

The U. S. Economy: Swedish Views of Bigness and Mobility

America becomes a frame of mind.

With great pride, Americans experienced the Olympics last summer in Atlanta. Rather than focusing on the games, a favorite topic of the Swedish media was Atlanta's crass commercialism. They called it the "Coca Cola Olympics." There is an interesting irony in how Swedes commonly perceive the United States. It is seen with a combination of disdain and fascination that is perhaps as contradictory as America itself. Two recently published pieces offer insightful perspectives on the United States from the eyes of Swedes. The good news is that both see the United States as having stronger dynamics and potential than in Sweden. The bad news is that both are published in Swedish only.

In the June 4, 1997, issue of the Swedish business weekly *Affärsvärlden*, the article "The American Flow" (Det amerikanska flytet) focused on the booming midwestern U.S. economy, which, like Sweden, relies on traditional industrial sectors. The article examines how productivity can continue to be high without causing a labor shortage or inflation:

The explanation can be found in the stimuli from services. All modern countries use information technology (IT) in industry. USA has also successfully fully utilized IT in the service sector. This leads to substantial benefits for society's welfare since service transactions have a greater effect on the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) than manufacturing. The reason that Europe cannot achieve the same is that the work force is not as mobile as in America.

A second view, by author Staffan Heimersson, sees these dynamics as created by the average American worker—not by companies or the government:

"Jobs. It's what America is about. Everyone is always looking for more work or another job, often one that pays better. This attitude builds the dynamics that creates the jobs that are needed. . . There is a difference in attitudes that has drawn a new noteworthy border in the world, the most dramatic since the Berlin Wall. It is in the middle of the Atlantic between Europe, which is trying to find political solutions to the political solutions that created mass unemployment, and America, which has the apolitical dynamics that has created a shortage of workers."

The mobility in U.S. society also determines the American lifestyle in all of its big and self-promoting ways. Perhaps it is with bigness and mobility in mind that Heimersson titled his

new book *Med Dolly Parton i baksätet* (*With Dolly Parton in the Back Seat*). This collection of thirty-five stories indulges in all things American—truck driver breakfasts, political conventions, the Ku Klux Klan and getting help with a flat tire on a lonesome highway. Covering a span of thirty years as a reporter and foreign correspondent for Swedish media, Heimersson has a knack for defining how Americans tick. He shares his personal encounters with American icons from Mohammed Ali to Clint Eastwood, with an eye for the little pieces of reality behind the myths. He captures the inherent contradictions that define America, all the things to admire and sneer at, and all from a clearly Swedish perspective.

Heimersson's colorful language has an ironic, yet endearing, edge. His optimism for the United States is clear: "With no embarrassment I proclaim that in my heart I like America. Americans are as if they came from another—and happier—planet. America doesn't bite. It hugs." (Readers can try special-ordering *Med Dolly Parton i baksätet* through the Swedish-American bookstores listed on page 34.)

—Anders Benson, Swedish Trade Council, Chicago. Telephone: 312/781-6243; e-mail: anders.benson@swedentrade.com

Excerpts from *Med Dolly Parton i baksätet*

On the American cuisine

Ken and I ate like truck drivers. We spread jelly, which is a sorry chemical state of artificial fruit flavors, on slices of Wonderbread, which are kitchen sponges fortified with flour. . . American culinary skill and food culture is mainly about quantity. It's not enough to eat to become satisfied. One should eat a lot. And hopefully some more.

On Swedes' views of America

In some dark, envious, suspicious depth of the soul, Swedes see America as politically incorrect: culture and cars, religiosity, consumption and optimism—above all, the American will to live and optimism. . . Yes, Americans have succeeded where so many have failed. They have created a first class workers' state and the classless society. There are no more egalitarian people on earth.

On American mobility

It is the views and horizons, the music of the miles and the unusual twists of fate in peoples' lives that America becomes more than a country. America becomes a frame of mind. . . It's on the roadsides that you understand America.