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Excerpt

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PART I

IMAGES

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Introduction

The Nordic Model and Its (Somewhat Surprising) Persistence

Why the Nordic countries should be a model for anything is not immediately obvious. The Nordic lands are cold, somewhat isolated, and – with the exception of filmmakers, mystery writers, and the occasional social activist – have produced only a few famous personalities in the past century or so. Almost no outsiders speak the local languages, and indeed, the Nordics don't always understand each other, as is demonstrated by the Swedes or Norwegians overheard speaking English in Copenhagen cafés. The most talented Nordics frequently leave the region for extended periods; some never come back.

Yet, the Nordic lifestyle retains a fascination beyond that of any comparable region. Books and articles, nearly all in English, tout the model's accomplishments and enumerate its challenges. An American presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders, said that the USA should look to “countries like Denmark, like Sweden and Norway” in designing social programs. A Finnish journalist went further, describing Nordic life as superior to the American version in every conceivable way. Lighter works, with titles like *The Almost Nearly Perfect People* and *My Year of Living Danishly*, fly off the bookshelves, while Nordic restaurants, cafés, and mystery novels attract an ever-widening audience.¹ Even people who hate the Nordics can't stop talking about them: then-candidate Donald Trump tweeted that Sweden had been overrun with immigrants and terrorists, ending his oration with an ironic flourish: “Sweden, who would believe this?”²

¹ See Anu Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016); Michael Booth, *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind the Myth of the Scandinavian Utopia* (London: Picador, 2015); Helen Russell, *The Year of Living Danishly: Uncovering the Secrets of the World's Happiest Country* (London: Icon Books, 2015). The Sanders quotation may be found at www.cnn.com/2016/02/17/politics/bernie-sanders-2016-denmark-democratic-socialism/.

² Suzanne Moore, “Trump's Sweden tweets expose the essential problem with social media,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 20, 2017, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/20/trump-

Nor is fascination with Norden limited to popular culture. At its best, the Nordic Model offers an alternate vision of happiness, in which the pursuit of individual objectives is balanced with collective goals and the preservation of values – gender equity, the environment, reduction of social conflict – that may be overlooked in a purely individualist society. Of course, the specter of collectivism, and the distrust of those who act in its name, motivates the demonization of the Nordic Model no less than its idealization. To say that a society is progressive is not necessarily to say that it is good. But the challenge posed by the Nordic countries is a serious one, and cannot be dismissed as mere fad or a cultural affectation.

The concept of the Nordic Model is usually traced to the 1936 publication of *Sweden: The Middle Way* by Marquis Childs, a Midwestern journalist who later received a medal from the king of Sweden and wound up on President Nixon's enemies list.³ The idea was that Sweden (and later its neighbors) had found a compromise between American capitalism on the one hand and Soviet-style communism on the other. The model combined private ownership of all or most means of production with a universal and increasingly generous welfare state, which eventually provided health, education, welfare, and other benefits to all citizens regardless of wealth or income levels. The model was also associated with political stability and relative labor peace, no small feat in a Europe dominated by Hitler, Stalin, and (after 1945) by the ongoing Cold War. While the model varied between countries, its essential features were extended to Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and (eventually) Finland, and had significant influence on other countries, as well.

The Soviet Union broke up in 1991, and the welfare state has been on the defensive for much of the intervening period. Even within the Nordic region, there are serious questions about its survival. Why then does the Nordic Model remain so popular? Why do American and British politicians cite the Nordic countries as an example to follow, and why do academics and journalists continue to write books and articles about it, some paying it the ultimate

sweeden-tweets-problem-social-meida-abuse. Trump's tweet was inaccurate but arguably clairvoyant: a major terrorist attack hit downtown Stockholm approximately six weeks later. See Christina Anderson, "Sweden mourns Stockholm attack victims; suspect is formally identified," *New York Times*, Apr. 10, 2017.

³ Marquis Childs, *Sweden: The Middle Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936). The use of the Nordic countries, and especially Sweden, as a model of one kind or another is considered by various scholars. Two especially good examples are Jenny Anderson, "Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic Light: The Swedish Model as Utopia 1930–2007," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 34(3), Sept. 2009, pp. 229–45; Carl Marklund, "The Social Laboratory, The Middle Way, and the Swedish Model: Three Frames for the Image of Sweden," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 34(3), Sept. 2009, pp. 264–85.

compliment of satire? Why do even politicians who hate the Nordic Model still feel a compulsion to talk about it?

This book attempts to answer these questions. While the book has seven chapters, its essential thesis can be stated in a few paragraphs. The Nordic Model has survived because it has changed with the passage of time, morphing into something related to but distinct from its original form. Specifically, the model has evolved from an essentially economic system, emphasizing welfare state rights and privileges, to a primarily social and cultural one, emphasizing issues like women's rights, environmentalism, and a culture of innovation that have broad appeal in progressive circles, especially in English-speaking countries. This model presents itself not as an alternative to socialism but as a more humane version of capitalism, which appears to balance individual and social goals better than other existing societies. The innovative aspect of Nordic life is especially important, because it suggests a high degree of social consciousness without sacrificing individual creativity: a region, so to speak, where everyplace is Silicon Valley with no Trumps or Brexits between them. The improved status of women is also central to this image, appearing to offer gender equality without sacrificing sex, eroticism, or traditional family values.

Like all mental constructs, the Nordic Model has some basis in fact. But it has also been promoted aggressively by Nordic businesses and governments, so that the reality of Nordic life is often difficult to distinguish from its image.⁴ This promotion is facilitated by the geographic isolation of the Nordic countries, which leaves traditional brands like Lego or Volvo and more recent ones like Skype or Spotify a largely blank slate on which to create a healthy, positive image of Nordic life that attaches to the region as a whole. More recent exports, like New Nordic cuisine and Nordic Noir literature, have piggy-backed upon this preexisting impression. Nordic governments are active participants in this process, promoting these and other products but also exporting concepts like human rights, feminism, and peaceful dispute resolution that – although no doubt genuine in nature – contribute further to their countries' progressive image.⁵ So sophisticated and ongoing are these efforts

⁴ For an especially systematic effort to “brand” the region, undertaken by a regional cooperation body, see Nordic Council of Ministers, “The Nordic Perspective: Strategy for International Branding of the Nordic Region, 2015–18” (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015), <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:783406/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

⁵ The Swedish-language website of the country's foreign ministry (Utrikesdepartementet) lists five major areas of government concern, three of which (democracy/human rights, international law, and development assistance) are essentially idealistic in nature and only two of which address traditional foreign policy concerns. www.regeringen.se/sveriges-regering/utrikesdepartementet/. The websites of other Nordic countries are only slightly less human rights-oriented.

that it has become common to speak of a “Nordic Brand” or “Nordic Branding” at the governmental as well as the business level.

In recent years the Nordic Model has been severely challenged, as immigration, multiculturalism, and even domestic terrorism have tested the region’s reputation for tolerance and social harmony. These tensions suggest a darker side of Nordic life – the basis for President Trump’s Twitter assault – which to some degree offsets the region’s utopian claims. Within the region itself, they have led to numerous disagreements between the different Nordic countries, and led some observers to doubt the continued existence of a single Nordic Model altogether. Yet, these tensions, however marked they may appear close up, have as yet done relatively little to blunt the model’s overseas appeal. Part of this results from the marketing (“branding”) efforts already described, and the difference between perception and reality that they inevitably create. Part of it may be a sense that, if the Trumps of the world dislike something, it can’t be all that bad. But it may also reflect an underlying truth: that the Nordic countries, for all of their disagreements and failures, are at least attempting to confront the fundamental economic, social, and cultural challenges of modern life, and that they remain just a small step ahead of their contemporaries in doing so. Given the current level of frustration within English-speaking countries, especially in elite or so-called progressive political circles, that may well be enough.⁶

Although the Nordic countries are in some ways unique, they also raise universal issues. The conflict between global and regional perspectives, the challenge of immigration and multiculturalism, and the often uneasy balance between image and reality are recurring issues in the contemporary world. While on one level a regional study, the book is also a case study in the transplantation of social and cultural models, together with the inevitable limitations of the transplanting process: of the search for utopia and the frequent disappointment of that search. To use a much overused term, it is

⁶ For examples of the continuing academic interest in the Nordic Model, *see, for example*, Nikolai Brandal, Øivind Bratberg, and Dag Einar Thorsen, *The Nordic Model of Social Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jon Kvist, Johan Fritzell, Bjørn Hvinden, and Olli Kangas (eds.), *Changing Social Equality: The Nordic Model in the 21st Century* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012); Andrew Scott, *Northern Lights: The Positive Policy Example of Sweden, Finland Denmark and Norway* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2014). For popular works on the subject, *see* sources cited in note 1. A good, highly readable summary of the region’s recent history is Mary Hilson, *The Nordic Model: Scandinavia since 1945* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008). A useful, somewhere between popular and academic in nature example is Andras Simonyi (project manager) and Debra L. Cagan (ed.), *Nordic Ways* (Baltimore: Center for Transatlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University, 2016).

a study in globalization and its limitations. It is a frustrating, even a contradictory, subject, but it is rarely a dull one.

THE NORDIC MODEL: WHY IS IT SO PERSISTENT?

Before heading back into history, it may be useful to ask: What precisely do foreigners, especially English-speaking foreigners, admire in the Nordic countries? In what particular way do they regard the region as a model for their home countries? The answer to this question has changed with time, and it varies markedly among different observers. Still, some common themes emerge.

The following is a list of positive characteristics that one or more authors have ascribed to one or more Nordic countries within the past two decades.⁷ Some of these authors actually come from the Nordic region, while others have paid visits of varying intensity and duration. I claim neither consistency nor completeness here, and indeed some of these factors have been identified partly to cast doubt or otherwise to poke fun at them. Nonetheless, they remain a good place to start:

Happiness – The starting point for foreign observers is the Nordic countries' consistently high rankings in international surveys of satisfaction, happiness, or similar values. In recent years Denmark has tended to score at or near the top of these surveys, with Sweden, Norway, and Finland very close behind. For example, the World Happiness Survey for 2016 ranked Denmark number one; Iceland, Finland, and Norway numbers three, four, and five, respectively; and Sweden number ten. (Switzerland, which is not a Nordic country, although it is sometimes confused with one, held the number two spot.)⁸ The Nordic countries also score well on more specific "quality of life" indices, especially those regarding education, environmental policy, and so forth. Finland seems to do especially well in the education field, especially for math and science subjects. There is admittedly something odd about these surveys, in that they often rely on people's description of their own mental state, suggesting that the Nordics may be conformists, communitarians, or simply afraid of criticism rather than truly happy.⁹ The surveys likewise reflect

⁷ I include the traditional Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) in this definition together with Finland and Iceland. The Nordic label was in part created to include the latter (*see* later discussion).

⁸ The report is available at https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2016/HR-V1_web.pdf.

⁹ An oft-cited if fictional source for Nordic conformity is the so-called Law of Jante, derived from an otherwise little-known novel by the Danish author Aksel Sandemose, which includes a sort of Nordic Ten Commandments ranging from "You shall not believe that you are someone" and "You shall not believe that you are any wiser than we are" to "You shall not believe that

subjective judgment of the factors – environment or education rather than, say, good food, warm weather, or high levels of religious devotion – that constitute a higher quality of life. But the surveys are highly publicized, often by the Nordics themselves, and they inevitably attract attention.

Social justice – One reason the Nordics score well on happiness surveys is that they have historically had a relatively equal distribution of income, wealth, and opportunity, although there is some evidence that this has receded in recent years.¹⁰ This, in turn, is variously attributed to a comprehensive welfare state, an egalitarian tradition supposedly dating to the Vikings, and even the cold weather, which is said to encourage a more collective, self-sacrificing approach to life.¹¹ This high degree of equality is especially attractive, as it appears to coexist with a high degree of individual initiative and creativity, at least in certain selected fields (see earlier). The increasing concentration of wealth in other societies makes this aspect of Nordic life especially attractive.

Women's equality – A substantial component of their egalitarian image is the Nordic countries' reputation for gender equity. This reputation is supported by statistical evidence, such as the relatively high number of women in government and the professions, and also by anecdotal stories, like the men observed pushing baby carriages around parks and playgrounds. (There is also some evidence in the opposite direction, including a low number of female CEOs and high levels of reported sexual violence, but we'll get to that later.) The reputation for gender equity is especially appealing, since it appears to come without sacrificing eroticism: indeed, the Nordic lands (especially Sweden) have a long-standing reputation for sexual freedom, albeit a difficult one to confirm without actually living there.¹² The counterattack against women's rights in other nations, especially the USA, likewise increases this appeal.

anyone cares about you" to "You shall not believe that you can teach us anything." For a good discussion of the law and its origins, see Michael Booth, "The Law of Jante: How an irritable Danish left a mark on the national character," *Paris Review*, Feb. 11, 2015, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/02/11/the-law-of-jante/.

¹⁰ See sources cited in note 6.

¹¹ On the historical and ideological roots of the Nordic welfare states, see M. Hilson, note 6, pp. 91–9. A good history, albeit limited to Sweden and Norway, is Francis Sejersted, *The Age of Social Democracy: Norway and Sweden in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹² An interesting study is Carl Marklund, "Hot Love and Cold People: Sexual Liberalism as Political Escapism in Radical Sweden," *NORDEUROPAforum* 19(1), 2009, pp. 83–101.

Environmentalism and sustainable living – Together with equality, the Nordic countries present an image of healthy, outdoor living that is good for the heart, soul, and environment. In part, this is a question of public policy: Nordic governments have historically been leaders in carbon taxes, alternative fuels, and various other efforts to reduce pollution and develop sustainable energy.¹³ In part, it is a question of lifestyle: pictures of cross-country skiing, city dwellers cycling to work, and so on contribute to an outdoorsy image and refute the suspicion that people in an egalitarian, communal society will tend to become soft, wimpy, or (in the case of men) unmanly with the passage of time. There are contradictions here too, like Norwegian oil exports or the school strike led by the Swede Greta Thunberg, but even these sometimes attract attention to Nordic environmental consciousness rather than contradicting it.

Innovation, creativity, and cultural sophistication – Although there is conflicting evidence, the Nordic countries – especially Sweden and Finland – tend to score well in studies of innovation and high technology, especially when measured on a per capita basis. A spirit of innovation is present both in advanced sectors like communications and more traditional areas like furniture or automobiles, where a combination of simplicity and practicality is so closely associated with the region that it is known as Nordic Design. More recently, Nordic cuisine, Nordic literature, and even Nordic-themed coffee bars have provided additional evidence of a creative, independent spirit. Indeed, these products are frequently the first contact that many outsiders have with the region, and they inevitably influence their perception of Nordic life as a whole.¹⁴

It should be noted here that the term “Nordic” was created partly so as to include Finland and Iceland – Nordic but not Scandinavian, geographically speaking – but also, one suspects, because of its more avant-garde cultural associations. Thus, while one speaks of Scandinavian immigrants or airlines, one never hears of Scandinavian fiction or a Scandinavian coffee bar, but always the Nordic characterization. The term itself is thus part of the region’s marketing efforts. We will have occasion to discuss this issue further in Chapter 6.

¹³ See, for example, “Nordic Environmental Action Plan: 2013–2018,” <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:701437/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

¹⁴ For an arguably overoptimistic analysis of Nordic success in business, by an American Quaker, see George Lakey, *Viking Economics* (Brooklyn, NY and London: Melville House, 2016).

Tolerance and social harmony – The Nordic countries have not fought each other for a few hundred years and anyone else for almost seventy-five (and the last time that they did, in the 1940s, cannot reasonably be described as their fault). Together with this reputation for pacifism, they present an image of internal stability and harmony, although this has suffered somewhat as a result of tensions over immigration, especially in Sweden. Like environmentalism and women’s rights, the Nordic countries use their foreign policy to export pacifism and peaceful resolution of disputes at the UN and other international fora, albeit with only mixed success.¹⁵ As in other areas, it is possible to point out contradictions in this image, like Swedish arms exports or the growth or right-wing, quasi-racist political parties in several Nordic countries, but (at least until recently) these were not well reported outside the region, and had only a limited effect on perceptions.¹⁶

Love – In her book, *The Nordic Theory of Everything*, Anu Partanen argues that the Nordic lands have perfected the concept of love.¹⁷ This results, she argues, from the reduced financial and health worries of Nordic residents, who are thereby free to choose a partner on the basis of deeper, more romantic criteria. A cynic might argue that the low marriage and high divorce rates in several Nordic countries disprove this theory, or that Partanen’s view of love is somewhat adolescent in nature, ignoring factors like consistency, dependability, and so on that account for successful relationships no less than romantic attraction. (Recent TV shows, notably the Swedish series *Bonusfamiljen*, which emphasizes the uneasy relationship between two recently fractured families, might be cited in support of this latter view.) But the argument retains a certain intuitive appeal.

This list is hardly exhaustive, and its categories are not especially well-defined. For example, social justice and women’s equality could easily be combined in one category, and happiness and love are closely related, as well. Notwithstanding these admitted limitations, two things about the list stand out.

First, most of the listed items – all except the first two, I would say – are primarily social or cultural rather than economic in nature. Of course, this is

¹⁵ On the foreign policy of the Nordic countries, see Christine Ingebritsen, “Norm Entrepreneurs: Scandinavia’s Role in World Politics,” in C. Ingebritsen, I. Neumann, S. Gstöhl, and J. Beyer (eds.), *Small States in International Relations* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

¹⁶ See Allison Jackson, “Peace-loving Sweden and Switzerland are among top arms exporters per capita in the world,” *GlobalPost*, May 23, 2014, www.pri.org/stories/2014-05-23/peace-loving-sweden-and-switzerland-are-among-top-arms-exporters-capita-world.

¹⁷ A. Partanen, note 1, pp. 47–62.

an arbitrary line, and ignores the correlation between economics and culture. Perhaps women's rights would not be so prominent without the welfare state, innovation depends upon a good public school system, and society would be less harmonious if there was a less equal distribution of income. Still, when we speak of the Nordic Model, we are speaking increasingly about a way of life rather than a mere political theory.

Second – if we may be permitted a dash of skepticism – the list has a bit of a “too good to be true” flavor, including some items that appear exaggerated or even contradictory in nature. For example, growth and environment inevitably conflict with one another, as do social harmony and a tolerant, multicultural society. And there is something a bit off-putting about one of the world's wealthiest regions – Norway has a per capita income of approximately \$70,000 – lecturing other countries about social justice.

These contradictions are frustrating, and may in the long run prove more than the model can handle. Yet, they may also, paradoxically, account for its continuing appeal. Much as the more traditional model offered a middle way between capitalism and socialism, the new Nordic Model arguably offers a better answer to the contradictions of twenty-first century life – growth versus environment, men versus women, innovation versus conformity – than the available alternatives. In particular, the model offers, or appears to offer, a humane, balanced approach to these contradictions rather than allowing one side of each equation (growth over environment, men over women, conformity over innovation) to overwhelm the other. To put the argument in slightly different terms, the Nordic Model has always been about balance.¹⁸ In the early and middle twentieth century, the most important challenges were economic and political in nature. Today, they are social, cultural, and often spiritual in character. The model, or at the very least the perception of it, has evolved with these changes.

PUSH AND PULL: THE NORDIC MODEL AND THE ANGLO-SAXON COUNTRIES

For an external model to be attractive, there must be something missing in the country that imports it as well as something attractive in the country of origin: both a push and a pull, so to speak. Not surprisingly, the Nordic Model has

¹⁸ The preoccupation with balance is captured by the Swedish term *lagom*, variously translated as “moderate,” “sufficient,” or “just the right amount,” but most of all implies a balance of conflicting elements and the absence of dangerous extremes. For a (slightly humorous) take on the concept, see Lola Akinmade Åkerström, “Why are Swedes so quiet?” *Slate*, Sept. 20, 2013, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/roads/2013/09/sweden_s_lagom_the_single_word_that_sums_up_the_swedish_psychology.html.