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. so effective is not simply its repeated exposure of excessive police violence against the African-American community, but also the ways in which it has shifted the national debate about race by revealing the everyday racism and discrimination faced by blacks in the U.S. These achievements have also led to a great deal of discomfort for white Americans who are now forced to face unpleasant truths about their country, and the complicity of its political structures in perpetuating their own privilege at the expense of others.

Similarly, Sweden now faces unpleasant truths about itself.

Just as Black Lives Matter forced the issue of privilege into the national consciousness, so Trollhattan forces Sweden to consider its own national rhetoric on egalitarianism and tolerance: to have its own Black Lives Matter. Swedish media regularly report on studies showing that Swedes are open to immigration and do not (as a rule) hold discriminatory or racist views. While this may be true in very broad and very general terms, such studies and reports aren't examined closely enough. A good example of this self-belief was in 2010, when the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats entered parliament with 5.7 percent of the national vote. Much of the talk in Sweden was of it being nothing more than a protest vote by disaffected nationalists — troubling, yes, but not indicative of broader sympathy. (The late Henning Mankell, author of the "Wallander" books, was less sanguine.) But that wasn't all. The Sweden Democrats increased their support to 12.9 percent in the 2014 elections, and in 2015 their support approached the 20

percent level, making them (by a considerable margin) the third-most-popular party in Sweden. The so-called protest now included 1 in 5 Swedish voters.

The Swedish global reputation for a heightened democratic sensibility is one of the things that makes the country unique. But there remains a danger that an excessive faith in one's egalitarianism and color-blindness is itself a form of visual impairment, making it difficult to recognize the need for more than proclamations of solidarity.

Sweden has much to be proud of, with an intake over the years of large numbers of refugees from countries such as Syria, Iraq and Kosovo at the top of that list. But pride must be put aside in order to consider, in a truly critical manner, the serious challenges facing the country in one of its darker hours.