

12-1-2017

News from the Swenson Center: Dag Blanck

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Recommended Citation

Berndt, Anders (2017) "News from the Swenson Center: Dag Blanck," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 37 : No. 4 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol37/iss4/24>

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News from the Swenson Center

“Important to promote academic knowledge about the United States”

Dag Blanck, Professor of North American Studies, has become one of the most sought-after experts in the media for explaining what is going on in the U.S. Dag Blanck is also the Director of the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center in Rock Island, Ill., U.S.A.

BY ANDERS BERNDT
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Dag Blanck has been interviewed by journalists thousands of times to comment on what is happening in the United States. As an historian, he began studying the migration from Sweden to America. He is now Director of the Swedish Institute for North American Studies (SINAS) at Uppsala University.

When journalists interviewed Dag Blanck, Professor of North American Studies, most intensively during the recent U.S. presidential election, an average of six articles or media reports were published a day, seven days a week, for a year and a half. There were over four thousand publications in total, although some of these were based on the same interview.

“So many? It is of course very rewarding when your subject of study is discussed,” says Dag Blanck. “Many people do have opinions on the U.S. and it is thus important that we can promote the academic study and knowledge of the country.”

Blanck has developed an approach in his many contacts with journalists.

“I’m an historian and almost always refrain from making predications,” he says, “but it’s difficult because journalists often want direct analyses. I’ve also learned to not talk too much – to say a couple of sentences instead and wait for follow-up questions. This creates a type of dynamic that journalists think makes good TV and radio.”

But why is it so difficult for Swedes to understand the U.S.?

“Our relationship with the U.S. is paradoxical in that we are very oriented toward the U.S. but at the same time our understanding is selective” says Blanck. “We know a lot about what we are familiar with, what we recognize. But a deeper understanding of the United States requires us to take in other and often unfamiliar aspects of the country, such as gun laws or the death penalty. To most Swedes, they seem very foreign.”

One key factor in understanding how the U.S. differs from Sweden is the view of the government.

“In the U.S., people have a very sceptical view of the government and the state, and have had so from the beginning,” says Blanck. “Sweden, on the other hand, is almost the opposite of the United States. We place a lot more trust in the state.”

It is also interesting to see how the image of America in Sweden and Europe has shifted.

“At the turn of the 19th century,” says Blanck, “it was the left that was positive towards the U.S. Many in the labor movement had been affected by the mass emigration and America stood out in a positive light. Among conservatives, on the other hand, there was criticism and the U.S. was viewed as crass, uncivilized and imperialistic. During the 20th century, the left and right slowly switched places, while the

arguments themselves remained surprisingly largely unchanged. It turned the picture around, but the arguments about America are still similar.”

Blanck took an early interest in the United States

Though it was not until he attended college in the U.S. that he became interested in the migration.

“I was always very interested in the U.S. and my mother asked me, ‘why don’t you apply for a scholarship to America?’ I was a little hesitant because I had marched in demonstrations against American foreign policy. But I was obedient and did as my mother said.”

Blanck received a scholarship through the Sweden-America Foundation and came to the Swedish-founded Augustana College in Illinois.

Once there, he discovered that the college had extensive material on the Swedish-American community that emerged in the U.S. around 1900, which became the starting point not only for his interest in Swedish-American history, but also in Swedish-American relationships in a broader sense. Since 1985, he has been affiliated with the college and spends time there every year.

“I became fascinated by the Swedishness that emerged in the U.S. and which could still be traced to the college,” he says. “But I quickly learned that the Swedishness that I encountered and that which existed

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at the turn of the century were very different. Something had happened with Swedishness when it came to America.”

As an example, Blanck describes a Christmas lunch with a Swedish-American club.

“They served meatballs and herring, but everyone was really waiting for the *potatiskorv*, a Swedish dish that was completely unknown to me. I grew up in Sollentuna outside Stockholm and had never heard of *potatiskorv*, but to them it was one of the most Swedish things there was. It turned out to be a regional dish from Värmland, which in the U.S. had become symbolically Swedish. Swedishness thus differed on either side of the Atlantic. It is changeable and contextually dependent. In the U.S., what must be called a ‘Swedish-Americanism’ emerged.”

The question engages Blanck and he continues to talk about it.

“There is misunderstanding on both sides,” he says. “Swedish Americans who go to Sweden cannot find the Sweden that they have grown up hearing about. Similarly, Swedish nationals do not recognize themselves in the American Swedishness, and sometimes laugh at it, finding it sentimental. But it is important to understand that the American Swedishness is not “inferior,” just different. It has evolved according to its own logic and should be understood in that light. It is like a dialect.”

This reasoning leads to a deeper understanding of the U.S., which is sometimes referred to as a melting pot for different cultures.

“In the U.S., ethnic identity is used as a sort of integration process,” says Blanck. “By becoming Swedish-American, you also become American. There is no contradiction here, and in the U.S., you are

almost expected to have an ethnic identity. The American identity is political-ideological and not cultural. The cultural aspects can then be taken from an ethnic origin in Sweden, Germany, Mexico, or another place. This particular national duality is not something we have in Sweden – yet.



Dag Blanck. Photo by Mikael Wallerstedt.

Welcome to the Swedish National Archives

The Swedish National Archives are one of Sweden’s oldest public authorities, nearly 400 years old. We collect and preserve records from government, public bodies, organisations and individuals from the Middle Ages onwards. One of our missions is to make this cultural heritage available. We have archives in several locations in Sweden.

On 6 December 2017 the Swedish Parliament decided to accept the government’s proposal to give the *Riksarkivet* (Swedish National Archives) the necessary funding to make all their digitized records free for everyone to use.

This means that the subscription to the SVAR web site, the Digital Research Room (also called the *Digitala forskarsalen*), and all their databases and records will be totally free for anyone to use.

The *Riksarkivet* (Swedish National Archives) has announced that this change in their new operation will take effect on **1 February 2018**.

<https://sok.riksarkivet.se/svar-digitala-forskarsalen>