

# Media stories: murder, motives and moralities

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Crime journalism may be viewed in several different ways: as an expression of the existing social order, and a reproduction of prevailing power hierarchies, or on the contrary as a threat to the existing order and power structures, that glamorises crime and inspires potential offenders. Journalism itself often emphasises a third perspective, one which views journalism as a means of investigating and critiquing those in power and their exercise of justice. Irrespective of which of these perspectives one adopts, crime journalism appears to have appealed to both the media and its audience throughout history. The subject matter is well suited to a dramatic, person-oriented and figurative form of journalism. Not least in the current climate, characterised as it is by harsh competition in the media market and the vigorous rationalisation of the production side, journalism of this kind is something of a recipe for success.

Ericson et al. (1991) argue that crime reporting in actual fact constitutes an arena for various cultural conflicts. Its stories define a society's morals, what is true and correct, what is perceived as normal and deviant, what is permissible and what is forbidden. Different actors, social institutions and interest groups participate in the struggle over definitional power in these areas. Viewed in this way, the crime journalism of a given epoch manifests those social problems and threats that are perceived to be most important and the ongoing cultural conflicts of each historical period can be traced in the crime reporting of the time. One might perhaps argue that one of the many possible roles assumed by crime reporting is that of the modern myth, which serves to establish the limits of social life. Even though crime journalism has undergone major changes over the course of the past century, with its various roles having undergone a radical transformation, its social significance being altered, and the weight it carries in the crime policy arena having grown over time – are there nonetheless certain characteristics, a narrative form, that recurs and can be traced in stories from different decades such as the 1930s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## The murders

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1932, 23-year-old Fredrik von Sydow murdered his father, Hjalmar von Sydow and the two housekeepers that lived and worked with him. The murders took place at around four in the afternoon, at Hjalmar von Sydow's home in Stockholm. After the murders, Fredrik von Sydow travelled, together with his wife to Uppsala, a university town lying 70 kilometres north of Stockholm. When the police arrived later that evening at the restaurant in which von Sydow and his wife were sitting, von Sydow killed both his wife and himself with a pistol.<sup>1</sup>

On 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2004, a young woman named Alexandra Fossmo was shot and killed at home in her bedroom. A man in the neighbouring house was also shot, but miraculously survived. The murdered woman was married to the leading pastor of a Pentecostal church in the small village of Knutby, near Uppsala. The Knutby Pentecostal church is of a rather special type that has been discussed in the public debate in terms of sect-formation. A former nursemaid to the pastor's family, and church member, Sara Svensson was suspected of having committed the crime and was arrested. The pastor, Helge Fossmo, who claimed to have been asleep in the house when his wife was murdered, was subsequently also arrested, as was the neighbour's wife, who had been involved in a love affair with the pastor. The pastor's family included three children from a previous marriage. Against the background of the current wife's murder, the fact that the pastor's first wife had died in the bath in the same house a few years earlier became a matter for renewed scrutiny. At the time, this death had been deemed an accident. The neighbour's wife was released after a time, and court proceedings initiated against the nursemaid and the pastor. The nursemaid was charged with murder, and was subsequently sentenced to forensic psychiatric care. The pastor was charged, convicted and sentenced to life-imprisonment for instigating the murder. He was also suspected of having killed his first wife, but was not convicted on this count.

The objective of the present paper is to attempt to identify what the murders described above may tell us about the social order and the role of journalism. How are these murders, both of which are

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<sup>1</sup> The von Sydow murders became the subject of renewed attention in Sweden in 2004 as a result of the publication of the book *I skuggan av ett brott* [In the shadow of a crime] written by Helena Henschen, whose mother was the younger sister of Fredrik von Sydow. The book is a mixture of fact and fiction, and constitutes an attempt to understand both the total taboo that arose within the family in relation to the crime, and also why Fredrik von Sydow committed the murders.

quite exceptional in the history of crime, discussed in the media? Are there recurrent, classic elements to be found in the journalistic narrative surrounding the murders committed in 1932 and the events of 2004?

Our focus is directed not at the way the media actually reports the events, but rather at how journalism discusses the motives underlying these events, at how the stories are linked to ideological-political interpretations of societal conditions and prevailing conceptions of crime, and at the way the perpetrators' characters are described in order to legitimise both speculation as to the motives for the crimes and moralising pronouncements on the condition of society.

### **Trends in violent crime and shifts in crime policy**

Over the past century, Sweden has witnessed a period of major social change. There have also been major changes in the areas of legislation and the theory of penal law, in criminological research, in the prison system and in trends in both crime and crime policy, in fact across the entire field of 'crime and punishment', or more correctly: of crime and society's response to crime, which of course does not always take the form of punishment. Crime levels may be said to have increased dramatically during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly since the Second World War. Legislation has undergone a marked liberalisation, once again particularly subsequent to World War II. Further, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed an increasing tendency towards the use of treatment in place of punishment. The liberalisation of crime policy ceased in the mid 1980s. The current trend is rather towards a stiffening of penal sanctioning. At the general level, Swedish trends in these areas are reminiscent of those noted elsewhere in western Europe.

Violent crime is today perceived to be one of Sweden's greatest social problems. In the public media sphere, this has constituted a dominant theme, particularly since the 1990s, with descriptions depicting a runaway trend in violent crime (Pollack 2001). Viewed from a much longer historical perspective, however, the period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was characterised by substantial decreases in levels of violence in Sweden, even when trends in population growth are taken into consideration. A marked increase then occurred around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the introduction of the industrial production of alcohol. There was a reaction that manifested itself in amongst other things the emergence of the temperance movement, and towards the end of the century, the level of violence declined. The level of violence then remained very low dur-

ing the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Sarnecki 2003), with lethal violence reaching its lowest level during the 1920s and 1930s (Kaspersson 2000). This picture shifted at some point in the 1960s, and the level of violence began to rise. The increase was not dramatic, but was nonetheless an increase. Violence remains at a lower level than that witnessed in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, but viewed from a more short-term perspective, it has been rising since the 1950s (Sarnecki op. cit. p. 96, Figure 5.3).

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Cause-of-death statistics indicate that levels of lethal violence have stagnated since the 1980s, and may even have declined somewhat. If one looks at offences reported to the police, rather than at causes of death or court convictions, however, there has instead been an increase in lethal violence. This appears primarily to be the result of coding errors in police statistics (Sarnecki 2000, p. 97). From the 1990s onwards, there has been a dramatic increase in levels of reported assaults and other crimes of violence. This increase has been particularly sharp among young people aged fifteen or under. Criminological research has argued that the increases noted in statistics relating to reported offences are primarily the result of a shift in attitudes and an increased propensity to report violence, in particular that taking place in schools (von Hofer 1996, Estrada 1999). According to cause-of-death statistics, the number of homicides and assaults resulting in death has lain at approximately 100 per year over the past few years in Sweden – and this in a country with a population of slightly over nine million.

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For the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, questions of crime and penal sanctioning were in Sweden first and foremost dealt with by various types of experts, primarily drawn from the fields of law and medicine. The central objective was that of finding solutions that in the best way possible would protect society from crime by transforming the criminal into a law-abiding citizen (Pollack 2001).

During the 1930s, discussions focusing on crime, penal sanctioning and mental disorders also included manifestations of social engineering. The field of forensic psychiatry assumed an established position in Sweden at around 1930 both in the area of justice administration, and in the fields of crime policy and the corrections system. Crime policy and corrections had begun to be formulated on the basis of scientific and psychiatric principles, and the provision of custodial care for the criminally insane to be organised on rational grounds at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This process may be said to have neared completion during the years around 1930, and was very much in line with contemporary ideals of social planning and social rationality (Qvarsell p. 226). All people, including those suffering from mental disorders, were from a social perspective viewed as being responsible for their actions. "It was not a criminal's state of mind at the time of the offence, but rather the level of danger he posed to society, that was to determine the way society responded to his actions." (ibid. p. 226-227) Among leading forensic psychiatrists, crime was viewed as a pathological phenomenon, and all socially significant forms of crime were seen as primarily having psychopathological causes.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the treatment ideology was dominant, being grounded in the idea that crime should no longer result in punishment but rather in treatment, whose objective was to remove the factors that had resulted in the individual committing offences. From this perspective, individual deviance is viewed as having its basis in poor social conditions, and a tough societal reaction to crime, in the form of imprisonment, for example, is therefore reprehensible and misdirected. The 'treatment ideology' did not change society's response to crime in any fundamental way, but it was nonetheless, and indeed remains, a profound influence within the justice system. It appears likely that the influence of the treatment ideology has been greater in Sweden than in most other countries (Pollack p. 104ff). When faith in the idea that it was possible to 'treat away' crime began to wane, there was a shift in the debate towards the use of legislative measures.

The more punitive approach had a renaissance at the beginning of the 1980s. At this point the view once again gained ground that the individual chooses to commit immoral acts that cause suffering and that society must therefore punish the offender (Estrada 2004, p. 127). The debate was increasingly taken over by party politicians at the expense of the experts (Victor 1995). And in this party-politicised debate, the general preventive function of the sanctioning system assumed an increasingly central position. The politicisation of the discussion of crime policy issues along party lines has also meant that the debate has been marked by beliefs and opinions, amongst other things as a result of the consideration paid by political parties to their sympathisers.

There are those who contend that the new "wave of criminalisation" witnessed over recent times within the western world, is motivated by progressive forces within the "human rights move-

ment”, an umbrella term for international movements and organisations such as environmentalist, feminist, consumer-protection and animal rights movements. It is these that today have assumed the role of driving the criminalisation process forwards, a role that had previously been ascribed to (hidden) middle-class values and political interests safeguarding capital and the state (Cohen 1996). The same forces that previously worked for decriminalisation, particularly during the 1960s, are today promoting expanded criminalisation. For some researchers, these forces are creating a nation of victims (Sykes 1992), with the media providing forums where private suffering is transformed into social movements that are able to publically express their political demands. There has been a tangible shift in the focus of media interest over the last two decades, from the offender to the victim. The personal sphere has become public among the victims, rather than among the criminals, as was the case during the 1960s (Pollack 2001, p. 106).

A longitudinal study of crime reporting in the Swedish press during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shown that the number of texts on crime increased over the course of the century, with the exception of the mid-1950s, when the number declined somewhat reaching a low point during the 1960s, before undergoing a new, slow but continuous increase thereafter (Pollack p. 109). One of the study’s central findings is that the types of offences that have become the focus of attention have varied over time, in a way that cannot be simply explained by shifting crime trends. There are a number of factors, not least the prevailing conceptions on crime trends and the causes of crime, that determine which types of crime are reported at different points in time, and the extent to which they are reported.

### **Sweden in 1932**

The von Sydow family, and Fredrik von Sydow’s wife, all belonged to what may be termed the Swedish upper class. Having had a prominent position within the Swedish Employers’ Confederation (*Svenska arbetsgivareföreningen*) since 1907, Hjalmar von Sydow had represented one of the parties to the labour conflicts that were characteristic of both the years around 1920 and the beginning of the 1930s.

The depression that followed the New York stock-market crash of 1929 reached Sweden after a short delay during 1931, and resulted in operational cut-backs, business closures and increased unemployment. The worsening of Swedish labour market conditions became even more apparent

when the Swedish financier Ivar Kreuger committed suicide in March of 1932 – just five days after the von Sydow murders (Magnusson 1996, p. 370ff).

Following record levels of unemployment at the beginning of the 1920s, these levels declined over the rest of the decade, with unemployment lying at approximately ten percent until 1931. At this point unemployment rose once more, and in 1933 reached a new peak at 23 percent, before subsequently dropping off again to approximately ten percent during the remainder of the inter-war period. During the 1920s, Swedish Governments for most part comprised representatives of the parties of the centre right.

The social democratic workers party had been formed in 1889, and won the parliamentary election held in the autumn of 1932. The party's election campaign focused on Sweden's high unemployment level. The visionary concepts employed in the campaign propaganda were those of the "welfare state" and the "folkhem" (literally 'home of the people'), which built on a strong central government that would increase demand and levels of employment by means of an expansive economic policy (Schön 2000, p. 345). One of the central ideas was that increased household consumption would lead to an increase in levels of production (Hirdman 1989, p. 95).

The politicians who wanted to build the "folkhem" referred to themselves as social engineers, for whom science, rationality and objectivity were important principles. The scientific perspective, was to liberate people from the dangers of subjective politics, and good politics were viewed as more or less identical with the good state. This democratic state with science as is guiding principle would serve to protect people from themselves (Hirdman op. cit., p. 97ff).

What was the media situation in 1932? The inter-war period could be described as a golden age of the Swedish press (Rydén 2001, p. 142). Over the course of the inter-war years, newspapers became more voluminous, circulations increased, and they reached many more readers than had previously been the case. At the beginning of 1930, there were just over 200 daily newspapers in publication in Sweden. In 1920, the aggregate circulation level of the combined daily press amounted to two million copies, and during the inter-war period this rose by half a million. The daily press had strong political sympathies, and in terms of ownership included social democratic, liberal and conservative papers.

Radio broadcasts started in 1925 and the newspaper publishers had a major influence over the way news was presented in this new media. The radio re-broadcast news from the Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå (i.e. the “Newspapers’ Telegram Office”) and was not permitted a news office of its own until 1936.

### **News as story-telling**

The news genre ought to be regarded as a special type of symbolic system, which should in turn be viewed as a whole and not broken down into different constituent elements such as “information” versus “story” for example or “news” versus “human interest”. Dichotomies of this type blind us to the devices that are employed in all forms of news journalism (Bird & Dardenne 1988).

News fills the same function as myth or folk tale, (its serves to educate), as a validation of culture, and as a force promoting conformity. Through myths and folk tales we learn the values of our culture, what is right and wrong, and through them we may sometimes also experience a vicarious excitement. This does not occur through different individual stories, but rather by means of the composite story of our folk-culture (Ibid).

As symbolic systems, myths and news function both as a model of and a model for a given culture. News, like myth, doesn’t tell it “like it is” but rather “like it means”.

The Present, The Unusual, The Dramatic, Simplicity, Actions, Personalization and Results are usually referred to as “news values” and constitute exactly the same devices as are used by every storyteller when creating a narrative. Stories in general, including news stories, never reflect reality, and nor do they focus on everyday events, but rather on things that are unusual and special but which nonetheless represent something universal. One could, like Barthes, say that news journalism is like a meta-language or communication system, that has to be unmasked (Barthes 1970).

## **The von Sydow murders in news reports<sup>2</sup>**

Hjalmar von Sydow, the murdered father, had recently left his post as chairman and managing director of the Swedish Employers' Confederation, a post he had held for 25 years. He was also a politician and had been a Member of Parliament for the party of the right for fifteen years or so. Hjalmar von Sydow had been a widower since 1926. His 23-year-old son, Fredrik von Sydow, had been studying law at the University of Uppsala for a number of years but had not as yet graduated. He lived for the most part in Uppsala, but when he was in Stockholm, he lived with his father. In 1930, Fredrik von Sydow married Ingun, who was one year younger than himself. They had since 1928 had a common daughter, who had been born to Ingun in Italy, but Ingun had returned to Sweden without the daughter subsequent to giving birth. Having got married, the pair sent for the daughter from Italy, and the child came to live together with her mother at the home of Ingun's parents.

The murders committed by Fredrik von Sydow in his father's home took place on the Monday afternoon. Having committed the murders, Fredrik von Sydow travelled to Uppsala together with his wife and when a policeman came to the restaurant where in which they were sitting, Fredrik von Sydow shot and killed both his wife and then himself.

The newspaper speculations on the murderer's motives printed on the day after the killings already included those that would constitute the focus of subsequent speculation. "According to firm rumours", the "patricide" was involved in embezzling money (S-T & SvD) or was involved in financial disputes with his father (DN). An alternative line was that one of the murdered housekeepers had refused to give the murderer the key to his father's wine cellar (DN). A different type of motive was also presented in the form of intimations that, according to a number of sources, persons acquainted with the murderer had lately been concerned about the possibility of mental illness (S-T), and that the murders had been committed in a fit of rage, which could in turn be traced to a cerebral disorder caused by a concussion some years earlier (SvD).

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the analysis has been focused primarily on the three largest morning papers in the Stockholm area, and a social democratic morning paper from the same area. The papers studied comprise: Dagens Nyheter, which is designated a liberal paper with a circulation of approximately 140,000 copies at the beginning of the 1930s, Stockholms-Tidningen which is designated liberal and with a circulation of approximately 110,000, Social-Demokraten, a social democratic paper with a circulation of approximately 38,000 and Svenska Dagbladet, designated conservative and with a circulation of approximately 68,000.

As early as the first day, the perpetrator is presented as having a dual personality: on the one hand cold-blooded, eccentric, peculiar, rash, and on the other as someone who had as a younger man had seemed so nice (as testified to by the local shopkeeper), had been extremely talented, (“teachers in agreement” on his exceptional intelligence), had brilliant student grades and was a charming and clever conversationalist (classmate).

According to the news reports, his manner of living was characterised by his having been a full-blown *bon viveur* as early as his schooldays, and his walking around with a cane and round-crowned hat. During his student years he devoted himself for the most part to a life of pleasure, and was well-known in society circles, being something of a king of the ball and somewhat blasé. He arranged grand parties and sent the bills for these to his father. He had previously learned how to fire a pistol and was supposed to have said amongst other things that he wouldn't have any compunction about shooting a person down (although the newspaper DN presents no source for this statement).

Dagens Nyheter also reported that Fredrik von Sydow was unusually well-read and had been particularly influenced by Oscar Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray*, with whom he readily identified. He had also read the Persian philosopher Omar Kayham<sup>3</sup> and had developed a “completely fatalistic outlook on life”.

The following day, speculation intensified that the motive for the crime had been money troubles. At this point, suspicions were raised that Fredrik von Sydow had also committed the murders a couple of days earlier of a man, his wife and his sister-in-law, who had all been battered to death. The murdered man was a money-lender. One newspaper ventured a guess that Fredrik had killed the man for telling Fredrik's father that Fredrik had borrowed money, and that furthermore Fredrik's father had suspected his son of these killings. Moreover he had refused to give his son money to enable him to flee the country together with his wife. In a fit of fury, mingled with anger and under the influence of his instinct for self-preservation, Fredrik von Sydow had murdered his father in order to prevent him reporting the crime.

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<sup>3</sup> A sufist-inspired poet of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

One newspaper expressed doubt about linking the two sets of murders, and “felt it likely” that Fredrik von Sydow had visited his father to ask for money, but that his father had reproached him for his extravagant lifestyle and had taken the unusual step of refusing his son’s request. But on the same day, this same newspaper introduced a completely different motive. It was one of the housekeepers who knew that Fredrik von Sydow had borrowed money from the man who had been murdered, and she suspected Fredrik of having committed these crimes. When she told Fredrik of her suspicions, he killed her, and was then forced to murder the other housekeeper and his father, since they discovered his crime.

On this second day following the murders of the father and the housekeepers, something of the double-persona was gone, and the characteristics ascribed to Fredrik were primarily of a kind suited to depicting a mass-murderer: asocial, ruthless – particularly when intoxicated or irritated, with a desperate temperament, granted he was well-read, but for the most part in the work of decadent [!] writers, reading that had heightened Fredrik’s celebratory approach to orgies for their own sake; cold and self-centred, a hedonist with a fairly insatiable craving for liquor. A former drug-user. As regards the possibility of mental illness, this was dismissed, according to one newspaper, by a doctor who had previously attended to Fredrik von Sydow following an accident.

In this context it may be worthwhile digressing briefly to include the perspective of a communist paper on the perpetrator and his crime. This publication argued that the police had wanted to assert that the murderer had acted in a state of “mental derangement”, but the paper felt that this was virtually always the case in relation to “well-to-do” felons (the quotation marks were present in the original text). The newspaper also argued that the police were misconducting their investigation by looking for evidence that the two sets of murders were not linked to one another. According to this paper, the murders had actually revealed, in a rather unsavoury fashion, the moral condition of the upper-class circles to which the mass-murderer belonged.<sup>4</sup>

The third day after the murders, the police also dismissed the idea that Fredrik von Sydow was guilty of the killings committed the previous week. The police now felt that they could confirm his alibi. Given this, the newspapers’ primary motive once again became that of Fredrik’s craving

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<sup>4</sup> Ny Dag, 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1932.

for alcohol and the unobtainable key to the wine cellar. But the papers at bottom expressed some doubt that this was the actual motive, adhering rather to the idea that the central factor was some form of dispute between father and son.

As regards Fredrik's murder of his wife and subsequent suicide, one newspaper argued that the pair had realised they had no other option than to themselves anticipate the outcome of judicial process. That they wanted to leave life in so dramatic a fashion as possible was only to be expected given their "highly-strung natures".

On March 12<sup>th</sup>, the Swedish businessman Ivar Kreuger shot himself, and the newspapers had new front-page material.

### **Motives and moralities**

When the papers in the context of their news reporting speculated as to the motives for the von Sydow murders, these were closely linked to Fredrik von Sydow as an individual. The motives discussed were mental illness or derangement, money troubles and an extravagant lifestyle, and a craving for alcohol. These different motives were rarely placed in any form of societal context. Besides the police, those who spoke out about the perpetrator included friends and neighbours, but to a large extent comprised anonymous sources, or the newspapers themselves described the distinguishing characteristics of the murderer and speculated on the motives for the crime without reporting their sources.

On the other hand, the murders provided the newspapers with an opportunity to comment on prevailing social conditions in the context of editorials and the work of columnists. These expressed both concern at the horrors of modernity and warnings not to take the von Sydow murders as evidence of the state of Swedish society.

### **Mentally abnormal**

The larger of the two liberal newspapers (DN) warned in its editorial against conceptions of a "corrupt age".

As soon as public opinion is shaken by an outrage of the more unusual and sensational kind, people are ready to draw conclusions that reach far beyond the individual case.

One captures fragments from the life of the malefactor, and joins them together into a general picture that is supposed to reflect certain general tendencies of the time.

The von Sydow murders could not be viewed as characteristic of the age, nor as an expression of the Swedish temperament or social life. Nor could the criminal in this case be exculpated on the grounds of poor social conditions or environmental influences. If external circumstances had been of significance, then the perpetrator had himself sought them out, driven by his pathological dispositions. The paper was also hesitant to speak in general terms of some form of “creeping decadence”. Rather, the causes of the murders were pathological.

Such cold-blooded cruelty, such perversity of emotions and desires as has manifested itself in connection with this patricide lie so far from what is normal that it is difficult to see these things as demonstrating anything about the character of our time.

People with such perverse dispositions emerge, said the paper, in every age and society. If one were to say something more general on the occurrence of such persons, it was rather the case that they were rarer “in our time and country than in earlier periods and in certain other types of society.” In other words, the newspaper warned against that which decades later would come to be termed “moral panic”.

### **Society versus the individual**

The conservative Stockholm newspaper (SvD) had no editorial on the event, but as early as two days after the murders, it presented statements from four psychiatrists on what had happened. In a preamble to these interviews, the newspaper assumed the role of interpreter of the way the events had been received by the public at large, using rhetorical questions. These painted a picture of a society that had failed to intervene successfully.

Once again, a mentally abnormal individual has spread death and horror. Once again, a shocked public is asking itself whether all possible measures and steps have really been taken to safeguard life and limb from catastrophes of the terrible kind that have in recent times introduced dread into their minds. Is there nothing that can be done to prevent horrific dramas of the kind just witnessed? The murderer Fredrik v. Sydow however was a person whose absolute amorality and asocial characteristics may be assumed to have

been fairly well-established. Why was he not rendered harmless at some earlier point in time. Does the law provide no opportunity for more comprehensive protective measures, first and foremost for the internment of high-risk individuals?

One of those interviewed was the leading forensic psychiatrist of the time, who argued that an “almost fetishistic conception of human freedom” meant that people failed to ask whether this freedom was used in a way that was harmful to others. This outlook, which “freely allowed monsters to develop with no form of intervention to ensure safety” was based on “sentimentalism and a deficient humanity”. It was thus “sentimental” conceptions on individual freedom that had made it possible for the perpetrator of these crimes to develop into a monster.

On the other hand, a columnist at the newspaper maintained that it wasn’t young people that were dangerous, but rather that

the ones who are really dangerous are those aged and ageing prophets of both sexes who systematically work to undermine the forces that among the young would develop into self-discipline; all those more or less clouded intellects, who must always be “modern”, whatever the cost, who construct new “systems” regarding that which in the young is no more than a natural reaction when they feel that they will be able to manage without the support of authority.

According to this columnist, the slogans and “morals” of these modern prophets bore no relation to the realities of life as it is actually lived, and this modernism was characterised throughout by muddled logic and conceptual confusion.

There appears at once a conception of the collective, whose realisation would require the stifling of individual differences of opinion and endeavour, hand in hand with an individualism whose simple content could be expressed thus: Do as you please, it is of no concern to anyone but yourself!

The unhealthy and weak-willed could not successfully deal with this. The columnist felt that collectively an “apparently highly civilisatory standard” had been reached, but that the von Sydow drama showed that the individual could never evade his own fate and his personal responsibility for the way in which this manifested itself.

These examples of different ideological-political arguments involve an external-interventionist assessment in relation to the effects of ill-health on individual freedom. But they also include the perception that modernism in the form of science and rationality resulted in a system of governance by the powers that be that stood in contrast to the natural reactions of young people when the time came to cope on their own without the support of authority. The freedom of the individual contra societal controls – people were faced with a confusing cross-pressure of old and new ideas.

### **The upper class**

The newspaper Aftonbladet (which designated itself neutral in 1932, but which had up to that point been conservative, and which was then liberal subsequent to 1932 and until 1956) argued in an editorial that the terrible question raised by the murders could not be resolved by talk of innate criminality or emotional abnormality. These constituted psychiatric categories that relieved the environment and the moral climate of responsibility. The newspaper contended that on the basis of what was now known of von Sydow's life, it was instead a question of a complex of both environmental and predispositional factors.

The fact is that he became what he was with the opportunities to gratify his bad tendencies that his assets afforded him and in the pleasure-seeking environment in which he lived and in which his degeneration flourished. ... In this case it was in no way necessity or the current depression that generated the crime. The drunken orgies, expensive cafés, and dance halls constitute the steps along the road that transported this couple to the patricide....

The newspaper emphasises the fact that von Sydow's wife shared his way of life, witnessed the murders and helped him remove the traces of the crime, which showed the inadequacy of blaming the crime on an underlying predisposition. There was no reason to suppose that the wife had begun life as an emotional defective. She had instead been seduced, and this had proved to be sufficient to lead "a weak spirit from an educated and wealthy circle in present-day Stockholm to participate in the most brutal of crimes".

Aftonbladet felt that the spirit of the times, and to some extent that of the upper class, had contributed to the moral collapse that had taken place in the murderer and his accomplice. Idle and

indolent segments of the upper class were characterised by a freedom that came too early in life and that resulted in “*the blague*, that moral, esthetically infused nihilism, the pretension to having a right to the pleasures of life ...”. The fact that the murder was committed by a couple belonging to the cream of society was thus a disgrace on Swedish culture.

The (conservative) editorial of the Upsala tidning was written under the headline “The orgiastic background”. Von Sydow’s “senselessly brutal way of life” appeared, according to this newspaper, to be foreign to the youth of the day, who were generally bent on “a sound and industrious life.” On the other hand there were individuals, who were easily drawn to a person such as von Sydow and who might even express a certain admiration for his reckless living. This newspaper felt that even if von Sydow’s ruinous end had been inevitable, these friends nonetheless bore a certain responsibility for the “state of frenzy in which von Sydow had lived, which he had brought into the lives of so many innocent people, and which had probably resulted in mental illness.”

### **Youth and the dangers of modernity**

The journalist at the Upsala Nya Tidning (liberal) wanted to awaken reflection. This newspaper could not but feel a certain horror “at the demoralisation and the asocial attitude that was at the present time on the advance in all things”. It was noted that the “patricians of psychiatry” had started to discuss what had occurred. But the newspaper argued that recourse to discussions of mental illness often became an excuse that absolved an individual of responsibility from the cradle to the grave. With regard to the current murders, the newspaper felt there was cause to discuss von Sydow’s childhood.

Is not the case of Fredrik von Sydow in fact perhaps also a consequence of a failure to maintain the parental authority on which the very foundations of society are built? When a young person can come to such a pass that he has both the money and the opportunity to live as a refined *bonvivant*, then the consequences will come more or less of themselves.

The paper saw the murderer as an example of a developmental path characterised by a gradual obduracy, where it was not only individual factors that played a role, but rather his lifestyle was viewed as not untypical for the young men of the day, whose vulgar extravagance impressed

amongst others young girls, who were then drawn into the vortex. The resulting injuries included financial distress, desperation and deep depression. The newspaper urged young people from different social classes not to underestimate all the dangers with which they would be tempted by the freedoms and opportunities for pleasure that modern life had to offer them.

All the banal films, seedy literature, the dance-cult, the life of pleasure at nightclubs, and not least the disintegration of the family, the constant divorces and the lack of parental authority in all social classes also constitute a warning to the older members of society to stop to consider what is necessary for the good of society, and to youth a serious: stop and think for yourselves!”

In these examples, the conscientious workers are contrasted with the idle rich of the upper class. Life in the latter is seen as leading to degeneration and to the disgracing of Swedish culture. The disintegration of the family and the excesses of the public entertainments on offer in the big city constitute the dangers of modern life. To this may be added the expansion of popular culture, with its cheap film productions, seedy literature and dance-cult. Young women are drawn into the vortex of this world and allow themselves to be impressed by vulgar extravagance.

These sweeping conclusions are drawn on the basis of an exceptional set of murders that others wanted to explain as the result of a temporarily unhinged mind or mental illness.

## **Sweden in 2004**

In the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Sweden has once again been led by a Social Democrat Government for the past ten years, this being the party that was also in government for the larger part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Government is supported in Parliament by the Vänsterpartiet (reformed communists) and the Miljöpartiet (the Green Party). Göran Persson is Prime Minister and Sweden is now a part of the European Union. Membership of the EU has changed the conditions of political life in a number of ways. Legislation and statutes have been introduced that the Swedish Government cannot decide upon alone. The legitimacy of journalism as the so-called third estate of government, which during earlier decades had rested on a national foundation, with the task of scrutinising the exercise of governmental power, has become a considerably more complex issue now that the decision-making process has been transformed and in part shifted to other arenas. Topical issues in the general social debate include unemployment and high levels of sick-leave,

and the problems of Swedish welfare. In 2003, the Swedish people voted against joining the Euro, and the issue of unemployment was specifically employed as an argument in the both the 'pro' and 'anti' campaigns. The debate on the Euro was rather hostile, with public opinion standing in opposition to the political establishment. Within the pro-Euro campaign, the most visible public face was that of Sweden's then Foreign Minister, Anna Lindh. When she was murdered on 11<sup>th</sup> September in a Stockholm department store by a young man (who was later arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment), the lack of protection afforded a Minister with such public exposure was greatly criticised.

In the area of crime policy, the social democratic movement (and also the supporting parties of government), have for slightly over a decade been moving towards a law-and-order perspective, in part as a result of powerful pressure exerted by the centre-right opposition, under the influence of neo-liberal ideas. All the political parties have their own crime policy programme, and the differences between the traditional, conservative view of combating crime and its more liberal counterpart can at times appear difficult to define. Politicians wishing to show efficacy employ crime policy as the means, and the media as the arena, for conducting their campaigns and getting their message across. Swedish crime policy is characterised by a long treatment tradition (see above). Murder was long regarded as to a large extent a psychiatric problem, and people were therefore often sentenced to psychiatric care. Over the past two decades, however, the neo-classical perspective has assumed an increasingly central role in the area of crime policy, and an ever more restrictive approach is employed in relation to sentencing individuals to forensic psychiatric care. A 2004 inquiry into forensic psychiatry presented a proposal to further restrict the use of treatment-based sanctions. It should only be possible to sentence persons to treatment in very severe cases, where the individuals in question are deemed to be clearly not responsible for their actions. The remainder should be sentenced to imprisonment, with the possibility of receiving treatment within the prison system. At the same time, there has been a trend towards stiffer sentencing for serious violent offences. In Sweden, persons sentenced to life imprisonment may be pardoned by the government. In this area, the trend has involved a shift in praxis. Pardons are awarded later and later, with those convicted thus spending an increasingly long time in prison.

As regards the media situation, this has of course changed radically since the 1930s. The trend is similar to that witnessed in the rest of the western world, and may in the present context be inti-

mated at by means of a few key terms: globalisation, transnational flows, commercialisation, concentration of ownership, tabloidisation, visualisation, and a powerful audience segmentation. The dividing-lines between the supply of entertainment and news are both fluid and changeable. The trend appears to be heading towards a populist journalism for the broad masses, and a more exclusive, serious journalism directed at a well-educated elite. These changes in the media world may be characterised as a simultaneous process of both convergence and divergence, with regard to ownership, technology and content (Hvitfelt & Nygren 2005).

### **The Knutby-murders**

Very early on the morning of January 10<sup>th</sup> 2004, the Swedish emergency services centre receives a telephone call from the small village of Knutby near Uppsala. A man has received severe gunshot wounds in a house. When the police and ambulance arrive, it is discovered that the young wife of a pastor in the neighbouring house has been shot and killed in her bedroom. Her husband is by this time on his way with to hospital with his injured neighbour. When he is later told of his wife's death, he claims to know nothing about it. He had been asleep in the neighbouring room, but had not been woken by the shots. He was woken somewhat later, however by an SMS text message. That same evening, the police interview a young woman, Sara Svensson, who has been living with the pastor and his wife, and who it turns out had attacked the murdered woman, Alexandra Fossmo, with a hammer a few months earlier. The following day, Sara Svensson is placed under arrest. On the evening of January 11<sup>th</sup>, this 26-year-old, Christian woman, with no prior criminal record, confesses to murder and attempted murder. Her motives are unknown. Sara Svensson is to undergo a forensic psychiatric examination. This then shows that she was seriously mentally ill at the time of the murders, and that she is still mentally disturbed.

On January 28<sup>th</sup>, the police arrest Pastor Fossmo, the leader of the Pentecostal church in Knutby, and the wife of his wounded neighbour. It is discovered that the pastor had been involved in a love affair with his neighbour's wife. Two weeks later the neighbour's wife is released and eliminated from the police investigation. More or less immediately, there are rumours that the Knutby church is rather peculiar and sect-like, with a leadership of pastors that exercise strict control over the church-members. A female church leader is singled out as a manipulative Bride of Christ. Knutby is characterised by a concrete interpretation of biblical scripture on that which in the Christian tradition symbolically characterises the Church of Christ. The trial begins in

May, and sentence is passed in July. Later, in the autumn of 2004, the original court's judgment is confirmed by a higher court. Pastor Helge Fossmo is convicted of instigating the murder and the attempted murder, and is given a life sentence. Sara Svensson is sentenced to forensic psychiatric care.

The court judgement observes that the story told by Sara Svensson is trustworthy, tenable and credible. She describes how in her search for a strong Christian fellowship, she was received into the Knutby church and felt like a chosen one and was happy. Fossmo demanded of her continuous closeness and an intense sexual relationship. At his exhortation she made a first failed attempt to murder his wife. As a result she was thrown out of the church, something which crushed her completely. The incident was not reported to the police, however. She was convinced by Helge Fossmo that the only way to find grace before God and to be readmitted to the fellowship was to complete the act which appeared to her as God's test of her obedience, and which involved the murders of the pastor's wife and his neighbour Daniel Linde. She was not aware that the pastor was involved in a love affair with his neighbour's wife. Sara Svensson's story constitutes the basis of the court judgement passed against Helge Fossmo. She has testified to the existence of intensive contacts between herself and the pastor, primarily by means of SMS text messages and phone-calls, which was confirmed by technical evidence. The court of appeal has found that Fossmo "knew all about Sara Svensson's activities and that he by means of an intense and single-minded influence, induced Sara Svensson to kill Alexandra Fossmo, and to attempt to kill Daniel Linde, on January 10<sup>th</sup> 2004, in the way alleged by the prosecutor." (Svea Hovrätt, Judgement 2004-11-12, B 665-04, p. 20). Thus the court finds that Helge Fossmo, in God's name, rationally and ruthlessly, and with the help of amongst other things sex and text-messaging, manipulated Sara Svensson to commit murder.

The court of appeal also examined the issue of whether Helge Fossmo's first wife had some years previously died as the result of an accident or of violence instigated by her husband. Contradictory expert statements led the court to find that it had not been proven that Helene Fossmo had died as a result of violence at the hands of her husband.

## Media coverage of the Knutby case

The village of Knutby<sup>5</sup> was quickly besieged. Journalists flocked to the area, and cars, helicopters and TV and radio equipment came to constitute a part of the everyday life of the village. Residents testified to how a curious public started in time to follow in the footsteps of the media circus. The drama became a focus of attention not only in Sweden, but also elsewhere, and a number of foreign media teams were also on the scene. The tragic events have been well-suited for presentation in the form of a kind of docu-soap or reality show, primarily by the evening press and tabloid journalism, both in Sweden and abroad.<sup>6</sup> Several television documentaries and interview shows have been produced on the subject. The news reporting has of course varied, but an imaginative narrative, with an ongoing storyline based on a cast of characters that the public has been able to follow, have assumed a dominant role across the different media. A critical debate has developed in a number of forums focusing on the character of this media coverage, the herd behaviour of the journalists, the ethical approach in relation to market-strategy considerations, and the unrestrained sensationalism, dramatisation and fictionalisation engaged in by so much of the journalism relating to the case. The more spectacular and speculative forms of crime reporting have appeared to dominate. The dubious and often intrusive journalistic methods led to the entire population of the village being subjected to massive media pressure; the failure to explore the credibility of sources led to the quick, but mistaken, identification of guilty parties. In several cases the publication of pictures and names exceeded formerly established norms. All this was the subject of critical debate in programmes on the media, and also within the so-called “Publicist Club”, an association for active journalists.<sup>7</sup> And all the while, the media coverage of the Knutby murders continued in parallel.

Just a few months earlier, there had been a similar discussion in connection with the reporting of the Anna Lindh murder. Part of the public discourse that followed the tragic death of the Foreign Minister came to focus on Swedish psychiatric care. Her killer had a history of mental illness.

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<sup>5</sup> Approximately 900 people live in the village, of whom just under 90 are members of the Knutby Philadelphia Church.

<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, it is the tabloid dailies (the Swedish evening papers) that have published most on the subject. The paper *Expressen*, which is also the paper that is most focused on the more sensationalist forms of journalism, is particularly prominent in this regard.

<sup>7</sup> Several pieces of journalism have been reported to amongst others the ethical review board of the Swedish Union of Journalists [*Journalistförbundet*].

During the years 2003-04, there were a number of cases of individuals suffering from mental illness committing terrible acts of violence. This resulted amongst other things in the Government appointing a one-man inquiry into Swedish psychiatric care and in journalism focusing a great deal of attention on the mentally ill, and on the system of care in place for this group. This preoccupation with a number of different murders with links to issues of mental health constitutes part of the context in which the Knutby case must be understood.

In the context of a small research project, we have gathered press material relating to Knutby from two of Sweden's largest national morning dailies, Svenska Dagbladet and Dagens Nyheter, and from the two leading evening papers, Expressen and Aftonbladet, and the local Upsala Tidning.<sup>8</sup> In addition, we have material comprised of television documentaries. Work is at present underway on a quantitative study focused on the use of sources, the publication of pictures and contentual thematic perspectives. A number of smaller studies focusing on certain periods have already been completed.<sup>9</sup> Crime journalism is often of a kind that may create seriality. A crime is committed, the hunt for a perpetrator begins, a person is caught (in successful cases), court proceedings are initiated and a court judgment is issued. At the same time, the tragedy and suffering of the victim is played out in parallel. All this provides major opportunities to keep a story alive over a long period of time, to create a narrative where events are driven forward and to capture and recapture the interest of an audience. The dramaturgy of the court case itself coincides with the demands of media dramaturgy. During less eventful periods, such as the time between arrest and the beginning of the trial, the media creates interest by focusing on the victims or following various secondary stories (points C and D below). Peaks of interest during the period between the day following the murder and the final appeal-court judgement were as follows:

- A. The murder and the arrest of Sara Svensson (mid-January)
- B. The arrest of Pastor Helge Fossmo (end of January)
- C. The shock of the Knutby-church at their pastor (mid-February)
- D. Different forms of scandal: sex, defections and financial matters (April)

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<sup>8</sup> The material comprises approximately 1,500 texts and has been collected for the period from the day after the murder, 10/1/04, until a few days after the district court judgement of 3/8/04. The collection and analysis of the material is a joint project with Åsa Pettersson, JMK, University of Stockholm.

<sup>9</sup> The results show that a large proportion of the material may be divided into two dominant themes: the sect and the Bride of Christ.

E. Trial coverage (May)

F. Sentence passed in the district court (July)

G. Judgement passed in the court of appeal (September)

The events in Knutby could have been taken directly from the pages of a highly imaginative crime novel. A number of books, with varying levels of documentary pretension have already been written.<sup>10</sup> The story has become one of the most singular and attended to in the Swedish media. Two months after the shots were fired in Knutby, the extent of the media reporting had exceeded that associated with the murder of Anna Lindh.<sup>11</sup> The case is undeniably unique in a number of respects. It involves the coincidence of murder, violence, sex, infidelity and religion, themes which interest us all, but which may also provide a virtually inexhaustible material for different types of news coverage. Not only have the events in Knutby resulted in the media assigning an uncommon amount of space to crime journalism and the reporting of the court case, but the story also has the potential to cross over genres. Thus cultural journalism, to take one example, has focused a substantial amount of attention on questions relating to the Knutby case. And the opportunities for fictionalisation were much utilised in the documentary news genres. One natural explanation for the extreme nature of the extent of the coverage is found in the market-economic power that may be exploited by journalism and the built-in mechanisms of media logic. The story sells. At the same time, if we follow the arguments of Ericsson noted above, crime journalism constitutes an expression for the perceived threats and problems of contemporary society, and an arena for cultural conflicts. What are the central questions that the Knutby case appears to bring to the fore? By means of an analysis, presented below, of editorials and texts commenting on the case (drawn from editorial pages or articles intended to mould opinion) in four different national dailies (in this case, the local UNT has been excluded) I look to find an

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<sup>10</sup> Christiansen, Terese (2004) *Himmel och helvete. Mord i Knutby*. Stockholm: Bokförlaget DN, Norling, Jan (2004) *Knutby. Sanningen och nåden*. Uppsala: Hallgren & Fallgren, Nilsson, Mårten (2005) *Pastorerna i Knutby. En autentisk kriminalroman*. Uppsala: Succesförlaget AB

<sup>11</sup> At the same time as the Knutby-case, Sweden was also witnessing the trial of Anna Lindh's murderer. Her killer was first sentenced to forensic psychiatric care, but when this sentence was subsequently examined by the Supreme Court, it was changed to one of life imprisonment.

answer to this question. The texts cover the entire period from January to September 2004. In total, the material comprises 91 separate texts (whose distribution reflects the study material as a whole as regards the proportional distribution of the extent of reporting):

Expressen: 32 texts

Aftonbladet: 26

Dagens Nyheter: 18

Svenska Dagbladet: 15

### **Motives and moralities**

Two principal features are distinguishable in the newspapers' discussions of the motives underlying the events in Knutby. The first of these is the individual explanatory model, in which the psyches and personality traits of both Sara Svensson, who actually carried out the acts, and Helge Fossmo are used to explain the crimes. The young woman is declared to be weak-willed and fragile, an individual who could easily be broken down by the will of another. The man is declared to be power-hungry, sex-hungry, manipulative and strong-willed, an individual who has succeeded in controlling and duping the people around him. The motive for the acts involves two elements: a pastor who wants to be rid of his wife, and a young woman who wants to find favour with God by carrying out His commands, and passing a test of obedience. Thus what we have here is a church leader who wants to switch wives. Religious decree forbids divorce. He therefore has to ensure that his wife, and the husband of his wife-to-be are killed by another. Sara Svensson becomes his victim and instrument of murder. For her part, the young woman lives in a conceptual world where she is a nobody, a great sinner who is not worthy to live in fellowship with the church, not worthy of contact with the female pastor of the church, the Bride of Christ whom she looks up to. Only complete obedience to God can restore her to the church fellowship. She believes that God speaks through the pastor, that the sexual acts he demands of her are necessary and sacred. She also believes that the anonymous text-messages she receives are sent by God.

The other explanatory model presented relates to the power and complicity of the collective: the sect as a society within society, an isolated culture that has been allowed to develop into a community where murder could be viewed as what God required of an individual. There are also discussions of the complicity of Swedish society at large, however. This complicity appears primarily to consist in our ignorance of the religious sects, such as that in Knutby, which exist in our midst without our having noted their presence and understood the importance of dealing with the strong attraction that they apparently hold for young people. Several of the editorials and daily

columnists focus on the secularisation of Swedish society which, according to these journalists, means that we are only able to conceptualise religious fallacies, indeed religion per se, in relation to immigrants and to Islam. The press therefore finds reason to reflect on the absence of a sense of community or fellowship in modern society, and on the lack of awareness of people's hunger for a sense of collective belonging. One recurrent theme is that of the modernist project's focus on the individual and the great responsibility this entails in the face of the life-choices that everyone has to make. This responsibility and this freedom may become too heavy a burden to bear.

The sources on which the newspapers' descriptions are based for the most part take one of two forms. One is comprised of the extensive material produced in the course of the police investigation and the court proceedings, including the written court judgement. The other consists in interviews with various kinds of expert, with police and neighbours, friends and relatives. A large proportion of these sources are referred to anonymously.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mental illness**

In many ways, crime journalism follows a stereotype. There are a number of roles that represent the good and the evil, innocence and guilt, and that often become very refined. In the context of the exceptional and dramatic event that the Knutby murder consists in, these roles became highly fictionalised, particularly in the evening (tabloid) press. Sara Svensson was quickly designated the 'nursemaid', since she had worked minding the children in the Fossmo family; Helge Fossmo became the 'pastor' and the female leader of the Knutby church became the 'Bride of Christ'.<sup>13</sup> The nursemaid came to be described as an involuntary murderer, a seduced innocent, as actually being a victim. This was a sweet, young, blonde woman of Christian conviction.

A young woman was isolated and broken down. ... She was forced to work as a maid in the home of a pastor who subjected her to a constant psychological terror (and took the opportunity to have sex with her). (Aftonbladet 20/5)

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<sup>12</sup> The material examined comes for the most part from two different periods: a relatively small number of the texts were published at the end of January, a larger number are drawn from the end of May and the June-July period, i.e. the time of the trial and the district court judgement. Between these periods, it was other genres that filled the newspapers with material.

<sup>13</sup> Other (supporting) roles were played by amongst others the 'defector', (the church member who left the congregation), Knutby residents, (persons living in the area who did not belong to the church), and the police, in the form of an often anonymous representative for the police authority.

Sara Svensson's remorse cannot be hidden. She is a murderer, but a fragile murderer.  
(Expressen 19/5)

Sara Svensson was subjected to a ruthless crime that robbed her of her mind. (Afton-  
bladet 3/8)

At an early stage, in January, before the press even know about Sara Svensson's situation in Knutby, both evening papers discuss the question of whether auditory hallucinations are a symptom of mental illness. In Aftonbladet three experts are asked questions about "Cause of murder: voices. Is it the truth or an attempt at receiving a more lenient sentence." Sara Svensson is said, during a police interrogation, to have described hearing an inner voice tell her to shoot the pastor's wife. The Knutby case is now linked to a number of previous murder stories (e.g. the murder of the Foreign Minister) where the perpetrators had claimed to be acting on the orders of inner voices. Psychiatric experts are given the opportunity to comment on what these voices might consist in. The theme of inner voices is then abandoned for good. Interest is shifted to questions of how sect-like communities are able to break individuals down or draw out characteristics which in other contexts would be identified as mental instability, delusions, pathological submissiveness etc.

In the world of the media, the pastor becomes the personification of evil, a man driven by power and desire, capable of almost anything. In this instance it is psychopathic traits that are emphasised. The pastor suffers from a pathological megalomania, believes himself almost to be God and can get away with anything. He drives people to commit actions by proxy and feels no remorse.

But his lust is powerful and his hubris great. (Aftonbladet 13/5)

The pastor stole these women with the help of religion, fine words and high status.  
(Aftonbladet 8/6)

The female pastor in Knutby, referred to as the Bride of Christ, is described as a charismatic but highly manipulative leader. She is said to hold an extremely powerful attraction for young people and is described as a gifted orator. She refuses to comply with media demands for interviews

right up to the point when the trial is about to begin. Then she gives an exclusive. When this TV-interview is broadcast, there is a discussion about what she is really like. Her statements are interpreted by a number of journalists as ice-cold calculation. A large number of questions are asked in the four papers as to whether the other church members in Knutby are implicated in the chain of events through not having reacted, not seeming to have seen what was going on. Aftonbladet, for example, asks how this is possible. Could it be a case of mechanisms of collective repression?

They say they love one another, but nobody saw the nursemaid suffering. (Aftonbladet 10/6)

### **Society versus the individual**

Several of the papers reflect over the responsibility of the individual as against that of society in relation to the chain of events in Knutby. The question is one of membership of a sect. By extension it can be seen that the influence of the sect may in extreme cases, such as Knutby, lead to acts of violence. Modernity has its price: not everybody is happy in modern culture, it is too complex a place to live, it makes demands on the individual that are simply too great.

The small community. The protective family. Ethics. Morality. The basic Christian values. Yes, this is the world that must be recaptured in order to introduce stability into the chaos of modern life. Everything in its rightful place. Right and wrong. True and false. Man and woman. Crystal clear categories. (Expressen 30/1)

Knutby is more than a crime drama. We have seen this flight from individual responsibility before in connection with this story and we will see it again. Where there is absolute faith and a powerful fellowship, there is always power and the abuse of power. (Dagens Nyheter 19/5)

Or one could say that Knutby is a reaction against the individualised and independent lifestyle that we Swedes have made our own. (Expressen 9/6)

These reflections relate to whether society also bears some responsibility for allowing sects to choose to form isolated communities, or alternatively for being incapable of offering a form of

community that fulfils people's need of a meaningful existence. It is never stated in plain language that society is culpable in the Knutby tragedy, but the shortcomings of the modern project are discussed on a more abstract theoretical level.

### **The sect**

From an early stage, speculation appeared that the motive for the murder and the attempted murder may have been related to the expulsion of a woman from the Pentecostal church in Knutby "which over recent years has evolved into a sect" (Aftonbladet 15/1). Religious experts, specialists on sects, not least from the Pentecostal movement, define what constitutes a sect and reflect on the Knutby church. The Member of Parliament who led the Government Inquiry into Society and new spirituality [*Samhället och nyandlighet*] writes a polemic in Sweden's largest daily newspaper Dagens Nyheter.

The politicians' complete silence following the dramatic murder in Knutby shows that they do not want to assume responsibility for people in religious movements. Children in particular are exposed to harm. There is a risk of damage to their mental health from an authoritarian religious doctrine that describes the world around them as dangerous, evil and inferior" (Dagens Nyheter 4/2)

Aftonbladet (29/1) describes a young woman who was first received with warmth into a fellowship of faith, who had then had to undertake special service with pastor Fossmo as her intercessor, but who was then expelled from the church and had to return home to Småland – where she then rationally and single-mindedly began planning the murders. What had induced this young woman to commit these acts of violence? The journalist at Aftonbladet discusses an inner rage whose causes are unclear. How did these mechanisms work exactly? This became a theme of Svenska Dagbladet's reporting relatively early on. The doctrine of the sect is examined by experts within the Pentecostal movement, on January 15<sup>th</sup>, for example, where under the headline "Dangerous sect doctrine in Knutby" the author of the piece expresses a clear repudiation of the Knutby-church as a degenerate variant of Pentecostalism. By May, when the whole of the population of Sweden had lived with the Knutby drama as a more or less daily saga since January, sect membership had long been accepted as the self-evident context for the murder. Svenska Dagbladet argues that religious instruction in Sweden had to accept its responsibility.

One of the few available methods to counter dangerous and authoritarian theologies is likely to be education in theology and religious science. (Svenska Dagbladet 8/7)

When the court judgment is issued in July, Dagens Nyheter writes:

For in Knutby, not only has a community been broken up, but a paradise has been lost. ... In Knutby, a young generation took over and formed a model community. Whilst it is certainly true that the children were strictly brought up and the patriarchal norm was firmly established, there was also a pioneering spirit which hinted that Knutby was a suburb of the Kingdom of Heaven. (Dagens Nyheter 30/7)

Is it the sect doctrine in Knutby that constitutes a danger, or is it perhaps the Christian doctrine as a whole? A commentator in the newspaper Expressen argues for the latter interpretation, and in doing so deviates from most other analyses, asserting that the religious fundament in its entirety must be called into question and criticised (Expressen ).

### **Religion and the dangers of modernity**

To summarise, the analytical material presented in the press depicts a secularised Swedish society that has forgotten man's deep-seated need of close fellowship, of a clear moral fundament on which to stand, and of clear, simple rules to follow. There are pitfalls in modernity; the individual is constantly required to make new choices, and has to take a stand on what is right and wrong with no clear guidance. Many people experience a spiritual emptiness and an inability to live up to the demands of an enlightened and rational social order based on scientific knowledge. Freedom is perceived as chaos. When cracks begin to appear in the foundations, doctrines presenting a clear message, transparent rules and strong leadership prove very attractive. This is the allure of religion. Charismatic leaders can however become intoxicated by this power over the minds of others, and that which starts out as a loving fellowship of the faithful can degenerate into something quite different. This is the danger of religion. Our problem in Sweden is that we did not believe that sects in which evil and extremism are able to germinate exist in our civilised and rational society.

Of course it is easy to become addicted to the Knutby story. It says something. About ourselves. (Expressen 1/7)

## Concluding remarks

The motives of the perpetrators involved in the two murder stories described above are built up on the basis of a number of fixed – and well-known – antagonisms (Eco 1964). These include the issues of the individual's responsibility for his actions, and the freedom of the individual versus the demands of society, as well as that of inherited and sect-like groups as degenerate forms in modern societies, but also that of the threat posed to traditional values by modernity itself. They also include the classic antagonism between love and death. These two exceptional crimes provided journalism with an opportunity to weave stories around the morality and responsibility of the individual and society, deviance and normality, in quite general terms. Journalistic narrative manifests the ongoing cultural conflicts of a given time, which during the 1930s were particularly focused on class antagonisms, and during the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the consequences of secularisation. In both cases journalism weaves tales not only about the antagonisms between a social order with pretensions to rationality, science and objectivity and people's failings in these respects, but also about the individual's right to self-determination. These crime stories relate stereotypical conceptions of women and men, of "us" and "them", young and old, and upright and rather less upright citizens. One might argue that the crime stories related in the media play the role of folk tales or myths by evaluating what is right for their contemporaries and moralising about what is wrong. Crime journalism offers us excitement "by proxy" through its depictions of events that are related as manifestations of the times in which we live, but which we are seldom directly involved in ourselves.

At the same time, the societal context in which these stories arise has changed dramatically between the 1930s and the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is true of crime trends and crime policy, of the media situation and of journalism itself. Today's journalism has a completely different relationship to politics than was the case in the 1930s. Journalism as an institution today constitutes an independent power, both in terms of its being the arena where much of the debating and decision-making process takes place and of itself being an actor that promotes certain issues. At the same time as crime policy has become an arena in which to show party-political efficacy, the media market has undergone a dramatic expansion and commercialisation. Both the von Sydow murders and that in Knutby raise a number of different questions relating to the deeply problematic relationships between journalism, the justice system, the members of society and crime pol-

icy. Over the course of history, crimes have been transformed into a media spectacle, in the 1930s as in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and have often acted together with a populist form of journalism. The exceptional crimes of our own time that are turned into an entertainment circus have a completely different range, however, in the context of the contemporary global media world, and may be exploited in quite a different way to promote various crime policy objectives.

**Comment [DS3]:** 'genom historien' – haft lite svårt med att välja om det handlar om 'history' eller typ 'berättelsen' – om det är det senare i detta fall, skulle jag istället föreslå: "By means of the story..." eller "By means of the journalistic (?) narrative" – eller något liknande.

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