

The Rot in the State of Sweden: On the Hypocrisy of the Canon Debate

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The Rot in the Public Debate

There is something rotten in the state of Swedish public debate. A sense of panic always lingers just beneath the surface; saying the wrong thing, or being perceived as the wrong kind of person, is catastrophic. Because there is a ‘correct’ stance—a predetermined line—everyone seems to instinctively know it. It is as if Swedes in public life form a ‘hive mind’, a colony where everyone must agree and fly in the exact same direction toward the same flowers. Consequently, real debate is non-existent. Instead, we see responses thrown out into a void. Most replies merely signal alignment with the safe, secure in-group, reiterating what the previous columnist wrote.

While a few brave souls do object, they are rarely addressed on substance. Reasonable objections are ignored while the establishment waits for a convenient outlier to appear—someone genuinely racist, homophobic, or misogynistic. It is far more comfortable, and safer, for the collective to unite in horror against a genuine extremist than to engage in nuanced discussions with well-grounded arguments that might disturb the sense of community.

The Canon Controversy

This dynamic was perfectly illustrated by the debate surrounding the Swedish cultural canon, launched as a project in September 2025. The government announced an expert committee which, in turn, would nominate specialists in fields like literature, music, and architecture.

From the outset, the idea was met with deep suspicion. Long before any names were revealed, the outcome was assumed *a priori* to be nationalist—and therefore racist, exclusionary, and harmful. Despite the bureaucratic safeguards—a committee appointing experts, placing the process at ‘arm’s length’ from the government—critics argued that this amounted to state-controlled culture. In Sweden, state influence is automatically deemed authoritarian, provided it comes from the ‘wrong’ political side. The culture pages erupted in outrage, and the Swedish Academy immediately distanced itself. There was widespread anxiety that a canon would create a national obligation to consume only approved works.

Ironically, this fear of power abuse came primarily from the most powerful institutions in Swedish cultural life: the Swedish Academy and the culture pages of *Dagens Nyheter* (the latter being the dominant voice in Swedish cultural criticism since the 1970s).

Gatekeeping and Class

The backlash bore all the hallmarks of in-group signaling: no nuance, no curiosity, no openness. I quickly tired of these repetitive dismissals and became interested in the arguments *for* the canon. My suspicion grew when I realized the resistance came almost exclusively from privileged cultural gatekeepers. Was their anxiety really about citizens being ‘forced’ to read classics? Or was it about losing control?

Today, culture is often treated as a matter of personal consumption and enjoyment. Yet, traces of prestige and refinement remain, serving as markers for the ‘right’ circles. As the cultural ‘pie’ shrinks, it becomes crucial for the elite to keep these circles exclusive. This is likely why the social aspect of the culture pages—whose influence in Sweden is globally unrivaled—has become so significant. Virtually no one on these pages could imagine that the type of *popular education* (folkbildning) a canon also represents might actually be valuable. Instead, it was consistently framed as a gateway to nationalism, with Nazism lurking just around the corner.

The Missed Opportunity

I had hoped for a debate focused on inclusion and education—particularly for ‘new Swedes’, immigrants, and their children, or indeed anyone curious about this country. A canon could serve as a vital tool for schools, offering support to teachers whose authority has diminished—partly due to the very same fear of ‘authority’ (often confused with authoritarianism) that drives the criticism of the canon.

There is a rich irony here. Contemporary culture is obsessed with ‘top lists’—a phenomenon that spread from pop music to literature, where critics’ lists now often replace serious criticism. Yet, these same critics opposed the canon, which is effectively a national ‘top list’. Why did not they seize the initiative? Why not use the opportunity to discuss which works truly shaped the Swedish language? We could have discussed translations of medieval ballads, Hagberg’s Shakespeare, or the fact that much of the ‘national’ canon rests on foreign foundations. A dynamic discussion could have highlighted overlooked figures, from 19th-century bestselling female authors like Emilie Flygare-Carlén and Anne Charlotte Leffler to literary originals like Clas Livijn and Gösta Oswald. These authors do not survive in some ‘organic’ canon that we simply ‘know’ exists; they require active preservation.

The Myth of the Organic Canon

A central argument against the project was that a canon exists organically and that writing it down would harm it. This mirrors the ancient prohibition in Judaism against recording the Oral Torah, intended to keep tradition flexible. However, under the pressure of persecution and diaspora, it was written down to prevent it from being lost forever.

While I do not claim that Swedes face the same existential threat as the Jewish people, cultural literacy is declining. Young people read less, and the generation that visits institutions like the Royal Dramatic Theatre (Dramaten) or the Opera out of habit is dying out. When the contemporary cultural elite insists that a ‘living, organic’ canon makes a written one unnecessary, it is an insult to the vast majority—native-born and immigrants alike—who did not grow up in homes filled with books.

A Matter of Class and Integration

The canon debate is, to an extreme degree, a class issue. The cultural upper class seems keen to protect its exclusivity, using the pretext of protecting the ‘lower classes’ (immigrants) from an imposed Swedishness. But who feels welcome in a country that claims to have no traditions, literature, or music worth preserving? Does it make no difference if a student of Italian reads Dante or a modern crime novel?

Of course, not every immigrant is interested in Swedish cultural identity—an identity many Swedes are eager to deny exists. But for those who are interested, knowing what matters is essential. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* has not suffered from being canonical; neither has Shakespeare.

Conclusion

Aside from the panicked slippery-slope argument that leads to Nazism, the opposition rests on a view of culture as purely private consumption—similar to the modern Swedish view of religion. But just as religion is increasingly understood as social (orthopraxy), culture too has a communal dimension. We celebrate minority cultures and praise their authenticity, yet Swedish culture is treated as either geeky, threatening, or non-existent.

Perhaps a canon cannot save Swedish culture from indifference. But now that the lists exist, they should be used. Instead of fretting over authoritarianism, we should debate the content. The only outlet that understood this was *Svenska Dagbladet*, which invited writers (myself included) to suggest works to remove (I voted to strike *Gösta Berlings saga*).

I speak from a position of privilege. I grew up with bookcases, a piano, and museum visits. I attended the Adolf Fredrik Music School, known for its high academic and musical standards, and performed at the Concert Hall and the Opera. For me, the canon is alive; I can afford to prefer the avant-garde and the marginal. But I realize this is rare. If homes cannot provide cultural capital, schools must. The canon is a tool for equality—whether for the rebellious teenager pushing against it, or the newly arrived woman seeking to understand her new home.

The canon is not a threat to cultural life. But snobbery, cronyism, and the weaponization of ‘good taste’ as a class marker are. That is the true authoritarianism revealed by this debate.