

# Understanding the Poor Economic Integration of Swedish Immigrants

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## ~ Introduction ~

Sweden's universal and generous social institutions are genuinely regarded as the bastion of pragmatic utopianism amongst progressive and leftist intellectuals alike. The welfare state has reached a Panglossian level in comparative social policy circles insofar that it seems to represent the best of all possible capitalist worlds.<sup>1</sup> Poverty rates among children and the elderly are commonly regarded as the two social markers that define a welfare state's effectiveness and in the Post War era, Sweden has consistently ranked either first or among the leaders in these two categories.<sup>2</sup> Sweden is also is also regarded highly because of the government's substantive commitment to low unemployment and high employment through the use of active labour market policies. Swedish unemployment levels from the 1950's through the 1970's hovered around a paltry two percent on average and rarely surpassed the four percent mark. During this period workers not only enjoyed high employment and low unemployment rates, but strong wage solidarity as well. What is particularly striking about this era is that the favourable economic conditions also proved even more advantageous for Swedish immigrants and, in fact, outperformed natives in employment rates during the 1950's and 1960's. Since the 1970's, the labour market performance of Swedish immigrants relative to native Swedes markedly declined to the point where immigrant incorporation is now a pressing issue in

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<sup>1</sup> Esping-Andersen & Myles, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Esping-Andersen, 1990; Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, *Economic and Social Trends: Lessons from*

Swedish policy circles. The resounding consensus in Swedish academic literature, public opinion polls and the media is that the labour market integration of immigrants has failed overwhelmingly. This paper will invoke an inter-disciplinarian approach exploring some of the major causes behind immigrants' underperformance in the Swedish labour market. Political science alone can not explain the complex and intricate processes underlying the economic plight of immigrant integration because of its exclusive focus on the state. However, immigration policy does provide a great jumping off point by facilitating an understanding of Sweden's immigrant population. Douglas Massey and his colleagues echo the importance of interdisciplinary work when researching immigration issues when they write that “Social scientists do not approach the study of immigration from a shared paradigm, but from a variety of competing theoretical viewpoints fragmented across disciplines, regions, and ideologies.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this paper will also employ economics and sociology by using human capital theory to help explain the economic difficulties faced by Swedish immigrants. A historical overview of Swedish migration will begin this essay and then move on to take a closer look at Swedish immigration policy in particular. The following section will then utilize human capital theory to explain why a marked change in Swedish immigration policy has exasperated the barriers to labour market entry for Swedish immigrant. Recent studies will then be used to examine the validity of human capital theory to Swedish immigrants. Finally, recent political events and labour legislation will be reviewed to analyse the current government's efforts to improve immigrants' labour market attachment.

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*Sweden.*

<sup>3</sup> Brettel and Hollifield, 2.

### ~ Swedish Immigrants Today ~

Sweden is not commonly regarded as a country of immigration. However, with one in five of the country's population born, or having at least one parent born outside the country, the size of Sweden's immigrant population approximately triples the European average.<sup>4</sup> By comparison, Finland has the smallest immigrant population in Europe at around five percent, while Norwegian and Danish immigrant populations hover slightly above the European average at ten percent.<sup>5</sup> A distinguishing feature of Sweden is that refugees and family members comprise the core majority of Swedish immigrants today. Even so, it is not surprising that increasing amounts of refugees have also constituted a larger part of other Nordic immigrant populations, given that refugee migration has been a general international trend since the 1970's in all advanced economies, but only in Sweden do refugees account for the core majority of the immigrant population. Differences in immigrant composition between Sweden and other Scandinavian countries is a direct attributable to different immigration policies Sweden's immigration policy is primarily politically driven but Norway, Denmark, and Finland, like most Western states, have immigration regimes that are determined predominantly by labour market conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Sweden experienced an average net gain of about 28,000 immigrants from 2000 to 2005.<sup>7</sup> Numbers jumped considerably in 2006 and 2007, hitting 50,842 and 54,067 respectively.<sup>8</sup> The 2008 year is likely to surpass the previous year due to recent numbers from Statistics Sweden which show that net migration was 43,000 during the first nine months of 2008. Since international migration trends do not show signs of abating and the current

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics Sweden and Bengtsson, Lundh and Scott.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Norway and Statistics Denmark.

<sup>6</sup> No more than 750 refugees per year were let into Norway up until 2005 and Denmark did not allow more than 500 refugees in until 2004. See Statistics Norway and Statistics Denmark

uncertainty regarding international economic market crisis will almost certainly exacerbate the economic plight of immigrants<sup>9</sup>, the problem of how to better integrate immigrants will remain a pressing issue for both Swedish politicians and policy makers alike. The official aim of the Swedish government is to integrate new immigrants effectively into society and to afford them the same opportunities and privileges enjoyed by native Swedes. A government resolution passed in 1968 explicitly states that substantive integration of immigrants is a continuation of their commitment to promoting and ensuring equality for all those that reside within its borders.<sup>10</sup> Sweden's duty to address the economic underperformance of immigrants in the labour market also reflects their commitment to the notion of social citizenship and echoes the work of T.H. Marshall, who pontificates that one's access to employment is an essential social right. Employment is therefore a cornerstone of social citizenship and necessary if immigrants are to participate as full members of society, or as the Swedes say, the people's home (*Folkhemmet*). But today Swedish immigrants lag considerably behind natives in employment numbers but this has not always been the case, as both immigrant employment rates and earnings were higher than native born Swedes in the 1950's and 1960's.<sup>11</sup>

Explanations as to why immigrants have done increasingly worse in the Swedish labour market can be broken down into two major contending schools of thought. One camp borrows heavily from human capital theory and holds that poor economic performance among Swedish immigrants can be linked directly the group's low level of social capital over the last

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<sup>7</sup> Statistics Sweden.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Recession in the 1990's had a more pronounced impact on the employment performance of Swedish immigrants.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1990's Tomas Hammar's writings did much to popularize the importance of denizenship because access to Swedish social benefits is based exclusively on residency rather than citizenship. Participating as full members of society, therefore, hinges on residency rather than citizenship, which stands in contrast to most other Western states.

<sup>11</sup> Wadensjö. Sweden had a strong solidaristic wage policy implemented after the Second World War and this

four decades. This school believes that deep structural changes in the Swedish economy have resulted in new labour demands from employers who now require greater skill sets from workers than in the past. The opposing school of thought does not deny human capital theory's merit in explaining some of the problems of immigrants, but they point out that the theory is too heavily grounded in economic theory and therefore underestimates the possibility of discrimination in general. It is therefore necessary to review the strength of each argument as it will dictate the direction and strength of future government policy. If the root of the problem is purely an issue of ethnic discrimination, then stricter punitive laws and education campaigns would help rectify the problem over time. But if the low level of human capital theory among immigrants is the primary obstacle, then substantial investments in education and measures promoting better accreditation of immigrant skills are needed. Such measures would almost certainly entail significant amounts of financial spending, a move that the Swedish government would be reluctant to make given the current financial uncertainty in the global markets. Given the current financial uncertainty in the global economic markets, one can expect some reluctance from the government to increase the budget further any reason.<sup>12</sup> Determining the causation behind the poor labour market integration of Swedish immigrants is therefore a pressing issue for the Swedish government and will continue to be until the trend begins to improve.

### ~ **Swedish Immigration Policy** ~

Immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden. It was predominantly a

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tradition is a reason for relatively high wage parity across different sectors of the economy.

<sup>12</sup> Swedish banks are majority stakeholders in the biggest banks in Estonia and Latvia, which have come under significant financial pressure due to the current financial crisis and have made mention of potential bankruptcy. The Swedish government is in the midst of negotiations with the Swedish banking industry to put together a

country of emigration during the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the common push and pull factors of poverty and better living conditions elsewhere. Increasing family sizes and decreasing plots of land on which to farm due to the Swedish land enclosure movement, coupled with poor soil and persistent droughts resulted in serious food shortages in much of 18<sup>th</sup> century Sweden. The transition from a feudalist to a capitalist mode of production created significant amounts of social stress and the existence of a conservative bureaucracy, which led many Swedes to become disillusioned with the future direction of their country. Gustav Unonius, considered the father of Swedish emigration, and many others were compelled to leave what was often referred to as a “land of poverty, want and social frustration.”<sup>13</sup> This trend carried over into the 20<sup>th</sup> century until economic and political conditions made Sweden a more favourable place to live. Substantial amounts of asylum seekers from Nordic and Baltic countries sought refuge in Sweden during and immediately after the Second World War, the result of which was that Sweden became a net immigration country after almost a century of continuous emigration.

Sweden's neutrality during World War II allowed the manufacturing sector to develop and expand without the normal endogenous pressures and constraints. When the war ended, the economy was well positioned to help in Europe's rebuilding efforts. With the removal of war-related trade barriers, Swedish manufacturers were more than willing to fulfill the massive demand for Swedish goods and materials; but, the economy was simply unable to meet the demand from mainland Europe. There were two channels through which Sweden could increase its productive capacity. Either employers could develop or purchase new technology and utilize it to increase production or they could hire more workers. With the

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potential rescue package as a result. Sweden's recent involvement in the recent Scandinavian aid package for Iceland is also placing the Swedish government under considerable financial pressure.

economy running near full employment and key sectors already equipped with the most modern technology available, pressure arose to liberalize immigration and fill in the economy's large labour demand gaps. The combination of high unionization rates, wage solidarity and low unemployment provided an hospitable environment in which labour willingly embraced the liberalization of immigration. The consent of labour was vital because immigration policy was determined jointly by the Swedish Labour Organization (LO) and Swedish Employers Federation (SAF); government merely passed into law policy recommendations from the SAF and LO during the 1950's and 1960's.<sup>14</sup> The LO knew immigrants could not undermine the employment performance of traditional workers or cause wage depression, the two most common reasons that unions oppose a liberal immigration policy, because there was a clear labour shortage in the economy.

The Swedish labour market first expanded in 1954 and allowed for the free movement of labour across Scandinavia. In addition, employers began recruiting skilled trade workers from out of country, which led some bigger companies, aided by the Swedish migration board, to put together foreign recruitment campaigns in Germany and the Ukraine. Despite large numbers of Nordic labour migrants and some refugees from across the Nordic region and Baltic states, Sweden remained unable to fulfill the labour demand gaps. Immigration policy was liberalized further when the government opened the job market to people with tourist visas, allowing them to actively seek employment during their stay. If a person with a tourist visa could find employment within the three months and wished to apply for Swedish residence, then he or she simply had to apply to the migration board and obtain a residence

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13 Beijbom.

14 Business and labour have historically had a symbiotic relationship and agreed collectively on how to improve and run the economy. The famous Saltsjöbaden agreement typifies this relationship. Please see the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions website for more information.

permit. Many work seeking tourists emigrated from Germany, Austria, and Italy during the 1950's and 1960's, and significant amounts of labour migrants also came from Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey.<sup>15</sup> An average of 16,000 people per year emigrated to Sweden during this era and Nordic citizens constituted about 60% of the Swedish immigrant cohort.<sup>16</sup>

After a couple of years of record immigration in 1965 and 1966, coupled with a downturn in the economy, labour became increasingly suspicious of immigrants and began pigeonholing them for many growing social and economic problems. Additionally, the source of immigrants shifted from Scandinavia to Southern Europe, and the LO's wariness over the declining benefits of a liberalized immigration policy soon escalated to open alarm. The LO single-handedly terminated labour migration in 1968 as they withdrew their support and forced the government to drastically reform policy.<sup>17</sup> The new immigration line made it almost impossible for non-Nordic citizens to engage in employment, resulting in an average of no more than 200 working permits being issued to non-Scandinavian migrants from 1968-1992.<sup>18</sup> New laws meant that those with a tourist visa could no longer enter Sweden, find a job and then apply for the residence permit with proof of employment in hand. Non-Nordic citizens had to apply for employment in their home country first, which made it almost impossible to procure job offers in Sweden.<sup>19</sup> Even if one could obtain a job offer from abroad, applications were heavily scrutinized by labour market authorities and LO representatives, who decided whether or not domestic applicants were available to fill the job. In 1972 the Swedish Trade Union Confederation made it even harder for foreigners when they advised the Swedish Migration to deny all outside applications for work, regardless of

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15 Bengtsson, Lundh and Scott, 3.

16 Ibid.

17 Rosenberg.

18 Bengtsson, Lundh and Scott, 8; Rosenberg.

qualifications or circumstance, in an attempt to curb the perceived rise in wage competition. Furthermore, economic conditions in the other Nordic states and Western Europe in general fed into the decrease in Sweden's net migration, which petered out to almost even during the second phase.

The first phase of Swedish immigration was created and shaped by the LO and SAF in an attempt to expand the size and strength of labour market, but the second phase has been qualitatively different insofar as its political motivations are driven by the Swedish government and not the LO and SAF.. International refugee migration has seen a massive surge since the 1970's due to a rise in political and social conflict across the globe, which is why refugee movements to Western countries have increased significantly over the past few decades. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNCHR) has been largely responsible for co-ordinating international action to help remove refugees from areas of harm into the West. The Swedish government, in their commitment to protecting international human rights, entered into an informal agreement with the UNHCR in 1950 to help accommodate refugees in Sweden. However, refugee migration into the country was only significant during and immediately after World War II. In fact, an average of only 1300 refugees per year between 1950 and 1968 were granted residence permits.<sup>20</sup> Not until 1967 did the Swedish government sign a written agreement with the UNHCR and formally acknowledge that they would be the recipients of more refugees in the future. Intake was contingent on Sweden's yearly budget and political considerations, avoiding a hard quota system such as Denmark's or the Netherland's. A clear shift in immigration policy therefore took place in Sweden as immigrants were no longer accepted on the belief that they would

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19 Bengtsson, Lundh and Scott, 8.

20 Ibid, 4.

contribute to the economy as labourers. Immigrants after 1968 were taken in on account of the Swedish government's political commitment to being more active members in the political community, and accepting more refugees was one manner in which they achieved this end. This marked shift merits attention since it would fundamentally change the composition of the Swedish immigrant population decades later. A testament to the impact of this change is that today in Sweden, the terms refugee and immigrant are synonymous.

From 1968 to 1997 an annual average of 8600 asylum seeking applications were approved in Sweden<sup>21</sup>. Sweden in 1968, by comparison, only admitted about 1300 refugees, illustrating a marked rise in refugee intake over time.<sup>22</sup> The 1970's saw Sweden accept refugees predominantly from politically unstable areas of Latin America and then changed as turmoil erupted in the Middle East during the 1980's. When the former Yugoslavia began to disintegrate during the 1990's, Sweden took in significant amounts of refugees. Figure 1<sup>23</sup> shows that in 1993 asylum seeking applications exploded, numbering about 85,000. Smaller amounts of refugees from politically unstable regions in Africa, such as Eritrea, Somalia, and the Congo also emigrated to, which is a trend that Sweden and this trend has continued into the present.

~ **Figure 1 here** ~

Since 2003, Sweden's immigrant intake has seen an influx of refugees predominantly from the war torn country of Iraq. Sweden has been particularly active and generous in this regard and granted 24, 799 Iraqis full refugee status between 2003 and 2007, but Britain, by

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21 Ibid, figure 5, 47.

22 Ibid.

contrast, granted only 260.<sup>24</sup> The United States has also lagged behind Sweden, accepting only a total of 4,238 Iraqis as of April, 2008.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, Sodertalje, Sweden, a small town of 60,000 south of Stockholm took in twice this amount in 2007.<sup>26</sup> Overall Sweden has taken in half of all Iraqi refugees who have fled to Europe since the war began, though it constitutes only five percent of the European population.<sup>27</sup> Family reunion has also changed the composition of the Swedish immigrant population in recent decades. Unlike Denmark and the Netherlands, the Swedish migration board does not place language knowledge or economic guarantees on families before allowing them to enter.<sup>28</sup> In 1968, when family reunion was made an exception to tightened immigration policies, the intent was to make it easier for both Swedish families and the immediate relatives of labour migrants, not refugees. In the years from 1992 to 1995, for example, approximately 45 per cent of residence permits were tied to family reunion.<sup>29</sup>

### ~ Swedish Immigrant Performance in the Post War Era ~

Income levels have commonly been used in immigration studies as the primary means of assessing the economic integration of new Swedes because censuses, statistical data and research studies have historically focused on employment patterns and attachment instead. This trend stems from two factors. For one, historical documents and Swedish statistical studies in the past have been rather poor and erratic. Secondly, Sweden's high unionization rates and centralized bargaining have resulted in strong wage solidarity in the labour market

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23 Ibid, table 1, 39.

24 Ekman.

25 United States Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors report.

26 Ekman.

27 Cooper.

28 Denmark and the Netherlands require immigrants to undergo language and income tests before family members are allowed to join them. Ekman.

and therefore prevented the same degree of social stratification that has occurred in the U.S.A. and Britain. Gauging the employment performance of Swedish immigrants lies largely within their attachment to the labour market because that attachment largely determines their annual earnings. The employment rates of Swedish immigrants relative to natives have steadily declined during the post-war period. Immigrant employment rates were around 20 percent higher than the rate of the total Swedish population in 1950,<sup>30</sup> but by the 1970's immigrant employment levels dropped to roughly the same as natives.<sup>31</sup> Immigrant employment levels have continued to slide since and recent studies<sup>32</sup> have indicated that employment rates are approximately 30 percent below those of the total population. Figure 2<sup>33</sup> shows that 1970 was a particular high point for immigrant employment rates with both immigrant men and women outperforming their native counterparts.

~ **Figure 2 here** ~

Beginning in the 1970's, unemployment numbers illustrate a noticeable decline in performance among immigrants. Although data from the 1960's and 1970's is scattered and scarce, figures suggest that immigrants were more prone to business fluctuations overall, though they still experienced similar employment rates of unemployment in the 70's. However, between the late 1970's and early 1990's, unemployment rates among Swedish immigrants have increased considerably, reaching approximately four times those of natives

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29 Bengtsson, Lundh and Scott, 9-10.

30 Ibid, 11.

31 Wadensjö; Arai, Regnér, and Schröder.

32 Bengtsson, Lundh and Scott; Carlsson and Dan-Olof.

33 Bengtsson, Lundh and Scott, Figure 7, 48.

in 1997 according to figure 2.<sup>34</sup> When Sweden experienced significant economic difficulties in the early 1990's, unemployment rates for immigrants were particularly pronounced, climaxing at a peak of about three times that of natives. Similarly, immigrant earnings averaged roughly 20 per cent higher than natives during the first phase, largely due to their higher employment rates and a strong solidaristic wage policy.<sup>35</sup> Immigrants' annual incomes of immigrants began to dip in the 1970's and continued to fall as employment rates dropped and unemployment rates saw noticeable increases relative to natives. Immigration policy has played a major part in the declining employment performance of Swedish immigrants over time because it has drastically changed the immigrant population. However, this fails to explain how or why immigration policy has hindered immigrants in the Swedish labour market and is a large reason why human capital theory has become influential in the literature. The theory holds that in knowledge economies, employers require high amounts of human capital like education, which often means that workers labour market performance is tied directly to the quality of the human capital they embodied over time. Requisite amounts of human capital was not an issue for first wave immigrants. Sweden was like most other Western states during the 1950's and 1960's in that its economy was based primarily on manufacturing and immigrants could procure work with relative ease because jobs were typically low skilled. Manufacturing jobs in the auto industry, for example, did not necessitate post-secondary education, or even a particularly high competence in Swedish, because positions were either automated or required minimal skill. Many immigrants willingly moved to Sweden under the work-seeking visa program because they knew they would be able to get jobs in any number of Sweden's robust and expanding manufacturing industries. However, the

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid, 13.

job market facing immigrants changed noticeably beginning in the 1970's when the Swedish economy underwent fundamental structural changes and became increasingly oriented towards the service industry.<sup>36</sup> Immigrants arriving in the 1970's and henceforth were bound to meet more obstacles in accessing the labour market, human capital theorists argue, because employer demands for labour skill were substantively higher than in previous decades. Sweden's emerging knowledge economy needed workers with significantly higher amounts of human capital in terms of education and skills.

Whereas first wave immigrants were labour migrants and voluntarily moved to Sweden with the explicit intent of taking up employment, second wave immigrants have for the most part been refugees or family members. The average level of human capital among second wave immigrants has been qualitatively lower than first wave immigrants, while the labour market has placed significantly higher emphasis on social capital from the former. The decline in human capital among the second-wave immigrant population is worth stressing. Migrants arriving in Sweden after 1970 faced a job market that required higher amounts of human capital from Swedish workers, let alone immigrant workers, yet the average level of human capital among immigrants was declining because of the political shift in immigration policy. There is also the issue of possible positive self-selection. First wave migrants chose to move to Sweden and take up employment, and this undoubtedly differentiates them from the second-wave cohort. The standard proposition in migration studies is that economic migrants are favourably self-selected integrate into the labour market integration smoother than other immigrants because “they tend, on average, to be more able, ambitious, aggressive, entrepreneurial, or otherwise more favourably self-selected than similar individuals who

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<sup>36</sup> Sweden expanded its care industry significantly as a response to maintain economic growth and full employment, as well as absorb the increasing numbers of females entering the labour market at the time. This

choose to remain in their place of origin.”<sup>37</sup> Most first wave immigrants were labour migrants and it is not a great leap of reason to deduce that these migrants were able to prepare themselves mentally, emotionally, and physically by acquiring the necessary skills and education before emigrating, or at least expected that their qualifications would be well suited and acknowledged in Sweden. Second wave immigrants, however, have primarily been refugees and tied movers and, therefore, less favourably self-selected<sup>38</sup>

Declining economic performance among immigrants is not unique to Sweden; it has been a general trend in all Western countries since the 1970's. Human capital proponents suggest that one reason for this is that knowledge economies greater amounts of what is commonly referred to as “country-specific” capital. Language acquisition, communication skills, and knowledge of important cultural norms and values are seen as key ingredients for success in the new labour markets of knowledge economies. The closer an immigrant's culture is to the new host country, the better he or she will be able to adapt because the cultural transition will be smaller and therefore easier to make. Human capital theorists believe that the “cultural distance” argument also explains why immigrants are more likely to have their skills and education recognized by employers if they obtained them in close geographic or cultural proximity to Sweden. British migrants, for example, are more likely to integrate successfully into the U.S.A. because they speak the same language and skill recognition is often not an issue due to the numerous mutually accredited institutions and associations. Human capital theory maintains that the farther the origin of immigrants, the less value their

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was also another reason the service economy emerged in Sweden.

37 Chiswick, 129, in Brettel and Hollified.

38 Sometimes refugees living in camps are moved unexpectedly by the UNHCR during the night and told that they will be moving to a new host country. No opportunity is given to say goodbye to family and shortly thereafter they are living in a completely new country. Some refugees would have chosen to remain behind if they were given the chance but their precarious circumstances often do not afford them this option. This situation is markedly different from positively self-selected migrants and should be taken into account when trying to

social capital will be worth in the new country, causing them greater difficulties in making successful transitions, all other things equal. First-wave immigrants were typically from either other Nordic countries, or the Balkans. Finnish, Danish, Norwegian and German culture possess similar linguistic roots and share similar cultural norms and values. The social integration process was relatively easier for first wave immigrants because the cultural jump was not particularly large and the manufacturing-based economy did not require high amounts of country-specific capital. Human capital theorists employ another theory to explain the underperformance of immigrants, namely that a “time-lag” exists between the time migrants arrive with their social capital and when they are able to use it effectively in the new environment. Immigrants underperform in the labour market because initially, their human capital is not directly transferable between national markets. Investment in country-specific capital, including language acquisition and the creation of stronger social networks, helps them to rectify this obstacle over time. Chiswick has shown that while there are initially wage and employment differences between American immigrants and natives full convergence occurs after 10 to 15 years of residence.

### ~ **The Skeptics** ~

Swedish literature on the economic plight of immigrants is clearly dominated and influenced by human capital theory. However recent studies have been increasingly sceptical of this tradition and begun to suggest other avenues of explanation. The time-lag theory has been taken up by a number of Swedish academics but its particular relevance for second wave Swedish immigrants is contentious. First, the countries that have been utilized to lend support to the time-lag hypothesis have completely different immigration policies because they exist

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understand the difficult circumstances facing refugees.

to attract skilled labour migrants who help contribute to economy. Canada and Australia, for instance, both have immigration policies that are based on a points system that highly favour migrants with high skill sets. Swedish immigration policy since the 1970's has been based on accepting refugees and family members, not labour migrants. The argument that the adoption of a politically-driven immigration policy after 1968 has fundamentally changed the composition of Swedish immigrants certainly has merit: but too often, the possibility of statistical immigration has been ignored in the literature. Human capital theory underestimates the possibility of employer discrimination because economic theory tends to deny the possibility of discrimination in a free market system. Discrimination is assumed as irrational since it does not serve the economic interests of employers, who will hire the best workers they can, at a price they can afford to pay. Critics of human capital theory contend that discrimination does exist and should be regarded as a real possibility of why Swedish immigrants have a considerably harder time accessing employment. Sweden was not a country created by immigration like Canada and consequently does not have the same policy experience with integrating foreigners into their social fabric. Colonization played a major part in making Europe a more multicultural continent but this a part of European history in which Sweden did not participate in. These factors are a few of the reasons why researchers have begun to question the relevance of human capital theory to the Swedish case.

Lena Nekby, an economist at the University of Stockholm, was one of the first researchers to do a comprehensive study testing the validity of the time-lag theory in Sweden. Between 1990 and 1997, she used a longitudinal data set on approximately 200,000 individuals, with more than 25,000 being born abroad, and assessed the probability of regularly employment according to gender and place of birth. Her study found that immigrant employment performance was, in fact, positively correlated with residence time, but that this

effect varied according to region of birth. Convergence between immigrants and natives occurred, much like the studies conducted in America, during the first 10 to 15 years of residence, but Nekby found that “No immigrant group, during the observation period, converges fully to native employment levels.”<sup>39</sup> Nekby's study also lends legitimacy to the cultural distance theory since “Nordic and West European immigrants show, at best 15 – 30 percent lower chances of being regularly employed while East and Non – European immigrants show 55 to 70 percent lower chances.”<sup>40</sup> In addition, immigrant groups do not appear to converge toward one another: “Non-European immigrants consistently show the largest employment gap to natives, followed by East European immigrants, regardless of gender.”<sup>41</sup> Nekby's study is weakened, however, by her failure to account for and isolate the differences in human capital between the various immigrant groups. The composition of the Nordic and Western immigrant population, for example, and the Non-European immigrant population, are undoubtedly different in terms of the human capital. Most of the non-European immigrant population, for instance, were former refugees but very few of those in the Nordic and Western immigrant cohort would have been. This point alone yields differences in the human capital levels between the two groups and could help explain why immigrant groups do not converge with one another.

One explanation for poor immigrant integration into the labour market that has begun to make headway in Sweden is the ugly possibility of statistical discrimination.<sup>42</sup> The discrimination argument is made on two accounts. First, institutional features in Sweden make it very expensive to let employees go once they have been hired and suggestions have been

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39 Nekby, 2.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid, 3.

42 For an excellent account of the recent rise in Swedish racism, see Allan Pred (2000), *Even in Sweden*.

made that this has promoted businesses to engage in risk aversion behaviour. Secondly, longitudinal attitude surveys of Swedish public opinion show evidence of negative attitudes toward immigrants in general, just as surveys among discriminated groups show that immigrants perceive certain degrees of discrimination.<sup>43</sup> Statistical and ethnic discrimination testing among employers has not been done in Sweden because the issue has only become a pressing one in recent political debates and media recently. Many studies have been conducted in the United States because it has been a prevalent there for well over a century. Perhaps more importantly, second, third, and even fourth generations of immigrants have existed there for some time now. A common method used by researchers to test discrimination in the job market is to send out fictitious resumes to real job openings and measure the call back response. The applications profess the same skills and profile characteristics but are randomly assigned either native or foreign-looking names. More involved studies go one step further and actually send people out to job interviews and determine if natives procure more job offers than visible minorities. Researchers however have not had access to young Swedish born adults with immigrant backgrounds until very recently. The second-generation, visible minority adults necessary to conduct studies like this only recently existed in Sweden. Second-generation, visible minorities are invaluable to researchers because they are identical to natives in every way except their ethnicity.

Two major studies have been conducted to investigate the effect discrimination has within the Swedish labour market. Carlsson and Dan-Olof's 2006 study involved testing statistical discrimination at the initial recruitment phase by sending out fake resumes to real job openings. Resumes had identical skills, were randomly assigned either Swedish or Middle Eastern sounding names, and then sent to 1552 job openings between May 2005 and February

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43 Lange; FSI; Swedish migration board.

2006. Their aggregated results showed that resumes with Swedish names had a 29 percent interview call back rate while applications with Middle Eastern names were only contacted for interviews about 20 percent of the time. The call back rate discrepancy between the two sets of resumes is attributable to name manipulation alone. The consequence of this discrepancy for the employability of ethnic minorities is difficult to determine; but implies, at least, that immigrants must send out 50 percent more applications to achieve the same number of employment chances as natives. This is likely to have a more pronounced effect during recessions, when the availability of jobs becomes scarcer. Carlsson and Dan-Olof did find that two factors affected the probability of call-backs of resumes that appeared to represent foreigners. First, the call-back rate for names that suggest Middle Eastern heritage was a full six points higher when females were responsible for deciding who to call back for interview. The success of Middle Eastern named applications also varied depending on the number of employees at the workplace; call-back rates were five percentage points lower with employers who managed less than 20 workers. The authors suggest that higher employee turnover rates in bigger companies necessitate more active, comprehensive recruitment campaigns and that this may reduce the level of statistical discrimination.

Carlsson and Dan-Olof conclude in their study that the Swedish government could improve the employment performance of immigrants could be enhanced by imposing heavy fines on employers who engage in employer discrimination. When it was published, Carlsson and Dan-Olof's study was the only extensive report showing clear evidence of labour market discrimination. The ruling Social Democratic government ordered the Swedish Migration Board to investigate the issue of ethnic discrimination further in 2006. The Swedish Migration Board sought the co-operation of the United Nation's International Labour Organization, which has significant experience setting up methodologically sound discrimination studies,

and investigated the matter. The study replicated methods used by Carlsson and Dan-Olof, fabricating 1000 resumes with either Swedish or foreign seeming names and sent them at random to real job openings in Göteborg, Malmö, and Stockholm. The study echoed Carlsson and Dan-Olof's findings that native born Swedes with immigrant backgrounds were less likely to receive call-backs. Natives were called after submitting an average of five resumes, while applicants with apparent immigrant backgrounds submitted 15 resumes before they were afforded the same employment opportunity. Discrimination at the interview stage was a non-issue as both groups of applicants experienced the same likelihood of a job offer.

### ~ **Recent Political Developments** ~

Immigrant integration was a small but important election issue in 2006, when the conservative Moderate party promised, if elected, to improve the transition period between initial arrival and entry into the labour market, which many studies pegged at approximately seven years. The Moderates won the election and appointed Sweden's first visible minority minister, Nyamko Sabuni, to head the ministry of integration and gender equality. She was born in Congo and moved to Sweden with her father, who was a political dissident, the age of 12. As an adult, she went on to earn her PhD at a Swedish university. As minister, Sabuni came under immediate fire when she suggested that the substandard social and economic integration of immigrants could be tied to cultural differences. She declared that the onus was on immigrants to adapt to Swedish culture and denounced what she saw as turtling honour cultures that were turning in on themselves rather embracing the new environment. Sabuni major proposals were to ban arranged and revoke all state financing of religious schools.<sup>43</sup> The immigrant community immediately denounced her suggestions and argued that she

entirely disregarded the immense economic factors behind immigrant woes. She countered their claims by arguing that she, too, had experienced discrimination in the job market but she, unlike many in the immigrant community, never used it as an excuse.<sup>44</sup> Mrs. Sabuni's culturally based understanding of the problem did not look encouraging for immigrants who were hoping the government would take a stance in their favour.

Two years later, Sabuni and her government came to understand that their initial approach was superficial and failed to grasp the economic factors underpinning the problems of most immigrants. On Nov. 4, 2008 at the European ministerial conference on integration, Minister Sabuni gave a speech detailing how the Swedish government is attempting to better weave immigrants into the national fabric. Last year she emphasized her government's commitment to understanding the complex obstacles facing immigrants in the labour market. Her government now believes the issues facing immigrants are multifaceted and therefore require a series of distinct actions on the part of government: "This low degree of employment has several causes. Some of them are related to the general level of supply and demand of labour. Others have to do with the language skills, education and the ability of the educational system to meet individual needs. And, of course, discrimination is another important factor that cannot be overlooked."<sup>45</sup> With this in mind, the Swedish government has tabled a multi-pronged strategy to increase the employment performance of Swedish people with immigrant backgrounds.

The influence of studies by the Swedish Migration Board and Carson and Dan-Olof is clearly evident in the government's new platform. A new law took effect on Jan. 15, 2009 to punish employers with large fines if they are found to be engaging in discriminatory hiring

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<sup>44</sup> Sarah Lyall.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

practices. Critics have claimed that existing laws are sufficient enough and that the real issue is to develop ways of effectively detecting and proving ethnic discrimination. The government has also amended business taxes in order to encourage employers to hire more chronically unemployed people, who are often immigrants: “Employers are exempted from payroll taxes and social security contributions during a period corresponding to the period a person has been unemployed.”<sup>46</sup> Another measure involves the government giving employers higher subsidies when they hire a recently arrived immigrant, in which case, employers will only have to pay 25 percent of the normal payroll costs, in exchange for letting new employees attend language courses during their initial two years. Businesses that hire any workers of or under the age of 26 will have their payroll taxes halved.<sup>47</sup> The government is hoping that together these measures will entice more employers to hire immigrants and that this will lead to a decrease in potential statistical discrimination over time.

The Swedish government has also committed to creating a more effective system of introduction and entry of immigrants into the labour market because they believe the current seven year gap can be reduced. Few details have been released regarding how exactly the government plans to do this, but the influence of human capital theory is evident when Sabuni posits that government must “improve [their] skills when it comes to recognizing foreign diplomas, correctly [evaluating] merits and [improving] access to complementary education.”<sup>48</sup> Another target area Sweden's government has named for improvement is the quality of education that immigrant children receive. Children arriving in Sweden before the age of five do as well as natives as adults in the labour market but children arriving after they

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<sup>46</sup> Nyamko Sabuni.

<sup>47</sup> Tom Sullivan.

<sup>48</sup> Unemployment among young adults is also a significant problem in Sweden. In 2007, youth aged 15 -24 experienced an unemployment rate of 19 percent. See *Ekonomifakta* (2008).

are five years old are struggling.<sup>49</sup> Case in point, many immigrant children leave primary school without passing their exams.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the government emphasizes language competency among adult immigrants as an important area for improvement, although nothing explicit has been outlined toward that end, besides the aforementioned subsidy incentive for employers who let new immigrants take classes on the job. Overall, Sweden's government seems to be heeding researcher's advice by using a variety of ways to help immigrants penetrate the labour market. New, punitive laws for employer discrimination address recent studies illustrating the statistical discrimination at the initial contact phase. Better performance goals for immigrant children and higher language efficiency among immigrant adults, as well as creating institutions to facilitate the transfer and accreditation of immigrants' skills, shows the noticeable influence of human capital theory in Swedish public policy.

### ~ **Future Research Directions** ~

The belief that Sweden has done a poor job of integrating immigrants into the labour force is perhaps unfair. First-wave immigrants were more successful than second wave migrants because the labour market conditions were more hospitable. The decline among immigrants in the labour market since the 1970's is not unique to Sweden and similar trends have been found in other Western countries, although the trend has definitely been more pronounced in Sweden. Although emigrants to the United States and Canada perform better than their counterparts to Sweden, one must bear in mind the major differences in immigration policy, which largely account for this discrepancy. The immigration systems of Canada and the United States are designed to favour immigrants with high amounts of human

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<sup>49</sup> Sabuni.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

capital; and thus, skilled labour migrants constitute the core of the immigrant population, whereas the majority of Sweden's immigrant population consists of former refugees and their family members. North American and Swedish immigrants are therefore qualitatively different in terms of their human capital, which partially explains why North American immigrants reach employment parity with natives after 10 years, while Swedish immigrants never do.

More research is needed on the numerous obstacles facing immigrants in the Swedish labour market before public policy can be reformed to help provide the optimal environment for immigrants in the country. A new phase in Swedish immigration appears imminent, however, in light of the legislation passed on Dec. 15, 2008 allowing, for the first time in four decades, more labour migrants to enter the country. Government officials have been adamant that they have no desire to move immigration policy towards the points based system of Canada and Australia, but the new policies are sure to result in greater numbers of labour migrants. The new legislation has abolished the agency responsible for the recruitment of foreign labour, the Swedish Public Employment Service, and now allows employers themselves to recruit workers directly outside of the European union. Migration Minister Tobias Billström notes that an ageing population and severe labour shortages in skilled sectors including health, engineering and IT must be filled by foreign labour. The law also states that terms of employment must be equal to or better than the ones set out in collective agreements but the Social Democrats, the Left Party and LO have argued that this will result in wage dumping and increased exploitation of workers.<sup>51</sup> Employers however will have to pay

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<sup>5</sup> Sabuni.

<sup>51</sup> Work visas will be restricted to the employers who sponsor their entry to Sweden for the first two years. New workers under this program will also be restricted to working within their field of expertise. Visa renewal after two years will also depend on the recommendation of employer. These conditions are why the LO and Social

foreign workers the average wage rate in the industry or better, and this will be closely monitored by the Swedish Migration board. This new legislation marks a major development because it marks a significant decrease in the power of the Swedish labour movement to dictate the terms of immigration policy. Swedish labour has not allowed labour conditions to drive immigration policy since it effectively shut it off in 1968. The LO has been able to keep Sweden closed off to labour migrants because they have constituted the political base of the traditional ruling party, the Social Democrats, which has enjoyed hegemonic status in Swedish politics for the past 80 years. But the political supremacy of the Social Democrats has been challenged in recent years and the conservative ruling party has decided that it is necessary for immigration policy to embrace labour migrants once again as there are labour demand gaps in the IT, health, and engineering sectors, which can not be filled by the current labour force.

### **~ Conclusion ~**

This paper has argued that no resounding consensus has been reached over why Swedish immigrants have continuously underperformed in the labour market since the 1970's. It seems at least that the poor economic integration of Swedish immigrants has been caused by both a substantive change immigration policy as well as marked changes in the labour demand for skill. The next couple of years will prove to be interesting and important ones for researchers of Swedish immigrants as they will have more research options available to them. Today's newly arriving labour migrants will be the first major group of immigrants arriving with high amounts of human capital and this will allow researchers to see if higher amounts of human capital do, in fact, help immigrants to succeed in the Swedish labour market.

Another development of interest is whether or not this marks a shift in immigration policy towards the inclusion of more labour migrants and less refugees. Furthermore, studies are needed to determine whether or not the arrival of new labour migrants result in wage depression and a more competitive labour market, as suspected. Finally, the elections set for September, 2009 will be vital in determining the life of this recent law, given that the Social Democrats and LO have voiced their vehement opposition to it and have declared their intention to repeal it. But if the program is initially successful in filling labour demand gaps in the skilled sectors and no evidence is found supporting the belief that labour migrants will negatively affect the labour market, then they might have a difficult time implementing their proposed plans in light of research studies. For the time being, however, Sweden's immigration policy is now more labour migrant friendly and is certain to attract more skilled worker than in recent decades.

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