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Market Wonderland: An Essay about a Statist Individualist Consumer Culture

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Who would have thought that the citizens of a Nordic, historically profound social democracy would wind up as hyper-individualists? This chapter takes its departure from Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh's *Is the Swede Human? Community and Autonomy in Modern Sweden* (2015; first released in 2006), a book which has had an unusually visible political, media, and cultural influence in Sweden, not least through its idea of Sweden as a *statist individualistic* society—a construct whose meaning I will elaborate on later. As a Swedish researcher on consumer society and culture, and fascinated by the academic, political, media, and intellectual popularity of this idea, I can't help wondering: What characterizes consumer culture in such a statist individualist context? What does it harness, celebrate, and encourage? For instance, might the market myth of

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Sweden as a Mecca in terms of the fast diffusion of consumer trends,[1] and therefore also an excellent market for corporations to test trends and innovations in, have anything to do with statist individualism? In this chapter I will audaciously ponder on this and other examples, by highlighting consumer culture in Sweden in general and some specific consumer lifestyle trends in particular, through the theoretical lens of Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh's statist individualism.

Statist Individualism

The Nordic "character" has been thoroughly debated throughout history, and still is. For instance, the curious may want to take a look at the fierce debate about the Nordics in *The Guardian* (Booth 2014; Booth et al. 2014), or the reception of Anu Partanen's (2016) book on the advantages of the Nordic model in the American press (Moynihan 2016). The topic is without a doubt charged with tension.

Moreover, the character of the Swede specifically has been molded and dissected from various historical angles and themes, where most descriptions entail less complimentary descriptive nouns like austerity, coldness, and loneliness. Not a very cozy country, it seems. And indeed, in the age of multiculturalism, one may wonder why anyone would even consider coming to Sweden. The answer is (of course) the welfare state.

Berggren and Trägårdh's seminal *Is the Swede Human? Community and Autonomy in Modern Sweden* (2015) is a praised social history book presenting a "Swedish theory of love." In fact, this Swedish theory of love has not only had an impact academically, but also in pop culture, through a film by Eric Gandini featuring Swedish citizens' anecdotal experiences, Lars Trägårdh himself, and even Zygmunt Bauman. More importantly, politically the ruling parties in government between 2006 and 2014—the Alliance—used the central concept of the book—namely, statist individualism—as a point of departure for their communication and strategies, and also employed

[1] Trigger warning for sensitive readers! "Trend" is often used by pop management consultants for commercial purposes, but is here reappropriated.

one of the authors, Professor Lars Trägårdh, as commissioner in their so-called Framtidskommisionen (the Commission of the Future), which was created to identify and report important expected societal challenges between 2020 and 2050. In the media the book was highly reported on and Trägårdh especially became a frequent guest on televised panel debates and so on. Culturally the book was not only a bestseller but, as mentioned earlier, also the object of and inspiration for the documentary movie by Gandin called *The Swedish Theory of Love*. All and all, the book, with its literary, historical, and institutional analysis, had an unusually large—for quite an academic book—impact on Sweden's various types of institutions.

What might make the thesis so compelling, both academically and popularly, is its revelation of conspicuously strong ideological contradictions absorbed and governed in the state model. At first blush these contradictions seem to be irreconcilable, but through Berggren and Trägårdh's historical exposition of influential ideas promoted by national icons amongst authors, poets, historians, and politicians, it nevertheless becomes comprehensible how these contradictions have managed to co-exist and co-work under the same national model. Moreover, being able to absorb and assuage ideological contradictions characterizes all Nordic countries, according to political scientist Byrkjeflot (2001), which to some part should make this book relevant to understanding the "Nordic model" as a whole. Furthermore, as Berggren and Trägårdh's exposition provides ideological explications for the Kantian and Simmelian classical tension between the social and the unsocial, it proves especially relevant in this time and age, when the meta level of cultural, political, social, and historical influence, and "the context of context" (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), has come to attract increasing interest among researchers of social science, rather than merely individual experiences. Sanctioned community and independence form the alluring paradox of the social contract in the welfare state.

So what does Berggren and Trägårdh's (2015) idea of statist individualism hold specifically? At a theoretical level (the less abstract level will be illustrated later by general examples from my years of research), three themes emerge as most important: *elitist social equality*, *individual freedom* (from other humans), and finally *the state as prime partner*. Berggren

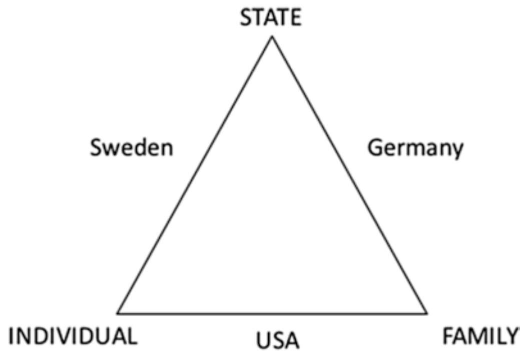

Fig. 3.1 Berggren and Trägårdh's (2015) sociopolitical triangle drama. Reprinted with permission

and Trägårdh make an ideal-typical classification of the most important units in society in their juxtaposed sites (Sweden, the USA, and Germany). They portray three results of a "sociopolitical triangle drama" (p. 79) where in Germany the state and family unite against the individual, in the USA the individual and family unite against the state, and in Sweden the state and individual unite against the family (see Fig. 3.1). In other words, a statist individualist society.

According to this model, for this welfare society to be realized, citizens must be emancipated from their (historically) clan-like family dependencies, and achieve equal value in relation to the rational and objective unit of the state. Instead of grandfathers and mothers deciding your fate by being the sole providers of your safety and survival, the state gives you as an individual the same right to decide your fate by providing you with what you need. Therefore, you no longer have to kiss up to your evil uncle, but in return must stay in a good relation with various national institutions; hence, freedom from forced personal relationships but not from the state. This influences the way Swedish people relate to each other in general. For example, who should put in an effort if someone is in urgent need of help? The state, of course, where the social acceptance of different kinds of dependencies look different than for instance in the USA (p. 81). In the American context, expectations are higher that relatives will take care of the weak, and the stigma is lower about accepting

it. In Sweden, the expectation on relatives is low and the stigma of acceptance of their donations is high. On the other hand, the stigma is much lower when accepting aid from the state and vice versa: the expectation and social acceptation of the same are both high. This is a sort of "institutionalized care" where "the state's abduction of traditional interhuman, relational duties drives the development towards a more cold and loveless society" (p. 85). One critique stipulates that "It replaces the bonds between people that have been the precondition for intimacy and being close"; another that "autonomy in relation to other people has come to a huge price," namely "the surrendering of power to the state," where we actually have quite weak rights toward the state. Modern Swedish society has been shaped out of a social contract that "provides the individuals maximal emancipation with minimal moral consequence" (p. 86), which according to Berggren and Trägårdh also leads to a curiously individualistic view of love relationships: *The Swedish Theory of Love*. There, the ideal-typical statist individualist views his or her love as the most pure form of love, as it is in no way arranged, but solely based on true romance and intimacy. Probably due to this relative freedom from traditional family pressure, Sweden has more single households (p. 441) and the highest percentage of divorces in the world (and the other Nordic countries don't come far after). In theory, we can expand the scope of relationships to involve general, volitional friendships, the pursuit of which is made possible by the benevolent state.

How did we end up in this peculiar, unique model of (in)dependence and welfare culture, according to Berggren and Trägårdh? They bring forth many culture-historical and political reasons for this, where some historical intellectual influencers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are especially emphasized. Among these the national poet, philosopher, and history professor Erik Gustaf Geijer stands out. In 1838 he wrote about the "Yeoman farmer" (*Odalbonden*), who became a normative archetype for at least as rugged an individualist as the American frontier myth archetypes of mountain men, cowboys, and action heroes (Holt and Thompson 2004; Belk and Costa 1998), but one more concerned with nature and equality. Most importantly, instead of freedom from a state, Geijer's yeoman farmer and Viking idealization rather celebrated freedom from other individuals and the freedom that a society, state, and

rule of law could give: the safety and security to be independent. Everyone is indeed part of a kinship, but one's fate is completely personal; "the individual is on his own," as historian Guretvitj states (in Berggren and Trägårdh 2015, p. 101). Another national influencer contemporary with Geijer was the author Carl Jonas Love Almqvist, who also emphasized the strong, individualist Swedish character as coming out of poverty, most ideally typified by the poor croft farmer. Yet another example was "Nietzsche's Swedish profet" (p. 159) Ellen Key, who like the national author August Strindberg celebrated Nietzsche in terms of radical individualism but, like Almqvist, with a touch of matriarchy. Her society model of rational Übermensch individuals, who deservingly would be emancipated as autonomous through thinking, were women (although by nature they were still regarded as more connected to the children and the home) and also children. Geijer, Almqvist, Strindberg, and Key were all proponents of human equality, not least between women and men, but in varying ways. What they had in common was their problematization of community and individualism, "a fusion between an individualistic view on man and a strong tradition of equality" (ibid., p. 167), from which modern Sweden in turn could develop.

This history of ideas came to lay cultural ground for the approaching era of social engineering in Sweden. Without this ground, the Social Democratic theorist, diplomat, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Alva Myrdal would perhaps not have been able to reach through with her ideas on common child care, women's right and duty to work, and so on; and Per Albin Hansson, the Social Democratic Prime Minister, would perhaps not have been able to announce and realize the idea of the new welfare Sweden as a relatively classless *Folkhem* (transl. "home of the people"). It is typically to the era of Folkhemmet that one refers in common speech when "misunderstanding" (as Berggren and Trägårdh see it) Sweden as collectivistic. The communality of Folkhemmet would never have been realized, they say, if it weren't for Sweden's hyper-individualist cultural roots, and it appears to be collectivist because everyone relates to one and the same agent—the state—but not to each other.

Next I will conceptually explore the statist individualist Sweden from a perspective of consumer culture; or rather, consider a few selected events, trends, and myths in Sweden's consumer culture and market

through the theoretical lens of statist individualism. I will use empirical observations from more than one and a half decades of consumer cultural research in Sweden as illustrations.

Consumer Culture and Statist Individualism

Consumer trends and phenomena are both concepts commonly used to describe how certain consumption patterns flash by, diffuse, or get established in a consumer market. In this chapter I will use the word trend not as a scientific but as an emic concept—that is, how these events and patterns have been talked about in Swedish consumer culture and media. None of these trends exists solely in Sweden, far from it, but they have a disproportionally wide or fast penetration compared to other markets. Conversely, these do not constitute an exhaustive account of Swedish consumer culture, but are important (from my subjective point of view) changes that reveal something about Sweden, and perhaps—at least to some degree—about Nordic consumer culture as a whole. Therefore, I here use Sweden as a case to reflect on what makes it such an apt context for these trends—or the idea of these trends—to thrive.

First, a prevailing myth in business circles is that Sweden makes the perfect market to test an idea, as it either spreads really fast or it doesn't spread at all. Hence, the test cost would be significantly lower than if one tested the idea in another market where potential diffusion would take a much more complicated route and thus require a longer time to produce test results. The common rationale is that the Swedish people are relatively homogeneous and prefer to look and behave in the same way in order not to stand out from the crowd. Berggren and Trägårdh ask the rhetorical question of whether "the Swedish state protestant conformism," coming out of a strong farming class in alliance with the king or the state against the nobility, is the antithesis to "breaking one's own paths, deviating, thinking independently, yes even being aristocratic and eccentric?" (p. 54). The answer is evidently no. With a historically strong farming class, religious homogeneity (protestantism), and relatively egalitarian family culture (p. 95), this unique conformism may rather be precisely the answer to why (if the myth holds any truth to it) the Swedish

consumer market would so quickly be penetrated, albeit saturated, by new innovations.

A complementary reason to these way-back-in-history understandings may be Sweden's road to becoming a welfare regime (p. 263) of citizen-consumers. In the first half of the twentieth century, social political decisions were made to depart from the stigma of verification of requirements to get social benefits *in natura* (food, clothes, or the like), and instead everyone should get general benefits in cash (such as the folk pension in 1913) to encourage "free consumer choice" (p. 264) in order for the citizen-consumer to consume what she or he—and not the state—preferred. This market orientation and "consumer power" ideology (pp. 354–355), in combination with a democracy built on popular unions on the one hand and a state-dominated corporative political order (p. 349) on the other, ending in a very broad middle class apt for everyday status competition, very likely paved the way for a consumer market particularly sensitive to consumer trends.

So, what consumer and market trends have been particularly influential in the Swedish consumer market during the last 20 years, and how can we understand their popularity from a statist individualist perspective? Next I will discuss five trends which revolve around Swedes' (1) swashbuckling body performances, (2) raging start-up fever, (3) swanky brat culture, (4) interior design frenzy, and (5) heroic foodism. I begin with the sweating body performances of the Swedish version of Robinson Crusoe.

Robinson Crusoe on the Run

During the past decade, the streets of rural and urban Sweden have seen more and more runners, more or less austere looking, some with backpacks with weights on their backs. In traditional and social media, a large focus has been given to running, not least to the more extreme versions: marathons and other endurance running events that often are combined with other branches like biking and swimming (e.g., Ironman). In various large surveys commissioned by organizations connected to the Swedish government, such as Riksidrottsförbundet and Svensk Friidrott, the inter-

est in running has increased by almost 70% since 2007, and between 2004 and 2014 the number of organized runs doubled. Today, almost every fourth adult in Sweden runs at least once a week. In a PhD dissertation by Janet Johansson (2017), this trend is explored specifically among top managers, a group in which endurance and ultrarunning appears to have become a growing imperative, requirement, and norm over the past years, at least if one wants to be seen as a "strong leader." Cederström and Thanem (2018) calls this "fitness leadership" and exemplify it with the CEO and self-titled "head coach" who runs the Swedish sport fashion brand Björn Borg like a "cross-fit gym". In the meantime, the types of organized training, climbing, and endurance running have become more and more extreme and absurd, where pain is to be maximized, something Scott et al. (2017) as well as Carys Egan-Wyer (forthcoming) explore in their research on "Tough Mudders" and endurance runners.

Through the lens of statist individualism, the success of this competition in endurance and suffering is not so peculiar. Berggren and Trägårdh (2015, p. 41) write: "The ideal state for a Swede is to live like Robinson Crusoe in nature, as an independent individual, free from the mutual dependence and collective consideration forced by close community with others." As the quote testifies, the Swedish national character literature conveys a heroic, hard-suffering, self-sufficient archetype best portrayed by Robinson Crusoe, who thrives in rough nature with scarce resources. And he (of course) makes it. This idealization of loving and thriving from poverty and nature corresponds with Geijer's yeoman and Almqvist's croft farmers, and latches on to the radical individualism they preached. Yet, as Berggren and Trägårdh also state in relation to the dream of the Robinson Crusoe hero, it is tragically not possible. The persistence of Swedish nation and culture requires from its solitary inhabitants that they form social bonds in the form of an abstract community. They need to leave nature and enter modern society. But today, within the safe confines of modern society, the freedom-seeking inhabitants have finally found a way to solve this conflict. In these endurance sports they can both be solitary and together; a crowd of solitary Robinson Crusoes struggling together.

A similar pattern can be observed in Iceland, where a disproportionally huge number of successful athletes are produced. As in other Nordic

contexts, the readiness for this can be understood through rough climate and terrain, and in turn the limited choice of leisure activities half the year (leading to indoor sports), but also through archetypes in folklore and myths (Itu 2018). In Swedish culture, there has also been a readiness which, according to Berggren and Trägårdh, is historically grounded in the "reliable, protestant self-help philosophy" (p. 262) that permeated Swedish culture at the turn of the nineteenth century. Self-help culture was strongly anchored in working- and lower middle-class culture for the majority of the twentieth century through local popular folk movements, where health (e.g., sobriety) and sports made common themes. Little did one know that one day these unification efforts would fragmentize into solitary Tough Mudders and stone-hard Ironmen.

A Unicorn Culture

Besides being amongst the world's most internet broadband–connected countries, Sweden is, according to a Wharton article in 2015, second only after Silicon Valley in multibillion-dollar tech companies—so called Unicorns—produced per capita. More generally, according to OECD research, Sweden has 20 startups per 1000 employees, compared to the USA's mere 5. Maliranta et al. (2012) argue that the Nordics—despite their "cuddly capitalism" (higher overall tax burden and more generous safety nets)—have generated at least as much innovation activity as the "cut-throat" capitalist USA, and reached matching levels of productivity and innovation in important parts of the economy. What from a statist individualist perspective has produced such an apparent hotbed for entrepreneurs?

The Swedish self-sufficient individualist celebrated by Geijer and Almqvist (pp. 89–177) became perhaps even more potent via the narcissistic molding of the Swedish version of the (Nietzschean) Übermensch by Strindberg and Key. As Geijer stated, "every genius is practical" (p. 98). Hence, being academic or refined was not the highest virtue, but getting things done.

Also according to Berggren and Trägårdh, the nineteenth-century French sociologist Frédéric Le Play stated that Sweden had a family form

which encouraged a strong sense of the individual power of initiative, as children generally were trusted with a lot of autonomy (p. 72). Later on, erasing the image of the allodial farmer as the national archetype, during the construction of Folkhemmet as a welfare model for the world led by Per Albin Hansson, the Swedes were often called “The Future People” (p. 232). Earlier, in 1916, Ludvig Nordström had already talked about “the excellent Swedish race,” who far better than any other people knew the art of engineering, progressive functionalism, and hard work; the Swedes were rational and futuristic.

All and all, a hard-working, progressive, practical (technological), hyper-individualist, and grounded grass-roots culture most likely made a perfect breeding ground for Unicorns, who often specialized in digital products organically entangled in consumer culture (e.g., Spotify, Skype, and King).

A Fashion of Equality Backlash

In the mid-1990s, unusually conservative-looking but colorful (male) flaneurs with pilot sunglasses and waxed slicked-back hairstyles began to appear on the streets of Stockholm. This style was called “brat” or “stekare,” and referred to a casual but conspicuous upper-class look which Östberg (2005) termed the “brat enclave.” He explained their emergence in Sweden as upper-class teenagers’ revenge for their parents’ voluntary disclaim of noble privileges in the 1970s. If we are to believe Berggren and Trägårdh (2015), the revenge may go deeper and further back than that. It may be a revenge for the centuries of “stigma” of being noble in a country where the nobility was seen as the enemy by both the king and the farmers. Early Swedish democracy occurred before urbanization started for real, and was usually exemplified by healthy farmers portrayed in opposition to the indolence, idleness, and laziness of the upper class.

In the 1800s, unlike in the more capitalist-developed countries of Europe or in the USA, in Sweden the bourgeoisie was very weak and liberal political movements were actually constituted by the largest group: the farmers. In fact, 80% of all citizens lived by agriculture and only 15% were somewhat urbanized at this time (today it is the other way

around; Statistiska Centralbyrån (2010)). Hence, the culture lived by farmers had an immense influence on what later has been talked about as "Swedishness," or "Nordicness" for that matter. Not theoretical or "educated" (*bildade*), only pragmatic (pp. 187 and 211), "The Nordic enlightenment was not utopic but took form from a pragmatic rationality anchored in the farmer society" (Berggren and Trägårdh 2015, p. 98), and paved the way for a vision of social rather than noble aristocracy (p. 167).

Under such circumstances, nobility was not appreciated. So, when Stockholm's upper-class youth saw its chance, it took it. Like peacocks, they took over club and restaurant culture with typical St. Tropez party behavior (drinks tables, *helrör*, champagne, etc.) in their pink shirts, Panerai watches, and club jackets. The fashion traveled fast to other Swedish towns and the phenomenon was established as a whole industry (e.g., Stureplansgruppen). This can paradoxically be interpreted as a result of the Swedish celebration of equality in combination with the Nietzschean belief in the Übermensch. As announced by Ellen Key at the beginning of the twentieth century (p. 165), *everyone* should be allowed to be an Übermensch, which hints at an elitarianism on a *national* rather than social group level. The brat enclave was a symbolic trial to invert this logic. We are still to see if it started a larger cultural process or if it backfired.

The gender equality backlash in this trend was also evident. Östberg (2005) notes that this enclave of brats was dominated by a male-chauvinist masculinity (although sometimes packaged as gentlemanly in its upper-class flair), where women were merely boat bunnies and trophies, often in conspicuously objectified erotic styles. This was a time where half-naked pinup girls became popular again on the covers of new lifestyle magazines like *Café* and *Slitz*, and silicon breasts became a much more common sight in the popular media. This (from a feminist standpoint) backlash seems to be a right provocation against all gender equality struggles in Swedish history. It stands out and doesn't seem to correspond with any of the national fathers' or mothers' preaching in Berggren and Trägårdh's diligent review. Neither does it seem to have resonated as much in the other Nordic countries as it did in Sweden. But perhaps this is exactly what the revenge was all about, targeting the most holy of values in

Swedish cultural history: the social equality virtue in general, and the gender equality virtue in particular.

The Perfect Home

When foreigners look at Sweden's largest homes-for-sale website Hemnet, a common reaction to the interior furnishing is: "Wow, all homes are so modern! And they all look the same!" Even Swedes themselves have the critical self-distance to note the same thing, I learnt during my empirical research on taste in home aesthetics (Ulver-Sneistrup 2008). Like in many countries, during the 1990s the Swedish real estate and home market started a giant value trip that has not yet stopped (at the time of writing), which has led to enormous profits for some, and an impossible home market to get into for others. But it also latched on to the global-western trend of interior decoration (Arsel and Bean 2012), where the consumption of interior decoration became the most expansive of all consumption categories in Sweden (Fuentes 2016). This could not least be observed in the plenitude of magazines, television programs, websites, designer brands, and stores that emerged at this time—and by just taking a glance at Hemnet.

Regardless of social position, the "home" is seen as special, even sacred, in the Nordic cultures; and improving the home is even viewed as a lifetime project which gives meaning to life (Gullestad 1997). Words like "kos" (Norwegian), "hygge" (Danish), and "mysigt" (Swedish) have—not least under the severe outdoor conditions throughout history—implied ideas of warmth, beauty, peace and quiet, solidarity, and protection against the outside world (be it institutions, factory work, or later the market). Grant McCracken (1989) found similar connotations of "homeyness" in the American context, but understood this use of the word as more particular to the working class than the middle class.

In Sweden specifically, historians and ethnologists have often described the home as that very special place where one displays one's "decency," not least in rural areas (e.g., Frykman and Löfgren 1987). Perhaps it is then not so strange that the entrepreneurial Ingvar Kamprad came up with the idea of IKEA—now a furniture retail giant—in the Småland countryside around Älmhult. The success story of IKEA runs so deep in

the collective memory that one could perhaps say it has become part of Swedishness itself, outside Sweden too.

During my PhD studies I did a multisited ethnography (Sweden, USA, and Turkey) looking at aesthetic taste in the homes of the urban middle class (Ulver-Sneistrup 2008). IKEA was a constantly recurring topic (me being Swedish) and was brought up by every respondent, no matter where in Turkey or the USA they came from. However, the modern, functionalistic furniture of IKEA meant completely different things depending on site and cultural capital (Holt 1998; Bourdieu 1984). Representatives of the cultural elite in the USA could appreciate IKEA's personal tone of voice, but looked down on its products for lacking authenticity and disliked its industrial, large-scale commercialism; whereas the corresponding group in Turkey highly appreciated IKEA's modern break with the clearly normative interior tradition they were used to, and socially pressured by their surroundings to follow. In Sweden, on the other hand, IKEA was taken for granted as the provider of household basics, and curiously respected as if it were a saint and international proof of national excellence.

Indeed, in Sweden, the home was often represented as something like "Society's elementary school for social virtues" (Berggren and Trägårdh 2015, p. 274), by for example Alva Myrdal and Ellen Key at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, the feminist Eva Moberg criticized this loudly. But nevertheless, in the social engineering of Folkhemmet, Alva Myrdal amongst others—not least architects—normatively proclaimed functionalistic, modern interior architecture and styles for the rural and working classes to become part of the upcoming middle class. Hence, long before IKEA started making modern, affordable furniture "for the many people," there was an established common assumption in Sweden that character and virtue could be decoded from the way your home was arranged and styled (Berggren and Trägårdh 2015; Frykman and Löfgren 1987; Ulver-Sneistrup 2008). Home was a micro cosmos of Folkhemmet, where the negotiation of ideological contradictions took place, because in many of the early visions for a modern Sweden, the public *became* the domestic (p. 154). Geijer's Lutheran standpoint was that women were indeed politically equal to men, but their natural place was the home; Almqvist was a proponent of matriar-

chy and state-governed responsibility for children; and to Strindberg the home was the battleground for the equality struggle, and women had exactly the same right of self-fulfillment as men, as long as their motives weren't trivial. Furthermore, early influential feminists like Ellen Key and Alva Myrdal, and later Eva Moberg's rebellious Group 222, Annika Baude, Maj-Britt Sandlund, Siv Thorsell, and Barbro Backberger, one of the eight in Group 8, never shared a common view of who would be the main one responsible for the home or the children. Unlike what many foreign observers usually assume, the versions of feminism varied widely, from conservative, liberal, to left wing, and from complementary, biological, to social constructionist views. However, the political synthesis nevertheless took a route from the internationally hegemonic joint taxation of families to individual taxation, which made the home a shared but not an economically unified space of socialization. Perhaps this economically individualized, but physically shared, relationship to space, together with other social political gender equality reforms, paved the way for not only one (the woman) but two (the woman and the man) consumers of interior home decoration and aesthetics. Considering also that children and teenagers in middle-class Sweden often had their own rooms and, as mentioned by Ellen Key for example, were regarded as autonomous with their own rights, the home encapsulated more than two such individualist consumers. The more the merrier.

Bearded, Climate-Friendly Foodies

Similar to, and contemporary with, the increased flurry of interior decoration in the 1990s, and continuing far after the turn of the millennium, a hype around food, cooking, and eating appeared, and to many the preferred way to express one's global middle-class identity was to become a *foodie* (Johnston and Baumann 2010). Considering that the cuisine had never been part of the Swedish, or even Nordic, national pride—quite the opposite—it was certainly not a given that this trend would take off as the home decoration trend had, but it sure did. Between 2004 and 2017, the interest in and consumption of food increased radically amongst Swedish people; the number of restaurants increased more than

threefold; Michelin stars started to sprinkle on Swedish, Danish, Finnish, and Norwegian chefs; and the "New Nordic" cuisine became a household brand in fine dining all over the world (Ulver 2017, 2019; Leer 2016). How could this trend become so wide, strong, and persistent in the Nordics, so historically poor in gastronomic refinement? The explanations are many, but if we view this from a statist individualist perspective and use Sweden as a case, what do we see?

Foodie culture, which is said to have emerged from the mid-1990s onward, celebrates "authenticity" in terms of natural, organic, crafted, small-scale, and non-industrial produce (Ulver and Klasson 2018; Ulver 2017, 2019; Ulver-Sneistrup et al. 2011; Johnston and Baumann 2010). This of course fits like a glove with the celebration of nature that we could see in nineteenth-century tales of the Swedish character's excellence and even superiority amongst Geijer, Almqvist, and Strindberg, but also the nationalist Rudolf Kjellén. It applies not least to the adoration of the farmer which, as elaborated on earlier, also had political and structural meaning, where farmers and the state shared a common enemy in nobility. Subsequently, Jante Law–loyal farmers had, relative to other countries in Europe, a very strong cultural and political position, which was a contrast class-wise to the more refined, gentlemanesque bourgeoisies on the continent. If this, as Berggren and Trägårdh (2015) argue, came to be a reason for later self-loathing and national bitterness during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—when Swedes were often accused of being impolite, uneducated, asocial, and uncivilized—through foodie culture this rural legacy could finally scent the fresh morning air. Farmer values were back, kicking the provocative nobility-worshiping brats off stage.

When we speak of "farmers' markets," we usually refer to the conjoining of some small-scale farmers and their partners at a small town square in some late capitalist country, selling their locally produced and ecological products directly to the town's benign consumers. However, when reading about the emergence of Swedish statist individualist culture, it becomes very clear that the whole of Sweden itself was a metaphorical farmers' market, judging by its historical constitution of stances as seen earlier. Hence, foodie culture, with its climate-friendly, locally produced, and from-scratch cooking imperative, could easily take root in such prepared soil.

The celebration of terroir and merroir from the soil, oceans, and forests has not least been visible at world-praised restaurants and in iconic television series like *Chef's Table*, as analyzed by Ulver and Klasson (2018), where, for instance, the renowned chef Francis Mallmann travels the world with his "band of gipsies" (*metranza*) and practices pit cooking over an open fire out in the wilderness. According to Berggren and Trägårdh (2015), Geijer saw two kinds of pagan religions: "fire," which was the active elevating us to the divine, and "water," which was the passive descent into dissolution of the individual. Not surprisingly, Geijer preferred the fire version of this Norse paganism: "war-like fire is also the life of human, which in struggle and combat seeks air, and birth in the death at the battlefield" (own translation from quotation in Berggren and Trägårdh 2015, p. 99). It probably does not leave a doubt that this is a celebration of traditionally "masculine virtue, bravery and harshness," as expressed by Berggren and Trägårdh (ibid., p. 99). And this obsession with rugged masculinity may be another route to understanding why foodie culture attracted such success in Sweden.

Despite today being the most gender equal country on earth, as the common tale and the United Nations have it, Sweden also has been a truly patriarchal society. As researched by Klasson and Ulver (2015) and Ulver (2015), this cultural legacy continues to thrive even in contexts where the immediate appearance states the opposite. Male foodies have now in some sense occupied the traditionally feminine space of the home, the kitchen, and made it into a stage for everyday performance and social identity construction. This has on the one hand encouraged a more equal distribution of mundane, unpaid household labor, but has also meant that *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell 2005) has taken over in terms of what practices and cultural codes are rewarded in the kitchen (Klasson and Ulver 2015), and where the interpretive prerogative for what is good taste is given to the one with "social magic": the man (Ulver and Klasson 2018; Neuman 2016). In other words, perhaps centuries of gender struggles have opened up for men to enter feminine spaces, and thereby particularly welcomed new consumption patterns and trends—such as foodie culture—that have invited them to do so.

Market Wonderland

As part of a wider Nordic model, but from the specific perspective of statist individualism, Swedish consumer-citizens need to stand alone next to, rather than within, the interdependent communality among co-consumers. This corresponds well with the *Gesellschaft*-like and Rousseauian "perfect independence" *from* other *citizens* that governs individualism in the Swedish context, instead of de Tocqueville's freedom from the state, and leads us to understand that communality does not automatically mean sociality. The social aspect may very well be absent from the state-sanctioned community, an insight that is often ignored in the "traditional" community literature in consumer culture research (e.g., Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), but acknowledged in more recent literature on crowds and publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2015), although usually referring specifically to the digital, more or less anonymous world.

Drawing from the consumer trend examples in this chapter, they all communicate very intimately with the main paradox of statist individualism; that is, the combination of freedom from interpersonal dependency, naturalized state dependency, and elitist equality. People compete for status in an otherwise stagnant and "obese" middle class, historically provided for by the welfare state, as solitary runners, unicorns, foodies, brats, and home stylists. In the line of independence all is done in an individualistic, competitive manner to stand out, but in line with isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) it all turns out the same in the end (for more insights on status competition in the Nordics, see Chap. 10 in this volume). In an elitist equality sense, they all deserve to have and be the very best, and that is how progress progresses in a statist individualistic society. As so well put by Berggren and Trägårdh, modern Sweden doesn't come out of warm solidarity (as perhaps has been popularly promoted), but out of a "chilly" merger of the ideals of individualism and equality (p. 167). Perhaps this is why Sweden is particularly apt to absorb what the sociologist Eva Illouz (2007) calls *emotional capitalism* with all its "cold intimacies."

Beyond the scope of this text, but as a potential route for future research, I would like to offer a short reflection on the importance of

societal units, as brought up earlier in Fig. 3.1. For a consumer cultural researcher, one of the first things that stands out is (of course) the relative lack of a "market" in Berggren and Trägårdh's model. The market is sometimes mentioned in the book—especially in the second part—but, as we saw in Fig. 3.1, the major institutional units of the USA's, Germany's, and Sweden's societies are represented by the family, individual, and state, yet not the market. I argue that by adding the market as a unit we could much better understand what forces are at hand in our society, which to a large extent can be considered a consumer society. Without the market as a central institutional unit, many important aspects will get lost in any social analysis. Although the following thoughts do not include what each society unites *against* (as Berggren and Trägårdh's excellent model did; e.g., individual and state *against* family as in Sweden's case), an initial step to include the market as a potential unit would be to acknowledge it at all. Throughout Berggren and Trägårdh's text, each national context highlights three units as the most important: (1) Sweden: state, individual, and market; (2) USA: market, individual, and family; and (3) Germany: family, state, and market (see Fig. 3.2).

Viewing the national contexts from that perspective, perhaps it now makes perfect sense that Swedish people conform so quickly and neatly to movements in their surroundings: visions of growth and progress provided by the market and the state, coupled with the solitary farmer's need to closely follow where the rain falls, sun shines, and wind blows.

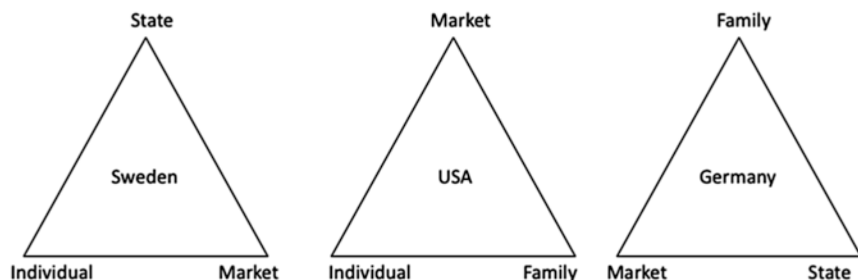

Fig. 3.2 Sociopolitical units of importance with the market, modified from Berggren and Trägårdh (2015). Reprinted with permission

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