

Concept Paper

The Return of the Clan in Sweden

Johan Lundberg

Department of Literature, Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden; johan.lundberg@littvet.su.se

Received: 9 June 2020; Accepted: 6 July 2020; Published: 7 July 2020



Abstract: This is a conceptual paper which deals with a subject that has been neglected by contemporary Swedish researchers, politicians and journalists: the clan society, which is one of the most common forms of society in the world—from which many of today’s nations seem to have sprung. The thesis of the essay is that the taboo around the clan issue has meant that we have no capacity to understand foreign policy or integration policy.

Keywords: clan; academic taboo; Sweden; state; postcolonialism

1. Introduction: Neglecting the Clans

Although the clan society is one of the most common forms of society in the world—and in addition, the form from which many nations seem to have sprung—the subject has been neglected by contemporary Swedish researchers, politicians and journalists. There has been a taboo around the issue, which has meant that we have a poor capacity to understand foreign policy or integration policy [1].¹

In this paper I intend to discuss the contents and consequences of this taboo as well as possible explanations for the failure to discuss clans in Swedish media and academia.

It is significant that when I, together with the Swedish journalist Per Brinkemo, edited an anthology in 2017 about clans, we were depicted in the Swedish daily *Aftonbladet* as racists and right-wing extremists, due to our tendency to discuss cultural differences with respect to the clan issue [2].

A few years earlier, in early March 2011, when the Arab Spring reached Libya, and Muammar al Gaddafi had lost control of large parts of the country, Sweden’s then Minister of Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt made a statement regarding the future of Libya: “It’s not about supporting one or the other, it’s about achieving stability and reasonable development” [3].

When criticism was directed towards Bildt, he explained that he was referring to clan leaders in opposition to Gaddafi, who was then still formally in government. According to the same daily that depicted me and Brinkemo as cultural racists, *Aftonbladet*, Bildt’s explanation made the Middle East expert and professor of Islamic Studies at Lund’s university, Jan Hjärpe, laugh. “Talking about clan problems is pure propaganda”, professor Hjärpe explained. “Downright stupidity”, he clarified. According to the article, the professor of Islamic Studies considered “that the view of Libya’s clan problems represented by Bildt is obsolete and derives from how the country was 50 years ago, before Gaddafi. The role of the clans today is not at all as prominent. [. . .] This is not about clan rivalry but the young people who set themselves up against the old guard. The young have a new, modern view of society and contact with the rest of the world through social media”.

We now know that it was a clan uprising that took place in Libya nine years ago. Libya, that Muammar al Gaddafi had then governed for 42 years, was thus plunged into a ruthless war between different clans. The main objective of the warring clans was to gain power over the state.

¹ This article is a re-written version of the introductory chapter of [1].

This was a struggle that to some extent Gaddafi had succeeded in curbing and profiting from ever since he took power in the country in 1969 through a military coup.

Knowing the significance and power of the clans, he first tried to oppose them—just as Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Siyad Barre in Somalia had before him. Initially the people were forbidden to speak about clans. All these three political leaders soon realized, however, each separately, that this was futile. Instead they used the clan structure to their advantage.

In the documentary film *Libya: An Impossible Nation State*, from 2015, Gaddafi's cousin was interviewed. He had worked for the regime for 42 years, but at the time of the interview he was living in exile. Unlike professor Hjärpe, Ahmad Gaddaf al Dam considered that Libya's modern history could be explained on the basis of how the clan structures had been dealt with: "There was an alliance between the Awlad, Sliman, Gaddafi, Magarha, Hasouna, Tarhoun and Warshefana tribes. That alliance remained under Gaddafi and he benefited from it. When there was fighting, they fought for him. They had an agreement, similar to an alliance between different parties in the West, though stronger due to the blood ties".

A Google search on words and groups of words to do with "clan" and "research" only results in two minor research projects about clans financed by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) in the 2000s. None of them seems to have resulted in any major publication or received much media attention. To the extent that other research projects on clans have been financed by scientific foundations, it is at any rate obvious that they have not been focused on the entirely essential question for Swedish integration policy of how the conflict between state and clan should be handled.

Research has, however, been undertaken outside Sweden. Reading anything from UN reports to anthropological studies, or contemporary works by political scientists such as Francis Fukuyama, author of *The Origins of Political Order* (2011), by Islam expert Akbar S. Ahmed or legal historian Mark S. Weiner, opens up worlds that are remarkably unknown in Sweden.

2. Clan Practices and the Law

While the existence of clans and cultural differences have been neglected, problems associated with clan cultures have found their way into the Swedish legal system.

The American professor of law, Mark S. Weiner, has discussed an Afghan murder case, in which the clan leaders agreed that an appropriate compensation for the murder would be to marry the brother of the murdered man to the perpetrator's sister [4] (pp. 19–22).

From a contemporary Swedish perspective, it may seem unfair that the close relatives of the victim are those affected the most by the punishment. The brother of the murdered Afghan man is, for the rest of his life, through his wife forced to be reminded of his brother's murderer, who in addition becomes a member of the victim's family, specifically his own brother-in-law. In accordance with the rationale of the clan, the family or extended family as a collective has thus received reasonable compensation for the death of one of its members. This compensation may simply consist of creating an alliance with the murderer's family through marriage.

Under such a system, women are seen as objects of exchange in transactions between families. The perpetrator, on the other hand, goes free.

This is of course a completely different system than the state-based form of organization that has characterized the Western world since the Enlightenment, with its idea of equality before the law and where justice is administered as objectively as possible. The ultimate result of this legal practice includes the idea that a person's origin and gender should not be adduced as support for their reliability or unreliability. Those judged are primarily individuals, rather than being regarded as cousins or offspring. This is an important cornerstone of democracy, which historically—ever since Greek antiquity—has resulted in (more or less bloody) conflict with clan ideology.

In spring 2018 a judgment by the Solna district court attracted great attention in the Swedish media. The judgment acquitted a man accused of assaulting his ex-wife. The strong reactions did not stem from the judgment as such but from its grounds stated by the divided court. The two dissenting

lay judges, of whom one was a relatively well-known Islamic activist (and politically active in the Centre Party at the time), cited as grounds for the judgment partly that the man was from a “good family, unlike hers” (the victim), and partly that “what is normal” in these circles “is [. . .] that a woman tells the relatives that she is being mistreated if she is, so that it can be resolved within the family. The fact that Maryam Jassem did not tell his relatives that he was beating her, but instead reported it to the police, further reduces her credibility” [5].

What upset people was that the judgement was written in obvious conflict with the principles that uphold the Swedish judicial system, a legislation that is incompatible with invocations to a family’s honor.

Just five or ten years ago, phenomena of customary law and clans, like parallel courts, were unknown to most Swedes. Nowadays, these kind of collisions between incompatible law systems have become increasingly common and are featured almost daily in news reports.

The fact that the lay judges pointed out that “in these circles” it is normal to resolve legal disputes “within the family”, shows how the very fundament of Swedish society is challenged by the persistent cultural structures of clan thinking.

That the clan society’s legal practice, after several hundred years of absence, has succeeded in reaching far into the Swedish judicial system is of course evidence of the tenacity and survival propensity of cultural traditions over hundreds and thousands of years.

However, it is also a sign of Swedish naivety concerning problems that can arise when a social form of organization, built up around the family and extended family, is confronted with a form of organization based on a strong state.

When the Swedish Ali Khan family, based in Angered, a suburb of Gothenburg, was described in a newspaper reportage in 2017, the head of the family, Hashem Ali Khan, or Abu Saleh, pointed out that his family should not be seen as it has been described by the police, as a kind of mafia conglomerate. What Hashem Ali Khan has basically been doing is, he points out, mediating in conflicts that have arisen, not just in Angered, but all over Europe: “If someone wants to kill you the police can’t help you. Because it is not just you. You have children and grandchildren, brothers and sisters. The police can’t save the whole family. You may have restaurants, you have shops. You can’t throw it away and disappear” [6]. He clarifies: “There are many families here in Sweden. Large families like ours. If there is a problem between two people in two families. They fight each other, for example, and the police come and take one person to the hospital and arrest one. That is where I come in, between the families, not between the two who have fought each other. I come in and talk to the other members of the families that the police did not take”.

And the solution arrived at is obviously not primarily to punish the person who has committed a crime. Instead it is a matter—according to the rationale of the clan—of reaching a state of harmony between families or extended families: “People in such situations just get uncomfortable sitting in court and accusing each other. Instead I supply a direct solution, so that the problem is solved and then I go home”.

This kind of justice—which generally speaking has been an unknown phenomenon in Sweden for many, many centuries—stands in contrast with the modern, liberal state and its legal system. The ultimate purpose of the latter is to safeguard the autonomy of the individual. This kind of autonomy applies to the ability to stand separate from the activities of the family and extended family—historically and in the present. Autonomy makes me responsible for my actions, not for my cousin’s or for my great-great-grandfather’s.

The strong state will thereby ultimately have the capacity to guarantee a system of justice, based on the idea of equality before the law, that does not judge people on the basis of their membership of a family, extended family or clan.

3. Why the Clan Is Neglected in Sweden

One reason for why debates on the state and its relation to clans have been so absent in Sweden is probably, or at least partly, that we due to our history take the state entirely for granted. The idea of the state, which in Sweden goes back at least to the 17th century, now rests on principles that, in terms of the history of ideas, gained acceptance in the second half of the 18th century. The transition from clan to state probably took place gradually from the 14th to the 17th century.

We have assumed, in our culturally chauvinistic way, that other people do not differ greatly from us in this respect. What was, in actuality, our distinctive nature was perceived by us as something almost universal. However, in many countries in the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans the process from clan to state never started or only took place partially.

Another partial explanation could build on the aversion to the state as such that exists in both the right and the academic left, where the state—at least at a theoretical level—is frequently perceived as repressive and disciplinarian rather than as promoting freedom.

But there are other, even more ideological, reasons. At least since the 1970s it has been more or less politically taboo among Swedish academics to discuss the challenges that the Western state in general, and the Swedish state in particular, face as a consequence of the extensive immigration of recent decades. This immigration has largely consisted of people from societies dominated by clans and with extremely weak and fragile state structures—in other words from cultures of a fundamentally and radically different type, it could perhaps be said in direct opposition to Swedish culture.

Historically, this taboo can be connected to the ideological shift from 1975 and onwards, when the government declared Sweden as a multicultural society. Immigrants could thereby choose the extent to which they would be integrated [7]. From this point of view cultural relativism has been encouraged, especially when it comes to religious demands, concerning for instance, Islamic prayer calls.

Just discussing differences between Somalian clan structures and Swedish history on the basis of a faith in the state system unique to the Western perspective, could in 2014 give rise to accusations of seeing the world “through the colonial view of a white man” [8].

Such objections were not in the least unusual in the 2000s and 2010s. In 2018 the following definition of the term “racism” could be found on the Swedish Equality Ombudsman website: “Originally a word describing the division of people in a race system in which some races are biologically inferior to others. Nowadays the discussion is more about cultural racism—the idea that cultures are absolute, unchangeable and define individual qualities” [9].

When Swedish postcolonial academics—and there are lots of them!—have directed criticism against notions of “so-called” honor culture in general and “the discourse on the murder of Fadime” Şahindal (a young Kurdish women, killed in 2002 by her father) in particular, the accusations of “cultural racism” have been regularly flung at debaters with the argument that they “are invoking differences between population groups in terms of cultural qualities” [10].

According to these authorities in the postcolonial field it is racist to state that there are considerable differences between a “population group” that has moved here from Somalia and a population group from Thailand.

If research on clans is in fact extremely rare in Sweden, the situation is radically different as regards research on “racism”. In 2016 the Swedish Research Council was notified that SEK 65 million had been earmarked for racism research in the 2016–2020 grant period. Interestingly enough, the type of research on integration and migration that the state chooses to fund is largely dominated by networks around precisely the people who criticize the idea that there could be culturally based differences between different groups of humans.

In this context one central name in post-colonial theory can be mentioned: the Harvard professor Homi K. Bhabha. In his research he has—like so many other contemporary academics, stemming from Jacques Derrida—criticized binary thinking in which cultures are set against each other as fundamentally different.

According to Bhabha there is nothing at all that is a pure, essential “I”. He perceives our identities as generally composed of segments from several different cultures and beliefs between which there is a constant interaction [11]. And that this is the case can be assumed on good grounds. The problem arises in the moment when it is maintained that colonial ideas are being put forward as soon as someone claims that there is a fundamental difference between on the one hand, growing up and being molded in a clan society and on the other, growing up in a modern state.

As with many other cultural theorists, Bhabha’s idea leans heavily on the kind of dichotomy he says he is opposing. It is rather touching to note that he himself is laboring with a binary opposition, one side of which is the idea that identities are set in stone, and the other side of which is the view that there are no fundamental differences between different population groups—such as Swedish or Thai.

What Bhabha and those like him do not seem to understand is that the existence of grey scales does not preclude binary opposition. A population group may be relatively homogeneous, at the same time as individuals in the group nevertheless exhibit considerable variations among themselves. The fact that a cultural identity is not absolute and unchangeable, does not mean that it cannot be fundamentally different from other cultural identities. Culturally based characteristics may be persistent without being a once and for all given, “absolute, unchangeable”—in the words of the Equality Ombudsman. It is not racism to assume that a cultural background can play a part, and sometimes even play a major part, in an individual’s “qualities”.

However, the consequence of the laboratory-like view of cultural meetings held by Bhabha and those who share his opinions is that anyone discussing phenomena such as clans and states as two fundamentally different ways of organizing communities are regarded as putting forward a colonial imperialist world view—according to the Swedish researchers in Bhabha’s tradition it is even racist to assume that there are differences between population groups on the basis of an upbringing in a distinctive clan society or in a state-based society like Sweden.

Possible reasons for the Swedish unwillingness to discuss problems connected with clans can thus be found in a value shift in Swedish society over the last decades, in which multiculturalism has replaced homogeneity and postcolonial criticism of the state as repressive has replaced an earlier and more positive idea of the state as an instrument of promoting civic equality.

As a consequence of this inability to discuss clan issues, it could be asked whether any Swedish analysis at all can be made of countries in the Middle East, without mentioning the most important social unit: the extended family, the clan. How is it possible to make political studies of such countries, without attaching importance to sociological and legal aspects that are related to the fundamental difference between clan and state?

For example, when the Israel-Palestine conflict is described we usually just hear about the two predominant political parties in Palestine: Fatah and Hamas. But what is the society in which they operate? What are the social structures? What is the legitimacy of these political parties and why?

4. Clan vs. State

A consequence of the development discussed above is a blindness to the difficulties in Sweden to accommodate clan culture to central liberal values such as equality before the law, individual freedom, and gender equality.

These difficulties are due to the fact that clan-based societies in many ways are incommensurable with state-based societies.

The democratically state-centered societies are hierarchical and in one way, authoritarian, in that the people elect a leadership that is given a mandate to govern and enact laws. Furthermore, these laws must then be obeyed.

Against this can be set the clan societies: a type of flat organization in which each clan group looks after itself and where solutions to practical problems are reached through internal discussion. The system builds on consensus. Clan chiefs fill the function of wise mediators rather than leaders.

Within the clan a person's value is mainly based on family relations, while in a state-based society one's status depends on individual merits. In clan societies the status the private individual enjoys is based on the status of the family he or she belongs to. Moreover, the family's status is, in turn, entirely dependent on each and every individual acting in accordance with the code of honor. This becomes clear not least in honor-related crime, which stems from the clan culture's collective nature being upheld by the concept of honor as a collective phenomenon. Among clans, the individual guilt is of far less importance than the collective shame. Honor plays a considerably greater role of importance than the individual act as such [12].

The fact that each person's value in the clan is tied to every other person's actions, is an important reason for the clan being such a successful way of organizing societies. In clan societies, order is in fact guaranteed through the structure of the clan itself rather than through a superior central power.

The fact that the collective good consistently is put before the self-fulfillment of the individual creates a self-regulating system that does not need any central power to administer justice: "The system as a whole can be compared to the steel girders of a building, which each provide support to the others so as to keep the entire structure in place" [4] (p. 61).

5. Concluding Remarks

Despite the fact that a post-colonial discourse weighs heavy over Swedish universities, over the cultural debate and over many authorities in Sweden, the question of the relation between clan and state has, however, gained increasing relevance, not least—as was shown by the example above, from the Solna district court—in the judicial system. It has not been possible for police and prosecutors to close their eyes to the fact that clans such as the Ali Khan family have taken over the administration of justice in some housing areas.

However, even if it is necessary to raise the awareness of the clans as a threat to a society built on the fundamental principles of The Enlightenment as well as to the idea of a socially cohesive society built on trust in the state, it is also important to be aware that, set against a clan-based society, the advantages of the modern state are far from self-evident. This may be a matter of a choice between on the one hand freedom and autonomy and on the other infallible loyalty and minimal opportunities for self-fulfillment. However, from a liberal point of view it is also necessary to understand that it is a choice between aloneness and fellowship, between a lack of context and historical continuity and between only being assigned value on the basis of performance and of having a natural value as part of a group.

However, above all it is a matter of being able to use the freedom the state provides for something constructive. If this opportunity is not offered it is difficult to understand why you should choose state over a form of organization that throughout history has exhibited an exceptional competitiveness and capacity for survival. Due to the current migration from clan-based societies in Africa and the Middle East it is an important problem for the liberal societies in Europe to solve.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References and Notes

1. Lundberg, J.; Brinkemo, P. Klanens återkomst. In *Klanen. Individ, Klan, Samhälle: Från Antikens Grekland till Dagens Sverige*; Timbro: Stockholm, Sweden, 2018.
2. Ravini, S. Mumma för högerextremister. *Aftonbladet*, 4 November 2018.
3. Röstlund, L. Sågar Bildt: Ren dumhet. Islamologen skattar åt utrikesministern. *Aftonbladet*, 10 March 2011.
4. Weiner, M.S. *The Rule of the Clan. What an Ancient Form of Social Organization Reveals About the Future of Individual Freedom*; Picador: New York, NY, USA, 2013.
5. Solna Tingsrätt. *Dom [Adjudgment]*; Solna tingsrätt 2018-02-19; Solna Tingsrätt: Solna, Sweden, 2018; B 3551-15.
6. Lernby, J.B. Så Kontrollerar Familjen en hel förort. *Aftonbladet*, 23 September 2011.

7. Bauhn, P.; Demirbag-Sten, D. *Till Frihetens Försvar. En Kritik av den Normativa Multikulturalismen*; Norstedts: Stockholm, Sweden, 2010.
8. Osman, B. Med kolonial Blick. *Expressen*, 26 July 2014.
9. Available online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20121203072312/https://www.do.se/Fakta/Ordlista/> (accessed on 1 July 2020).
10. De los Reyes, P.; Johansson, S.; Knocke, W.; Molina, I.; Mulinari, D. Våldet Mot Kvinnor är Problemet. *Aftonbladet*, 15 March 2002.
11. Bhabha, H.K. *The Location of Culture*; Routledge: London, UK, 1994.
12. Gellner, E. Trust, Cohesion, and the Social Order. In *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*; Gambetta, D., Ed.; Basil Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 1988; pp. 142–157.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).