

New PBS Documentary Shows How Sweden's Socialist Success Story Falls Short

Americans tend to see Sweden as a democratic socialist utopia, although the nation changed course decisively two decades ago. A White House report, "[The Opportunity Costs of Socialism](#)," debunked the notion of enduring Nordic socialism, and now PBS has aired a documentary produced by a Swedish free-market leader intended to dispel popular American falsehoods about his home country.

[Johan Norberg](#), a Stockholm native and senior fellow at the [Cato Institute](#), produced the program *Sweden: Lessons for America* to clear the air. In the documentary, he details how the nation rose from poverty to prosperity by following the free-market philosophy of Lutheran pastor-turned-politician [Anders Chydenius](#), the intellectual freedom championed by Lars Johan Hierta, and the political program implemented by Johan August Gripenstedt that ultimately codified their insights into law.

But once Sweden reached the apogee of its power in the postwar era, Norberg reveals, "We screwed it up."

The social welfare programs enacted during this era slowed Swedish economic growth to half the rate of developed countries, caused native businesses to flee the country, imposed taxes sometimes exceeding 100 percent of income, and briefly increased interest rates to 500 percent. (At one point, the founder of IKEA, Ingvar Kamprad, said on camera, "The high capital tax is extremely oppressive in Sweden. ... I think that many of our problems in Sweden are because we punish people who want to venture into business.")

Ludwig von Mises said that all action is caused by a desire to

relieve some discomfort. Sweden's steps away from socialism proved no exception.

To combat the economic stagnation of the 1990s, the nation scaled back government domination of the private sector – and the average family's disposable income increased multiple times over. Multiple governments paid a high political price for this painful, if necessary, step. Yet they pressed on as the nation instituted school vouchers, repealed minimum wage laws, set relatively low trade barriers, and reformed its (still generous) old-age healthcare and pension systems.

The film shows that Sweden's burgeoning entrepreneurial sector is in some ways less regulated than in the United States. A memorable segment on bicycle helmets shows the nation's open-minded approach to innovation – one of the many “lessons” for the United States. Norberg's personal ties to Sweden and entertaining approach make the film easier for those who still believe in the myth of socialist Sweden to tolerate.

Collectivism harms human flourishing, and [socialism contradicts the teachings of Christianity](#), so people of faith will want to know why and how socialists' favorite “success story” falls short.

The 57-minute documentary began airing on PBS stations (take a moment to savor the irony) nationwide last night. It is highly recommended.

If you missed the program – or if your PBS affiliate is not carrying the show – you can watch the full documentary below:

You may also enjoy watching Norberg dispatch popular myths in bite-sized segments during his fast-paced program [Dead Wrong](#) for the [Free to Choose Network](#).

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