

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

---

Stadius, Peter  
Happy moderation : Serge de Chessin s promotion  
in France as a counter image to bolchevik Russia

Stadius, Peter

2022-03-23

---

Stadius , P 2022 , ' Happy moderation : Serge de Chessin s promotion  
as a counter image to bolchevik Russia ' , Nordiques. , vol. 41 .

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/343694>

---

unspecified  
publishedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*



**Nordiques**

41 | 2021

Le bonheur nordique

---

## Happy moderation – Serge de Chessin’s promotion of Sweden in France as a counter image to bolchevik Russia

Peter G. Stadius

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/nordiques/3080>

ISSN: 2777-8479

**Publisher:**

Association Norden, Bibliothèque de Caen la mer

**Electronic reference**

Peter G. Stadius, “Happy moderation – Serge de Chessin’s promotion of Sweden in France as a counter image to bolchevik Russia”, *Nordiques* [Online], 41 | 2021, Online since 01 November 2021, connection on 23 March 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/nordiques/3080>

---

This text was automatically generated on 23 March 2022.

Nordiques

---

# Happy moderation – Serge de Chessin's promotion of Sweden in France as a counter image to bolchevik Russia

Peter G. Stadius

---

“La Suède est un pays heureux. Elle l'est grâce à sa permanence, à sa continuité nationale, un fonds historique qui demeure intangible malgré la fuite des années [...]”<sup>1</sup>

- 1 The Russian-French journalist and author Serge de Chessin, alias Sergej Cherchevskij (1880-1942), moved from St. Petersburg to Stockholm in 1917, where he would live the rest of his active life. His main occupation was that of a press attaché for the French embassy. He gradually rose to a prominent position among the foreign correspondents, serving as head of the Foreign Press Association (*Utländska pressföreningen*) for several years. He apparently was a household name in high society circles, and seems to have been very well connected in Sweden's capital.<sup>2</sup> During this tenure much of his journalistic work was amended into a considerable bibliography consisting of 47 books, when including all translations. His main publication outlet in France was *L'Écho de Paris*.
- 2 Serge de Chessin's best-known work *Les clefs de la Suède* appeared in 1935 by the esteemed Parisian publisher Hachette. No less than 15 editions were printed during the first three years. Previously, he had published several books, ranging from fiction to socio-political pamphlets. Alongside his country of residence, Sweden, his focus was on Russia, one of his two countries of origin. The titles on Russia abound and one, *La nuit qui vient de l'Orient* (1929), was also translated into English in 1930.<sup>3</sup> Already in 1917 he had published his first work on the Russian revolution, and during the following years he would dedicate much of his authorship to Russian matters, profiling himself as an ardent opponent of the revolutionary Soviet state and the Bolsheviks who had made it

happen. This seems to have been his main task and passion as a writer and his works on Sweden and Scandinavia must be put into this context.

- 3 Serge de Chessin's activities in Russia are not that well documented, but it is an established fact that he also there served as a press attaché in the French embassy. He also provided several French journals with articles from Russia. He was apparently a Russian citizen, at least that is stated in the award letters when rewarded with the Légion d'Honneur, first time 1920 and the second (Chevalier) in 1923. He was also referred to by the title Dr of Law. The spelling of his original Russian name varies, and in the first letter he is referred to as, "Cherchevsky, de nationalité russe", and in the second letter as, "Mr Chercheffsky de Chessin, de nationalité russe, publiciste, Stockholm."<sup>4</sup> His personal archive does not reveal any detailed facts about his origins. In a review of *Les clefs de la Suède* in the Social Democratic magazine *Tiden*, he is referred to as a "Latvian Jew."<sup>5</sup> In a recent article, the Swedish Slavist Magnus Ljunggren notes his "slightly Asian features."<sup>6</sup> An air of mysticism surrounds this ambitious and socially talented networker, who seems to have known everybody, but apparently remained private about his past.
- 4 In the trend of promoting Scandinavia as an especially happy region during the inter-war years, Serge de Chessin's production is of value and interest. The allusion to either one, or many of the Nordic/Scandinavian countries as especially happy was established for various reasons during these years, a trend that also became visible in France.<sup>7</sup> Martin Kylhammar has even claimed that the image of progressive Sweden model was actually invented in France.<sup>8</sup> He compares Marquis W. Childs, *Sweden the Middle Way* (1936), with Chessin's books on Sweden, and points to the fact that Chessin published before Childs, which is only partly true since Childs had published on Sweden and Scandinavia before 1936.<sup>9</sup> Much of Kylhammar's analysis of Chessin's images on Sweden are naturally similar to the ones presented in this text. However, it is rather Émile Schreiber's (later Servan-Schreiber) *Heureux Scandinaves* appearing 1936 in France, that perhaps better match with Childs' book.<sup>10</sup> What is important especially in the French works, is the urge to show the absence of any major tendencies for totalitarian regimes among the Nordic peoples. In this respect, the happiness label owes to the absence of strong fascist movements, and the northernmost parts of Europe are portrayed as inhabited by sensible, wise and mature nations that would not succumb to totalitarian and anti-democratic forms of government, but rather stick to the rule of law.
- 5 Most literature in the inter-war era bibliography of apologetic depictions contain similar categories when depicting Nordic societies. History, social and political development, education, national psychology, and other types of cultural essentialization constitute the substance in all various books and pamphlets on the subject. The texts by Chessin follows this convention. We can apply a tri-parted level of analysis, that of inter-text, context and text, as it has been simply but precisely established by the comparatist literary scholar Joep Leerssen as a working method in one of his recent updates on imagology theory.<sup>11</sup> In this article Chessin's best known work will be analysed from these three levels, with the context as the perhaps dominating focus. In addition, the article parts form the recognition of internal debates and discrepancies when producing and reproducing hetero-stereotypes about other regions. This exercise is embedded in a translation process, where information is fitted to the cultural context of the reader. The main arguments of Chessin thus position

itself with respect to other French depictions of Sweden and Scandinavia of its time. In this regard, Andreas Mørkved Hellenes recent doctoral thesis has been of great value,<sup>12</sup> but also previous imagological works establishing the study of French images of Scandinavia have been studied.<sup>13</sup>

- 6 The focus in this article will be on Chessin's main work on Sweden, *Les clefs de la Suède*, but a few words need to be said about some of his other works on Sweden and Scandinavia. During the 1920s he published two brief expositions of the first social democratic prime minister Hjalmar Branting and the Swedish king Gustaf V respectively.<sup>14</sup> Both depictions are panegyric and seemingly make any public diplomacy efforts from the part of Swedish authorities superfluous. The author certainly had a tactical touch on how to get around in his new country of residence, but the obvious sincerity he portrays should also be taken at face value. He also wrote two follow-up articles on the Danish King Christian X, and Norway's Haakon VII, published in *Le Journal* 1931. In these shorter texts, he already presents the main ideas about how monarchy and progressive socialism can be combined in a harmonious fashion. When writing about the Danish king, the social democratic prime minister Thorvald Stauning is quoted stating that if there would be a republic in Denmark, he would vote for the king as president.<sup>15</sup> The second major contribution to the apologetic and positive image building literature about the happy Scandinavians by Serge de Chessin, was the book *Les Sourires du Danemark*, that appeared in 1936, one year after the publication of *Les clefs*.

## Young, but still so old

- 7 One of the central ideas in Serge de Chessin's depiction of Sweden was the dynamics between history and tradition on the one hand, and the youthfulness, vitality and progressive features of contemporary Sweden on the other. The cover image of the book embraces this idea. A young and blond boy in summer clothes is fitting a huge and old-fashioned key to a heavy and ornamented door of what seems to be a palace, church or perhaps a historical mansion. The young boy may here represent the youthful vitality, but also the innocence and cultural simplicity attributed to Nordic people traditionally. Intra-European imagological hierarchies have traditionally seen the semi-peripheral northern areas, that were not part of the Roman Empire, as being of a lesser level concerning cultural heritage.<sup>16</sup> However, the ideas portrayed by the romantic movement contributed to an elevation of this image of a more natural state as something to be highly valued. As such, it also reaffirmed the positive promotion of northern regions present among many Enlightenment philosophers applying a more scientific rhetoric, Montesquieu being one of the most prominent.<sup>17</sup> The reading public can relate to the fact that Sweden was a major European power in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and an ally to the pragmatically acting France under Cardinal de Richelieu's influence during the Thirty Year's War. This makes Sweden a legitimate example in the eyes of a French audience. What is even more important for the author is to show the continuity of the historical development of this country.
- 8 The young boy thus holds the key to understanding Sweden. The seemingly innocent child understands how to open up the heavy door of history and tradition, in order to cherish the past and show understanding for the heritage that has brought this nation to what it is, and what it might be in the future. The both young and old Swedish nation

is in the textual strategies of Serge de Chessin made into a cultivated nation with sensibility towards its past. In the introduction of the book, Chessin points to, “la vraie clef d’un pays où les renouveaux se succèdent dans les cadres de la continuité nationale”.<sup>18</sup> The key is thus continuity, not revolution, not overthrowing the system by violent upheavals, but rather a calm evolution, based on core qualities of a nation. Chessin makes Sweden of the inter-war years exactly to what Russia was not. The image of moderate and gradual tradition conscious reforms is the total opposite to the image of Russian revolution chaos. The general understanding at the time of Sweden as a country, together with Denmark, in the process of a national modernity project embracing all aspects of a successful role model was almost an axiom at the time.<sup>19</sup> In the broader geopolitical mapping of Europe and the Occident, Scandinavia acquires a certain image of being in the avant-garde. The mechanisation of the Danish agricultural production, a school system reducing illiteracy to zero, prosperous export industries, modern facilities for the effective extraction of rich natural resources in the Swedish case, are some of the examples that made these countries stand out as serious contenders in any discussion about how to meet the challenges of modernity, and the new mass society in a positive fashion.

- 9 One of the keys to this success in Chessin’s narrative is the preservation and respect showed to the institution of monarchy in Scandinavia. In the second chapter, “Un royaume démocratique”, the Swedish royal family is described as modern and absolutely in line with constitutional democracy. When describing the Royal Palace in central Stockholm the allusion to French history is present:

Bâti pour héberger des Rois-Soleils, il est habité par les souverains les plus constitutionnels du monde. Entre le sanctuaire de la dynastie et le peuple, il n’y a pas de divorce.<sup>20</sup>

- 10 The allusion to past absolutist rule in both France and Sweden is reframed in a fashion that helps the French reader to approve the almost republican order in the Scandinavian kingdoms. There is no antagonism between the monarchy and the people, but rather a harmonic relationship of mutual respect. The popular sense of the royal family is explained with the example of avoiding excessive luxury, and adhering to a modern life-style, as is suggested in the title of the third chapter: “La vie d’un souverain moderne”. While still preserving the traditions and ceremonies, it is not done in an exclusive but inclusive fashion winning seemingly unanimous popular acceptance and support. Only the diminutive communist party is mentioned to have republican sympathies.<sup>21</sup> The obvious context here is the Russian revolution and the grim fate of the imperial Russian family, which in Chessin produces an aversion he hardly manages to keep within reasonable bounds. At a more general level the French revolution in 1789 obviously also provides a reference to the readers. While the Bolsheviks are described, with an abundant variation of invectives, as a barbarian Mongol mob, the democratic sense of the Swedish royal family is also reversed into an interpretation of an inherent aristocratic essence of the Swedish people.

Bien des traits du peuple suédois, – comme nous le verrons plus loin, – correspondent à la noblesse planétaire de son sol : aristocratie de race, solidité granitique et calme fierté.<sup>22</sup>

- 11 The amplification of the notion of aristocracy was typical when assessing nations around this time. Some nations just seemed to own a population material that was more noble than others. The eugenic dimensions of this image is more or less explicit, and placing the Swedish nation among the best breed in any racial categorization of the

time, was certainly widely as accepted at the time. As Marius Turda has shown, the nationalization of eugenics was normalized after the First World War, and the Scandinavian nations were generally held as the purest of the highest “Aryan race”.<sup>23</sup> The ‘nobility of race’ that Chessin talks about, is a description of a nation that is mature and wise, solid as its granite, and therefore secure in its self-confidence. All this is interpreted as a special capability to make gradual and well-balanced reforms and changes in one’s own society.

- 12 The new Stockholm architecture is taken as an example of this. Kungstornen, the King’s Towers, Sweden’s first pair of skyscrapers along Kungsgatan, are mentioned as symbols of modernity, while the flamboyant City Hall of Ragnar Östberg for Chessin exemplifies the deep understanding for history and heritage. Östberg’s chef œuvre at the shore of Lake Mälaren was in itself a statement against the most radical currents in modern architecture of the time, and it is no wonder that Chessin saw much of the Swedish moderation he talked about manifested in that very building. He chooses not to talk about the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930, which was seen as a spectacular starting point in the realization of the new and modern city, and which made the American journalist Marquis W. Childs fall in love with Sweden and its modernity project. The radical forces behind this arts, crafts and industrial home production fair were in deep conflict with the more traditionally minded and to a certain extent more elitist actors on the Swedish scene. Chessin chooses not to write about the exhibition, which he sees as an essentially non-Swedish mistake that he labels as American and “Kreugerian”, after the fallen business tycoon Ivar Kreuger.<sup>24</sup> He is astonishingly silent about an event that by many contemporaries and later admirers of the Swedish welfare state is seen as the starting point for modern life in the country. One obvious reason is that the masterminds behind the exposition, such as Gregor Paulson, Sven Markelius, and Uno Åhrén, exquisitely and in a bombastic fashion proclaimed that the exposition meant a complete break with the old.<sup>25</sup> They were everything else but ‘continueurs’. The futuristic and radical pamphlet *Acceptera* (1930), which was published by this group in connection to the exposition, included some heavy-handed mockery of the bourgeois life style and aesthetics. Serge de Chessin was for sure more comfortable and ideologically rooted in the 1920s Sweden and the aesthetics of what was referred to as ‘Swedish grace’, when promoted abroad. In *Les clefs*, he would mention Ragnar Östberg, but not Markelius, who were the two main antagonists in the fierce debates between more traditionalist bourgeoisie architects and the young radicals who believed solely in the gospel of rational industrial production. The classicist aesthetics and craftsmanship-based approach to design was apparently more in line with the preferences of de Chessin, who felt at home in the patrician flats of the haute bourgeoisie, an entourage he so much cherished. He did not want to be reminded in any way of Marxist materialism. Thus, for Chessin the Swedish architects were, “continueurs dans le meilleur sens de ce terme.”<sup>26</sup> And here he sees the fortunate combination of dynamic youthfulness, without any radical hunger for abrupt revolutions:

[...] Stockholm a développé la plus moderne des parures. La reine du Mälaren est aussi jeune, aussi riante, aussi saine que les blondes baigneuses de l’archipel. Amoureuse de vitesse et de confort, vibrante d’activité, elle n’a rien de la dolente et mélancolique dogaresse à laquelle les prospectus touristiques s’acharnent à la comparer.<sup>27</sup>

- 13 The Swedish mode of modernity is described as an almost racially defined vitality and hunger for life. The suggestive image of laughing blond Swedish women bathing in the Lake Mälaren is an effective textual strategy to convert any traditional image of Nordic melancholy into a gospel of Scandinavian vitality and *joie de vivre*. The author is clearly fighting a battle against prevailing stereotypes of Nordic people. Not only melancholy, but also the strong promotion of the moderate, gradual, and 'continuateur' qualities of Scandinavian culture and society has a French background.
- 14 Serge de Chessin was a well-oriented scholar in world literature, and he would without doubt be familiar with the French reception and debates on Scandinavian literature in France around 1900. The main focus in these debates, that started in the early years of the 1890s, would be on Scandinavian drama and especially the works of Henrik Ibsen. But, also other prominent names, such as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and August Strindberg, awoke interest in Paris and Latin Europe more broadly. One of the main protagonists in the critique against Ibsen's works were, together with the critic Francisque Sarcey, the brothers Edmond and Jules Goncourt. They accused Ibsen's novel ways of understanding the inner dynamics of playwriting for being too cerebral, and discarding the principles of 'a pièce bien faite', that prevailed on the grand theatre scenes to the delight of the bourgeoisie. Ibsen's plays had been made into works of symbolism in the hands of the cultural mediator André Antoine, who introduced Ibsen's works in France together with Aurélien Lugné-Poë.<sup>28</sup> For Edmond Goncourt these gloomy and dreamlike plays were not suitable for the "lucides cervelles" of the French public.<sup>29</sup> Even if Ibsen was received with much enthusiasm in certain progressive avant-garde circles, his messianic role never converted into popular acceptance in France. Strindberg's intentions to conquer Paris, and become a French author failed just the same way as his alchemist experiments. The new Scandinavian stars of the European literary scene were most often seen as semi-peripheral and semi-wild renegades, whose radical ideas could be taken for proofs of an uncivilized lacking of a sense for tradition and moderation. In one obituary over August Strindberg, written by a Spanish critic Julián Juderías, the violent radicalism of the author was explained by the northern climate, "with its violent contrasts and incapable of adhering to the concept of gradual transitions, the subtle gradations."<sup>30</sup>
- 15 In this sense, Serge de Chessin's description of Sweden, with its aim to show positive alternatives to the dystopian Russian reality, has to tackle and/or omit certain themes and tropes familiar to the French audience from recent times. The association of semi-peripheral Scandinavia as producing violent and uncontrolled artistic expressions do not fit the authors need to demonize the Russian Bolsheviks, and lifting all that content over to Soviet Russia was a textual strategy, which did not pose too many difficulties. Writing about Sweden in the 1920s and 1930s, a time that saw a major shift in the country's political power balance, meant that he would have to soften the most radical dimensions of the ascending social democratic rule during the 1930s.

## Sweden, where bolshevism is controlled

- 16 The intriguing Swedish combination of a socialist government (since 1932), capitalist based export industry, and a century-old monarchy, was the single-most important theme for Serge de Chessin, when trying to serve the keys of understanding Sweden to his French audience. Since the term 'social democracy' is not really used and familiar in



a Latin European context<sup>31</sup>, but rather part of a German-Nordic political terminology, Chessin operated with the French notion of socialists when treating the Swedish social democratic party in power. In France, the term 'socialist' is intelligible to the general audience. This divergence of terms had its obvious hazards, especially since the idea of a united communist-socialist popular front was very much in the centre of French politics at the time of the book's appearance. The word socialist would obviously awake associations of class struggle and even violence. In order to convince his audience of the total absence of any inclination towards bolshevism in Sweden in any serious political level, Chessin launches the idea of a bourgeoisie socialism to describe the political reality in this country:

Tel qu'il est pratiqué en Suède, le socialisme ne se distingue donc guère de la ligne de conduite suivie dans d'autres pays, sous les étiquettes des partis bourgeois avancés. Nous ne sommes pas en face d'une politique étroite, égoïste et ombrageuse de classe, mais d'une politique adaptée aux besoins des grandes masses moyennes.<sup>32</sup>

- 17 Chessin places the Swedish social democrats rather in the centre than on the left side on the ideological map. He brings up multiple examples to support his claim. When observing the May parade he finds the Swedish workers unusually tidy and well-dressed, and no signs of what he would associate with the proletariat can be seen: "Où sont donc les prolétaires? Je ne vois que des bourgeois". Chessin notices that any French engineer would be astonished in a Swedish factory, since he would cry out: "Où donc est la main-d'œuvre? Je ne vois que des confrères, des techniciens."<sup>33</sup> What Chessin is describing is a society of a capable and content working class. The image of good and happy workers forms part of a domestic French positioning. As Andreas Mørkved Hellenes has shown, Serge de Chessin published mainly in the conservative press. The increased political tensions in France, with right-wing mass demonstrations in 1934 and the counter-action of forming a Popular Front, that would be victorious in the 1936 elections, is an obvious context for Chessin's depiction of Sweden.<sup>34</sup> The seemingly harmonious and conflict-free Swedish political life constitutes a kind of conservative fantasy of how an ideal working class should behave. The Swedish working class and the labour movement is depoliticized by Chessin in favour of a cultural-racial essentialization of the Swedish people. To support his argument of a content and more practically that ideologically oriented Swedish worker, Chessin brings up the rich life that workers live outside work-hours and during their holidays. A two-week industrial holiday was introduced by law in Sweden 1938, but it had become current practice already a bit earlier, so there was a factual point to Chessin's descriptions. He sees how the working class actually is emulating the bourgeoisie life-style when offered a chance to free time and vacation:

Les ouvriers qui n'ont pas encore leur « villa » ont comme ressource les « parcs populaires » avec leurs « théâtres d'été », leurs restaurants à bon compte, leurs bals en plein air. Le « yachting » n'est guère moins en faveur chez la main d'œuvre que chez le patronat : des milliers d'ouvriers ont leur canot à vapeur et passent leurs vacances à voguer dans le labyrinthe des archipels ; pendant quelque deux semaines, ils jouent ainsi au Robinson Crusoë, bivouaquent sur quelque îlot perdu, se baignent dix fois par jour et retournent à leurs usines bronzés par le soleil et les poumons régénérés ; on ne saurait imaginer de vacances mieux employées.<sup>35</sup>

- 18 This lengthy quote contains many interesting points. The first observation one can make is that Chessin identifies a consensual national culture, where all classes seem to want to self-fashion themselves in a similar manner. It is not only the question of how the aristocracy is taking part in the modern bourgeois life by contributing to society,

but how the working class have the same kind of goals. This suggests a feeble self-conscious working class culture, since the ascendance towards a bourgeois life-style seems to be the norm. This image is interesting taken into account the deep roots of the pre-modern Lutheran unity culture in Scandinavia. The literacy culture and reading proficiency connected to the control exercised by the state church is one example of how rooted a consensual view on learning is, which can also be referred to as what the German speaking world knows as *Bildung*. The historian Henrik Stenius has noted that the pre-modern trust in the state church was transformed, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, into a dynamic support and acceptance of a progressive social democratic welfare state.<sup>36</sup> This conformity, trust, and acceptance is another way of explaining the consensual nature often connected to Nordic societies.

- 19 It is a well-known fact that the early years of the development of what is generally known as the Nordic welfare state model, was born out of a consensual bargaining between employers and employee organisations on the one hand, and on the parliamentary cooperation between social democrats and other parties. This strategy meant that the communist parties were often abandoned by the social democrats, while the agrarians would hold fascist tendencies at bay (with some exceptions). In this sense, we can say that bolshevism was controlled in Sweden.<sup>37</sup> In this respect also the reality Chessin experienced in Sweden was easily transformed into a narrative that contrasted the situation in French politics at the same time.
- 20 Another aspect of the previous citation is the suggestion of how the Swedish working class actively would make use of their holidays in a seemingly paradise-like natural scenery. Chessin creates an image of the workers returning from their holidays tanned, fit, and motivated to contribute. Also, the mentioning that they are living like Robinson Crusoe during the summer adventures, points to an aptness and capability of the Swedes to survive and cope with the forces of nature. This was one of the central features in the social-Darwinist interpretation of modern life and the struggle between nations and races. The eugenic perspective elaborated by Chessin, is related to his descriptions of the Russian Bolsheviks. The latter are depicted as hordes and almost creature like barbarians, “l’apache rouge” and “socialisme mongol”<sup>38</sup>, are some of the labels Chessin uses when analysing the civilizational connections and true spirit of the Bolsheviks. On the other hand, the Scandinavian worker appears as well-bread Aryans, whose racial and physical superiority is the combined result of a mystical age-old social and racial evolution, and a well-directed social policy of the modern mass society. In Serge de Chessin’s world, the Swedish bourgeois socialist clearly represents a higher form of evolution than the Russian Bolshevik: “Les socialistes suédois ne sont pas des révolutionnaires. Risquons même le mot: ils sont conservateurs!”<sup>39</sup>

## Hitler and Kreuger

- 21 In order to persuade his readers about the uniqueness and perfection of Sweden and Scandinavia in a broader sense, Serge de Chessin needed to draw the borders of separation towards the closest neighbours. The mental mapping of the Baltic Sea Region is simultaneously a description of three cultures and societal models: Sweden, national socialist Germany and Soviet Russia. Chessin also chooses to make an internal western world separation between Sweden and another protestant culture based

power, that of USA. In that case, he uses the fate of the Swedish industrial tycoon Ivar Kreuger, and his spectacular fall from grace, as a warning example of Americanisation.

22 The German Kaiserreich had emerged during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the major enemy for both France and Russia, and the dramatic political developments of the 1930s did little to pacify these feelings. When narrating the story of Sweden and the good and virtuous Swedes, Chessin would allude to social and racial qualities, which obviously posed questions with respect to the German kinship of Swedish culture. While admitting the Germanophile tendencies of the Swedish court and among some important figures, such as the explorer Sven Hedin, Chessin builds an argument for explaining why Sweden was fundamentally different from Germany. He does so by taking the bull at its horn, when composing the sub-title for the seventh chapter of his book: “Les vrais aryens devant le nazisme”.<sup>40</sup> The line of argumentation is that Adolf Hitler's monopolization of the term Aryan is false and misleading. The fact that Sweden had stayed neutral during the war is taken as a proof that rather than being Germanophile, Sweden was primarily ‘Swedofile’.<sup>41</sup>

23 Chessin continues his exercise of separating Sweden and Germany by alluding to the rise of the social democratic party, making the comparison to the totalitarian one party state of the national socialists. Even if the economic challenges have caused hardships in Sweden as well, Chessin points to the fact that the government has avoided a similar chaos that led to the end of the Weimar Republic. The national cohesion and sense of responsibility over the entire spectre of the political parties is hinted being the key to the comparatively successful economic recovery.<sup>42</sup> And there are no signs of any sympathies for the German alternative:

Tous les partis politiques, sans exception, par la bouche ou la plume de leurs chefs les plus autorisés, ont condamné le national-socialisme comme une doctrine incompatible avec la mentalité, les aspirations et les mœurs de la Suède.<sup>43</sup>

24 Here the accent is on the continuity against sudden upheavals, the Swedish customs and mentality is sovereign and not easily affected. This granite rock solid nation is nurtured by the atavistic need for freedom, a millennium old stereotype of the Scandinavian people.<sup>44</sup> The essentialization of the Swedes, is thus made more comprehensive than just that of simple contemporaneous racial anthropology. Chessin explains how leading public figures have signed a petition in favour of exiles German intellectuals, and “Les vrais Nordiques n'ont pas hésité à prendre sous leur protection des Juifs persécutés pour la plus grande gloire de la race aryenne.”<sup>45</sup> While depicting the Hitlerian discourses and politics as a perversion of the ‘true Nordic and Aryans’, he finds Sweden being a moral problem for Germany, a constant reminder of how civic rights are not respected in Germany:

Le plus nordique de la terre, le plus ‘aryen’ pour employer un terme impropre, un peuple dolichocéphale à souhait, compose de grands gaillards aux cheveux couleur de lin, aux yeux couleur de ciel, en un mot la quintessence même du germanisme, l'incarnation même de la pureté raciale, et qui, au lieu d'applaudir à l'avènement du nazisme, s'en détourne avec indignation ou bien avec dégoût...<sup>46</sup>

25 Both Sweden and Denmark, as it is depicted in *Les sourires du Danemark*, is narratively constructed as the true and more pure form of the Nordics, thus disqualifying any German intention of monopolizing the term for chauvinist Nazi propaganda. This is the function of Scandinavia in a French imagological discourse on the border-drawing between Germany and Scandinavia in the mid-1930s.

- 26 As for Chessin's fascination for Ivar Kreuger, the world famous 'match king', who built an industrial and financial empire which rose to incredible heights during the 1920s, the story has many curious elements. The last chapter of *Les clefs*, "Un krach salutaire", is in its totality dedicated to the rise and fall of Kreuger. This is understandable, since Kreuger ended his life in his Parisian home, and this "Cagliostro suédois" was well known to the French audience. King Charles XII and his lofty warfare strategies exceeding by far the historical boundaries of Sweden, is given as a point of comparison of how un-Swedish the megalomaniac Kreuger's businesses had to be viewed. Both had committed the error of megalomania. Chessin arrives to the conclusion that even if many, himself included, had been mesmerized by this tycoon – "Charles XII de l'industrie"<sup>47</sup> – who at a point was a creditor to many nations, France and Germany included, in the end would be a sad figure. As such, he was proof of what happens when Americanization sets in, because that is how Chessin sees the whole phenomenon in a light of posterior reflection. In this interpretation Ivar Kreuger was a creation of unlimited American capitalism that knows no boundaries and as such had little connection to the specific national Swedish societal culture.<sup>48</sup>
- 27 Kreuger's incessant activities, knowing no apparent boundaries, is even seen by Chessin as a sort of illness. The diagnosis includes the symptoms of losing touch with reality, and a total moral breakdown. It is pointed out that after Kreuger's tragic death by his own hand in 1932, more stable servants of Sweden's financial and industrial circles had been forced to step in and clean up the mess he had created. The selfish and feverish hubris of Kreuger had almost caused a national disaster: "La Société des téléphones Ericsson et les mines d'or de Boliden n'ont-elles pas été sur le point de tomber aux mains des Américains?"<sup>49</sup> The whole Kreugerian era is seen as a nightmare from which the Swedes only recently have awoken. As for Serge de Chessin, he was one of many who did not hesitate to contribute to the glorification of the very same Ivar Kreuger, when he was at his heights. As a well-connected member of the Stockholm high society Chessin celebrated his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday on 16 September 1930 at the distinguished Stockholm restaurant Riche. Chessin's personal archive contain a list of guests, telegrams from friends not able to be present. One of the telegrams was from Ivar Kreuger, whose greeting acknowledges the "extraordinary work You [Chessin] have made for promoting the contacts between France and Sweden."<sup>50</sup> This sounds very different from what Chessin later wrote about Kreuger. In his need to describe Sweden as different, not only from Soviet Russia and National Socialist Germany, but also from the uncontrolled American capitalist culture, Kreuger appears as a sinner gone astray from his Swedish origins: "une Suède qui n'était pas suédoise, une Suède américanisée."<sup>51</sup> The narrative of Sweden as a happy nation had to deal with Kreuger somehow, and this was Chessin's strategy to explain the rise and fall of Ivar Kreuger by otherfying his persona, as having been infected by what he referred to as Americanisation.

## Conclusion: The essence of Swedish happiness according to Serge de Chessin

- 28 The main explanation offered by Serge de Chessin when assessing the happiness of the Swedes, is that of a well-functioning society and a population that is both well-mannered, well-educated and in all senses mature and self-reliant in its moral

understanding. The image is a conservative view of Sweden and Scandinavian political and societal culture, containing depoliticized aspects of eugenic reasoning, which was an obvious point of reference for the general public at that time. As such, Chessin’s narrative and textual strategies follow the general trend of apologetic depictions of Scandinavia from those years. As has been showed, there were particular reasons and contexts that made Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia interesting and a model to admire.

- 29 Chessin’s motives were closely tied to his own background as half Russian and half French. The Russian revolution, which had forced him to leave his post at the French embassy in St. Petersburg, seems to have been a traumatic event that would cast a shadow on the rest of his life. When arriving in Stockholm 1917, he would from day one have Russia in mind when writing about Sweden for a French audience. The image of Sweden that he consequently forges, will highlight the continuity and maturity of the Swedish nation, both old and modern at the same time. This is according to him the key to the happiness of the Swedes, and as such it provides a model for responsible and non-revolutionary action as a key to happiness in any given society.

---

## NOTES

1. Serge de Chessin, *Les clefs de la Suède*, Paris, Hachette, 1935, p. 97.
2. His personal archive is deposited at Riksarkivet (RA; Swedish National Archive), and consists of 13 folders.
3. Among other title on Russia in French: *Au Pays de la Démence rouge (La Révolution russe 1917-1918)*, 1921; *L’Apocalypse russe*, 1921; *Excellences (roman)*, 1929.
4. RA/Chessin, *op. cit.*, F1.
5. s.a., *Tiden*, 10, 29.9.1935, p. 503. See also: Andreas Mørkved Hellenes, *Fabricating Sweden. Studies of Swedish Public Diplomacy in France from the 1930s to the 1990s*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Sciences Po, 2019, p. 63.
6. Magnus Ljunggren, “Serge de Chessin and Ivan Bunin”, *Toronto Slavic Quaterly*, 56, Spring 2016, p. 1.
7. Peter Stadius, “Happy countries. Appraisals of Interwar Nordic societies”, in *Communicating the North. Media Structures and Images in the Making of the Nordic Region*, J. Harvard & P. Stadius (eds.), Burlington, Ashgate, 2013, 241-262; Peter Stadius, “Blessed Nordic Modernity: French Images of Welfare Scandinavia in the 1930s”, in *Travels in The North*, S. Gaupseth, P. Pippin Aspaas, M.-T. Federhofer (eds.), Hannover, Wehrhahn, 2014; Nathalie Blanc-Noël, “A recurring mantra in French political debate: Reference to the Nordic model”, *French Politics*, 16, 2018, p. 220; A. Hellenes, 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 51-80.
8. Martin Kylhammar, “Comment le modèle suédois est né en France”, in *Poétocratie. Les écrivains à l’avant-garde du modèle suédois*, S. Briens & M. Kylhammar (eds.), Paris, Ithaque, 2016, p. 150.
9. Marquis W. Childs, *Sweden, where Capitalism is controlled*, New York, John Day, 1934.
10. A. Hellenes, 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
11. Joep Leerssen, “Imagology: On using ethnicity to make sense of the world”, *Iberic@*, 10, 2/2016, p. 20.

12. A. Hellenes, 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 51-80.
13. Vincent Fournier, *L'utopie ambiguë: la Suède et la Norvège chez les voyageurs et essayistes français (1882-1914)*, Clermont-Ferrand, Adosa, 1989; Sylvain Briens & Martin Kylhammar, *Poétocratie. Les écrivains à l'avant-garde du modèle suédois*, Paris, Ithaque, 2016.
14. Serge de Chessin, "Hjalmar Branting. Un grand Européen", *La revue contemporaine 1923 - Le roi Gustave V de Suède*, Plon, 1928.
15. "Gustave V de Suède" & "Christian X de Danemark, Haakon VII de Norvège", *Le Journal*, 12.10.1931.
16. Peter Stadius, *Southern Perspectives on the North: Legends, Stereotypes, Images and Models*, BaltSeaNet working papers 3, Gdansk-Berlin 2001; Astrid Andt, "North/South", in *Imagology: The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters. A critical survey*, Manfred Beller & Joep Leerssen (eds.), Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2007, p. 387-389.
17. Pierre Bourdieu, "Le Nord et le Midi: Contribution a une analyse de l'effet Montesquieu", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, Vol. 35, novembre 1980, p. 21-25.
18. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, Avant-propos.
19. Kazimierz Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model. Images of progress in the Era of Modernisation*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2000, p. 42-70.
20. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
23. Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 72-78.
24. A. Hellenes, 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
25. Carl Marklund & Peter Stadius, "Merging Nationalism with Modernity in the Stockholm Exhibition 1930", *Culture Unbound*, vol. 2, December 2010, p. 609-634.
26. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, p. 13-14.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
28. Peter Stadius, *Resan till norr. Spanska Nordenbilder kring sekelskiftet 1900*, Helsingfors, Vetenskaps-Societeten, 2005, p. 65.
29. Stellan Ahlström, *Strindbergs erövring av Paris. Strindberg och Frankrike 1884-1895*, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1956, p. 165.
30. Peter Stadius, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 81: "[...] contrastes violentos y que no haya podido adquirir la noción de las transiciones graduales, de las sutiles gradaciones."
31. Alan Granadino & Peter Stadius, "Adapting the Swedish Model: PSOE-SAP Relations During the Spanish Transition to Democracy", in *The Making and Circulation of Nordic Models, Ideas and Images*, H. Byrkjeflot, L. Mjøset, M. Mordhorst, K. Petersen (eds.), Abingdon, Routledge, 2021, p. 108.
32. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
34. A. Hellenes, 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
35. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
36. Henrik Stenius, "The Good Life is a Life of Conformity: The Impact of Lutheran Tradition on Nordic Political Culture", in *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, B. Stråth & Ø. Sørensen (eds.), Oslo, Scandinavian University Press, 1997, p. 121.
37. The sub-title here is an allusion to one of Marquis W. Childs books, *Sweden, where capitalism is controlled* (1934).
38. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, p. 216 & 241.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 120: "[...] il faut bien se rendre à l'évidence que la Suède était avant tout... suédophile [...]".

42. Martin Kylhammar, 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 3-5.
43. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
44. Peter Fjågesund, *The Dream of the North: A Cultural History to 1920*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2014, p. 34.
45. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 125-126.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
48. Martin Kylhammar, 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
49. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, p. 249.
50. RA/Chessin, *op. cit.*, F2. “[...] min livliga uppskattning av allt det utomordentliga arbete Ni nedlagt till fromma för förbindelserna emellan Frankrike och Sverige.”
51. Serge de Chessin, 1935, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

## ABSTRACTS

The French-Russian journalist and author Serge de Chessin is one of the important contributors to the promotion of a positive image of Sweden and Scandinavia in the 1920s and 1930s. His work aligns with the discourse of happy Scandinavian nations, but has some specific features in comparison with others. Chessin's major work on Sweden, *Les clefs de la Suède* (1935), is an apologetic depiction of Sweden from a conservative angle. Sweden is presented as a harmonious society based on mutual class respect where the people has a sense for the nation's past while committing to modern life. The image of the Swedes as top of the class in a eugenic sense is a recurring theme, as well as Chessin's continuous and fierce anti-bolshevik rhetoric. In Chessin's work, Sweden becomes a model for how a not too radical form of a democratization is possible in a mass society and modernity project during the inter-war era.

L'auteur et journaliste franco-russe Serge de Chessin a apporté l'une des plus importantes contributions à une image positive de la Suède et de la Scandinavie au cours des années 1920 et 1930. Son travail cadre avec un discours sur des nations scandinaves heureuses mais présente quelques spécificités par rapport à d'autres contributions comparables. L'œuvre majeure de Chessin, *Les Clefs de la Suède* (1935), est une représentation dithyrambique de la Suède au travers d'un prisme conservateur. La Suède y est décrite comme une société harmonieuse, reposant sur un respect mutuel entre classes sociales, et où la population conserve un intérêt pour le passé national, tout en se tournant vers la vie moderne. L'image des Suédois comme des premiers de la classe, non-exempte d'eugénisme, est un poncif, tout comme la rhétorique antibolchevique continue et acerbe de Chessin. Dans les écrits de Chessin, la Suède est devenue une référence démontrant l'absorption réussie d'une forme douce de démocratisation dans une modernité et une société de masse en germe pendant l'entre-deux-guerres.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Chessin (Serge de), Suède, Scandinavie, imagologie

**Keywords:** Chessin (Serge de), Sweden, Scandinavia, imagology

## AUTHOR

### **PETER G. STADIUS**

Peter Stadius is a historian and professor in Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki. He is Director of the Centre for Nordic Studies at the same university.