

Report: STINT Teaching Sabbatical at Amherst College, MA

Dr. Andreas Önnarfors, University of Gothenburg (UGOT)

Fall 2018

(1) Preparation and planning

In early 2018 it was announced that I would stay a term at Amherst College (AC), MA. Following that decision, I entered in direct communication with AC through email-conversations and skype-calls. My main concern was to get an understanding of which tasks and responsibilities were most important over the next few months as well as to plan for my forthcoming contact trip. I was placed at the History Department of AC and was informed immediately of which course to prepare as well as of important deadlines for course proposal, description and guide (see 2 below). I also received some previous examples from course guides and started to develop my course. My contact trip to Amherst took for personal reasons admittedly place somewhat late (22-30 April) and was excellently coordinated from the side of AC. I was introduced to the college and department and made familiar with the future learning environment. It was great to get ID and access to all administrative systems so early, which facilitated the contact and working relationship immensely. When I arrived in Amherst in August, everything was in place and I got immediately access to office and services.

A substantial amount of time was devoted to find an adequate and reasonably priced place to stay at during the fall. My and my partners decision was based on climate-smart and proximity-arguments. Trying to avoid commuting by car (which almost is impossible), we wanted to live close to campus. Finally, we managed to find an ideal property, which also was the starting point for choosing a school for my two daughters who stayed with us. Registration for school in Amherst implied substantial paperwork, but could fortunately be done online. Also, during the contact trip, we lived close to campus, which was a great advantage for exploring both college and community. Public transport is definitely an issue and could be solved through *Amtrak* (NY Penn Station to Northampton, MA; *PeterPan* bus to Boston, MA) and *Uber* during the contact trip and mostly car-sharing (*zipcar*, a company I wholeheartedly can recommend, however registration with a foreign license takes longer time) during my stay in autumn. In retrospect we should have looked into the option of leasing or long-term renting a car, even if we didn't want to. But many day-to-day tasks proved to be extremely difficult to carry out without direct access to a car.

Preparing the move to the US proved to be both more time-consuming and bureaucratic than anticipated in the 21st century. Whereas AC offered all necessary assistance, getting the passport in Sweden (because of new rules) and visa-related contacts with the US consular service in Stockholm was a challenging experience to say the least. Also, it is of utmost importance that vaccination for children in school-age is cleared well in advance. It turned out, Massachusetts required different vaccinations than in Sweden, which we managed to solve last minute through the effectiveness of the Swedish public-school health system. UGOT was also somewhat slow to produce the necessary insurance for the family and me from Kammarkollegiet, a process I should have initiated far earlier.

(2) Tasks and Responsibilities

My main task and responsibility were to develop and to deliver the course HIST327 (cross-listed in European Studies as EUST327) “The European New Right” during the autumn term of 2018. Both the syllabus as well as most of the lectures are available online on <https://gu-se.academia.edu/AndreasÖnnerfors/Teaching-Documents>. For me, it was a completely new course to develop, so during spring 2018 and into summer, I devoted a substantial amount of time to plan for and to prepare course content, meaningful examination and reading tasks. In this, I was actively assisted from the side of AC, whenever I needed. Informal contacts made during my trip in April were very helpful. During spring and summer, the task was most to meet deadlines from AC concerning course-related documents and setting up the course in AC’s Learning Management System (LMS) “Moodle”. Apart from teaching the course (see 3 below), I participated in the excellent introduction-days before the start of the semester. This was a great opportunity not only to get to know AC better, but also to make contacts to other new temporary staff as well as to understand policies and attitudes towards students, grading, and learning. The History Department organized a BBQ just at the start of the semester, which was a great occasion to get to know colleagues at the department better.

AC has a Centre for Humanistic Inquiry (CHI), which is a hub for cultural, intellectual and social activities almost on a weekly basis directed towards faculty and staff (and their families) and which we frequently attended. I also arranged a public event related to my course at CHI, a panel discussion on “The Global Rise of Illiberalism and Nativism” on 27 November 2018 (the report is published online: <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2019/01/16/conference-report-the-global-rise-of-nativism-and-illiberalism-a-conversation-on-the-contemporary-political-pathology/>). The event was made possible through an application to the Lecture Funds of AC through which I received funds to invite two guest speakers, Tamir Bar-On and Chip Berlet, to lecture on my course. Application to these funds was not particularly complicated and I was assisted in arranging practical things (travel, living etc) through the help of the Academic Department Coordinator. I participated in the first AC faculty meeting and convocation ceremony at the beginning of the semester and in a Christmas reception hosted by the President of AC, Biddy Martin. Both events were very inviting. Theoretically, I could have participated in all faculty meetings during my stay. Temporary staff received also a fund to organize luncheons and other social activities; however, since I only stayed for a semester, I didn’t participate in these, time was moving very quickly. One should not forget that AC is part of the Five-College collaboration together with other HEI’s in the immediate surrounding. Through these links, I made contact with a team of Scandinavian Studies people from UMass who invited me to submit a chapter for a forthcoming volume and which I wrote during my time in Amherst. I participated also once in a Five College International Relations seminar as well as a few other seminars and lectures at AC and liaised with colleagues working in similar research areas.

During my stay I was also invited to present a guest lecture at Clark University in Worcester, MA (29 November, “Freemasonry and Early Modern Sociability”). I also profited hugely from the possibility of using access to the Hathi Trust digital collections through AC as well as to rare material available through interlibrary loan. During my time at AC, I was interviewed by *Al Jazeera* (3 September 2018, on the Chemnitz riots) and wrote a series of blog posts for the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) in the UK:

- “Conference Report – The Global Rise of Nativism and Illiberalism: A Conversation on the Contemporary Political Pathology”, CARR post 7, 16 January 2019,

<http://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2019/01/16/conference-report-the-global-rise-of-nativism-and-illiberalism-a-conversation-on-the-contemporary-political-pathology/>

- “Does ‘Retrotopia’ Explain the Rise of the Radical Right?”, CARR post 6, 4 January 2019, <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2019/01/04/does-retrotopia-explain-the-rise-of-the-radical-right/>
- “Holocaust survivors in Sweden- the ‘straw men’ for the radical right” (part 2), CARR post 5, 11 October 2018, <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2018/10/11/holocaust-survivors-in-sweden-the-straw-men-for-the-radical-right-part-1-2/>
- “Holocaust survivors in Sweden- the ‘straw men’ for the radical right” (part 1), CARR post 4, 10 October 10 2018, <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2018/10/10/holocaust-survivors-in-sweden-the-straw-men-for-the-radical-right-part-1/>
- “Pride Against Prejudice: Swedish Superhero Episode Strikes Against the Radical Right”, CARR post 3, 4 September 2018, <http://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2018/09/04/pride-against-prejudice-swedish-superhero-episode-strikes-against-the-radical-right/>

(3) Activities during the Semester

My main activity during the semester was to deliver two lectures weekly (Mondays and Wednesdays, in total 26 lectures), to upload course-related content to the LMS, to communicate with students during contact hours (2 hours, twice weekly) and over email and to provide with feedback to the student’s six shorter assignments and two more substantial examinations (mid-term and final, oral and written).

(4) Comparison and Reflection concerning Teaching Responsibilities

Teaching at a Liberal Arts College like AC provides with rare insights into the fabric of the US higher education system and its pros and cons. First of all, I was extremely delighted that AC relied upon my competence to develop and deliver a course without the enormous amount of bureaucracy and time that is involved in Sweden. It allowed me to make clear connections between ongoing research interests and teaching, something Swedish HEI:s could profit from without compromising quality or a student-focussed approach. Currently, Swedish administration for developing and delivering courses neither serves the purpose of strengthening ties between research and teaching nor the student’s interests of taking courses that reflect ongoing research or as in my case are focussed on developments with immediate importance for a deeper understanding of contemporary issues. This puts Swedish HEI:s in a clear disadvantage.

Teaching at AC allowed to focus on a comparatively small class of five students. Whereas the numbers of people pre-registered, showing up during the two-week ‘shopping period’ at the start of the term and eventually being present throughout the course shifted, a small class enabled a closer focus on the interests and needs of the students. In general, my impression was that the students were as motivated as in Sweden. It was also very interesting to encounter students who were studying in a truly liberal arts system of an open curriculum, which implies that they can choose from courses in different disciplines up to the moment they choose their major. I found it very rewarding that the students had different disciplinary backgrounds or ambitions and to make a contribution towards their learning even if the Humanities not were their main area.

Having previously taught courses with ECTS and now with the American grading scale reminded me again of their clear advantage when compared to the very rough categories of Swedish High Pass, Pass and Fail. The American grading scale is a pedagogical tool that is clearly superior to the Swedish. Swedish grading is predominantly concerned with the border between fail and pass, whereas ECTS or the American grading scale is much more concerned with quality in the Pass and High Pass degrees and clarity of grading criteria. To my mind, both for students and academic teachers, it is here the real issue lies, to make progression and expectations more visible through diversified grading.

A fake discussion in Swedish higher education right now concerns so-called 'professionalism'. A number of university teachers pretend that professionalism and academic freedom is endangered by putting student's interest at the core of delivery of higher education. To my mind, this is utter nonsense. These university teachers want to use so-called 'professionalism' as a code word for arbitrariness, unaccountability and to undermine legal security in higher education. Encountering liberal arts education in the US taught me that professionalism and competence and the focus on students as well as clear legal frameworks are not placed in such an unproductive opposition, but rather reinforce each other. During the introduction days at AC, it was clearly stressed that there were many red tapes in relationship to the students in terms of e.g. diversity and inclusiveness, pedagogic excellence and teaching delivery. But within these red tapes, the autonomy of the university teachers is almost infinite for the benefit of both parts.

(5) Important Lessons

The stay at AC has hugely improved my skills in delivering a specialised course over a long time period. As compared to Sweden, where co-teaching and shorter time frames are rather the rule than the exception, I had to 'keep the ball rolling' and make sure that my planned course structure continuously offered new perspectives. This places quite huge responsibility upon the lecturer and allows not particularly much leeway. The number of students was lower than anticipated and could have provided the opportunity to re-arrange the course structure with a less traditional approach (I prepared lectures based on course readings followed by Q&A and discussion). Another thing I learned too late was that I could have applied for funds to employ student research assistants for research-related work.

(6) Action Plan

Upon my return to Sweden, I presented the experiences of my stay to a department lunch meeting (16 January 2019). When it comes to course development, what I directly took away from AC is how academic writing and particularly collaborative writing is encouraged. I will immediately turn this experience into re-designing an examination task that has negatively affected students in my subject in the past. Upon my return, I have also been appointed to contribute to course development of English-language master programs at the Faculty of Medicine. Here I also will be able to make significant contributions in creating stimulating learning environments. Since the task also implies to develop university-wide initiatives in the area of sustainability, my hope is that my experiences of internationalization will contribute positively to the process. My stay at AC has confirmed my conviction of that increased international experiences are beneficial to research as much as to higher education and that Sweden risks lagging behind if Swedish HEIs fail to address the potential of

internationalization properly. What is off the limit to influence in Sweden is the beneficial effect of on-campus accommodation for students together with an elaborate dining complex (called 'Val' at AC) which offered an excellent range of food and drinks for an extremely fair amount of money. This side of student life was well organized and welcoming. 'Val' turned into a natural meeting place more than any other university restaurant or cantina I have experienced previously.

(7) Summary and Conclusion

All in all, my stay at AC was a wonderful opportunity to expand my competence in international teaching delivery. AC was an excellent and generous host, a stimulating and vibrant intellectual hub thrown into the charms of Western Massachusetts as a strong reminder of its cultural legacy. However, intellectual independence comes at a price (such as exceedingly high tuition fees). It is absolutely clear that under political circumstances as in the US right now, intellectual freedom cannot be taken for granted and that the liberty of a liberal arts college is relative to its economic independence. AC is fortunate in this regard and has the capacity to invest into socially diverse student and staff recruitment or adapting its operations to the challenge of climate change. Still, the prestige attached to representing a well-endowed and highly-ranked HEI also creates a number of un-outspoken invisible walls that impact the fabric of academic culture. As a Swedish STINT-Fellow I was placed in a highly interesting state of participant observation, which is difficult to prepare for, but important to be aware of.