Sweden and Its Colonial and Racial Entanglements

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IN REVIEW

Decolonial Sweden
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REVIEW

Decolonial Sweden is an anthology edited by Michael McEachrane and Louis Faye. According to the editors, it serves as a kind of follow-up to the 2001 anthology *Sverige och de Andra: Postkoloniala perspektiv [Sweden and the Others: Postcolonial Perspectives]*. The editors situate the book within the evolution of post- and decolonial studies in Swedish academia and political activism—a "decolonial turn"—which shifts the emphasis from:

> …notions of racial difference, identity, culture, representation, discourse, and narrative [to] a socio-political emphasis on racial conditions, social and international power relations, social and global justice, the global economy, climate change, and ecological destruction (p. 1).

This is a long and comprehensive book that spans numerous topics and theories, making it impossible to present it in full depth in a short review. Consequently, my summary cannot do full justice to the complexity and richness of each chapter or of the book as a whole.

The book is structured around three sections that each aim at challenging one of three dominant assumptions about Sweden:

1. Sweden is not implicated in the histories and legacies of European colonialism.
2. Race is not relevant to Swedish society or its global position.
3. Sweden is a progressively egalitarian welfare state that champions human rights, equality, and non-discrimination—non-racist and/or anti-racist, anti-colonial, and in solidarity with the Global South.

These assumptions frame the book's three sections.

SECTION I: SWEDEN'S COLONIAL ENTANGLEMENTS

The first section includes four contributions that explore Sweden's direct and indirect involvement in European colonialism. Håkan Thörn discusses Sweden's colonial engagements in Sápmi and the centrality of Sámi resistance in environmental political activism since the 1950s. Thörn highlights the contentious relationship to both the Swedish state and Swedish environmental organizations. Carla Lanyon-Garrido et al. present collaborative work between researchers and a Sámi sijda to build a decolonial Sámi understanding of landscapes and human–nature relations. This chapter highlights the ethical challenges of co-producing knowledge with Indigenous communities and the epistemological clashes that may arise.

Göran Collste shifts the focus to the Caribbean, examining whether Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Reparation Commission's inclusion of Sweden in its reparations demands is justified. Although a relatively minor colonial player, Sweden's complicity is evident through its acquisition of Saint Barthelemy in 1784, which operated as a free port for ships carrying enslaved Africans. Collste further argues that Sweden benefited not only from direct colonial possessions but also through its integration into the global colonial economy and should therefore engage constructively with CARICOM's demands.

In the final chapter of this section, comprising an email correspondence, several of the section's contributors reflect collectively on the continued denial of Sweden's colonial past and the importance of building decolonial Black and Sámi consciousness.

SECTION II: THE SWEDISH WELFARE STATE AND RACIAL POLITICS

The second section turns to the Swedish welfare state. Michael McEachrane traces its historical trajectory as a "racial social democracy," shaped by white supremacy from its explicit racist forms to its post-WWII racial politics. Inspired by the works of Charles W. Mills's conceptualization of white supremacy as a global socio-political system of race, the chapter

traces how the Swedish nation-state, and later the welfare state, has fundamentally been shaped within this system of white supremacy from its de jure or explicit racist forms to the de facto racial politics post-WWII. Paula Mulinari and Anders Neergaard explore the relationship between capitalism and racism in Sweden, analyzing labor market stratification and racial capitalism within male-dominated trade unions in Sweden.

Sarah Hamed and Beth Maina Ahlberg interrogate the Swedish health care system in chapter 8. They argue that Sweden's exceptionalist image obscures and denies racism within health care systems and practices, through arguments of neutrality and objectivity. The authors reflect on decolonization as an active, institutional promotion of anti-racism among health care staff, acknowledgement of Sweden's colonial history and complicity, and offers different pathways for decolonizing health care in Sweden.

Again, the final chapter of section comprises an email conversation between some of the section contributors, Domino Kai, Minoo Alinia, and Maribel Morey, in which they engage with and discuss ten decolonial propositions set forth by McEachrane.

SECTION III: SWEDEN'S GLOBAL COLONIALITY

The third section explores Sweden's global entanglements. Klas Rönnbäck and Oskar Broberg investigate the neo-colonial ventures of Swedish capital through the case of LAMCO in Liberia, illustrating racialized hierarchies in the global economy. Alf Hornborg critiques the ideology of progress linked to technological advancement and economic growth, proposing a decolonial economics rooted in a holistic understanding of humanity's role in the biosphere.

Maria Eriksson Baaz and Paula Mählck analyze structural racism in Swedish development assistance, highlighting white savior narratives and unequal economic privileges between Swedish and local staff. Seema Arora-Jonsson and Arvid Stiernström critique Sweden's 'green transition,' arguing that it perpetuates colonial exploitation of Sámi lands under the guise of sustainability. Yet again, the section concludes with an email correspondence, offering further reflections, this time on global ecological emergencies and their colonial origins.

I hope this summary conveys the breadth and scope of the book and how it illustrates the omnipresence of colonial legacies in contemporary Sweden. The book also demonstrates that decolonization is an immense endeavor with no simple answers or single method. This complexity may also be its limitation, as I found it difficult to tie the many chapters into a coherent whole. The email conversations that conclude each section may have been intended to do so, but rather than unifying the chapters, the conversations moved in new and other directions. While intellectually stimulating, they left me with a sense of unresolved reflection.

This unresolved feeling may stem from what I consider the book's greatest weakness: the limited theoretical and conceptual engagement with postcolonial and decolonial frameworks. The 'decolonial turn' that anchors the book is never fully unfolded or explored. How does it depart from the postcolonial? This is a missed opportunity, especially given the contributors' extensive experience in these fields. It would have been valuable to understand how their intellectual journeys have been shaped by this turn. For instance, the final email conversations seem like missed opportunities for the contributors to really reflect on how the chapters contribute to decolonial insights, which would have deepened the understanding of what precisely decolonial approaches add beyond the postcolonial.

Despite this, the book is a smorgasbord of insightful contributions. Each chapter stands on its own, but their collective impact is even greater. I recommend this book to anyone interested in Sweden's colonial past and present. Its breadth makes it a valuable resource for teaching across a wide range of subjects and disciplines.