

- Letter to Sweden -

Novéant-sur-Moselle, April, 28<sup>th</sup> 2013

"He who never leaves his country is full of prejudices."

Carlo Goldoni, *Pamela* (1750)

Dear Sweden,

We will meet soon, and I am eager to find you out. I am writing to you today this letter to share with you my expectations, my hopes and fears about our future meeting, your lands and your inhabitants. I would like to transmit you how I imagine you, which picture I have from you, according to my social background, my French culture, and the media. Some viewpoints are probably true, and others, completely false: perhaps you will be surprised by some French prejudices. But that the point: isn't it interesting to know how you perceive people, and how people perceive you? Thus, I imagine that you also have some prejudices about France. I wonder which they are: all that I can do for now is to voice hypothesis...

Firstly, I would like to say that my global image about you is very positive. Finding bad pictures from you will be hard, that's why I have chosen you. Let's start with the negative parts. First, as regards the climate in which you live, particularly in your northern part, I am afraid - as probably all French people or inhabitants from the South of Europe - about your extreme coldness. I imagine *very low temperatures*: to my mind, North of Scandinavia is about the same as arctic polar circle, that is to say, large surfaces with snow, ice, during all year,

which can be really beautiful, but too much cold, particularly if it is cold even in summer. Also we imagine you with lot of wind. Nevertheless, I believe that it is often sunny (and I don't know why, because lots of French people imagine you as a rainy country), therefore it compensates coldness and may be very nice.

A second bad part of my picture would concern food (maybe it's due to the fact that I am French): I am afraid to find less varieties of food (for instance, cheese and pastries), to eat often the same dish, like *herring or salmon with boiled potatoes*, and to be disappointed by some dishes because they are tasteless. This picture about food probably comes from *Ikea* cafeterias... I don't feel particularly proud about my country, but I think that we really are good at cooking.

Third bad aspect: the purchasing power. Last year, I thought that life was expensive in Scandinavian countries; then I went to Finland (on last autumn), and I realize that I was right: everything seemed to be *expensive* to me. And I suppose that it will be the same (or worse) when I visit you.

Lastly, some persons who live in France believe that your inhabitants can be xenophobic, or even racist. I don't share this opinion, but I think that is due to your strong *patriotism* (I suppose that Swedes are proud of their country, of their culture, with lots of flags on displays or streets and national celebrations; and that your number of immigrates is low), which can be perceived sometimes as negative in French politics.

Now, what are positive pictures about you, dear Sweden? One of the first thing to which a French boy or girl thinks about you is the physical of Swedes: beautiful, tall and slim (like models), and above all *blond*, girls; and tall, fit, sporty, blue eyed and blond haired boys. In the mind of most French people, almost all Swedes are blond. Some people imagine their skin very pale, while others think they look tanned (like skiers), even with an orange complexion. They wear caps, multicolor clothes (*flashy colors* such as yellow, red, pink, contrary to

French people who wear above all black), and these clothes are scarcely worn by the inhabitants of France : ski suits, raincoats, gloves, ski glasses. In other words, fashion is not particularly your cup of tea: you prefer the practical aspects of clothes, in order to practice sports more easily, and to have a healthy life. Thus, I believe that your ice hockey players and your Nordic skiers (and all sportsmen who practice their sport in snow or ice) are good in these fields, and I think that Swedes walk and *cycle* more than we do; they use their cars less often.

This leads me to a second positive image: your closeness to nature. Dear Sweden, for me, you are strongly *ecologist*, you respect the animals, you don't destroy your forests (that's why you have lot of available wood for your economy), and you preserve your atmosphere. Your cities are not huge, you prefer large spaces with few inhabitants, with green areas of grass and trees just near to houses and buildings. Third idea, linked with the first two: your inhabitants have healthier habits than ours. They are sporty persons, who go regularly to the *sauna* (or maybe the hammam?), who eat breads such as "*krispröller*", and all kinds of breads with cereals (rich in fibers), toasted breads like those made by *Wasa*, instead of fat French pastries or baguettes, and drink *cranberry* juice instead of sweetened sodas. They eat often meatballs, and make often biscuits with cinnamon and cloves such as "*pepparkaka*" or with oats. (Again, that's Ikea grocers that gives me this image.)

As regards the education of your children, you seem to be excellent. Pupils are not as stressed as in French schools. They are not afraid of making mistakes and having bad marks. I heard that some of your teachers are rated by pupils, but I don't know if that is true. Anyway, your learning methods pay off: your children have excellent results, maybe the best in the world, particularly at languages. To my mind, almost every Swede is *good at English* (or at least, better than the average French man) and can speak it more or less fluently, even young children in primary school.

You are also a model of *social-democracy*: homeless people and delinquency are scarce, *equality between men and women* is real, more women participate to politics and top jobs than in France. Incomes are not disparate and your democracy is efficient.

What could I say more, if I had to paint (imagine) your portrait? I would draw *elks, reindeers* and brown *bears* in forests, and white bears on the *ice floe* in the extreme north... For me, imagining animals that we often see in France living in Sweden is hard: for instance I cannot imagine cat, sparrow, sheep, horse... whereas I am sure that they live in your lands too. In my imagination, your fauna and your flora are completely different than ours. I could add on my painting *Santa Claus*, living in Lapponia, lots of Ikea shops, or at least shops with *blue and yellow colors* - the colors of your flat, but also of sun and sea -, and some symbolic red wood horses, made in little wood workshops... I would draw little houses made of maroon wood, with chimneys, in villages. By contrast, in towns, some *Volvo* cars, for people who succeed in their career, and lots of high technologies in buildings with modern architecture. Dear Sweden, you seem to have two faces: one is traditional, rural, close to nature, past-oriented; the other is a future-oriented city, with a high level of education (and why not, *Nobel prizes*), with postmodernist works of art and high buildings.

I believe that you will welcome the "Eurovision" competition this year, since you won it last year with the song "Euphoria", by Loreen (I remember it because I like it; despite it has not been a big success in France). On that subject, one of the most famous Swedish musical group is still *Abba*, even if it does not exist anymore. Generally speaking, when a French thinks about Scandinavian music, he thinks about heavy metal and rock music.

Of course, all these pictures are stereotypes or products from my imagination. But you probably have such stereotypes about my country. For the present, I

can't know exactly what they are, but if I had to guess how do you perceive France, what could I tell? To my mind, it is impossible for you to miss the picture of the French man with a *baguette* (bread), a *beret*, a *moustache*, a *smock* and a red scarf. Everybody in the world as this image from French people, and I found this cliché even in one book to learn Swedish. This is a more sophisticated, urban version, but you may also think about a man with a big belly, big *moustache*, Basque *beret*, possibly a *pipe*, maybe an *accordion*, brown straps, and perhaps someone who does not smell very good. In short, a rural version of French (a kind of *Obélix*, if you know this character from *Udergo's* comics). Unfortunately for us, I am sure that this second version is dominant: in my opinion, you believe that most of us are non-educated peasant. As regards our tastes, you must probably think that we drink a lot of *wine* (red, white wines, *Champaign...*) - in fact, it depends on people -, we eat a lot of *cheese* with a large variety -and on this point, you are right - but the most emblematic is "camembert". We eat strange food - I should say, nauseating food - such as frog legs, snails, oysters, and cheeses with moisture inside... Nevertheless, you probably believe that we are good in *cooking*, gastronomy, that we spend lot of time in our kitchen to prepare sophisticated dishes; you probably know some of our specialties, such as "croissants", "ratatouille" (like the title of a Disney movie), "coq au vin", "foie gras (mousse)", "boeuf bourguignon", "quiche lorraine" (from my region), "crêpes (from Brittany)", "flammenküche", "choucroute", "cassoulet" ... To continue with clichés about France that you can't have missed, I could make a long list: a French guy likes *soccer*, he listens (and plays the) *accordion*, he sings the *Marseillaise*, he plays to *petanque*, he eats *baguette* and lots of pastries, he drinks *champaign*, he knows *fashion*, *luxury* and *perfumes* (maybe to mask his bad smell!)... A stranger who would have to combine images to France would speak about historical characters such as *Jeanne d'Arc*, *Napoléon*, *Charles de Gaulle*, and maybe more recently our last president *Sarkozy* (more than the current president *Hollande*); celebrities such as *Edith Piaf* (singer), *Coco*

Chanel, Jean-Paul Gaultier, David Ghetta, monuments: of course the Eiffel tower, and maybe the Champs-Élysées, the cathedral Notre-Dame de Paris, the patriotic symbols that you may know thanks to soccer matches (our flag, our hymn, the Gallic cock), and other elements such as the Moulin Rouge, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the French kiss and so on, that is to say, a globally positive picture. I think that the picture you make about our landscape is also good. France is a beautiful country for you, with large varieties of climates and ideal areas for holidays, particularly in the Côte d'Azur; Marseille and Cannes are two cities that you probably know and consider as pleasant. I think that you have also a dreamy image of Paris (from Hollywood movies), with its lights, its famous historical monuments, its numerous leisure and cultural places, its gastronomy and its luxury.

Nevertheless, to my mind, you don't have a positive picture of our personality, our character: you should think that we are particularly proud, vain, rude, stressed people (that's why we consume lots of medicines), that we don't like strangers (particularly Germans) whereas there are lots of tourists and immigrants. And I have to admit that you would be partly right. Another idea that you have, perhaps, is that we are lazy, because we have lots of holidays, and we work only 35 hours per week, and despite of our good working conditions, we are never satisfied, and sometimes we suicide because of our work. I am pretty sure that you imagine we are always on strike, but you should know that we are efficient and productive. You may have a negative opinion about social life in France, with problems of delinquency and high rate of unemployment.

As regards our communication style: you may think that we are more expressive, more extravert than you (French people believe that you are more distant, sometimes cold, or introvert, not extravagant), and that we make lots of gestures when we are speaking. You probably think that French language is really difficult, because of the pronunciation and the numerous exceptions in grammar

rules, but at least, you can learn it at school. In France, we cannot learn Swedish language, except in some prestigious universities or by correspondence course, and in our mind, it is also a difficult language. I have started to learn it a little with books, and it seems to be easier than I imagined (it looks like German and English), but the pronunciation must be harder. But our reputation in languages is really bad - everybody (I am sure that you too) knows that French people are not good at English.

To conclude, I would say that a large part of my vision about you has been shaped by school (classes of economy, geography...), TV. advertisements, by the Ikea shops and cafeterias, as lots of French people, and by my exchange semester to Finland. I am impatient that you reveal your own prejudices about my nation, and I will be glad to give you a preview more realistic about it. During my studies, I have learnt that one of the main role of a philosopher is to overpass prejudices (and illusions that come with them), in order to find truth. It's up to me to face these prejudices in your country, by living in you, dear Sweden, feeling and smelling your air, tasting your specialties, looking at your landscapes, your fauna, your flora, listening to your songs, your noises, and your nature, experiencing your games and your work. Facing reality: that is the best way to check my hypothesis about you and your prejudices about France, that is the best way to fight prejudices.

I would finish this letter with these words: everyone has prejudices; the most important is to be well aware of them.

See you soon!

Yours sincerely,

Mickaël Dangin