

**BENGT OLLE BENGTTSSON & GUNNAR BROBERG (red.),**  
*Bortom det acceptablas gränser. Bengt Lidforss och*  
*lundaradikalismen*

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Following the end of the Second World War, aeronautical engineer John Maynard Smith was pondering his next career move. He knew what kind of life he wanted to live: that of a socialist and a puzzle-solver. But, science or politics, which would it be? As Oren Harman described it in the *Price of Altruism* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2010): “one’s heart may be in two places, perhaps, but the brain is more demanding” (p. 154). Luckily for the field of evolutionary biology, he chose science. However, just like his hero and mentor J. B. S. Haldane, he remained a committed man of the left for all his life. On the other side of the Atlantic, other Darwinian heavy weights, such as Richard Lewontin and Stephen Jay Gould, were comrades in the same cause and came to live similar lives as biologists and public intellectuals. Their science never divorced them from wanting to reform the society in which they lived.

The botanist Bengt Lidforss (1868–1913) is not well known outside his native Sweden. This is a great shame as his life and work put him squarely in the company above. The parallels are perhaps most striking when compared to Haldane. In addition to being accomplished biologists, they were both excellent popularizers of the new science of evolution, had longstanding relationships with a left wing paper—Haldane as the chairman of the editorial board of the communist newspaper the *Daily Worker* and Lidforss as a long term contributor to *Arbetaren* (*The Worker*)—and had a life style that upset the conservative universities at which they taught.

Lidforss’ combination of a botanist of international stature with a prominent left wing public intellectual (he was the first university lecturer to join the social democratic movement) has meant that his life has been the subject of numerous

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books. In particular, Nils Beyer's comprehensive 1968 biography remains a go-to piece, but multiple publications dealing with various aspects of his life have followed. Most recently, geneticist Bengt Olle Bengtsson and historian of science and ideas Gunnar Broberg have edited a fascinating volume (in Swedish) touching on the many controversies that defined his career (the book is aptly titled *Beyond the limits of acceptability: Bengt Lidforss and the Lund Radicalism*) to commemorate the 2013 centennial of his death. Moreover, the book also paints a fascinating picture of Swedish academic and cultural life more broadly in the early days of the twentieth century and the growing tensions between left wing radicalism and the prevailing conservatism in Swedish society.

For the twelve chapters of the book, the editors have brought together a diverse group of authors, ranging from art and literary historians to biologists, reflecting the multifaceted life of Lidforss. I cannot do justice to all contributions, but will instead focus on some topics that emerged where I think further research would be worthwhile.

A lasting legacy of Lidforss' work is his texts popularizing Darwinian evolution, many of which are still worth reading. However, if he was quick to pick up on evolution, he remained deeply sceptical of Mendelian genetics, the second major innovation in biology of his time. While some of his own data from work on blackberry crosses were in line with Mendelian predictions, he was never won over to the new ideas. For example, he never joined the Mendelian Society of Lund, formed in 1910, and the world's oldest learned society dedicated to the study of inheritance. He also struggled with the idea that there may be fixed determined differences between individuals, and how political reformers should handle such information. This very question of whether a fixed idea of human nature may be helpful or not for political radicals was later echoed in the disagreement between Stephen Jay Gould and Noam Chomsky in the 1970s over the value of sociobiology.

Lidforss' lifestyle often got him in trouble with the establishment. A case in point is that he once missed out on a Professorship at Uppsala University after the Archbishop intervened in the hiring process due to Lidforss' radical views and way of living (he was known to be bisexual). Reading about this and other incidents also provides an opportunity to reflect upon the limits of acceptability in academia today. While Lidforss' views on social issues are now probably closer to the mainstream of students and university faculty than are those of his opponents, the debate over what views are acceptable at university platforms continues to this day. For example, the last few years have seen several US universities withdraw invitations to commencement speakers following student protests. Another issue that makes you reflect on how the limits of acceptability have changed over time is Lidforss' critique of Christianity. A common argument among critics of the so-called New Atheists of today, which include biologists such as Richard Dawkins and Jerry Coyne, is that they are ruder than their predecessors. Reading about Lidforss' arguments with bishops and other Christian apologists makes you wonder if this was really the case, or if the Swedish debate climate a century ago was simply tougher than that of other countries. In general, these are two issues where historical and cross-cultural comparisons would be very interesting.

Overall, this volume is an important contribution, not only to the understanding Lidfors's life, but also to the study of the biologist as a public intellectual in general. The book illustrates the breadth of Lidfors's contributions, to biology, to the public understanding of science and the broader cultural debate, and to the burgeoning Swedish labour movement. Ultimately, it prompts us to reflect upon the biologist's role in society at large and it shows why Lidfors's life is worthy of continued scholarship.