

From Enemies to Friends

Political Culture and History in the Nordic Countries

Østergaard, Uffe

Document Version

Final published version

Publication date:

2015

License

CC BY-NC-ND

Citation for published version (APA):

Østergaard, U. (2015). *From Enemies to Friends: Political Culture and History in the Nordic Countries*. Paper presented at Regions of Peace and Conflicts, Kampala, Uganda.

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us (research.lib@cbs.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 17. May. 2022



1. From Enemies to Friends – Political Culture and History in the Nordic Countries¹

Uffe Østergård

The Nordic countries are normally seen as small, peaceful and egalitarian democracies, internationally oriented and strong supporters of law and order among the nations of the world. There is some truth to this conventional wisdom but it does not cover the whole picture. Or rather, there are some backdrops to the total reliance on the principle of national self-determination in sovereign states which have to be taken into account when evaluating the positive sides of the political culture in this northern part of Europe (cf. Østergård 1997b, 2003d and 2006b). The aim of the following paper is to analyze some of the particularities of these homogeneous nation-states in order to map the various national routes they have taken to their apparent success of today and the reasons for the different choices they have made vis-à-vis European cooperation. Furthermore, the nature and history of the cooperation among the Nordic states is analysed in some detail. Such an analysis may be of interest to students of Europe and European integration as the in many ways successful cooperation among the Nordic states in the 20th century builds on recognition of every nation's right to independence, regardless of its size.

Still today, according to many Scandinavians, the secret to economic and political success in this remote and sparsely populated part of Europe lies in keeping distance to all the neighboring powers, Germany and Russia in particular. There is some truth in this lesson from history if we look at the periods of great power confrontations, but the mentality also testifies to major naivety as to the real background of the amazing success story of the Nordic nation states in the twentieth century. It is often claimed that Nordic states share a collective mentality and political culture different from that of the rest of Europe. This claim ignores much of the history of warfare that the Nordic countries share with the rest of Europe, in particular their involvement in the bloody religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is true that Sweden withdrew from European power politics after the disastrous defeat in 1709 at Poltava in today's Ukraine and gradually replaced its imperial ambitions with those of a smaller nation-state. Yet, the state still harbored revanchist ambitions against the rising Russia which led to war in 1788-89. The resulting stalemate, however, eventually led to total defeat in 1809 and loss of half of the Swedish state to Russia. Under Russian patronage this province together with eastern Karelia was

¹ The article builds on and elaborates some of my previous publications in this area, in particular Østergård 1994b, 1997b, 2002a, 2004a, 2008a and 2013a.

reorganized as Finland. Denmark or rather the Oldenburg Monarchy on the other hand lost most of its wars, primarily to Sweden and later German states and as a result was reduced to the ultimate small state from the middle of the nineteenth century.

National sovereignty is the basis of the success for the Nordic states in the world of today. But sovereignty comes in many forms. Many observers – in particular in Denmark – long doubted the ability of the Icelanders to establish a successful state in an island with small a population.² Yet, Iceland was, at least until the financial crisis in 2008, a thriving and wealthy society with an interesting combination of traditional agriculture, fisheries, hypermodern industries and information technology.³ Iceland survived the economic crisis as a sovereign nation state, although it has debated its relation to the European Union. Much the same can be said of the Faroe Islands with little over 50.000 inhabitants who, although not independent, enjoy home rule within in the Danish Commonwealth. The economic crisis in Iceland after 2008 has provoked the majority of the Faroese to think twice before embarking on the final route to complete independence of Denmark (cf. Østergård 2005d and 2008b). Greenland which is also part of the Danish Commonwealth, although since 2009 enjoying a higher degree of independence called ‘self-rule’, has played with the idea of full independence but now seems to have second thoughts after encountering weakened international interest in exploiting its mineral and oil resources.

Norden’ as a Result of 1814

In early modern times, from 1523 to 1814, the Nordic or Scandinavian countries were divided between two multinational, conglomerate states or empires, ‘Sweden’ under the Vasa dynasty and ‘Denmark’ under the House of Oldenburg. These two states waged almost permanent war until 1814 as they had done in the Middle Ages. Judging from historical experience, the Nordic or Scandinavian countries are the most prone to war and internal conflict in all of Europe, even more than the Balkan states if evaluated on the number of years they have been at war with each other. And yet today they have turned peaceful, affluent and often are taken as role model for the world. A good example is the major work of the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who in a major analysis of the origins of

² In 1801, Iceland had just over 47.000 inhabitants, 307 of these living in the Reykjavik (Agnarsdóttor 2004, 80). Today the island has little over 300.000 inhabitants, almost half of these living in the greater Reykjavik area.

³ The Icelandic historian Gudmundur Halfdanarson, though, has called attention to an inherent contradiction in Icelandic nationalism and the country’s economic performance. According to the nationalist ideology Icelanders ought to live on farms raising cattle and sheep as they had done in the Middle Ages. Because of this ideology they tended to overlook that the real basis of the country’s economic success in the late nineteenth and twentieth century was fishing (Halfdanarson 2006). Whether this analysis can explain the predatory nature of so-called “Viking”-financial capitalism let loose in the 1990s and early 2000s yet remains to be seen.

democracy and rule of law has asked the intriguing question of “getting to Denmark?” (Fukuyama 2011 and 2014). How did this come about in a sparsely populated northern periphery of Europe blessed with an uninviting climate?

After defeat in the Napoleonic Wars, Denmark in 1814 was forced to cede Norway to victorious Sweden under the newly elected crown prince, Carl XIV Johan, formerly a French general known as Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte. Finland became a separate state entity in 1809, when Russia took away the Finnish half of Sweden and established an archduchy in personal union with the Russian empire, gaining independence in 1917 as a result of the Russian revolution. Sweden got Norway as a compensation for the loss of Finland in a shaky personal union which lasted until 1905, when the union was peacefully dissolved. Iceland broke away from Denmark in two phases, 1918 and 1944 respectively, while connections were suspended because of the world wars, effectively preventing Denmark from intervening. The Faeroe Islands gained their autonomous status in 1948, while Greenland got home rule in 1979 and left the EU after a referendum in 1983. The development towards independence so far culminated in 2009 with the introduction of so-called ‘self-rule’.⁴ The Sami in northern Norway and Sweden may follow suit as one or several autonomous units someday. The Aaland Islands were accorded status as a separate, non-militarized part of Finland in 1921 as compensation for not allowed to join Sweden; 1951 followed home rule, a status the Aaland Islands interpreted as to implying the right to a referendum on their entry into the European Union in 1994, separate from the one in Finland – and the upholding of tax free sales on the ferries to and from the islands although both Sweden and Finland are members of the EU. Denmark joined the EU in 1973, Sweden and Finland in 1995 whereas Norway twice has rejected membership after a referendum. On the other hand Norway and Iceland are members of the European Economic Area, EEA, and thus follow most of the legislation of the EU

⁴ Greenland ([Kalaallisut](#): *Kalaallit Nunaat* meaning “Land of the [Greenlanders](#)”; [Danish](#): *Grønland*) is an [autonomous country](#) within the [Kingdom of Denmark](#), located between the [Arctic](#) and [Atlantic Oceans](#), east of the [Canadian Arctic Archipelago](#). Though [physiographically](#) a part of the [continent](#) of [North America](#), Greenland has been politically associated with [Denmark and Norway](#) for a thousand years. Greenland has been inhabited, though not continuously, by [indigenous peoples](#) since 2500 BC. [Viking](#) migrants from Iceland lived in Greenland from AD 986 until sometime in the 15th century. In 1721 contact was re-established when Denmark established a colony in Nuuk (Godthåb). With the [Constitution of Denmark](#) of 1953 Greenland became a part of the Kingdom of Denmark known as *Rigsenheden* or [Rigsfællesskabet](#) (Commonwealth of the Realm). In 1979 Denmark granted [home rule](#) to Greenland. In 2008 Greenland and Denmark negotiated a transfer of power from the [Danish government](#) to the [Greenlandic](#) government, effective of 2009. According to this agreement the Danish government is in charge of foreign affairs, security (defence-police-justice) and financial policy, providing an annual subsidy of [DKK](#) 3.4 billion. The population amounts to 56,452 according to an estimate of January 2010.

apart from fisheries and agriculture. Similar differences characterize their choices in security politics where Norway, Denmark and Iceland are members of NATO while Finland and Sweden are not.

All together the Nordic countries are at the size of the largest German state (*Bundesland*) Nordrhein-Westfalen with around 26 million inhabitants. Seen in this context they are hugely overrepresented in international organisations such as the UN which is built on the principle of independent nation states. The Nordic countries also collaborate, primarily through the Nordic Council which is an interesting blend of cooperation among parliaments, civil society and states (Wendt 1981 and Tønneson 2002). Nordic cooperation is hugely popular among average people, although linguistically the Nordic peoples today seem to lose the ability to understand each other's languages. English is the preferred language of communication among the younger generations, also at university level. This tendency is deplored among traditional upholders of the so-called "Nordic unity", but nothing much is done about it since a common television channel never got off the ground in 1960s and 1970s when it might have made a difference. Because of this lack of understanding and the importance of the European Union in Northern Europe since Sweden and Finland joined in 1995, political and administrative elites do not invest much energy in Nordic cooperation, although they still pay lip service to "Nordic values" at festive occasions. This tendency seems most dominant in Denmark, but can be detected in different versions in all the countries. Nevertheless, Nordic unity and Nordic values still score highly in surveys and Scandinavians still seem to prefer each other's societies and values over those of the rest of Europe.

The year 1814 was a watershed in Nordic history. In the glare of hindsight, we can see that it was on the whole fortunate that Denmark and Norway separated in an almost bloodless manner without sparking conflict between the two peoples. Norway did not become wholly independent with the Treaty of Kiel on January 14, 1814. It eventually became so after the signing of the Constitution of Norway at Eidsvoll on May 17 of the same year but was forced into a personal union with Sweden that lasted almost ninety years (Glenthøj and Ottosen 2014). That the Norwegian struggle for political emancipation was directed at Sweden, while cultural emancipation from Denmark proceeded quietly throughout the 19th century was a blessing for all parties. If both of these emancipations, along with economic independence, had taken place within the confines of the multinational Oldenburg state under continued Danish rule, it is easy to imagine the legacy of bitterness the struggles would have left to the present day among Danes and Norwegians.

The outcome would probably have been the same, but stained by hatred between the peoples. There would have been a genuine basis for Norwegian anti-colonialist repudiation of all things Danish, otherwise propounded only by the anti-Danish writer Henrik Wergeland and the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen's dramatic poem *Peer Gynt* of 1867, in which the characterization of the history of the union as "four hundred years of darkness" was launched. The line "Twice two hundred years of darkness brooded o'er the race of monkeys" (where the monkeys represent the Norwegians) is said while Peer Gynt is in a madhouse in Cairo. Ibsen did not, as popularly believed, ascribe to this interpretation of the shared history of the countries. On the contrary, this was meant as a criticism of his countrymen and their mentality and probably a reckoning with his own earlier, more national-romanticist works. *Peer Gynt* embodied a mentality Ibsen believed to be typically Norwegian and the poem should be read as a satirical fantasy about a boastful egotist, the feckless and irresponsible Peer, a character of Norwegian folklore.

After the loss of Norway, the Nordic countries got used to their fate as small independent nation-states, especially after Norway and Sweden peacefully dissolved the union in 1905, Finland achieved independence in 1917, and Iceland became independent in 1918.⁵ It was by no means a given that things would turn out this way, but when they did, the foundations were laid for today's good relations between the countries and especially the peoples. So, in the long view, the outcome of 1814 was probably the best imaginable. But that was not easy to see at the time. From the Danish point of view, the break was so enormous that it was psychologically repressed. A half-century later, 1814 paled in the light of the total defeat to Austria and Prussia and the loss of Schleswig and Holstein in 1864 (Østergård 2014c). But the critical step on Denmark's journey to becoming a small nation was the loss of Norway in 1814. This is probably why the year has been forgotten or at any rate ignored in Denmark. The surrender was simply too painful. This began with king Frederik VI who considered the defeat and the loss of Norway so ignominious that he forbade any mention of it. And Danes by and large since have followed his lead to such a degree that Norway, until recently, was written out of Danish history (Østergård 2013a).

The descent of the Danish state, or more accurately the Oldenburg Monarchy, from a mid-sized European power to helpless small nation happened in 1814, although the fate of the nation was not

⁵ At the 25th Congress of Nordic Historians held in Stockholm in August 2004, a session was arranged on the "New Norden." The session, which included chapters on each of the five Nordic countries and a chapter on Scandinavianism and Nordic cooperation and one on pictures of the Nordic countries, has been published as *Det nya Norden efter Napoleon*, Max Engman and Åke Sandström (eds.), Stockholm: Almqvist & Wicksell 2004.

finally sealed until the total defeat in 1864. 1814 entailed not only the loss of one third of the nation's population and an even larger proportion of its territory, but also a change in the demographic composition from about one third Danish, one third Norwegian, and one third Holsteiners (and Schleswigers) to a situation with 40 % German speakers against 60 % Danish speakers, when they formerly had made up only about 25 % of the population of the entire realm. This led almost inevitably to national conflict and a civil war in 1848-51 which culminated in the Danish defeat by Prussia and Austria in 1864 (Østergård 2014b). It is difficult to determine today whether things necessarily had to go this way, but the conflict was lying in wait, especially since the Holstein elite had retreated to their estates in Holstein after the attempt to centralize the state following the incorporation of Schleswig-Holstein in the wake of the disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. The economic hardships of the war culminated in a national bankruptcy in 1813. The loss of agricultural exports to Norway and tax revenues from that country, so rich in natural resources, transformed the Oldenburg Monarchy into a small, poor country, albeit still a multinational one by virtue of Schleswig-Holstein and the islands in the Atlantic. The fateful year of 1814 dealt a nearly insurmountable blow to the Danish state that after total defeat in 1864 took a new and nationally and socially homogeneous shape. That new Denmark is embraced with great satisfaction today, just as the foundation was laid for good relationships among the modern Nordic states. But this occurred at the expense of a larger and more multinational state formation, which we now remember only vaguely and which was until recently either ignored or disparaged.

Denmark – or rather the Oldenburg Monarchy – suffered critical defeats between 1645 and 1660 at the hand of its hereditary enemy, Sweden, which had been ruled by kings of the House of Vasa since 1523, after Gustav Vasa severed the country's ties with the Danish-dominated Kalmar Union.⁶ But the state survived as a composite state comprised of four realms and a number of dependencies in the Atlantic, augmented by an overseas colonial empire that made it possible to engage in the profitable triangular trade of slaves and sugar cane, albeit at a far more modest level than Britain or France. In addition to the Kingdom of Denmark, made up of Northern Jutland, the Islands, and Norway, the state comprised the Duchies of Schleswig (South Jutland) and Holstein, which were gradually incorporated into the

⁶ Gustav Vasa (1496-1560) was the first king of independent Sweden after the break-up of the Danish dominated Union of Kalmar comprising all the Nordic countries which lasted from 1397 to 1523. He ruled a centrally organized state of Sweden (with Finland) and introduced the Lutheran reformation from above in 1527, almost at the same time as Lutheranism was introduced in Denmark after a bloody civil war in 1536. In Sweden, though, the reformation took much longer to settle in permanently, because Gustav Vasa's son Johan 3. (1537-1592) through marriage also came to rule catholic Poland. Because of this dynastic connection the reformation only took permanent root when after Johan's death in 1592 his son Sigismund opted for Poland and resigned the Swedish throne.

state after 1721. Ever since the dissolution of the medieval Kalmar Union (which resembled the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the same period (*Rzeczpospolita* in Polish, of Latin *res publica*) in 1523, Denmark and Sweden had been embroiled in savage competition for dominion over the Baltic – *Dominium Maris Baltici*. The struggle ended in victory for Denmark’s ally, the rising Russian Empire under Peter the Great, in 1721. But the two Nordic states remained multinational states – called ‘composite states’ by historians – until 1809, when Sweden was compelled to cede the Finnish part of the realm to the Russian tsar and 1814.

The existence of nationally homogeneous states in *Norden* was possible because the interests of the great powers of northern Europe held each other in check since the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1814. Apart from isolated threats against Denmark and Finland, the countries were never in real jeopardy in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Especially in the Cold War era of 1948 to 1989, peace reigned in *Norden* by virtue of the firmly established Iron Curtain that cut through the Baltic. At the time, we did not know how safe we were, but it became clear to many after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The peaceful and predictable nature of international politics explains why public enthusiasm for the Nordic alternative was at its peak between 1945 and 1989. During this period, Sweden could play the neutrality card, while Denmark, Norway, and Iceland could be on the winning NATO side without having to foot the bill. Finland is the Nordic exception: the country demonstrated its will to survive in 1939-1944 and thus escaped the cruel fate of Estonia – annexation by the Soviet Union. That is why the country wholeheartedly joined the European Union in 1995 and has embraced the Euro, in contrast to the more hesitant Sweden and Denmark.

Seen in the longer historical perspective, the Nordic countries are not as different from other European countries as the ideology of Scandinavianism and the Scandinavian model would lead us to believe – but they are Lutheran. Not due to the reformation in 1536, but at some point in the 1700s, the pious revivalist movements took hold of the populations in all the Nordic countries, a development that later continued with the political and economic movements and the twentieth century’s red-green alliances of farmers and the workers. This process is brilliantly described in the late Niels Kayser Nielsen’s major synthesis on Nordic democracy (Nielsen 2009). He describes the rationale for the Nordic welfare state as stemming less from a distinctly Nordic social structure than from the homogeneous Lutheranism of the countries. Other Lutheran communities are part of larger state formations (Germany and the United States) or have been conquered by other realms (Estonia and Latvia), but in the Nordic countries, the Lutherans dominate entire states. The link has not yet been systematically studied, but

from the perspective of the history of mentality, it seems plausible. If the hypothesis proves correct, the consequence would be that Nordic social democracy, regardless of that said by party platforms and generations of party members, is the result of secularized Lutheranism rather than democratized socialism (Østergård 2011d).

The relatively smooth course of democratization in the Nordic countries was paved by peace, as the countries were spared involvement in international conflicts after the middle of the nineteenth century. They were in the right place at the right time. To the extent they no longer are, it becomes difficult to live high on the Nordic myths and braggadocio of yesterday. There is much to indicate that the Baltic Region is on the verge of reclaiming its former place as an economic and civilizational axis in northern Europe, as I described in 1998 in a book on European identity (Østergård 1998). This means, however, that the region might attract outside attention with no guarantee that the major powers will constrain each other as they did during the Cold War. To the extent this occurs, it will be difficult to bridge the antagonism between the Atlantic *Norden* facing the oceans in one direction and the land-based *Norden* facing the Baltic Sea in the other. Not to mention the Arctic, where Denmark-Greenland – or the “Kingdom” as it is called when the Commonwealth of the Realm engages in international politics – in alliance with Iceland and the United States is pursuing a different policy than Norway, Russia, and Canada with regard to national control over the shipping routes that are opening in pace with global warming.⁷ This is the basis for future conflicts of interest that will make the conflict between Denmark and Norway over the right to East Greenland in the 1920s and 1930s look like small potatoes.⁸

Nordic Cooperation

The lesson of history is that there is no objective law that binds the Nordic peoples together. But the historical and cultural raw materials for building such an identity do exist – if the nation-states and their

⁷ The seventh meeting of the Arctic Ministerial Council was held May 12, 2011 in Greenland’s capital Nuuk to mark the end of the joint chairmanship of Denmark and Greenland over this organization. Foreign Ministers representing the eight Arctic States met to discuss future challenges in the Arctic. The Arctic Council was established in 1996 with the signing of the Ottawa Declaration. Its Member States are Canada, Denmark (representing Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States of America. Since then, the Council has gradually evolved from exclusively addressing environmental issues to currently serving as the preeminent forum where challenges and opportunities facing the eight Arctic States and their peoples are addressed. The problems of security in the Commonwealth of the Realm (the “Kingdom”) in the Arctic have been analyzed in a report from the Danish Center for Military Studies at the University of Copenhagen by Jon Rahbek-Clemmesen, Esben Salling Larsen, and Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, *Forsvaret i Arktis. Suverænitet, samarbejde og sikkerhed*, January 2012. Recently, the Danish admiral Niels Wang has analysed the potential conflicts in the Arctic in Wang 2014.

⁸ July 1931 Norwegian hunters and fishermen occupied parts of the then uninhabited eastern Greenland and called it Eirik Raude’s Land claiming that it constituted terra nullius. In 1933 Norway and Denmark agreed to submit the matter to the Permanent Court of International Justice in den Haag. The Court decided against Norway in one of the first international disputes settled according to international law.

voters wish it. While there are no economic and geopolitical laws at stake, the political and cultural opportunities are so much the greater. In a cooperating Europe, it is important to hold onto the strengths in the arena of civil society that Nordic cooperation does in fact. The root of both the strengths and weaknesses of this cooperation is that the countries were organized early on as relatively small and homogeneous nation states (Østergård 2008a). As demonstrated that is mainly a product of 1814. Yet, there is a widespread but vague sense that the Nordic peoples share an age old common identity dating back to the Viking Age before 1000 AD. Judging by opinion polls, Nordic cooperation is viewed favorably by the people of the Nordic countries. But this positive interest in their neighboring countries is losing ground fast, especially among the young and the youngish. This is particularly evident in the language, where Swedish and Danish are often considered, even by university students, mutually unintelligible. Norwegian might perhaps be understood but is considered, at least by Danish students, as a peculiar form of Danish, littered with spelling errors and amusing neologisms – or as utterly mysterious, should they happen to stumble upon a text written in New Norwegian. To top it off, most people do not consider Finnish, Icelandic, Faroese, Greenlandic, or Sami to be Nordic languages at all. As a result, conferences outside particularly committed Nordic circles are increasingly being held in English. This is why, when a group of Nordic historians published a cross-Nordic presentation of important themes in the countries' histories, we chose to do so in English.⁹

There are several reasons for this unfortunate state of affairs, but it is a logical result of the organization of Nordic cooperation, based on sovereign national states as it is. Successful Nordic cooperation was not a result of the romantic Scandinavianism rife in Denmark and Sweden in the mid-19th century. In actuality, these currents had to do with an attempt by Sweden to muster assistance against Russia, which had conquered the eastern part of Sweden in 1809 and established the Grand Duchy of Finland, while Denmark was seeking assistance against the expanding Germany, which was on the verge of unity – considerably helped along by the foolhardy policies of the Danish National Liberals in 1863-186 (Østergård 2013b and 2014b). Norway and Iceland were primarily interested in their own independence, while Finland successfully became Finnish under relatively benevolent Russian suzerainty. These considerations were obviously irreconcilable and it all led to nothing. Cultural Scandinavianism on the other hand, especially in literature, remained a vigorous force throughout the nineteenth century, although it rarely included Finland and Iceland.

⁹ Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth (eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, Oslo: Scandinavian University Press 1997.

Norden as a model of regional partnership is mainly the outcome of practical and pragmatic cooperation in a long list of professional areas that developed in the second half of the 19th century – but the necessary prerequisite was that the countries were independent. Thus, the Nordic Association could not be established until 1919 after the dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway in 1905 and Iceland's de facto independence from Denmark in 1918 (completed in 1944). Finland likewise became independent in 1917, but was at first and for many years preoccupied mainly with its own internal conflicts and relations with Russia, as one of the successor states of the Russian Empire. In reality, Finland did not embark upon the Nordic path until the end of the 1930s and not definitively until after her defeat by the Soviet Union in the Winter War of 1939-1940 and the Continuation War of 1940-1944 (Meinander 2006; Johansen 2013).

Nordic cooperation as formalized in the Nordic Council in 1952 (expanded with the accession of Finland in 1955) is unusual in being at once far-reaching in numerous areas of the civil society and weak on the governmental level. For a long time, Nordic cooperation was run primarily by the parliaments, not the governments. Lack of interference with national sovereignty was the prerequisite for this success. The Nordic approach to international coordination of legislation has worked extremely well, except in the critical areas of economic policy, foreign policy, and defense. The Nordic countries have failed at every attempt in these areas from the Scandinavian Defense Union in the late 1940s to Nordek in 1970.¹⁰ This is unsurprising in light of the geopolitical situation of the Nordic countries. But for precisely that reason, it is also no wonder that the peoples have drifted apart linguistically and thus, over time, psychologically as well.

Well into the 1950s and 1960s, the idea of the universal Nordic welfare state flourished in opposition to the patriarchal systems of the European Continent and the Anglo-American systems of minimal government. As historical studies have shown, there was a great deal of mythology involved in the cultivation of these differences. Welfare researchers speak bluntly of a model made up of five

¹⁰ The Organization for Nordic Economic Cooperation, with its Swedish acronym NORDEK, was a project on a Nordic common market consisting of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland negotiated between 1968 and 1970 in a situation where two economic blocs stood in opposition to each other in Europe, the EEC and the EFTA. The Nordic plan was based on establishing a customs union supplemented by cooperation in economics, industry, energy, agriculture, and fishing, as well as financing and capital flows. The Nordic Council approved a draft treaty in 1970, but it was never ratified by the participating countries, in part due to Finnish misgivings arising from Soviet opposition. A Danish attempt to create a Nordic customs union excluding Finland, SKANDEK, came to nothing due to Swedish and Finnish opposition.

exceptions.¹¹ One gets the same impression from a comparative analysis of the distinctive characteristics of Nordic capitalism.¹² The universal aspect of the welfare state, that citizenship alone conferred rights to uniform benefits, independently of connection to the labor market, has long been an important difference between the Nordic countries and the rest of Europe, hence the widespread notion of the socially minded and democratic *Norden* in contrast to Catholic and Conservative Europe. Today, this hallmark has been modified by the introduction of employment-related pensions and it is thus likely that the distinctively Nordic, democratic nationalism will also decline in importance.

Each in their own way, Sweden and Norway kept their distance from the European community, while Denmark acceded in 1973. And therewith began a political divide that deepened when Sweden and Finland joined the EU in 1995 and Norway once again chose to remain on the outside – albeit in such a way that the country, like Iceland, adopts EU legislation on the inner market through the EEA. These divergent choices go some way towards explaining the lack of interest in Nordic cooperation among the governments of Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, but not the more deep-seated cultural and political differences that have become increasingly clear in recent years, even though Iceland flirted with the idea of joining the EU after the financial crisis of 2008. Denmark and Sweden in particular have grown apart from each other politically. Sweden has officially declared itself a multicultural land of immigrants with the abolition of the close connection between the Lutheran church and the state. In Denmark, the debate on the relationship between church and state has finally begun, at least in circles with a particular interest, but most politicians who express an opinion on the subject adhere firmly to the utterly vague balance of power we call the “people’s church.” Among younger politicians, there seems to be enthusiasm for total separation, but the people’s church, more than 150 years old, seems as popular as ever with the Danish people. Indeed, along with the so-called “grammatical comma” (which is actually German and diverges from both Norwegian and Swedish), the majority of the population seem to perceive the national church as the most important guarantee of “Danishness.” Along with religious holidays like the Public Day of Prayer and Ascension Day, it has proven more difficult to abolish religious left overs than the center-left Danish government envisaged in 2011 when it tried to do away with the holydays in an attempt to increase productivity. Norway has recently disestablished the state church in favor of an arrangement designated the “people’s church,” whereby the Evangelical Lutheran Church is accorded the status of one among many religious communities. It is too soon to tell

¹¹ Niels Finn Christiansen, Klaus Petersen, Niels Edling, and Per Have (eds.), *The Nordic Model of Welfare. A Historical Reappraisal*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2006.

¹² Susana Fellman, Martin Jess Iversen, Hans Sjögren, and Lars Thue (eds.), *Creating Nordic Capitalism. The Business History of a Competitive Periphery*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2008.

whether this will eventually entail a separation of church and state as in Sweden or a vague situation like that in Denmark. On the other hand, Denmark is leading the way in Europe along with Austria, Italy, and perhaps the Netherlands, towards curbing immigration. The discourse in Norway – thus far – is different than in Denmark. On the surface, the words are politically correct as in Sweden, but the actual deeds are closer to Denmark's. Iceland and Finland have not yet been challenged to the point where it has been necessary to take an open stance on immigration. It is too early to say whether all of this combined with foreign policy differences will drive the Nordic countries even further apart.

Under the surface in Sweden lies a latent threat of violent revolt against the multicultural policy and political correctness that Danish media love to talk about. But there is a strong tradition in Sweden of putting a lid on that kind of behavior, while in Denmark, ever since the breakthrough of religious and “popular” movements in the nineteenth century a strong tradition of anti-elite populism has been influential under the heading of “folkelighed”. This has been under way for some time, as evident in the Danish Power and Democracy Study for instance which was more confident on behalf of democracy than the almost contemporaneous Norwegian power study under the direction of Øyvind Østerud.¹³ By 1973, Denmark had already taken a different route than the other Nordic countries with the breakthrough of Glistrup's Progress Party. The differences did not become actual system differences however until the alliance established between the Danish People's Party, the Liberal Party, and the Conservative People's Party of 2001-2011. The center-right government in Sweden 2006-14 did not bring about any significant rapprochement between Denmark and Sweden. On the contrary, a united political Sweden has successfully isolated the populist and anti-immigration party, the Sweden Democrats, even though the party entered the Parliament on the strength of a platform and strategy lifted from the Danish People's Party. The situation is however still relatively open, as is also the case in Norway, since 2013 governed by a coalition of the conservatives and the Progress Party.

In that situation, the future seems dim for Swedish historian and former government official Gunnar Wetterberg's proposal for a Nordic federation, put forward in the winter of 2009 in *Dagens Nyheter* and later expanded upon in a pamphlet, *The United Nordic Federation* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers 2010). He argues well, objectively, and persuasively for the advantages of formalized partnership to the Nordic countries, in that the countries could gain international influence

¹³ Lise Togeby et al., *Power and Democracy in Denmark: Main Conclusions from the Democracy and Power Study*, Århus: Aarhus University Press 2003; Østerud, Øyvind, Engelstad, Fredrik, and Selle, Per, *Makten og demokratiet*, [Power and democracy], Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk 2003, Øyvind Østerud, “Maktutredning og demokrati”, *Nytt norsk tidsskrift* 2004:1.

commensurate to their aggregate size. In a united federation, the countries could be represented in the G20 and other international fora, although he does not clarify what policies would be pursued in these contexts. The Nordic countries already have a greater international presence than their modest size would dictate. The combined population of the Nordic countries, 26 million, is not much larger than that of a single German federal state as Nordrhein-Westfalen, but they play a much greater role internationally. Wetterberg also wisely saves his thoughts about the historical barriers to a formalized federation for the end of the book, not to mention the issue of where the capital would be. It does not take a great deal of imagination to foresee the fight between Stockholm, which has successfully marketed itself as the “Capital of Scandinavia,” and Copenhagen, which cannot achieve consensus among the suburban municipalities on Zealand – let alone its own administration – on any subject whatsoever. The obvious choice of a third city is not much more likely. And the geographical center of the geographical *Norden* from Greenland in the west to Karelia (and Estonia) in the east, Tórshavn on the Faeroe Islands, has slim chance, unless such a choice was able to remove the emotional significance of the idea of a capital city altogether. And that would be no easy thing in countries so intensely nationalist as the Nordic nations.¹⁴

One Nordic Model or many?

The nation-states of today, then, are the configurations through which the common Nordic identity manifests itself. As these nations have achieved the recognition of the surrounding world, so too have they come to appear as “natural” entities. Even though Danes and Swedes may have had difficulties in appreciating this because of their age old struggle for supremacy in Northern Europe. Both Denmark and Sweden have a long, unbroken history, though strictly speaking not as homogeneous nation states, but rather as composite states or small empires, exercising various kinds of hegemony over their neighbors inside and outside *Norden*. Denmark and Sweden thus belong to the traditions of territorial state nations basically on a par with France, Britain, Spain, Poland, Hungary and Portugal although of course smaller, Norway and Iceland belong to the family of integral national movements who in the 19th century resurrected their medieval nations to independent status as did the catholic Irish and the Czechs. Finland did not even have a medieval past to refer back to (Østergård 1997 and 2006b). The rudiments of a state were established within the conglomerate Russian empire and subsequently gave rise to a bilingual political nation of Finlanders (Engman 2004).

¹⁴ Wetterberg himself is prudently realistic about the perspectives for his utopia to come true. In an interview in the Danish weekly *Weekendavisen* February 8, 2013 he rated the chances of success for his proposal a chance of 8 % of being realized, up from 5 % because of the financial crisis.

The origins of the success of Lutheranism may be traced as far back as the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times. As Max Engman has pointed out in an interesting essay on the place of *Norden* in European history unitary law codes for the whole realm were introduced in Norway in 1274 (not Iceland) and in Sweden (including Finland) around 1350, while Denmark with her three co-called landscape-laws of Jutland, Sealand and Scania (Skaane) only got a unitary law in 1683 (Engman 2002, 29). This too was relatively early in a European context, yet the difference in time testifies to the fact that Denmark in many ways always has been closer to the continental pattern of social development than the rest of *Norden*. This certainly holds true for the other factor Engman identifies as specific, namely the continued political role of free peasants and as a consequence weak feudal structures and very small and insignificant towns.

Though not yet completely understood, a bond seems to exist between the continued domination of small, but free peasants in the clearances in the forests on the northern peripheries and literacy among ordinary people. The further to the north the more widespread the literacy seems to be a Nordic rule of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a rule which also holds true for the poor peripheries of Iceland and the Faroe Islands.¹⁵ It is true that that many Icelandic farmers did hand over their valuable medieval manuscripts to Danish civil servants such as Árni Magnússon in the eighteenth century. He was a native Icelander who lived and worked in Copenhagen and left his vast collections of manuscripts to the University of Copenhagen in 1730, collections that only were turned over to Iceland in 1965 after a heated debate. The reason why the Icelandic owners parted with their manuscripts was not lack of interest or declining literacy, but on the contrary that they kept copying the manuscripts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, only now on the cheaper material paper instead of parchment. This change enabled the owners to sell the older manuscripts to collectors from the continent as interest in this uniquely preserved literary treasure grew.

Literacy, thus seems to have been widespread, and more so the further to the north in the Nordic countries. This trend was not reversed with the introduction of Lutheran Protestantism. On the contrary, literacy now spread to the south into Denmark and northern Germany in particular. That Lutheranism also meant a narrowing of cultural horizons and stronger German influence among the elites of society only has to be added in order to complete the contradictory picture of the specifics of “Nordic” features of social development. Whether Lutheranism was the cause or the result of previous

¹⁵ The high level of literacy in Iceland is reported in Agnarsdóttir 2004, 81; the early spread of literacy in the Nordic countries has been investigated in a comparative context in a series of detailed studies.

e existing factors is not yet clear, but however that may be, it seems impossible to overestimate the importance for the Nordic countries of the Lutheran reformation in the 16th century and the subsequent developments of religious movements on the one hand and an enlightened bureaucracy consisting of priests and other theologically trained academics. This Lutheran background goes a long way to explain what the Polish-Norwegian researcher Nina Witoszek has called the “pastoral enlightenment” of Scandinavia (Witoszek 1997).

Yet the dominating tradition in comparative welfare state studies is to describe the welfare state in the Nordic countries as a result of particular Nordic features, the so-called “Nordic” or Social Democratic model”. Until the breakdown of the Communist block the model of the “Nordic” welfare state was perceived as a third way between the two dominant superpowers and their attendant ideologies (cf. Stråth 1992 and 1993 for a critical account of the notions of the Swedish “*folkhem*” and of a distinct Nordic model). Interest in a particular Nordic model is no longer dominating among comparative political scientists and historical sociologists who now concentrate on describing the specific national varieties of capitalism (cf. the analysis of specific institutional features of the Danish version of capitalism by Campbell, Hall and Pedersen 2006). Models develop when there is a success story to tell. The Scandinavian states only managed to assume importance in their own right in the interwar years; they did not become a model, though, until after World War II when, thanks to alliances with agrarian groups, Social Democracy prevailed. This happened in slightly different ways in the different Nordic states, but everywhere the strength of the hegemony of the working classes reflected the weaknesses of the divided middle classes. Such consensus took longer to evolve in Denmark, Norway and Finland than in Sweden. This explains why the Nordic model much discussed in the social scientific literature of the 1960s and 70s in reality was a Swedish model. As the German political scientist Klaus von Beyme observed, “only in the 1960s, partly thanks to an international project on the smaller European democracies, was the Scandinavian model discovered as a unique product of the North. The Nordic countries certainly lacked the “pillarization” (*verzuiling*) of sub-units of society which, in multi-confessional societies from the Netherlands to Switzerland, resulted in cooperation among élites. The élites of the Scandinavian model cooperated, though some sections of them still clung to a rhetoric of class struggle, and the non-élite, for whom they negotiated a consensus, cooperated in their own way at the grass-roots level. The less strong the aristocracy had been in the history of the country concerned, the more markedly they did so – with Norway as a case in point.” (Beyme 1992, 190-91).

Indeed, one may doubt whether a “Nordic model” in the proper sense has ever existed. Scandinavians have never seen themselves as representatives of one consistent and distinctive social model (Christoffersen and Hastrup 1983, 3), national differences always having been considered more important. The notion of “*Norden*” as a conscious Social Democratic alternative to the continental European class struggles between bourgeoisie, workers and peasants first emerged outside Scandinavia with the publication of the American journalist Marquis Childs’ classic work in 1936, bearing the telling title *Sweden: The Middle Way*. The trend culminated in the 1980s with Gösta Esping-Andersen’s analyses of the Nordic welfare states as different variations of a parallel Social Democratic strategy (1985). He defined three versions of “welfare capitalism”: the Social Democratic, the liberal and the conservative (Esping-Andersen 1990). The social democratic character of the Nordic welfare state has come under criticism from an American comparative historian (Baldwin 1990), while others, as already mentioned, attempt to trace the origins of the Nordic universal welfare state back to the Lutheran version of Protestantism which was introduced by revolutions from above in Denmark and Sweden in the 1530s (Østergård 2003a; Knudsen 2003).

Despite the dubious character of the notion of a specifically Nordic model, it is an indisputable fact that the Nordic countries have experienced a more harmonious process of modernization in the twentieth century than most other countries in Europe (Arnason and Wittrock 2012). Thanks to the compromises of the 1930s, Norway, Sweden and Denmark proved largely immune to the temptations of the totalitarian ideologies of Nazism, fascism and communism (Lindström 1985). In many ways the Nordic countries still provide shining examples of social order and internal democracy – exemplary not only for the insiders, but also for surprising numbers elsewhere in the world, and with good reason. The Nordic countries, irrespective of the existence of a Nordic model, function more smoothly than the majority of societies. The problem, however, is that a majority in the Nordic countries has embraced the notion to such an extent that they believe in the mythical notion of Nordic unity as a contrast to the rest of Europe. Nordic history and culture, however, represent but one variation of common European patterns and themes, a variation which, due to geopolitical conditions, has resulted in small, nationally homogenous, socially democratic, Lutheran states. But a variation, nevertheless, of common European themes it is.¹⁶ As Klaus von Beyme noted in his illuminating contribution from the early 1990s: “A model’s greatest success is its death. The things of value which it (the Nordic model, u.ø.) incorporated have already spread far afield in various forms – there is no longer a need to

¹⁶ These similarities are the recurrent themes in two books of comparative studies of European history that I have published in Danish, Østergård 1992d and 1998.

ideologize it. The sober and pragmatic approach of most Scandinavians makes them better equipped to realize this than the people of other nations who once ideologized the Scandinavian model.” (Beyme 1992, 209).

Conclusion

The nation-states of today, then, are the configurations through which the common Nordic identity manifests itself. As these nations have achieved the recognition of the surrounding world, so too have they come to appear as “natural” entities. But although Danes and Swedes have difficulty appreciating it (see Stein Tønnesen’s impressions from a Nordic conference on national identity held on the Faeroe Islands, Tønnesen 1989), this has far from always been the case. These two nationalities today administer the legacy of two multinational empires, which for centuries contended for supremacy in Northern Europe. Or rather, the two states do not administer this legacy, but act, on the strength of their long, unbroken history, as though they nevertheless possess a natural right to their independent existence. This is to a much lesser extent true of the other Nordic countries, which for periods have been subject to Swedish and Danish rule respectively. Hence the insecurity that until recently made Norwegians, Finlanders and Icelanders assertively emphasize their national character, to the mild astonishment of the Danes and Swedes confronted with what to them looked like aggressive nationalism. Today, in the early twentyfirst century, it is so long ago one nation ruled another, that Scandinavians freely converse on an equal footing – even the Faroese and the Greenlanders in their dealings with Denmark and the Danes. If anything, though, this makes it even more important to remember the difficult, and far from inevitable, genesis of the sovereign Nordic states. The active entities are states and nations, not a diffuse Nordic identity. Regardless of the widespread opposition to the supra-national cooperation in the European Union, the political cultures of these states ought to be compatible with a European Union where national identity in reality has been strengthened by the exercising sovereignty in common (Østergård 2004a, 2004d, 2008c and 2008d).

The Nordic countries of today all share a Lutheran monarchical heritage, even if Finland and Iceland formally are republics (Stenius 1997 and Østergård 2011d). This common heritage is demonstrated by the Christian cross in eight of the nine national flags of the Nordic countries. The peripheral position of the countries with regard to Europe made it possible to realize democratic potentials that less fortunate smaller nations such as the Czechs have experienced more difficulty realizing (Hroch 1996). But this fortunate history owes much less to homespun “Nordic” merits than normally assumed. The primary reason lies in the optimal geographical situation of the Nordic countries with regard to foreign

policy as well as in relation to both economy and communications. The Nordic countries were in various ways useful as suppliers of raw materials to the industrial centres and have moreover been able to profit on a favourable relationship between low transportation costs and high manufacturing costs in the world economy. It was this stroke of cyclical good fortune that rendered the welfare states possible, despite unfavourable climatic conditions. The Nordic countries happened to be in the right place at the right time. To the extent that this is no longer the case, it will become increasingly difficult to live on the Nordic myths and copious outpourings of yesteryear. Much would seem to indicate that the Baltic is about to regain its former position as the economic and civilizing pivot of Northern Europe as a region in a united Europe. To the extent this occurs, it will prove difficult to bridge the gap between the Atlantic, sea-facing *Norden* on the one hand and the land-based, Baltic *Norden* on the other. The Norwegian ethnologist, Brit Berggren, once stressed this important constant in the mental geography of the Nordic peoples in a contribution to a collection of essays on Nordic identity (Berggren 1992). The historical lesson is that there are no objective laws binding the people of *Norden* together. No common, manifest destiny. But there is a historical and cultural raw material of traditions and discourses on which such an identity may be built. Providing, of course, that this is what the Nordic peoples want.

No grand economic or geopolitical laws are at work, which opens the room for active political and cultural choices. In a cooperating Europe it is important to maintain the strengths embodied in the civil society of the Nordic societies. Such respect for national differences and sovereignty is the basis of Nordic political culture though it does not amount to much more than an ideal and a discourse. Respect for these specific traditions might even help bridge the gap between elites and voters in the rest of the European Union, running to risk to dilute the “Nordic” principles to what they have probably been all along, namely variations of general European principles. In the 1960s, the Nordic states demonstrated their lack of interest in supporting a common Nordic culture and preserving the common understanding of their languages. Today, the need is greater than ever since the two Nordic multinational states of Denmark and Sweden were separated into national states in 1809 and 1814. This separation process, at least in relation to Denmark, will not come to an end until the Faeroe Islands and Greenland have determined their political futures. *Norden* should perhaps be called “Northern Europe” rather than the ideologically charged *Norden*. But there is little reason to conceive of *Norden* as an exceptional region or merely as a permanent alliance in the EU. The Nordic countries are European countries, for good and bad. And as the other EU Member States become relatively smaller and more closely aligned while maintaining or accentuating their distinctive national characteristics, the special relationship between the Nordic countries will probably become less significant, provided that the

European project does not disintegrate due to the financial crisis and the problems associated with the euro. Regardless of what lies ahead, the Nordic countries started down their separate path in 1814, when the Oldenburg state became the biggest European loser in the Napoleonic Wars only a few years after 1809, when Sweden had for a short period been reduced to a small state in danger of being carved up by its neighbors.