

Pierre Schori:

*The Slum gets its revenge- Carl Sandburg and the American Dream*

Preface

On a beautiful August day in 1959, Swedish Prime Minister Tage Erlander invited an American poet to his residence. It was the Swedish descendant Carl Sandburg, proposed for the Nobel Prize in Literature by, among others, Ernest Hemingway and Harry Martinson. Five years later, a future Nobel laureate in literature knocked on the poet's door. The young man began cockily: »You are Carl Sandburg. I'm Bob Dylan. I'm also a poet.« Dylan was then 26 and Sandburg 84.

The story of Carl Sandburg is the story of an America in dynamic change, at the same time hard and hopeful, rejecting and inviting, nightmare and dream. It is also an American odyssey about a young immigrant boy's break from family and poverty, driven by a longing for freedom and unyielding faith in the future, gifted with a rare combination of keen observation, sharp and poetic pen, marked by solidarity and social justice, class struggle and love. All this is contained in his ground-breaking epic of popular liberation: *The People, Yes*.

Growing up in the small town of Galesburg, close to the noise of Chicago's explosive development, gave him early material for writing. He began his life's journey as a vagabond and recorder of the living conditions of his fellow men in anecdotes and articles, poems and songs. Barely twenty years old, he signed up as a volunteer soldier to free Cuba from the Spanish occupation. Then he became a student, traveling salesman, journalist, lecturer and poet.

Carl called himself a seeker and a stranger, a singer and a vagabond. He never gave up his affinity and solidarity with the emigrant and the vagabond, with society's unfortunate children, "who die without ever having lived". He kept the perspective from below and distrusted power. He was »a radical« all his life. Carl became the first full-time ombudsman in the growing social democratic labor movement. He met the love of his life and comrade, the intellectual socialist Lilian Steichen, in the party office. With his dedicated work, he contributed to what would become the golden age of American social democracy.

Ten years later, when President Wilson declared war on Germany in April 1917, Carl left the pacifist party. The following year, he spent a couple of months in Sweden as a war correspondent with the task of covering the Finnish rebellion after the Bolsheviks' victory in Russia.

Carl became soul mates with Joe Hill and Jack London, and he fought a leading figure in the isolationist America First movement, another Swedish descendant, aviator Charles Lindbergh. He was invited by President Roosevelt to become a member of Congress, took issue with President Eisenhower on "Swedish socialism and sin", supported John F Kennedy and the black civil rights movement, and committed himself against Cold War confrontational politics and nuclear threats.

Sandburg is also among the American poets who were often quoted by Olof Palme, as well as much later by Barack Obama in his autobiography *A Promised Land*. Carl Sandburg's work gives us a unique insight into a country that is searching for its soul and exploring its dream in a revolutionary time. He knew his country by heart, as Rebecca West wrote in the preface to her selection of his poems.

Practically everything that Sandburg did, observed and documented also has a bearing on today's American – and Swedish – politics.

My own American dream began early in colorful comic books and science fiction and film magazines imported by a globalized tobacconist near my parents' small hotel on Norra Vallgatan in Malmö. Over

time, the comic books and magazines had to give way to the books. As a high school student, I worked as a substitute at Christmas time for a couple of years in the well-stocked Lundgren's bookstore on Södergatan and was then able to secretly read John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway. Steinbeck's *East of Eden* mixed a poignant family drama with tantalizing descriptions of wild strawberries and women's skin, while Hemingway conjured up hard-boiled images in short-cut texts about bullfighters and gangsters, shark fishing and safaris, anti-fascist struggles and men without women.

Later came other idols: James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*, J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Nelson Algren's dark Chicago pictures, Harlem resident poet Langston Hughes, beatniks Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg in cool California. The three poetic wild minds, like Bob Dylan, drew inspiration from Walt Whitman and Sandburg.

Who can ever forget them after reading poems like Ginsberg's »America«?

"America I have given you all and now I'm nothing.

America two dollars and twentyseven cents on January 17, 1956.

(...)

America when will we end the human war?

Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.

(...)

America it's them bad Russians,

Them Russians and them Russians and them Chinamen. And them Russians.

The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power mad.

She wants to take our cars from our garages.

Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red Reader's Digest."

(...)

My favorite eventually became Carl Sandburg and his *The People, Yes*, with its at once concentrated and kaleidoscopic language, poetic shimmer and popular harshness. Sandburg, like his role model Whitman, broke new ground by mixing the melodies of bars and ballads. The acquisition of the book, at 26 kroner and 10 öre in 1958, became for me an important building block in a nascent worldview.

Also in two other collections, *Poems of the Midwest* and *Chicago Poems*, Sandburg presented his radical legal pathos and political commitment. He saw "the gangster kill and go free to kill again", he saw the hunger in the eyes of the children and in worn-out men and women from the working class. But he also saw a possible other America. When Steinbeck lets his protagonist in *East of Eden* condemn the 19th century - "To hell with the rotten century" - Sandburg wrote in "Prairie":

"I speak of new cities and new people. I tell you, the past is a bucket of ashes".