

Part 2: New Nordic Theory

TWO

THE NORDIC THEORY OF LOVE

PIPPI LONGSTOCKING'S MAGIC

IS THE SWEDE A HUMAN BEING?

Pippi Longstocking is a rebellious girl of superhuman strength with two perky red braids and a face full of freckles. Her mother is dead, and her father is always away traveling, so she lives by herself in a big house along with a monkey and a spotted white horse that she can lift above her head. Pippi is sometimes abrupt with people, and her manners aren't the best, but her heart is in the right place.

Pippi is the star of a Swedish children's book series by Astrid Lindgren, first published in the 1940s. The Pippi Longstocking books have since been translated into seventy languages and adapted numerous times for film and television—including several American screen adaptations, the first hosted by Shirley Temple in 1961. In neighboring Finland, I grew up reading and loving Lindgren's books, loving Pippi, and especially loving her horse, which she brought indoors and rode bareback.

But Pippi is also a legend among children and families all over the world, not just in the Nordic countries—my American husband, Trevor, remembers having the Pippi Longstocking books read to him as a kid, too. But what is it, exactly, that captivates so many people about Pippi?

Pippi's best friends in the stories are the two children next door, Annika and Tommy. Unlike Pippi, they belong to an intact and idyllic nuclear family. The significance of Pippi's character and her relationship with Annika and Tommy was never explicitly clear to me as a child, or even as an adult, until a man named Lars Trägårdh pointed it out to me.

Lars Trägårdh is a Swedish scholar and historian who lived in the United States for decades and knows the country intimately. As a boy Trägårdh had dreamed of coming to America, and after high school in Sweden he was accepted by Pomona, a small liberal arts college in California. As he set out to do what millions of Americans do every year—apply for financial aid to help cover the cost of his college tuition—he got his first taste of how things worked in the United States. The financial aid office at Pomona gave him two sets of forms to fill out. One asked about his income and savings. The other asked about his parents' income and savings.

Trägårdh was confused. He was already eighteen, legally an adult. In Sweden his parents no longer had any responsibility for him or any legal right to be involved in his affairs. He supported himself, and he didn't understand what his parents' money had to do with his college expenses. Trägårdh remembers that when he explained all this to a financial aid officer at Pomona, he was told that in America, parents love their children so much that they happily spend tens of thousands of dollars—today it could easily be hundreds of thousands—on college.

The exchange led Trägårdh to a lifetime of thinking and

writing about the American dream, and how it compares to the Nordic dream. The son of a single mother, he did receive the financial aid he needed, and once he finished his studies at Pomona in the 1970s, he ran a café in San Francisco, became an entrepreneur and started his own computer business, and then eventually returned to academia and earned his PhD from UC Berkeley in the early 1990s. He taught European history for a decade at Barnard College in New York City until he moved back to Sweden with his American wife. His current work at a Swedish university focuses on children's rights and social trust—the moral glue that helps hold societies together.

Some years ago Trägårdh and a coauthor came out with a book called *Är svensken människa?* (Is the Swede a human being?) This somewhat startling question refers to the title of a past work that many Swedes would probably recognize, but that requires a little explanation for the rest of us, and that, in a roundabout way, gets us back to the subject of Pippi Longstocking.

In the 1940s, around the same time that Astrid Lindgren was writing the first of her stories about the vivacious and likable Pippi, another Swedish writer was analyzing the Swedish character and writing a very different sort of book, with that provocative question as his title. His name was Sanfrid Neander-Nilsson, and as far as he was concerned, the Swedish national character was ice cold, inward-turned, sad, depressed, and almost animal-like. It was a portrait of Swedes who yearned for solitude and feared other people—nothing like Pippi Longstocking.

A characterization of Swedes as the ultimate loners may seem surprising, especially considering Pippi Longstocking's global popularity. But there is some truth to it—we Nordics aren't known to be especially outgoing, and we probably deserve our reputation as stoic, silent types who can be a bit dour.

That said, the stereotypical Nordic person would probably also be thought of as someone who, although perhaps not particularly talkative, is sensitive to the needs of his or her fellow human beings, especially since we're sometimes believed to have socialist tendencies. It follows that we ought to have a collective mind-set and some solidarity, not be extreme individualists.

In fact, however, a powerful strain of individualism is part of the bedrock of Nordic societies—so much so that Lars Trägårdh felt it was worth dusting off the old question “Is the Swede a human being?” and taking a fresh and more positive look at Nordic individualism. After years of observing the differences between Sweden and the United States, Trägårdh identifies in his book some fundamental qualities at the heart of Swedish society—qualities that also exist in all Nordic societies—that help explain Nordic success. Indeed, Trägårdh's findings tell us a lot about why the Nordic countries are doing so well in surveys of global competitiveness and quality of life. And for me Trägårdh helped explain why I'd been feeling so confused by American relationships, especially those between parents and children, between spouses, and between employees and their employers. It all came down to the Nordic way of thinking about love—perfectly exemplified by Pippi Longstocking.

Trägårdh and his collaborator—a well-known Swedish historian and journalist named Henrik Berggren—put together their observations on individualism and formulated something they called “the Swedish theory of love.” The core idea is that authentic love and friendship are possible only between individuals who are independent and equal. This notion represents exactly the values that I grew up with and that I feel are most dear to Finns as well as people from the other Nordic nations, not just Swedes, so I like to call it “the Nordic theory of love.”

For the citizens of the Nordic countries, the most important values in life are individual self-sufficiency and independence in relation to other members of the community. If you're a fan of American individualism and personal freedom, this might strike you as downright all-American thinking.

A person who must depend on his or her fellow citizens is, like it or not, put in a position of being subservient and unequal. Even worse, as Trägårdh and Berggren explain in their discussion of the moral logic of the Pippi Longstocking stories, “He who is in debt, who is beholden to others, or who requires the charity and kindness not only from strangers but also from his most intimate companions to get by, also becomes untrustworthy. . . . He becomes dishonest and inauthentic.”

In the realm of Pippi—who, let's remember, is a strong superhuman girl living alone in a big house—this means that exactly because she is totally self-sufficient, her friendship with the children next door, Tommy and Annika, is a great gift to them. That's because they are absolutely assured that Pippi's friendship is being given freely, no strings attached. It's precisely because Pippi is an exaggeration of self-sufficiency that she draws our awareness to the purity and unbridled enthusiasm of her love, and elicits our admiring affection. In real life, of course, a child Pippi's age would still have a healthy dependency on her parents, the way her neighbors Tommy and Annika do. But Pippi illustrates an ideal of unencumbered love, whose logic, in Nordic thinking, extends to most real-life adult relationships.

What Lars Trägårdh came to understand during his years in the United States was that the overarching ambition of Nordic societies during the course of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, has not been to socialize the economy at all, as is often mistakenly assumed. Rather the goal has been to free

the individual from *all* forms of dependency within the family *and* in civil society: the poor from charity, wives from husbands, adult children from parents, and elderly parents from their children. The express purpose of this freedom is to allow all those human relationships to be unencumbered by ulterior motives and needs, and thus to be entirely free, completely authentic, and driven purely by love.

I wanted to talk with Trägårdh myself about all this, so I contacted him in Sweden from my new home in New York. As we chatted on Skype, he explained that these were precisely the reasons why he'd felt so at odds with his American college's financial aid policy. "In the United States there is both a moral, and to some extent legal, expectation that parents provide for their children even after the children have come of age," Trägårdh said. "But this expectation also means that parents have power over their children."

Freed from such expectations, people in Nordic societies can raise their children primarily with the goal of helping them become independent and capable of handling life on their own. The prevailing expectation is that every person should be able to craft his or her own life, without an excessive financial debt to one's parents, for example, that might skew one's decisions. There is a corresponding expectation that no one should be penalized in advance by the unlucky accident of having parents who might, for whatever reason, have less than robust finances. Similarly a wife should not be put in a position of being financially overdependent on her husband. Or vice versa, for that matter. And people should be able to make choices related to their employment without worrying whether they will still be able to receive, say, treatment for cancer.

All this creates relationships that are much freer of resentments, guilt, and baggage. In this sense, then, the Nordic theory

of love is an intimate philosophy for how empowered individuals can engage in personal relationships in the modern age. Liberated from many of the more onerous financial and logistical obligations of the old days, we can base our relationships with family, friends, and loved ones more on pure human connection. We are also freer to express our true feelings in our relationships with others.

At the same time the Nordic theory of love has become an overarching philosophy about how to structure a society. As such, it has inspired the broad variety of policy choices in the Nordic nations that together ensure a single, predominant goal: independence, freedom, and opportunity for every member of society. Most of the major decisions the Nordic nations have made, whether related to family policies, education, or health care, have followed from, and are direct manifestations of, the Nordic theory of love. While the inspiration for these decisions may originally have been rooted in Nordic cultural values, the policy choices themselves are not questions of culture—they are exactly that: policy choices. How all this has worked, however, is widely misunderstood in America.

THE MARCH OF MODERNITY

In the United States the biggest perceived enemy to individual freedom is the state, and Americans do have a point. History has proved beyond a doubt that the state can be used to oppress and even completely destroy individual liberties. After all, for decades America's worst enemy was the Soviet Union, where the state often controlled even the most intimate details of people's lives. When American critics of Nordic success condemn countries like my own as "socialist nanny states," they are voicing

a real fear that citizens could become docile lambs, subject to increasing government influence and control.

Every time I hear an American refer to Finland as a socialist country, however, I feel like I've been suddenly transported back to the 1950s. Finns of my generation and older have a pretty good idea of what socialism is, not to mention communism, having grown up with the Soviet Union right on our doorstep. Our nation fought three brutal wars against socialism in the twentieth century to protect our freedom, independence, and free-market system.

A little history: Until the early twentieth century, Finland was ruled alternately by Sweden and Russia, but gained its independence in 1917 when the Communist revolution in Russia overthrew the czars, creating the soon-to-be Soviet juggernaut. Finland was immediately plunged into a bitter struggle that pitted Finland's own working class—sympathetic to the Russian Communist cause—against our own conservative capitalists. In a short but vicious civil war, the free-market forces in Finland won, crushing the socialist uprising.

Then, when the Soviet Union threatened Finland's independence two decades later, Finns beat back socialism both times, preserving Finnish freedom and independence—at great sacrifice. Nearly a fifth of Finland's entire population fought against the Soviets, and many more participated as nurses and in other supporting roles. Some 93,000 Finns perished out of a population of 3.7 million.

Here's how we in Finland understand socialism: The government controls production and bans ownership of property—no private factories, companies, or stores, and no free markets. No one is allowed to accumulate any personal riches. There is only one political party, few personal freedoms, and little or no free-

dom of speech. Socialism is one step away from communism, which Karl Marx defined as a situation in which the government, or indeed, the state itself, has become expendable.

The idea that a contemporary Nordic society is anything like this sort of socialism is absurd. The notion that even a liberal American leader such as Barack Obama could be considered a socialist, as some of his conservative critics like to claim, seems to us downright comic. In fact such stereotypes quickly wear thin for us Finns. The number of Finns who sacrificed their lives fighting socialism and communism in the twentieth century is roughly the same as the number of Americans who died in America's two hot wars against communism—Korea and Vietnam—and that's out of a population about one-sixtieth the size of America's. Over the past seventy years what the experience of the Nordic nations actually suggests is that even the United States, with its already very impressive commitments to freedom, might actually be able to learn a few things from us about freedom and free-market capitalism.

Indeed, what if the entire purpose of the state in the twenty-first century, as agreed upon and expressly stated by its citizens, was not to take more power away from the people, but just the opposite: to push the modern values of freedom and independence even further, to provide the people with the logistical foundation for the most comprehensive form of individual liberty possible? It is exactly this exceptional commitment to individualism that defines the Nordic social contract today. And the results of this approach are plain to see from the Nordic region's rankings in global surveys, not only in quality of life but in economic dynamism as well.

All the advantages I gave up when I left Finland and moved to America—universal public health care, universal affordable

day care, real maternity benefits, high-quality free education, taxpayer-funded residences for the elderly, even the separate taxation of spouses—were not gifts from the government to make me a servile dependent on the state's largesse. Rather the Nordic system is intentionally designed to take into account the specific challenges of modern life and give citizens as much logistical and financial independence as possible. This is actually the opposite of a community-centered system, or socialism, or whatever you want to call it. This is also why the supposed social solidarity of people in the Nordic nations is not really as noble an undertaking as it is often made out to be.

Here's how Trägårdh puts it: "The Swedes like to flatter themselves into thinking that they are just very altruistic people, always doing good things," he told me. The same could be said of Finns, or other Nordics. However, what really motivates Swedes and other Nordic citizens to support their system isn't altruism—no one is that selfless—but self-interest. Nordic societies provide their citizens—all their citizens, and especially the middle class—with maximum autonomy from old-fashioned, traditional ties of dependency, which among other things ends up saving people a lot of money and heartache along with securing personal freedom. According to Trägårdh and Berggren, Nordic countries are, in fact, the most individualized societies on the face of the earth.

I know just how horrible this might sound to some Americans. Surely it brings to mind a totalitarian state—one that has cleverly severed all emotional ties between people in order to make citizens into slaves of the system. You could also be forgiven for harboring a dim view of Nordic society simply from living in Finland. Finns themselves love nothing more than to grumble and complain constantly about how everything in

their country is terrible—how the social services are terrible, how burdensome family relations are, how children are growing up miserable, how the government is a terrible bureaucratic overlord. Part of this is simply human nature: People always find fault with their situation no matter how good they have it. But the reality is that many Finns really have no idea how good they *do* have it, because they've never been on their own as a citizen of a place like the United States. Even many of my cosmopolitan and well-educated Finnish acquaintances still don't understand, for example, even after I've explained it to them for the hundredth time, that despite the passage of ObamaCare (the Affordable Care Act), the United States still does not have a universal public health-care system. It's simply unimaginable to them that an advanced rich country could be so backward.

Despite the genuine grumbling you hear in Nordic societies, if you compare statistics on family life in Nordic countries during recent decades with those in other countries, it becomes clear that loving families, well-adjusted children, and caring communities are by far the Nordic norm. When UNICEF looked at children's well-being throughout the different rich nations of the world—considering such metrics as childhood poverty, children's health and safety, family relationships, education, and behavior, including diet, teenage pregnancy, and bullying—the Netherlands, Norway, Iceland, Finland, and Sweden ranked best. Sad to say, the United States came in near the bottom. A study by Save the Children deemed Nordic nations the world's best countries for mothers, while the United States came in thirty-third. How is that possible? It's possible because freeing people from the shackles of financial and other sorts of dependency on one another enables them to be more

caring toward each other, not less. This is precisely the Nordic theory of love in action.

But surely all this Nordic talk of extreme individualism and independence means that even if Nordic people love their families, the bonds of family ultimately are weak. Indeed, by dispensing with many of the financial interdependencies that require a husband and wife to stay together, doesn't the Nordic arrangement encourage families to break apart?

Actually, by empowering individuals for the modern age, the Nordic theory of love has given the family a reboot, making it, in a sense, more up-to-date and relevant—and better prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century. In a report prepared for the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, titled *The Nordic Way*, Trägårdh and Berggren write: "The family remains a central social institution in the Nordic countries, but it too is infused with the same moral logic stressing autonomy and equality. The ideal family is made up of adults who work and are not financially dependent on the other, and children who are encouraged to be as independent as early as possible. Rather than undermining 'family values' this could be interpreted as a modernization of the family as a social institution."

An example that Trägårdh uses to illustrate the Nordic theory of love, and to show how Nordic societies value family, is elder care. In the United States, if your parents develop a long-term health condition in their old age, taking care of them and paying their medical bills can steal away years of your life. In the Nordic countries, if one or both of your parents are chronically ill, you can rely on your country's universal health-care system to handle the logistics and medical treatment. The result? You are freed up to do the more rewarding, loving things in the precious time you have left with your ailing parent, which the

social workers can't do: go for a walk, talk, read, just spend time together.

"When surveys ask elderly Swedes whether they prefer to be dependent on their own adult children or the state," Trägårdh told me, "they say the state. If you rephrase the question and ask if they'd like their children to visit them, they all say yes. So it is not that the elderly in Sweden don't want to have relationships with their children. It's that they don't want to see them on terms and conditions where they are being reduced to a state of dependency in relation to their own children."

Despite the doubts that some Americans still seem to have about the Nordic countries' commitment to free markets, Sweden, Finland, the United States, and other wealthy industrialized nations are all societies immersed in modern capitalism. It is precisely life in this modern free-market world that is breaking down the old-fashioned, traditional relationships of family and community, gradually equalizing gender roles, and encouraging individuality and independence. Critics sometimes argue that the Nordic countries have little to teach the rest of the world, because their success is specific to an isolated group of small, culturally uniform, ethnically homogeneous countries. But this misses the larger point. While the Nordic theory of love may have emerged as a set of cultural ideas specific to the region, the smart social policies that have resulted happen to dovetail perfectly with the universal challenges that all nations are facing as modernity inevitably advances.

Today the United States is at once a hypermodern society in its embrace of the contemporary free-market system, but an antiquarian society in leaving it to families and other community institutions to address the problems the system creates. Seen from a Nordic perspective, the United States is stuck in a

conflict, but it's not the conflict between liberals and conservatives, or between Democrats and Republicans, and it's not the old debate about bigger government versus smaller government. It's the conflict between the past and the future. Much of America's government does look ridiculously bloated and intrusive in all the wrong ways for modernity. The way the United States government micromanages society with case-by-case policies, and hands out uniquely tailored gifts left and right to special interests, strikes a Nordic as a clearly outdated way to govern. And whether the United States wants to admit this to itself or not, staying stuck in the past is putting itself at an ever-increasing disadvantage in the world.

As the world continues to evolve and change, all nations need new ideas. One of America's best-known commentators, the columnist David Brooks, expressed this need particularly well in relation to the United States in an article he titled "The Talent Society." "We're living in the middle of an amazing era of individualism," Brooks wrote, expressing a view that's actually almost identical to Trägårdh's. The evidence that Brooks cites makes it clear that the changes caused by the relentless advance of modernity are happening whether we like it or not. Whereas a few generations ago it was considered shameful for people to have children unless they were married, for example, now more than 50 percent of births to American women under thirty occur outside of marriage. More than 50 percent of American adults are single, and 28 percent of households consist of just one person. There are more single-person American households than there are married-with-children households. More Americans consider themselves politically independent than either Republican or Democrat. Lifetime employment is down, and union membership has plummeted.

"The trend is pretty clear," Brooks concluded, articulating his own version of how old-fashioned, traditional relationships have given way to personal independence: "Fifty years ago, America was groupy. People were more likely to be enmeshed in stable, dense and obligatory relationships. They were more defined by permanent social roles: mother, father, deacon. Today, individuals have more freedom. They move between more diverse, loosely structured and flexible networks of relationships."

Brooks paints a picture of an America that allows "the ambitious and the gifted to surf through amazing possibilities," but where the people who lack these skills fall further behind. Though this captures America's dilemma to a degree, it's not the complete picture. When it comes to "the ambitious and the gifted," we need to add that for the most part, it's only the ambitious and gifted lucky enough to have access to substantial private resources who find opportunity in America today.

Brooks says it is time to build new versions of the settled, stable, and thick arrangements of the past that Americans have left behind. This is exactly what the Nordic region has set out to do, and the Nordic theory of love has turned out to be a solid foundation for what Brooks calls the "diverse, loosely structured, and flexible networks of relationships" that characterize our current cultural and economic life. In an age when people are experiencing more freedom than ever, Finland and its Nordic neighbors have found a way to expand personal liberty while also ensuring that the vast majority of individuals—not just the elite—have new ways to be stable and be able to prosper.

As the twenty-first century progresses, countries that can figure out their own version of the Nordic theory of love will have a long-term advantage. Good quality of life, worker satisfaction and health, economic dynamism, and political

freedom and stability are all interconnected. Given all that, if the United States were able to borrow anything from the successes of Nordic societies to reinvigorate its own success—just supposing—where would it begin?

Well, from a Nordic point of view, a pretty good place to start would be at the beginning, with babies.

THREE

FAMILY VALUES FOR REAL

STRONG INDIVIDUALS FORM A BEAUTIFUL TEAM

IT STARTS WITH CHILDREN

When my American acquaintance Jennifer realized she was pregnant, she asked her friends for recommendations for good obstetricians. She called the doctors to see whether they accepted her insurance, and which hospital they were affiliated with. When Jennifer found a doctor she liked and could see without additional costs, she started going for regular appointments. Most of the visits focused on medical care, and she remembers getting general advice about becoming a new mother only in regard to the possibility of post-partum depression. On matters such as breast-feeding, she consulted the Internet and her friends.

At the time she was working for a large media company in New York City. Her workdays would often stretch until seven or eight at night. Now that she was pregnant, she asked her boss if she could transfer to a position with shorter days and