

Sweden continued eugenics policy until 1976

Social Democrats implemented measures to forcibly sterilise 62,000 people

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For over 40 years, young socially marginalised working class women in Sweden faced the danger of forced sterilisation. This was carried out under laws intended to purify the Swedish race, prevent the mentally ill from reproducing and stamp out social activities classed as deviant. The last sterilisation took place in 1975.

Between 1934 and 1976, when the Sterilisation Act was finally repealed, 62,000 people, 90 percent of them women, were sterilised. 15-year-old teenagers were sterilised for "crimes" such as going to dance halls. One woman was sterilised in 1960 for being in a motorcycle gang. Orphans were sterilised as a condition of their release from children's homes. Others were pinpointed on the basis of local neighbourhood gossip and personal grudges. Some were targeted because of their "low intelligence", being of mixed race, being gypsies, or for physical defects.

The issue has assumed the character of a national scandal, although similar revelations have emerged in other countries including neighbouring Norway, Austria, Denmark, Finland, Belgium and the United States. Per head of population, however, only Nazi Germany sterilised more people than Sweden. How could such a programme be sustained in a country famed during the post-war epoch for its apparently enlightened social policy?

The Swedish Institute for Racial Biology was opened in Stockholm in the early 1920s. It emerged as part of a worldwide interest in eugenics--the notion that human stock could be improved by selective breeding, much like cattle. From the start, the Swedish institute was fascinated with the notions of racial purity, which were to be made notorious by the Nazis. The Swedish institute invited German speakers on Aryanism.

The Sterilisation Act was passed in 1935, under the

government of the Swedish social democratic party (SAP). The Act shortly preceded the founding of the so-called "Swedish model" of welfare capitalism, based on a vision of national unity between large corporations and workers. The concept of the "people's home" (*folkhemmet*) accompanied a close corporatist relationship between the Swedish employers' federation and the major trade union federations. This was promoted by the trade unions, and the SAP, as an alternative to the bitter class struggles that had raged across Scandinavia since the turn of the century, and as a barrier to social revolution.

The relationship was formulated in the town of Saltzjoben, and the "spirit of Saltzjoben" was invoked on many occasions to anoint new agreements between the trade unions and big business. Yet, in the basement of the "people's home", social policies promoted by the Nazis were maintained by the social democrats. The Sterilisation Act was directed against the most oppressed and vulnerable, those without any legal or political voice. In the 1930s and 40s the victims were also those who simply failed to fit the racist stereotype deemed acceptable in order to ensure full membership in Swedish society.

Files recently released from the Swedish National Archives make clear that from the 1950s, after the Institute for Racial Biology was wound up, sterilisation continued based on an agenda to promote social conformity. Those targeted were misfits and rebellious young people. The young woman who hung around with a motorcycle gang was described as being "without good judgement", with "no concept of ethics". Her doctors were, in addition, sure she was sexually active, and so she was sterilised.

People deemed likely to burden the state with the cost of child allowance payments were also targeted. When the

new benefit was introduced in the 1950s, the rate of sterilisations doubled. In some cases, sterilisation was also made a condition of obtaining an abortion.

In 1997, the *Irish Times*, quoting the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, reported on the work of Maija Runcis, a doctoral student who spent eight years researching 5,000 case files. The files brought out the horrible detail of a process reminiscent of a witch trial.

"Each file starts with a form applying for permission to have the person sterilised. This could come from a relative, social worker, teacher, politician or even a neighbour. 'These people would have the application forms in their possession, fill them in and send them to the Medical Board,' said Ms Runcis. There would also be a doctor's report and often results of intelligence tests. 'They would ask questions like: name the King of Sweden, what is the population of some city and where in the country is another city? They were ridiculous questions. I can't answer some of them.' The medical board, in Stockholm, would assess the applications. A single official, invariably a man, would finally sanction the operation. 'They made about 20 decisions a day.' The most disturbing cases Ms Runcis found were those of the teenagers, some as young as 15, who accepted sterilisations in return for a release from a children's home or special school. 'It was a form of blackmail and these people didn't have any choice,' she says."

The Swedish press took up Ms Runcis's reports and the government was forced to concede a commission of inquiry. Since its inception in 1997 the commission has received 200 calls a month from victims of the state sterilisation programme.

The commission reported in January this year and recommended that victims should be financially compensated. Earlier this month the Swedish Social Affairs Department, run by the same party that introduced the 1935 act, announced that victims would be offered a miserly \$21,000, if they had not "consented" to the sterilisation operation, and if they themselves applied for compensation.



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