

## **Notions of Immigrants as New Customers**

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## **Notions of Immigrants as New Customers**

### **Summary**

This paper describes one public argument for diversity in the trade and industry in Sweden; “immigrants as a new group of customers”. At diversity conferences immigrants are spoken in terms of “growing markets” or “available profit”. I would like to show how the notion of “immigrants” is constructed in economic and ethnic terms, how consumption is associated with a notion of market economy and liberation of the immigrant. Economy and ethnic identity I understand as part of discourses, that enable and limit the way of speaking about diversity.

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Today we live in a myth that we have a good knowledge of our customers and their desires. It is a simplified picture of reality. There are many target groups whose needs the standard range of products do not answer. The consumers are not only wealthy families with two children in a terrace house. The market has changed – and is always changing. To identify new customers we need to be open to difference. The question is how we will get to know a market we know so little about today? (Swedish Trade and Industry, Svenskt Näringsliv 2002:3).

This is an introduction of a brochure, which was distributed at a conference arranged by the Swedish Trade and Industry. It is a part of my empirical material, which is based on fieldwork at conferences about ethnic diversity and business, and interviews with leaders of companies and consultants who speak at the conferences. They are all taking a standpoint for “diversity” in public. One argument is for ethnically diverse organizations which brings new perspectives and solutions. Another argument is for non-discrimination at the labour market since there will be a lack of labour force in the near future. The last argument is for the importance of making “immigrants” as new customers. These arguments are seen as one way among others to stay in business. In this paper I will present one of the arguments; how people are presented as new customers. My main question is how notions of ethnic identity are related to notions of economic resource (see de los Reyes 2001). I would like to explore the following questions: In what way is the “we” and the “other” constructed in the notion of new customers? How is the notion of (ethnic) national identity and territory expressed in these categories? How does the discourse of ethnic identity combined with discourses of economy construct “immigrants” as the objects of the speech? Where is this object placed – in relation to the speaker in these discourses?

I have been inspired by the writings of the anthropologist Liisa Malkki. Malkki articulate how the relationship in between identity and territory often are taken for granted in everyday language. She interprets the relationship as part of nationalist discourses and focuses on how refugees become an object of knowledge. In the same way as “immigrants” become a public statements about diversity, as researchers we produce knowledge about diversity by telling our “own” truths about the best ways to study and interpret it. What kind of knowledge do I (re)produce using discourse analyses? I am not sure I am able to answer the question in this paper, but it might be something we could discuss at the seminar. Malkki writings show

how researchers play an important part in reproducing notions of national identity. She speaks about how refugees are viewed, by researchers and politicians, as people without a place, a national territory. In the national discourse everyone belongs to a place, a culture, and a language. “There are widely held common-sense assumptions linking people to a place, nation to territory, are not simply territorializing, but deeply metaphysical” (Malkki 1992:27). She continues by saying that one way to understand the displacement in order is to explore aspects of metaphysics, how links between people and place is routinely conceived in botanical metaphors. One strong metaphor is roots, which are arborescent in form. Malkki gives examples of these forms; metaphors of kinship, home, origins, ancestries, racial lines, developments and evolutionary (Malkki 1992: 26-27).

### Finding New Customers

You could say that conferences and texts about diversity establish these truths, it gives certain interpretations authority. Conferences are examples how discourses are created in practice by the speakers, the audience, the brochures and program. The setting creates a “we” who are attending to understand the matter of diversity, while the matter of the speech is placed outside the conference setting. The speakers at the conference use the terms “we” and “our” when norms and normality are defined as problems, since “norms” stop “immigrants” to become new customers.

Turning the problem towards your self constructs a national order, it constructs a “we”. On the one hand it gives the speaker an agency; “we” have to do something, we have to define “immigrants” as new customers. “Immigrants” are presented as an unexplored economic resource, a new market. On the other hand the position as “immigrant” remains as “the other”, the object of the speech like in the example below. It is an open discussion at a conference, arranged by the Swedish Trade and Industry. Erik who is one of the main speakers and a researcher starts by saying:

– We think our ways of looking at things are normal and everything else is exotic and we have not been interested in the exotic. In the trade and industry there is no knowledge of immigrants’ habits. No statistics showing what they consume. For instance most immigrants read the Metro [free paper distributed in the subway] and not Dagens Nyheter [daily morning paper in Stockholm area]. Still companies think the norm is to read Dagens Nyheter.

Bengt who worked with advertise agrees:

– There is not much advertising gaining immigrants. The problem is that we rarely speak of immigrants as customers. Instead they are associated with “not” things. They’re not

Swedes, not speaking Swedish and not having a job. My suggestion is to see the immigrants as our new consumers.

Meryem who had her own business continues:

– We should define immigrants as people who have power to act. Immigrants are not always subordinated or depended on the welfare state. It is tiring to hear people speak of immigrants as criminals, unemployed or somebody you should feel sorry for. I think we should speak of them as wealthy consumers, like Bengt suggested.

Two different subject positions are constructed; one who is carrying the norms and the other who is excluded by norms. Discourses of economy give the position “immigrant” a specific kind of value, an economic value. You could see it as protest against voices who stress “immigrants” being dependent on the welfare state.

As I can see in general the public arguments of diversity are also producing notions of class, roughly the “immigrant” is categorised as a highly educated person or wealthy customer, it is producing images of class. The poor and the worker is put in the margin or used as the outside to stress the changes in the Trade and Industry, the worker is put in the past in the era of industry or as immigrant labour force. At the same time, in a paradoxical way, the category is placed in the suburb, travelling by subway (not car).

The “immigrants” are treated as brand blind audience (Halter 2000), it shows how notions of economy and ethnic identity work together, and creates a hegemonic field. One consult, among many others speak of 1,7 million new customers (it is often said that Sweden have 1.7 million immigrants), he continues at the same conference by saying:

– A Swedish brand, like Kalles Kaviar (Carl’s Caviar), does not mean anything to an immigrant; they do not know is a better quality than any other brand. This is a great possibility for companies to sell their trademark! You should not treat immigrants differently – just see them as a possible market. Do what you usually do when it comes to customers; get information about their habits. For instance telephone companies. They should find out where do the immigrants call, which companies do they use and how often they call. It is the same with travelling agencies; where do they travel, how often and what kind of service is requested. The next question is how to get in touch with the new customers, where to advertise. Is it in local newspapers, special papers, television channels or radio programs for immigrants?

“A normal and common” customer is constructed in relation to a “new and unusual” customer. The “normal” is presented as a person who has lived a long time in Sweden, has

well known habits and knowledge of the products on the market. Is also described as a limited, explored and stagnating group of customers. While the new one is presented as an unexplored and growing group of customers. It is defined as person who moved to Sweden, has different consumption habits, less knowledge, and a different relation to the products on the market. The new customers are assumed to bring with them habits, customs from and connections to other countries (travelling and phoning). He or she is this way supposed to be attached and located to “another” country – and the connection is making him/her to a new customers (see also Malkki 1992:26).

What are the consequences of this way of speaking of ethnic identity? One is that ethnic identity is something you can differ, package and sell. It is quantitative and profitable; more ethnic identities mean more profit. “Immigrants” (certain group of immigrants) are supposed to have an ethnic identity – and a longing to express it as consumer.

Naomi Klein writes about how the public space has become an arena where identities as women, homosexual and ethnic are produced. Klein says that the public room used to be a place where margin groups fought for their rights to be different – and have the same possibilities as everyone else in the society. Today the identities in the margin became a product – a selling concept of its own (Klein 1999: 115, 117, also see Bauman 1998:40ff).

Another consequence is; to have an ethnic identity is the opposite to be normal. The normal customers are seldom spoken of as having ethnic identity, but at the same time it constructs notions of an ethnic Swedish identity. It is a person who is there as a customer, somebody you do not need to find or reach to in any certain way.

### Communication with New Customers

Notions of different cultures are constructed by stressing the importance of communication to achieve new customers. It is as if the “immigrants” as the new customers are not “among us”; therefore “we” have to reach and communicate with “them” and get “their” trust. Personal service is often explained as one way to get trust, here it means knowing the new customers language and culture. I would like to point out, like Liisa Malkki, that a nationalist discourse tie people to a culture and create notions of cultural walls or barriers between people. It also creates a placed otherness, people are bound to a culture or a suburb. Malkki refers to Clifford Geertz; “the idea of culture carries with it expectations of roots, of stable, territorialized existence” (Malkki 1992:28). Again, these discourses are almost always linked to the notions of market economy. In many cases the economy was stressed as the main argument why one should pay attention to diversity, it made economy natural.

The next illustration, from a conference where a representative from a bank holds a speech, is an example of how economic reasoning is interrelated to notions of national identity. One should notice how “immigrants” are seen as the last outpost, to declare them as consumers the company has pleaded to all customers.

– Today’s harsh reality demands economic profit everyday. We have to be efficient and professional. One way is to reach out to all the customers. The majority of the citizens of this city has foreign background and many of them come from a non-Nordic country. Our problem is that we do not reach out to them. Why is it a problem? I will tell you about Mustafa and his family. He has a wife and three children. He is educated as an engineer but works as a bus driver – and extra as a taxi driver. His wife is a librarian, his daughter studies law and the eldest son are in the Swedish military and the youngest is in elementary school. Mustafa is engaged in social questions, which is why he had to escape Iran. Today he works as an interpreter and helps his compatriots. Mustafa is also interested in sports; he is engaged in the local football team.

“Immigrants” are presented as invisible at the marketplace, but when defined as new customers “they” become visible. The new customers value is expressed in economic terms, expressed as “profit”, “business” and “growing markets” and “good for the competition” and as “win-win-situation”. This way notions of economy is constructed, but also notions of how the new customers is different. There is an image of essentialism, people are supposed to carry an essential identity, it works as explanation why people are different but it works as question of equal rights. The representative of the bank continues by saying:

What kind of relation does he have to the bank? He usually takes out his entire salary at once and pays his bills at the post office. Every Friday he goes food shopping and pays with cash. The problem is that the bank only earns two crowns every year on Mustafa. It is not a profitable situation for bank or for him. This is not his fault! He might not be confident with the bank because of bad experience. He does not have a good relation to bank employees. But, today we have to try to solve this problem, solve the communication between employees and customers by having a representative. A person who can explain the Swedish banking system and be aware of the customers needs. The spoken and body language might differ, which could easily lead to misunderstandings. Our most important question is; what can we as a bank do for Mustafa? If Mustafa pays with a credit card and pays his bills on the Internet he would be able to save money. He would also be able to borrow money and for instance to buy that new car he has dreamt of. This would be a win-and win situation. In my calculations the bank could make a profit of 2000 crowns every year instead of two crowns every year.

”Mustafa” is described as a new growing group of customers. Firstly he is presented as a casual ordinary customer with everyday concerns; heterosexual, wife and children, working, interested in football, pay bills and goes food shopping. But he does not use the bank like everyone else (constructing Swedes as the normal users). In the explanation Mustafa becomes a representative of a different culture. There is a notion of that ethnical heritage affects ones behaviour and that the company needs certain skills, in language and culture, to meet the new customers.

The bank representative speaks of the importance of change, the change has to come from herself she explains, far as I understand it reflexivity is presented as a tool at the diversity conferences. Researchers and consultants play an important part to help the audience to reflect, you could say that diversity conferences reproduce discourses of reflexivity (Giddens 1990).

Communication is also presented as a practical matter, the same bank employee I have referred continues by saying:

– We have to be aware of how we communicate – and there is a problem of communication. We have to change the personal attitudes towards immigrants. We our selves have to work as good role models. It is important to engage everyone in the company and ask the customers what kind of service they need. I have hired to persons from Iran and Turkey. I think diversity comes from the heart. It is more important to see people as they are and to appreciate differences. I myself would not like to be like everyone else. That is what I said when I went to the hairdresser [she has hair in different colours].

There are many other examples of how companies describe how they move to the suburb to help ”new customers”, ”immigrants”, to use the companies services in a ”right way”. One speaker sees himself as a ”bridge constructor”, he said he was overcoming barriers between ”Swedes” and ”immigrants”. He ends by saying; ”this is not about kindness, this is business for us. We are not able to survive without the customer’s loyalty.”

It seemed important to stress that the bottom line is economic growth. The notion of personnel service is common. In the market economy the personnel’s way of communication has been seen as the most important tool to sell the products of the company. The responsibility of the success of the company is in the hands of socially competent personnel (Heuberger, Kellner 1992:50f).

The specific in the arguments for ethnic diversity is the notion of taking “immigrants” from the periphery to the centre as new customers – into the consumer society. But at the same time it territorialized the new customers in a certain cultural and place – and deterritorialize from Sweden, Swedish language or culture. “Immigrants” become people who are lacking something (since they are not seen as Swedes), here exemplified as lacking knowledge how they could use the bank. Liisa Malkki writes conceiving that the relationships people have to places in expressed in cultural term’s leads to a strange sedentarism. It is reflected in language, it actively territorializes our identities and it enables a vision of territorial displacement as pathological (Malkki 1992:31).

### New Customers and Engagement in the Society

One way to find new customers is to declare you are a company who cares about questions of “immigration”. It is seen as a declaration of fair trade, which will appeal to all customers who want to express their consciousness (Michelletti 2003). In the following example I would like to show how questions of integration are used as an important question in public relations. How the head of the company explained their work in terms of integration and selling their products to people living in the suburb.

My interview with the head of the company was probably seen as a part of a public relation. She told me I was one of many other journalists, companies and researches who had contacted them lately, everyone wanted to know how the company worked with ethnic diversity. This comment made the interview itself to possibility for her to declare her engagement, it also created a the manger as the norm, as the one who is leading the company towards the diversity (Martinsson 2006).

– I was worried about all these people who does not get a proper job because of their ethnic background. So I asked myself, this is the society I would like to see? Would I like to live in society were people have more understanding for each other? Do I want us to be living isolated on small islands floating far apart from each other? So I decided I wanted to see a new society! I asked my fellow workers if we could start working with diversity. Everybody agreed. It was bound to be a long-term project; we could change the society at once. We started organising workshops to be able to discuss our own behaviour. For instance, we bring our traditions with us when we move to other countries and we take it for granted. Why should not other cultures be able to do the same – have the same possibility?

In this quotation place is constructed by notions of being inside and outside the society. The speaker sees herself as inside, an active helper, while object of the speech is outside the society in a subordinated position as being helped. The emphasis on “meeting” stresses also an image of a segregated society – people segregated in different places and cultures. It is also stresses that everyone is supposed to be striving to become a customer – and a notion of consumption being equal to integration.

– We started to discuss how to reach out to new customers who do not speak Swedish or are part of the Swedish culture. We decided to organise special evenings for customers. If it was difficult for the customers to come to us – we will come to them. We held the customer evenings at a local meeting place (föreningslokal). The point was to inform, teach and sell our product to the customers. Few times we had a translator to make the conversation work. We also discussed where the products came from, cacao butters from Ghana, beeswax from Kenya and Henna from Egypt. The customer evenings worked as a bridge between different cultures. We noticed a growing interest for the products – it generated an economic profit (interview 6/6-00).

Again, people treated as having different cultures and languages – and interested in traditions and the heritage of the products. I would like to raise some sort of the questions that Liisa Malkki raises about the anthropologist’s descriptions of Indigenous People. She asks why should the rights of “Indigenous People” be an environmental issue? “Are they rooted in their native soil somehow more natural, their rights somehow more sacred, than those of the other exploited and oppressed people?” (Malkki 1992:29).

In my case the question would be; why does integration have to be a cultural issue, what if people who are positioned as “immigrants” are not interested in traditions or heritage of the products. Or moves away from the suburb or speaks Swedish fluently? Like in the case of Indigenous people the immobility weighs heavily as an issue here, the “immigrants” are supposed to stay in their culture and suburb. When content of “immigrant” changes, then people are not positioned as “immigrants” any more...or?

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