

# The Far-Right Sweden Democrats and the Construction of the Muslim Other

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## The Far-Right Sweden Democrats and the Construction of the Muslim Other

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In the 2022 Swedish general election, the Sweden Democrats (SD), a populist, radical-right party with neo-Nazi roots, received the second-most votes at 20.5% of the electorate (Kenes, 2020; Olsen & Gera, 2022). Three Swedish center-right parties have now formed a coalition agreement with the support of the SD, putting the party in a position to influence government policy for the first time (Ritter, 2022). The SD only received 1.4% of the votes in the 2002 election and 2.9% in 2006, finally reaching 5.7% in 2010 when the party entered the national parliament. In the 2014 election, electoral support was as high as 12.9% (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019, p. 589). The rise in support for the SD could be attributed to the increased politicization and salience of immigration in Sweden (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019, p. 446).

Sweden has experienced a record influx of asylum seekers after the exodus of many Muslim migrants caused by conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War. Muslim immigrants have emerged as the “universal out-group” in Sweden (Kenes, 2020, p. 23). The SD view is that multiculturalism poses a threat to the shared values that constitute the cultural community of Sweden (Hellström & Nilsen, 2010, p. 61). Members of the SD hold significantly more negative views towards Muslims and people with a foreign name than voters of other Swedish parties, and these views are rooted in anti-minority sentiments (Müller et al., 2014, p. 3). Post 9/11, Muslims in Sweden became victims and targets of increasing anti-Muslim and Islamophobic attitudes and behavior (Larsson, 2005, p. 29). Muslims are seen as a threat to Swedish culture and “Swedishness” and are far from being accepted as a natural feature of a multicultural Sweden (Mohiuddin, 2019, p. 147). Jimmi Åkesson, the current leader of the SD, sees Islam and Muslims as ‘the biggest foreign threat since World War II’ (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012, p. 67). Accordingly, the research question for this paper is as follows: *How do the Sweden Democrats construct Muslims as a security threat to the Swedish identity?*

### Literature Review

Much of the relevant literature focuses on the securitization of Islam (SOI) in Europe post-9/11. Securitization refers to extraordinary measures justified by emergencies that imperil the survival of a political community – it operates outside the domain of “normal” politics (Cesari, 2012, pp. 432–433). The 9/11 attacks were discerned by many in the West as an existential threat to Western political and secular norms and led to a period of increased national security (Fox & Akbaba, 2015, p. 175). The relationship between Western states and Islam has ceased to be solely related to foreign affairs. Instead, it has become an internal matter because of various terrorist attacks linked to *jihadism*, engendering an awareness of an internal Islam that must be controlled to preserve Western values (Motilla, 2018, pp. 7–8). Signs of religious belief, such as the *hijab* or *burqa*, were identified as threats to national identity and security (Edmunds, 2012, p. 67). Laws restricting Islamic dress were introduced and enforced, essentially signaling to Muslims that their legal and political inclusion depends on their abandoning signs of religious or cultural differences (Edmunds, 2012, p. 82). SOI not only results in restricting dress and spiritual practice but also engenders anti-Islamic discourse, which has pervaded mainstream politics since 9/11 (Cesari, 2012, p. 434).

Much of the other pertinent literature concentrates on conducting discourse analysis of the SD’s employed rhetoric, which is to a large extent anti-Islamic, and analyzes what exactly is meant when they refer to the Swedish identity

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and “Swedishness” (Hellström et al., 2012; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; Norocel, 2017). SD rhetoric purports that the threat Muslims constitute is not merely a threat to democratic ideas but also an actual physical threat and a threat to law and order (Steiner, 2014, p. 29).

Both strands of research are valuable but require an additional theoretical framework to find a meaningful and coherent answer to the research question, which will be explicated below.

## Theoretical Framework

As stated above, most pertinent research centers around securitization theory and discourse analysis, but in an effort to move beyond them, a critical constructivist approach will be employed, attempting to generate a synthesis between the three approaches, since all pertain to political discourse (Cesari, 2012, p. 433).

Constructivists contend that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of meanings that the objects have for them – and these meanings are fundamentally cultural (Wendt, 1992, pp. 396–397; Weldes et al., 1999, p. 13). Constructivism assumes the world is constituted in part through the meaningful practices of social subjects (Weldes et al., 1999, p. 13). It provides an account of the politics of identity – understanding how identities are constructed and what norms and practices accompany their reproduction (Hopf, 1998, p. 192).

It should be noted that there are different plural constructivisms (Cho, 2012, p. 312). At a meta-theoretical level, there has been contention between conventional and critical constructivist security studies regarding how to conceive of state identity, which is integral to national security (Cho, 2012, p. 299). Conventional constructivists aim to discover identities and then provide an account of how those identities engender certain (state) actions. Critical constructivists also aspire to uncover identities, not to articulate their effects, but to elucidate how such an identity is naturalized (Hopf, 1998, pp. 183–184). Thus, critical constructivism aims to explain the identities themselves and make sense of the cultural production of insecurities (Cho, 2009, p. 75). Identities and insecurities, rather than being treated as given, emerge out of a process of representation through which individuals describe to themselves and others the world they live in (Weldes et al., 1999, p. 14).

Critical constructivists believe that (re)producing and patrolling the state identity is vital to its stability and security since the concept of security is inextricably linked to that of identity (Cho, 2009, p. 90; Cho, 2012, p. 299). Critical constructivism rests on the preeminent assumption that ‘insecurity is itself the product of processes of identity construction in which the self and the other, or multiple others, are constituted’ (Cho, 2012, p. 301; Weldes et al., 1999, p. 10). Therefore, identities and insecurities are not pre-given and natural facts which are ontologically separate but ‘are produced in a mutually constitutive process’ (Weldes et al., 1999, p. 11).

Identity has a relational nature: often, a notion of who and what ‘we’ are is best articulated by emphasizing who or what “we” are not and what “we” have to fear, which serves as a source of insecurity (Cho, 2012, p. 300; Campbell, 1998, p. 48). In critical constructivist security studies, it is essential to make sense of the notion of identity/difference. Identity is constructed in relation to difference and vice versa (Cho, 2009, p. 90). Therefore, identities are relational and contingent rather than essential and fixed. Identity should be understood as a production “which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” – it is performatively constituted (Cho, 2009, p. 90). In the construction of the Self, the Other usually tends to be defined as inferior rather than as equal or simply different. Identity converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty (Cho, 2009, p. 91). There is a perpetual politics of identity and difference through which difference can, but need not, be converted into otherness. When it is, it becomes a source of insecurity (Weldes et al., 1999, p. 11).

Insecurities should, thus, be understood as social and cultural productions rather than being natural facts (Weldes et al., 1999, p. 10). States, their identities, and insecurities are conceived of as mutually constituted and reinforced social and cultural entities (Das, 2009, p. 980). “Discourses of insecurity” are the targets of analysis since the performative constitution of identity takes place within discourse. Political discourse consists, among other things, of essentializing representations of identities (Cho, 2009, p. 92–93). In and through hegemonic discourse, dominant realities are socially constructed, and the essential cores of identities appear to be ontologically prior to their

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performative constitution (Cho, 2009, p. 93). Critical constructivism aims to denaturalize such dominant constructions and purported realities (Weldes et al., 1999, p. 13).

Similarly, “discourses of danger” provide a set of apparent truths about a state identity in the way it articulates “danger” or “threat” (Thompson & Heathershaw, 2005, p. 1; Cho, 2009, p. 94). The danger is discursively constructed, premised on the (false) dichotomy and binary “us” and “them,” and is not ontologically separate from those to whom it may become a threat – the danger is, in effect an interpretation (Thompson & Heathershaw, 2005, p. 1). Discourses of danger are frequently concomitant with the strategies of otherness highlighted above, directed at the constructed enemy (Cho, 2009, p. 94).

## A Study of the Sweden Democrats

The following analysis examines how the SD constructs the Muslim Other as a security threat, or instead as an insecurity, to the Swedish identity. The programs of the radical right are usually directed toward the consolidation of the nation by making it more ethnically homogeneous and by reverting to traditional values, hence why anti-immigration sentiments are the most vital reason why the radical right gets support from the electorate. Immigrants, especially Muslims, are depicted as a threat to the ethnonational identity of the majority and as a major cause of criminality and other forms of social insecurity (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2017, p. 353). The SD has ethnicized Swedish politics by combining the ideals of ethnic nationalism with Swedish democracy and sets out to reconstruct a Swedish golden age in the future. Ethno-nationalist claims are closely connected with articulating a national origin, a cultural heritage, and significant national events that constitute the nation as one continuous community of one homogenous people (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2017, p. 354).

The party has defined what it means when they refer to the Swedish identity as follows: ‘Swedish applies to the one who has a principal Swedish identity, and is from her own perspective and by others regarded as Swedish’ (Hellström & Nilsson, 2010, p. 61). A person is thus Swedish if perceived by self and others as Swedish, according to the terminology of ‘open Swedishness’ (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2017, p. 357). Note that a discrepancy could arise quite easily when one’s self-perception conflicts with the perception other people have of that person, signifying the fact that identity construction always takes place within the representation. According to the official party doctrine, Swedishness is constituted by culture and not by race. The SD has switched its emphasis on ethnicity to a focus on culture and insuperable cultural differences (Hellström & Nilsson, 2010, p. 61). The SD does not presuppose that certain ethnic groups or cultures are superior or inferior to others but instead talks about ethnicities, cultures, and nationalities according to an ethnopluralist doctrine in a way that used to be reserved for race, essentially communicating the idea that immigration entails the destruction of both ‘our’ and ‘their’ people – the integration of cultures is considered pernicious, effectively concealing the desire for an ethno-nationalist state (Hellström & Nilsson, 2010, p. 58; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012, p. 72). The SD shields itself from accusations of racism in this manner: they proclaim themselves as opposers of migration and integration policies, not as racists but as upholders of Swedish culture (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012, p. 73).

Accordingly, SD’s racism takes on different forms, one being ‘caring racism,’ which is inextricably tied to ethnopluralist discourse, propounding the view that each culture is good but should not be mixed. There is, however, an insinuation that laziness and reliance on benefits, criminality, patriarchy, and disrespect for the environment are cultural traits of the Muslim Other (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012). The second discourse, connected to ‘caring racism’, concerns second-generation immigrants, suggesting that the issues faced by the young Swedish Muslims born and raised in Sweden are a consequence of them being uprooted from their own ‘authentic’ culture and cultural home. The SD accomplishes converting their campaign of opposition to immigration and ‘repatriating’ immigrants into ‘caring’ for the Muslim Other (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012, p. 78). This form of racism demonstrates that difference has not explicitly been converted into otherness.

The second form of racism, ‘racism-as-exclusion,’ functions through a process in which the Other is identified as different and not belonging here and is thereby considered ‘undesirable’. Racism against Muslims is the dominant trait of SD’s exclusionary racism (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012, p. 71). In this form of racism, the difference is explicitly converted into otherness, with Muslims becoming a source of insecurity to Swedish identity and culture.

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Furthermore, SD defines culture as 'the surroundings of obvious facts, memories, and beliefs that we live in and that we are continuously shaping' (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012, p. 73). Culture is seen as an instrument to mobilize societal cohesion in Sweden and involves taken-for-granted assumptions about a specific way of life that is supposedly natural for Swedes who have grown up in Sweden and unnatural for those who did not (Hellström & Nilsson, 2010, p. 61). The SD treats cultural heritage as a pre-given, non-negotiable, and objective phenomenon, and this 'objectivity' is precisely what we seek to denaturalize since cultural heritage is socially constructed (Nilsson, 2022, p. 627). According to the rhetoric of the non-government bills formulated by the SD, Sweden's cultural heritage is threatened by multiculturalism. The SD constructs 'us' as represented by Sweden's cultural heritage and Swedish culture, history, and identity, and accordingly, 'them' is built through connecting multiculturalism and non-Swedishness. It is also 'them' who constitute the enemy and represent the main threat to 'us' and to what is discerned as the 'true' cultural heritage in the SD's populist discourse (Nilsson, 2022, p. 629). This construction highlights the relational nature of identity and propounds the view that migration of the Muslim Other would entail the destruction of Sweden's cultural heritage.

Next to the non-government bills, SD-Kuriren, the official newspaper of the SD, also contends that migration of the Muslim Other would entail the destruction of the Swedish identity. The newspaper purports that Muslims in Europe constitute a threat to democracy, and they are portrayed as violent and irrational. The threat they pose is not merely a threat to democratic ideas that Swedes stand for, but they also supposedly constitute an actual physical threat and a threat to law and order (Steiner, 2014, p. 29). In the newspaper, there is no appeal for readers to understand the cultural differences between themselves and Muslims or to establish a constructive relationship with them. On the contrary, readers are encouraged to dissociate themselves from Muslims and deter them from further aggression to reclaim control of the Western world from supposed Muslim influence (Steiner, 2014, p. 40).

The SD depiction of the Muslim Other fluctuates between a powerful and threatening Other – the Muslim Other as a terrorist, well organized, and overtaking Sweden, and conversely, a weak and problematic Muslim Other as a burden for the welfare state and the Swedish nation (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012, p. 79). The latter depiction is particularly significant when analyzing the SD's conception of the *folkhem*, the Swedish welfare system, translated as the 'people's home,' and the quintessential concept of modern Swedish politics (Kenes, 2020, p. 14). Recent articles in SD Kuriren make unequivocal links between refugees, unemployment and welfare dependency, and the inherent conflict between immigration and the *folkhem*: the newspaper states that 'without change, this may be the beginning of the end of the Sweden as a welfare nation' (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019, p. 597). The *folkhem*'s conceptual salience has been exploited to cement an image of Swedish society as the home reserved exclusively for 'Swedish people' who are under perpetual threat by the Muslim Other (Norocel, 2017, p. 96). The SD portrays itself as the exclusive defender of the *folkhem*; according to the party's leader, Jimmie Åkesson, Swedish society was better off before, when it was more monocultural. He contends that mass immigration to Sweden constitutes a severe threat to the welfare state and the 'people's home' (Hellström et al., 2012, p. 195).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have explicated the answer to the research question *How do the Sweden Democrats construct Muslims as a security threat to the Swedish identity?* Most pertinent research concerns securitization theory and discourse analysis, but I have employed a critical constructivist approach to more accurately reflect the social construction of identity. Especially the relational nature of identity is essential to consider: often, a notion of who and what 'we' are is best articulated by emphasizing who or what "we" are not and what "we" have to fear.

Discourses of insecurity, when the difference is converted into otherness, and discourses of danger, when something is discursively constructed as a threat, were analyzed to articulate an answer to the research question.

The SD constructs Muslims as a security threat to the Swedish identity by employing an ethnopluralist discourse, communicating the idea that immigration entails the destruction of both 'our' and 'their' people. Additionally, through the use of 'caring racism,' the SD accomplishes converting their campaign of opposition to immigration and 'repatriating' immigrants into 'caring' for the Muslim Other, demonstrating that difference has not explicitly been converted into otherness. However, 'racism-as-exclusion' functions through a process in which the Muslim Other is

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identified as different and thereby considered 'undesirable,' signifying that, in this case, the difference is explicitly converted into otherness. Moreover, the SD constructs 'us' as represented by Sweden's cultural heritage and Swedish culture, history, and identity, and accordingly, 'them' is constructed through connecting Muslims, multiculturalism, and non-Swedishness. Additionally, the SD depiction of the Muslim Other oscillates between a powerful and threatening Other – the Muslim Other as a terrorist, well organized, and overtaking Sweden, and conversely, a weak and problematic Muslim Other as a burden for the welfare state and the Swedish nation. To achieve this latter depiction, the SD has exploited the folkhem's conceptual salience to cement an image of Swedish society as the home reserved exclusively for "Swedish people" under perpetual threat by the Muslim Other. All in all, the SD has difficulty articulating what it means to be Swedish and therefore resorts to highlighting what Swedishness is not, epitomized by the Muslim identity. The relational nature of identity thus becomes conspicuous in their discourses: Swedishness is best articulated by emphasizing that we are not Muslims.

For future research, I suggest continuing the work of Nilsson (2022). As of the recent election, the SD wield significantly more influence in the Swedish government than before; therefore, their policies are more likely to be implemented, meaning discourse analysis can be complemented by policy analysis.

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