3 Social science, humanities, and the ‘Nordic model’¹

Lars Mjøset

Introduction

The relation between social science and politics does not lend itself to easy generalizations. For a long time, there was no close relation between political invocations of Nordic common features and the systematic knowledge provided by historians and social scientists on that question. While academic scholars through the twentieth century contributed compilations of facts about the Nordic countries, we find that only in the late 1960s did a few social scientists start the research projects that paved the way for the systematic study of common Nordic traits in line with current standards of research. We label these researchers ‘pioneers’ in the specific sense that they laid down the foundations for research on such common traits. But their followers only began to explicitly investigate such traits in the early 1980s – just at the time when the notion of a Nordic model was launched in political circles. That notion, however, was not at all related to the research of the pioneers and their followers.

This chapter provides *both* a review of research *and* an exercise in the sociology of knowledge. The review is not just a description of relevant research along a timeline as if knowledge on common Nordic traits accumulated in a linear sense. Two conceptual frameworks are used to classify and evaluate the various strands of research under review. A sociology of knowledge framework establishes a typology of public spheres. A more specified sociology of social scientific knowledge specifies relevant features of the public sphere of science, distinguishing three different ways of doing social science (history included). Key elements of these conceptual frameworks will be introduced in separate sections at the point where they are necessary for the argument (cf. the sections below on public spheres, types of party organizations, strong and loose comparisons).

Combining the two frameworks, the analysis focuses on the role of boundary terms that circulate between various public spheres. The Nordic model is identified as a boundary term that emerges in the political public sphere in the early 1980s, generalizing an earlier, cautious understanding of a Swedish model. The main problem investigated is what happens to social science

studies of Nordic common traits (Nordic model) once this term circulates from the political into the scientific public sphere.

The review covers efforts by social scientists to establish synthetic accounts of common traits between trajectories of socio-economic development at the macro level. Such accounts have to tackle the explanatory challenge of combining national and transnational factors, paying attention to both comparative specificities and transfers between the units analyzed. Unlike narrower, sectoral definitions, such synthetic understandings are claims about common traits in the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) across more than one issue area. We are particularly concerned with research that has laid the foundations for and made claims about a model with reference to the complementarities between institutional domains such as the welfare state, parliamentary democracy, the state apparatus (central and local), labor markets, education, skills, and innovation.

Boundary terms

One concept should be presented up front. A *boundary term* originates in one public sphere (science, politics, culture), but circulates as it becomes central to discussions in more than one sphere. Stakeholders agree on such terms, in spite of their differing agendas. This is what Miettinen (2013: 89) refers to as *transdiscursive* terms. He finds that in discussions across the science/politics divide, such terms focus attention, integrate formally separate issues, facilitate discussions between different social groups, create broad ideological consensus, and empower proponents of specific views. In short, they provide interpretations of the present, what Mannheim called ‘diagnosis of our time’ (Miettinen, 2013: 21). It is important to note that as such they are terms or labels, they are not concepts formed through systematic scientific investigation. As we shall see, scientific disciplines can relate their concept formation to boundary terms in different ways.

Miettinen mainly focuses on what such terms do in terms of coordinating administration, politics, and interest groups. He studied the term ‘national innovation system’ which evolved in interaction between research (evolutionary economics) and policy making (The Finnish Science and Technology Policy Council). In this chapter, we mainly study circulations in the opposite direction. Our main question is thus: when a boundary term circulates from politics into science, what are the effects on research in the science sphere? We study many different political and administrative agents, and a number of social science disciplines.

We find that since the 1990s, the ‘Nordic model’ became a boundary term facilitating communication across public spheres, especially politics and research, providing a common reference in many different discourses. From that time, the Nordic model was investigated by an increasing number of academic disciplines and invoked by a widening circle of political

parties. In that situation, research on the Nordic model was drawn away from the careful contextual specification that prevailed among the pioneers and their followers. This discussion invokes our specified sociology of social science, a distinction between three practical philosophies or styles of social science (Mjøset, 2009). While the research of the pioneers expressed a *contextualizing* style, developing concepts to analyze institutional complexes as singular historical outcomes, the disciplines that responded to the Nordic model as a boundary term, were committed to either the *standard* or the *social-philosophical* practical philosophies. Both of these generalize in decontextualizing ways, relying on either definitive concepts (standard) or epochal concepts (social philosophy). The value of these distinctions will emerge from the analysis below.

Toward the end of the chapter, particular attention is paid to specific research projects in economics and history, projects that express the standard and social-philosophical style, respectively. The discussion intends to demonstrate both strengths and weaknesses in the way scholars in these disciplines contribute to the accumulation of knowledge in the form of synthetic claims about Nordic common traits. Comparison with the earlier work of the pioneers/followers leads to a number of critical remarks, in the hope that this will stimulate self-reflection among scholars analyzing Nordic models in different disciplines.

Late 1940s – the Rehn/Meidner model

In the late 1940s, the Swedish Social Democratic party (SAP) government struggled to avoid inflation in a situation of full employment and potential overheating of the economy. The Ministry of Finance, led by one of the party's main intellectuals, Ernst Wigforss, suggested an incomes policy that would imply wage moderation, particularly for workers in the least productive firms.

The Swedish trade union confederation (LO) sensed that this might undermine its membership support in these sectors. Two LO economists, Gösta Rehn and Rudolf Meidner, educated under the Stockholm school of economics, suggested an alternative model which avoided incomes policies (Erixon, 2017). LO would pursue a 'wage policy of solidarity' in the centralized wage negotiations. Workers in all firms would claim an average wage level, putting pressure on low-productivity firms, but securing a generous profit level in high-productivity firms. As long as the most productive capitalists reinvested their above-average profits (avoiding too much waste and conspicuous consumption), this would boost the transformation of Swedish manufacturing industry. Inflation would be avoided by generally tight fiscal and monetary policies, while full employment would be safeguarded by active labor market policies through the State Labor Market Board (AMS), which organized reskilling and geographical mobility.

To show how this model had only a limited circulation, we apply a typology of public spheres.

Public spheres

A science public sphere (science sphere, for short) can be distinguished from two interconnected political public spheres, as well as a cultural literary sphere. The science sphere involves curricula, peer-reviewed scientific publications, conferences, and internationalized disciplines with different disciplinary profiles. The political sphere is divided between a mobilizing sphere, involving social movements pursuing contentious politics (Tilly, 2007), and an administrative sphere of routine politics involving governing political parties and the bureaucracy.

Political parties often emerged as social movements whose arguments spread into the mobilizing political public sphere. The Nordic labor parties are cases in point, serving as the political extension of unions aggregated in trade union confederations (LOs) which pursue workers' economic interests. As the parties attained governmental responsibility following the turbulence of the 1920s and 1930s, their politics became routinized. Policy making in the administrative public sphere, involving bureaucracy, government, and parliament, gained in importance. Parties thus faced an administration/mobilization dilemma: an increasing gap between routine (managing the state) and contentious (reproducing support from a sufficient amount of voters) politics (Esping-Andersen, 1985).

In the case of the Rehn/Meidner model, communication across public spheres was limited: 'model' was understood in line with the economics discipline mainstream, internal to the science sphere. The model was reported in at least one scientific publication (Meidner, 1952). There was no spread to other academic disciplines. In the early post-war decades, the model was only considered in the relatively closed public spheres of Swedish economic policy making, strictly inside the administrative layers of the political public sphere: bureaucrats in the finance ministry (administrators socialized into the same economics terminology), SAP politicians, and LO staff. Only later was it labeled a 'Swedish model' (Leion, 1974). In spite of the existence of a few common institutional features (e.g., centralized wage setting) and the existence of Nordic congresses of labor federations, a broader discussion of the Swedish Rehn-Meidner model as a Nordic model did not emerge.

Mid-1970s – a Swedish model launched in political public spheres

Another notion of the Swedish model was launched by the Swedish social democrats in the mid-1970. There was some French/international attention to a Swedish model in the late 1960s (see Chapter 5 by Hellenes), but the actual struggles on how to understand it started in the Swedish political public sphere in 1974.

Only in the 1958–1974 period did the Rehn/Meidner model guide Swedish economic policies (Erixon, 2017). LO unions in exporting sectors soon criticized the policy for consequences such as structural rationalization, high

labor mobility, and authoritarian work organization (Stråth, 1998). Illegal strikes in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Korpi, 1981a) indicated that parts of the LO grassroots opposed SAP's routine politics. An LO-employed economist, Leion (1974), synthesized the criticism.

Responding to this mobilization, both LO and SAP waged new policies. Meidner headed the LO committee that developed a proposal for wage earner investment funds (WEIF). It addressed a main asymmetry in the Rehn/Meidner model, the problem of excess profits in the most productive firms. The funds would control increasing shares of these profits, dampening wealth inequalities, and increasing union power over investment decisions. The proposal challenged the historical (Saltsjöbaden) compromise at the core of Swedish reformism since 1938: Employers had accepted social democratic welfare state reforms (secured by the large number of SAP MPs), as long as they were allowed to retain control over investments and shop-floor management. In June 1976, the LO congress decided to pursue the WEIF-reform, suggesting the negotiation of a new historical compromise.

As governing party, SAP had already embarked on a more cautious line, embracing milder economic democracy reforms (laws on employment security (LAS) and codetermination (MBL) in 1974 and 1976). In contrast, the LO 1976 decision opted for the strongest possible version of economic democracy: in the longer term, unions would displace employers' decision-making autonomy. The emphasis was on the contentious politics of the union grassroots, with less concern for routine politics.

Hellenes (Chapter 5) notes that wider circulation of the term 'Swedish model' started as both the social democratic and the non-socialist press discussed these matters in 1974. In 1975, and especially after the 1976 WEIF decision, the Conservative party attacked SAP's concern for economic democracy, arguing that any violation of the original historical compromise was an attack on democracy. Two interpretations of democracy here clashed: employers and conservative politicians insisted on political democracy only, while the labor movement wanted to extend democratic participation further into the economic domain.

The labor movement was internally split on how far to extend economic democracy: LO surprised SAP in 1976, and despite some verbal support, the party elite regretted the WEIF proposal and sought to modify it (Stråth, 1998). When SAP made the Swedish model its major PR-slogan in the 1976 electoral campaign, that term differed markedly from the one implied in LO's proposal, which was concerned with the contentious question of investment control, and suggesting negotiation of a new historical compromise. The SAP claim to a Swedish model summed up the historical achievements of social democratic routine politics under the stable historical compromise until the late 1960s, celebrating its best results (welfare, safety, full employment).

The discussions that circulated the term 'Swedish model' in Swedish political public spheres 1974–1976 implied three divergent claims to such

Table 3.1 Three claims to a Swedish model

	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Historical compromise</i>	<i>Economic democracy</i>	<i>Capitalism/ democracy</i>
Radical	LO	Fundamental renegotiation	Challenge employers' control over investments and work organization	Capitalism can no longer be reconciled with democracy
Cautious	SAP	Revision	Negotiate and/ or legislate codetermination, board representation	Capitalism and democracy can be reconciled (reformist position)
Liberal/ conservative	Non-socialist parties, employers (SAF)	Retain as agreed in 1938	Not a legitimate part of the democratic agenda	Democratic principles were never meant for the sphere of production

a model. In Table 3.1, the two different understandings within the LO/ SAP-discussions are labeled the radical versus the cautious one. These two versions of the Swedish model circulated in different ways. The radical notion was mainly reproduced in international academic discussions inside the science sphere, spilling over only into marginal left-wing politics. The cautious concept, in contrast, was generalized into a Nordic model and circulated broadly between politics and research. Finally, the liberal/conservative notion (Table 3.1) played a role as Swedish employers responded to the WEIF challenge but became less relevant as non-socialist intellectuals and think tanks found they could hijack the cautious notion and disconnect it from the achievements of social democracy.

Types of party organization

A second conceptual resource in our analysis concerns political parties. They are main political organizations that operate in-between mobilization, contentious politics, and routine politics. They contribute many candidates for terms such as 'the Swedish model' that circulate in politics and beyond. We employ Katz and Mair's (2018) periodization of the mass party (the late 1940s to early 1970s), the catch-all party (the 1970s to the 1990s), and the cartel party (since the 1990s). The periodization is tailor-made for social democratic parties, but the last two phases apply to any party with a large share of the vote. The cartel party organizational form emerged since the 1990s in conjunction with the new consensus on austere economic policies and delegation of power to the EU in many European states. The larger

parties effectively (more than consciously) create a cartel in which the policy choices converge despite rhetorical disagreements.

SAP's use of 'Swedish model' in the 1976 electoral campaign indicates the final stage of the party's transformation from a mass party to a catch-all party competing for middle-class votes, thus downplaying LO's efforts to counteract increasing inequalities of wealth and to push for radical economic democracy in the large manufacturing firms.

Swedish debates in the 1980s

In later debates on the Swedish model, the three different understandings (Table 3.1) often circulated together in political and cultural public spheres: the left-labor version clashing with the right-leaning/employer version, and the cautious position wavering between claims that the early post-war model was seriously threatened (when labor was in opposition) and promises that it was being revised in the light of new challenges (when labor was in office). Conservatives held that even the cautious version would eventually undermine democracy, quoting the radical version as proof.

When the social democratic party returned to government in 1982, the WEIF proposal had been thoroughly modified. By the time it was implemented in 1983, SAP's economic and social policy making was increasingly influenced by a moderate group of social democratic bureaucrats and politicians, with Kjell O. Feldt and Erik Åsbrink as key persons. Despite this victory for the cautious version of the Swedish model in politics, even this watered-down proposal generated massive mobilization by the non-socialist side (parties and employers' organizations), defending the conservative-liberal version. If – as Meidner (1993: 226) implied – Sweden by 1976 had been 'closer to the ideal of a classless society than any other country,' the hostilities whirled up by the WEIF-reform was one reason why its path changed. In a couple of decades – according to the radical interpretation – Sweden became the Nordic country that had departed the furthest from such radical ideals. In that period, the generalized concept of a Nordic model emerged.

That concept generalized the *cautious* notion of the Swedish model. The Swedish debates had already circulated it in politics, so it was easy to find similar elements (mixed economy, centralized bargaining, generous security net) in the other Nordic countries. But even that generalization was no simple process. At the time, social scientists had searched for Nordic common traits within the relatively autonomous science sphere. This scholarly development took place in sociology and political science. In order to cover this part of the story, we present another main conceptual element: the use of strong comparisons as a methodological tool that specifies sensitizing concepts.

Strong and loose comparisons

According to Blumer (1954: 140), the natural sciences employ *definitive* concepts, which define the traits common to a class of objects, allowing

inference directly from the concept to the understanding of a singular case and its relevant empirical properties. In contrast, the human/social sciences use *sensitizing* concepts, which are *not* able to define such common traits (attributes, benchmarks). Applied to singular cases, they only give ‘a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances’ (Blumer, 1954: 148). Sensitizing concepts require a specification for each new case.

This point was further developed in the case-based methodology of grounded theory. This ‘constant comparative method’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 102) is a way to develop middle range theories that explain by developing and adjusting sets of sensitizing concepts to specific cases. Generalization only covers the cases that are actually investigated. Theory is thus not predictive. We define *strong comparisons* as case comparisons that study similarities and differences across properties of the cases relevant to the explanatory purpose. Empirical comparisons of all relevant properties are provided for all cases and for one or more specified periods. Strong comparison implies filling all the cells of such a case/property matrix. *Loose comparisons* fail to satisfy this criterion: all cells are not filled, empirical information across cases is not fully comparable, and similar properties are not covered in all case accounts. One form in which such loose comparisons appear is the edited volume with country chapters and only very short introductory and concluding chapters.

The overall methodological framework for the use of strong comparisons is what we have called a contextualist approach (Mjøset, 2009). Such an attitude was shared by three researchers that can be seen as pioneers because they laid down the foundations for proper research into Nordic common traits.

Pioneers of comparative social science in the 1960s and 1970s

In the post-war period, social science was upgraded across Western Europe, mainly inspired by US adaptation and upgrading of European traditions (Mjøset, 1991).

Three pioneers of sociology/political science posed distinct research questions that led them to study selections of nation states, the Nordics included. Through systematic, strong comparisons of these countries, they also became pioneers of the study of state and society in Norden. They are Stein Rokkan (Norwegian, 1921–1979), Walter Korpi (Swedish, 1934–), and Dieter Senghaas (German, 1941–). Their work enabled later researchers to pose the question of common Nordic traits.

The pioneers conducted comparisons both within the Nordic area and between Nordic and non-Nordic countries. Two of them compared within the Western world, while Senghaas also compared with third world countries. They combined qualitative/historical and quantitative/statistical methods. Their historical range differed: Korpi mainly analyzed the period from the 1930s to the present, Rokkan and Senghaas mainly the age of industrialism

since the nineteenth century, but Rokkan even made excursions further backward.

None of these pioneers made any claims to a Nordic model, but each of them displays a 'relation to values,' as Weber (1973 [1904]) called it. Rokkan (1970) saw the Nordic countries as early instances of multiparty mass democracy. Korpi saw Sweden as the country that recently had extended democracy the most, turning political democracy into social democracy and then demanding radical economic democracy (see above on the WEIF proposal). Senghaas considered the Nordic countries as some of the earliest cases of small countries achieving catch-up industrialization that fulfilled a major development goal – economic growth with equity. Among the pioneers, only Senghaas applied a regional label: 'The Scandinavian development path' (*Entwicklungsweg*), mainly analyzing Finland (working paper ca. 1980, later Chapter 2 in Senghaas, 1982).

This development of conceptual frameworks in the science sphere took place in relative autonomy from other public spheres. Unlike economics, these upstart disciplines (sociology, political science) had few direct connections to the administrative public sphere. They did not make models related to national accounts and planning. They studied historical mobilization, returning to the more institutionalist/legal, historical kind of political economy that mathematized economics had left behind. True, like most scholars in the 1960s, the pioneers aimed at general theories. Rokkan tried out formal conceptual frameworks from Parsons and Hirschman, Korpi developed a power resource framework that modeled historical compromises between collective actors (referring to rational choice theory), and Senghaas combined dependency theories from development economics with linkage theories of economic growth. But each of their conceptual frameworks was related to the relevant contexts by means of strong comparisons. In this way sensitizing concepts were contextualized into components of conjunctural explanations of the outcomes under study. Their methodological self-understanding may have been conventional (closer to the standard approach, Mjøset, 2009), but their comparisons yielded comprehensive case accounts and contextualized generalizations, typical of the contextualist approach.

Korpi published some of his most important scientific works (synthesized in Korpi, 1983) during the historical context of the WEIF debates 1976–1983. He studied the administration/mobilization dilemma (as defined above) through large survey materials on the situation of Swedish metalworkers (Korpi, 1978). He further generated an empirically based taxonomy that ranked Western countries depending on the degree to which labor movements had been able to accumulate wage earners' power resources (in parliamentary democratic institutions) to counter the power resources of employers (investment and labor process control) (Korpi, 1983).

Some may argue that Korpi was biased. He related to the WEIF debates in the public sphere like any other active citizen. As a SAP member, he wrote in the party journal (Korpi, 1981b), criticizing LO's scheme for being

too syndicalist. Modifying LO's suggestion that only unions would be represented on the funds' boards, Korpi (1982) proposed broader board representation by local governments and civil society groups. In the end, as we saw (p. 37 above), both proposals lost out.

Korpi's views in the WEIF debates were based on his research, but his interventions in the mobilizing political sphere did not affect the concepts he – as a researcher – chose to employ when formulating his research questions and developing explanations of contemporary processes. Below, we argue that such grounding was lost when a new wave of researchers just took the reality of a Swedish or Nordic model for granted.

In principle, developing the pioneers' strong comparisons, one should be able to determine whether – and in what respects – the Nordic countries display enough similarities to merit conclusions on common traits. These conclusions might then be aggregated into properties of a synthetic understanding of Nordic common traits, valid for a certain historical period. *Several* synthetic models would be possible, depending on the research questions asked and the properties involved. Thus, on the basis of these results and additional research, some of the pioneers' followers explicitly began to discuss Nordic common traits.

The Late 1970s to the early 1990s – social science followers searching for common Nordic traits

In the mid-to-late 1970s, the followers extended the work of their teachers in many ways, addressing both old and new research questions. They did so just as the Swedish model claim surfaced in Swedish political public spheres (see p. 37 above). Possibly, this led some of them to investigate claims to common Scandinavian or Nordic traits. Still, the question of a Nordic model did not come up in these scholarly debates. The questions they asked related to current debates in both political and cultural public spheres, but answers were developed *within* the science sphere, relatively independent of circulating terms from other public spheres.

The Australian political scientist Francis G. Castles (1978) – drawing on concepts and findings from Rokkan – was the first follower to thoroughly analyze common Scandinavian traits, labeled a social democratic 'image' of society. Other Rokkan-students (Lafferty, 1971; Østerud, 1978; Kuhnle, 1975, 1978, 1981) had analyzed Nordic countries, but only comparing, not studying common traits. Later, Kuhnle also studied common traits (Al-estalo and Kuhnle, 1986).

In several influential contributions, sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1980, 1985) – using Korpi's data set (Esping-Andersen, 1990) – suggested a typology of welfare regimes, linking state, labor market, and family. He distinguished the social democratic regime from the conservative (continental Europe) and liberal (Anglo-Saxon) regimes. Later, political scientists Evelyn Huber and John D. Stephens (2001; summing up research since the

1980s) – based on their own dataset – explicitly used the term ‘Nordic social democratic welfare state,’ analyzing the three Scandinavian countries and Finland. There were several other followers, and the following four points apply to all of them.

First, the work of the followers yielded no converging conclusions on common traits. Like the pioneers, the followers did not think of *one* Nordic model when they designed their projects. Claims to common traits were made on the basis of careful comparisons, both within Norden and with non-Nordic cases.

A striking example is the joint work of the most influential pioneer/follower team. In the mid-1980s, Esping-Andersen and Korpi explicitly discussed common features of Nordic welfare states. In their original calculation of power resource and decommodification indexes, they found that Finland ranked lower than Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Esping-Andersen defined decommodification by the combination of universalism (pension provision) and generous benefit levels, securing maximum personal independence from the market. Nordic traits could not be reduced to high decommodification scores since also Belgium and the Netherlands scored high here. A distinct Nordic approach emerged only when the egalitarian orientation was included. The same conclusion was brought out in a clustered case comparison between Scandinavia, Austria, and Germany (Esping-Andersen and Korpi, 1984). They explicitly challenged a view held by several Rokkan followers (including Kuhnle) that the post-war welfare states were explained by political consensus rather than by the relative power position of the labor movements (Esping-Andersen and Korpi, 1986: 71).

Referring to complementarities between the welfare state and other institutional complexes, their approach was definitely synthetic as defined above. They emphasized that egalitarianism (less skewed income distribution) was also taken care of via taxation, collective bargaining, and manpower re-training measures (active labor market policies).

Second, the fifth sovereign member country of the Nordic council (founded 1952), Iceland, was seldom included in these comparisons. Among the pioneers, only Rokkan (1981) included the country on equal terms with the others. Among the followers, Iceland was fully included in a comparison of the five Nordic post-war economic policy models (Mjøset, 1987), and in studies of its welfare state in a comparative Scandinavian perspective (Ólafsson, 1993). The fact that Iceland shares a Nordic early history is a challenge for any research-based discussion of a Nordic model (Mjøset, 2011a) since its historical development from around the Napoleonic wars displays more elements of economic dependency, later and more one-sided industrialization, and a weaker coalition for bureaucratic autonomy than any of the other Nordic states.

Third, many of the followers were inspired by the radical version of the Swedish model. They had been socialized into academic social science during the student revolt. That revolt was no broad social mobilization; rather it

was a mobilization internal to the institutions of higher learning. Attempts to broaden mobilization into general politics hardly ever led to more than small-scale political organizations expressing revolutionary romanticism. The best research on the Nordic countries was never driven by such sentiments. Still, many young scholars at the time were inspired by the continuities between the Rehn/Meidner model and the WEIF proposal. Especially non-Nordic scholars here saw a ‘third way’ to democratic socialism. Martin (1975, and several other publications) was an early case, followed by Stephens (1979; cf also Huber/Stephens, 2001). However, none of these scholars idealized the WEIF proposal since they all followed the Swedish situation very closely.

Fourth, the followers later directed attention to the issues brought up by the feminist movement. Esping-Andersen (1999) and others, driven by discussions with feminist researchers, argued that high female labor force participation rates were an integral part of the social-democratic welfare regime. Esping-Andersen coined the concept ‘defamilialization,’ social policies that render women autonomous to engage in the labor market or to set up autonomous households. Defamilialization turned out to be one of the strongest instances of a single common trait. The main demographic outcome was a relatively high fertility rate, making the emerging ‘aging crisis’ less of a problem in Norden than on the continent. However, that outcome could be observed in at least one continental welfare state too, namely France. Specified comparisons, particularly referring to the French pronatalist tradition in family policies, were needed here. There is now a large literature covering the ‘women-friendly’ welfare states in the Nordic area, celebrating the region’s recent tradition of state feminism (Hernes, 1987), another case of a mobilization/administration link.

Concerning family policies as an important branch of social policies (in contrast to the principle of subsidiarity typical of Catholic countries), policy ideas have circulated across public spheres connecting state feminist activists (whether in academia or in movements) and administrators in social affairs ministries. This was the first time social researchers focused on potential common traits that were not directly linked to the history of the social-democratic labor movement (Lister, 2009). Bergqvist et al. (1999) provide comparisons of gender and politics in all five Nordic cases, concluding with a balanced count of similarities and differences. They do not claim to study a Nordic model in this field.

1980s social democratic politics – emergence of the Nordic model in political public spheres

In the early 1980s, the cautious notion of the Swedish model was generalized for Norden. This was accomplished within SAMAK, the discussion forum for all the Nordic social democratic parties/organizations (Lundberg, 2006; Parr, 2007). Following committee work in 1981, the former Norwegian

finance minister, Per Kleppe, in 1982 presented a paper (to the SAMAK congress) entitled *The Nordic Model. An outline for discussion*. In the dry bureaucrat language of the administrative public sphere, he surveyed the main challenges to Nordic social democratic routine politics in the early 1980s.

The main external challenge was the lower average rates of world economic growth as well as the coming of newly industrializing, low-wage competitors. In addition, there were internal challenges, largely unanticipated consequences of labor's (and other governing parties') policies during the preceding 'Golden age': the fact that the various national 'Keynesian' varieties of economic policy making were less effective (stagflation); unruly grassroots at the factory level; and protests focusing on nature conservation.

Kleppe regarded the old model as a synthetic one, combining solidaristic wage-policy in collective bargaining, a welfare state safety net, 'Keynesian' economic policies, and redistributive arrangements. The new model he suggested was an upgraded version of the *cautious* Swedish model. The main Swedish representative on the SAMAK committee was Feldt, a clear proponent of the cautious – against the radical – version (Table 3.1). However, one point was shared with the radical version: the old model was regarded as outdated. But Kleppe's new model would pursue the cautious line, not push toward the radical WEIF alternative.

Kleppe's 'outline for discussion' only used the phrase 'Nordic model' in the title. In the main text, 'Scandinavian model' was the preferred label. He generalized the Norwegian and Swedish experiences, and to some extent the Danish one as well. It mattered little for his attempts to define a new model that Finland and Iceland most likely did not share all elements of the old model. For instance, their wage negotiations had been wound up with devaluation cycles (Mjøset, 1987). Kleppe was probably aware that the Finnish and Icelandic members of SAMAK were eager to follow and learn from the three leading Nordic social democracies. He could also reasonably assume that Iceland and Finland faced the same external challenges as the three others. Whether the internal challenges were similar for all SAMAK members was never discussed.

The analysis conveyed a deep sense of the administration/mobilization dilemma. Kleppe noted that some might consider it strange to discuss 'technical questions' such as the composition of state budgets and credit flows. But he stated as a fact that the economics experts are in control. If politicians did not interfere 'with the work of the "technicians," these "technicians" will strongly limit the politicians' chances of achieving their goals' (Kleppe, 1982: 15). Thus, a new model – like the old one – should be able to forge renewed links between an administrative elite and the movement's grassroots. The administration/mobilization dilemma should be solved by forging a closer connection between contentious and routine politics.

But at the same time, the quest for a new model was – as in the case of the cautious Swedish model – related to the labor parties' efforts to succeed as catch-all parties. Kleppe urged a Norden-wide discussion of what the

movement could do to mobilize voters to support the same political forces that had guaranteed welfare, equality, and security throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Kleppe's notion of the old model, like the earlier cautious Swedish model claim had little basis in research. As shown above, by 1980 researchers had come up with terms such as 'social democratic image of society' and 'Scandinavian development path.' But Kleppe's account shows no inspiration from such explorations of common traits. His political reference to a Nordic model was not a case of a concept circulating from the science sphere into politics.

Since the early 1980s, the Nordic model was increasingly on the agenda in the social democrat movement, especially in SAMAK. Two points, however, should be noted: First, SAMAK applied Chatham house-like rules, blocking circulation to the broader political public sphere (Parr, 2007: 33). Second, SAMAK was less concerned with common Nordic traits than with what the five countries could achieve together. In the 1980s, they discussed whether the Nordic countries could solve the new challenges by concerted action. But such Nordic concertation failed in the early 1990s crises, and SAMAK became more preoccupied with the chances that social-democratic principles might be reinforced via the EU level.

It took some time before the notion of a Nordic model became really influential in social and historical research. The 1980s saw the publication of a lot of follower works (Esping-Andersen, 1980, 1985, 1990, and various others), projects that had been conceived and started too early to be fully affected by the growing political attention to a Nordic model. Only since the late 1980s and through the 1990s has the term been more widely quoted in both political and science spheres. This circulation from the political to the science sphere turned the Nordic model into a boundary term.

The spread of the Nordic model as a boundary term since the 1990s

At the time, higher learning and research changed in important respects. The number of skilled social researchers grew, university departments and independent research institutes expanded. Economics had played a role in state planning since the late 1930s; now the younger social sciences followed suit. The university became a mass university, while the evaluation of research proposals became more systematic and funding more focused on value for society.

As for politics, government power increasingly shifted between social democratic and non-socialist coalitions. The cautious notion of the Nordic model seemed to function even with non-socialist governments. Social democratic parties were transformed into cartel parties sharing responsibility with the main non-socialist parties for tight economic policies and structural reforms. There was a political learning process: non-socialist parties

and think tanks gave up criticism and instead embraced the cautious model, holding that it could sustain employers' interest in growth and stability.

These broader changes form the background to a more subtle change in the science sphere. Through the 1990s, an increasing number of social researchers internalized the Nordic model to such an extent that it was written into their research proposals. They allowed a boundary term ('the Nordic model' or varieties thereof: 'Nordic welfare state,' 'Nordic capitalism') to be part of the outcomes they wanted to explain. They accepted the reality of an entity that the earlier followers had only explored on the basis of the work of the pioneers. Now, in contrast, the aggregation to Nordic common traits was accomplished before the research started. These researchers took the model for granted already when defining their research problems. For lack of a better term, we label them *new wave researchers*.

These researchers no longer asked whether all the Nordic cases could be subsumed under one concept. They reasoned like Kleppe and a corps of other social democratic politicians, generalizing the Swedish experience (somehow akin to Norway and Denmark) even for Finland and Iceland. If comparisons were made at all, they were loose comparisons, as defined above. Whatever qualifications followed in the course of the analysis; some ambivalent notion of the Nordic model survived in the conclusion.

Boundary terms spread because they facilitate communication across public spheres and establish common reference points in discourses. Their meanings differ across the various actors and groups that refer to them. The adoption of a boundary term as a scientific concept is not necessarily a problem, at least not if researchers treat it as a sensitizing concept, to be specified via strong comparisons. However, since the term is used across different discourses, it lends itself easily to loose comparisons. This again invites styles of generalization that are insensitive to actual cases. The new wave analyses often referred to the three Scandinavian countries, sometimes with Finland added, or all five Nordics. But for macro-units such as a country – however small – this implies that researchers ignore the specific contexts within which actors in the various countries operate. This is so regardless of how open the economy is and how many international regimes the state has committed itself to. Loose comparisons do not seriously address criteria for including cases, the period for which model claims are made, the issue areas included, and the properties involved.

New wave research appeared first in sociology and political science, both in qualitative and in quantitative projects. Although twitter-size assessments are unfair, two examples may be quoted. The project reported in Kauto et al (1999, 2001) used variables-based methods, analyzing regression net effects within specific social policy domains. The very brief concluding chapters fragment into unsystematic counts of subsections of social policies where the case countries differ as compared to subsections where they are similar. A later project for SAMAK provided five extensive country studies of qualitative analysis and descriptive statistics, but the final synthetic

report (Dølvik et al., 2015) portrays Nordic developments primarily in aggregate terms, thus failing to provide the strong comparisons that could have been constructed from the country studies. In both cases, it may well be that strong comparisons ended up as residuals because of strict time limits as funds for research began to run out. But the problem should be noted anyway.

Pioneers, followers, and new wave researchers should not be conceived as generations. In other words, even after new wave research appeared, there have been studies that approach the strong comparisons of the pioneers/followers. Examples are the Bergqvist et al (1999) study already mentioned, as well as the account of the ‘Nordic labor relations model’ by Bruun et al. (1992), and studies by American scholars Baldwin (1990), and Luebbert (1991), both of which also provide important comparisons with non-Nordic cases.

In the following, we discuss the consequences of the more frequent and wider circulation of the Nordic model boundary term between the political and science public sphere (summarized in Table 3.2). Inside the science sphere, the term inspired a larger range of disciplines, triggering research in line with their various disciplinary profiles. This implied that both the standard and the social-philosophical attitudes were more frequently represented. These profiles had less of tradition for comparison, so it was easy for researchers to take the ‘model’ for granted in the new wave sense. In the following, we investigate economics and one branch of history, representing the standard and social-philosophical approaches, respectively.

Nordic model for economists

The economics discipline seeks rigor through a combination of mathematical formalisms (usually constrained optimization) and a general theory of actor motivations (producers maximize profits, consumers maximize utility). This combination yields idealized models that are used as thought experiments.

Comparing economic models to models in physics, Cartwright (2007: Ch. 15) found that since economic models lack bridge principles that translate them into empirical experiments, the mathematical formalism chosen plays a more important role than in physics. Unlike with physics laws, internal validity comes at the cost of external validity. In what economists’ dub ‘toy economy’ models, assumptions about economic realities are stated in ways that fit the formalism. In economics, the prestige of modeling is so high that many scholars succeed in publishing work that ignores external validity.

When it comes to quantitative, empirical methods, the difference between economics, sociology, and political science is less pronounced. All these disciplines employ statistical analysis of large, non-experimental datasets. Historically, economics was the pioneer. However, unlike the other social sciences, modern mathematized economics has no tradition for case studies.

Comparative methods play no significant role. Strong comparisons contrast with most elements of the economics disciplinary profile.

The Nordic model first caught the interest of some academic economists. A dialogue with political science and sociology was facilitated by an interest in rational choice modeling in parts of these disciplines. Within political science, Michael Wallerstein already in the 1980s (with Adam Przeworski) combined historically informed work on labor and politics with considerable skills in economic modeling and quantitative data analysis. From the early 1990s, Wallerstein cooperated with Norwegian economist Kalle Moene.

Substantively, they studied topics that sociology and political science had brought up, especially drawn from the radical interpretation in continuity with the Rehn/Meidner model. But their method of analysis was different. Consistent with the disciplinary profile of economics, they used constrained optimization formalisms with econometric empirical checks. Like other new wave scholars, they took the Nordic model for granted. Like earlier research in the 1980s, they saw the model as being ‘in retreat.’ Later, they were less certain. They avoided the dilemma between the radical and the cautious interpretation (Table 3.1) by arguing that whatever the fate of social democracy in Europe, ‘Nordic lessons’ were highly relevant for social reformers elsewhere and particularly in the third world (Moene, 2008: 368).

After Wallerstein’s death in 2006, Moene continued along the same lines in the ESOP project (2007–2017) at the University of Oslo. The topic of Nordic lessons for third world countries had been investigated by pioneer Senghaas since the mid-1970s (Mjøset, 2007). It is a proof of the divergence between social science disciplines that the ESOP project never considered the lessons that had already been drawn in that project, led by Senghaas. One may guess that one reason was that Senghaas never employed constrained optimization models or statistical inference. In contrast, he pursued a series of case studies by means of strong comparisons.

The ESOP project spread selected findings into political and cultural-political spheres, at least in Norway. Still, the main repercussions of the project were internal to the international economics profession. Methodologically, the ESOP researchers demonstrated to other economists that the advantages of the Nordic countries could be modeled by toy economy techniques. They mostly modeled the small open Nordic economies taken in isolation. It is, however, equally possible to draw up a toy economy model of the world economy, choosing assumptions and mathematical form, concluding that Nordic capitalism is ‘cuddly capitalism’ (Acemoglu et al., 2012).

Such parallel toy economies are not competing theories. Each model is a thought experiment. There is no way to discriminate empirically between the various toy economies modeled, each of which depicts one way of thinking about various aspects of an economy. The ‘cuddly capitalism’ toy economy thought experiment runs counter to the ESOP idea of beneficial ‘learning from Norden’ in poor countries, but thorough *empirical*

investigations – moving beyond toy economy models – would be needed to answer that question. Stiglitz (2015) provided a reply with more case material on the United States, but he still basically pursued thought experimental modeling.

Somewhat later, applied macroeconomists also became concerned with the Nordic model. Many such experts had been involved in fiscal and monetary management of the Nordic economies under new conditions since the 1980s. The most relevant schools were varieties of Keynesianism, but all strands agreed that the region's varieties of centralized labor market bargaining are quite efficient institutions despite their breach of free-market principles (Andersen et al., 2007; overview in Erixon, 2011; Mjøset, 2011a).

We now turn to a specific humanities tradition, at the opposite end of the disciplinary spectrum from economics.

Nordic model for cultural turn humanities

Contemporary humanities contain several disciplinary profiles. We focus on the discipline of history, but even that discipline in itself is more diverse than economics. Modern historical science has traditionally been committed to archives-based research on aspects of national histories. From the 1960s student movement on, historians were also influenced by sociology/political science. Since the 1990s, the so-called linguistic or cultural turn implied additional influence from the aesthetic humanities.

History's disciplinary profile today combines these three impulses. First, process tracing based on archives and other sources allows reconstruction of chains of events tied together by singular causal conjunctures. Second, the social science impulse leads to histories of economic development, various social groups (workers, women), and international developments. This implies a historical study of contexts within which such historical processes are embedded. Third, the recent cultural turn requires interpretation of the historical evolution and impact of knowledge regimes.

The aesthetic humanities disciplines interpret human works of art. The cultural turn generalized such methods to the study of texts and artifacts. This analysis can be conducted in entirely formal terms, moving close to linguistics and cognitive science. But mostly, interpretation also involves judgments on the context of the work in terms such as '*Zeitgeist*' (*spirit of the age*), identity, or some existential archetype. Such terms may become boundary terms if they start to circulate between science and cultural literary spheres. At times, they are linked up with social philosophical theories of modernity within sociology, contributing their versions of the kind of synthetic accounts that we here study. We shall discuss two cases of such cultural studies-inspired history.

Swedish historians Bo Stråth and Lars Trägårdh both regard Nordic 'modernity' as a special case of Western modernity. They generalize the Swedish case, despite cursory remarks about differences to other Nordic cases

in certain respects. None of them conduct any strong internal Nordic comparisons. Both conduct some loose external comparisons with other areas of the West (Stråth with Germany, Trägårdh with both Germany and the United States).

Trägårdh's (1997) main external comparisons are with liberal United States and Christian democratic Germany. Their political cultures, he claims, stem from the generalization of the political privileges of the bourgeoisie (the United States) and the nobles (Germany) to the lower classes. Sweden, by contrast, leveled upper-class privileges down to the level of the peasants. His core category 'statist individualism' indicates that the 'rather universal drive' of 'striving for individual freedom and prosperity (life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness)' has been thoroughly institutionalized by the Nordic states. He also summarizes his overall comparison in a triangular form (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2011); Sweden fuses state and individual, ignoring the family; the United States fuses family and the individual, with skepticism against the state; Germany finally fuses the state and the family, ignoring the individual.

Stråth claims that Western modernity implies a tension between freedom and equality, which is solved in Nordic modernity through 'individualism with solidarity' (Stråth, 2012: 28). For instance, he suggests that when Nordic intellectuals/clergy mobilized tradition by constructing the 'figure of the peasant,' they reduced 'the conflict between freedom and equality' (Stråth, 2012: 29).

These formulas are quite similar, but Trägårdh emphasizes the individualist side more than Stråth. Trägårdh downplays as much as possible any autonomous impact of social mobilization and formation of associations within civil society, thus ignoring a long line of research (e.g., Jansson, 1988; Nielsen, 2009; Stenius, 2010). Maximizing the contrast to US developments, he regards Nordic civil society solely as a function of the state. To the extent the labor movement is mentioned, its success in the 1930s–1970s period is analyzed as an effect of conditions established earlier, such as the reformation and peasant influence on the state. (In this respect, the interpretation in Sanandaji (2015) is similar, but the analysis of the state differs.)

In contrast, Stråth (2012: 25) links Nordic modernity to 'images of a Social Democratic model,' implying 'progressive and egalitarian development,' including more economic and political elements. Still, even Stråth puts heavy emphasis on the historical conditions antedating the red/green alliances of the late 1930s.

Both Stråth and Trägårdh rely basically on cultural studies, histories of ideas, and political philosophy. Stråth, however, has a large publication list of historical studies that he can rely on. Full causal conjunctures are hardly discussed. Both scholars hint that the cultural matters they trace have explanatory relevance. But it is never demonstrated empirically that the added 'modernity' factors – pertaining to the knowledge regime – are necessary to correct earlier explanatory deficiencies.

History and strong comparisons

It should be emphasized that there are many recent historical contributions of relevance to the study of Nordic common traits that do not share such a strong cultural studies commitment. Rather, they mostly combine social science impulses with historical process tracing. Some of these studies (such as Hilson's (2008) historical overview and political scientist Knudsen's (2010) study of Protestantism and the origins of the welfare state) are on the verge of strong comparisons but often struggle to accommodate history's commitment to reconstruction of singular cases. Although it is unfair to comment on major historical contributions in just a few sentences, the following remarks must suffice.

It is striking that the Fellman et al. (2008) study of Nordic capitalism includes country chapters on Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden that apply the same economic history periodization, while the brief introductory and concluding chapters make no serious attempt to define properties and make comparisons within each period. The Christiansen et al. (2006) volume covers all five cases, providing many valuable comparisons within separate areas of the welfare state, but again, introductory and summary chapters fail to provide synthesis. (It should be emphasized that a similar criticism would apply to most of Mjøset, 2011b.) In this case, they do not provide a satisfactory analysis of complementarities between the various institutional complexes. Furthermore, an interesting attempt is made to reduce the importance of comparisons by suggesting that parts of the explanation rely on international networks and regimes of Nordic, European, and Western range. However, this balancing between regional and national explanatory factors is not carried out in sufficient detail. The role of domestic factors tends to be minimized with reference to a generalized critique of 'methodological nationalism,' one that possibly hits many earlier historical works on Nordic cases, but not the social science work as represented by the tradition from the pioneers.

Finally, with his study of the development of Nordic democracy, Nielsen (2009) does a masterly job of weaving together material from the four large Nordics (and partly even Iceland) in a net of impressionistic comparisons and selected case accounts. The conclusion provides an explicit and balanced discussion of 'one Nordic model – or several Nordic ones' (Nielsen, 2009: 568). Thus, is the most valuable historical work so far when it comes to accumulating case material according to topics and periods although provision of an explicit case/property matrix would be a breach of the more literary/philosophical style chosen by Nielsen for his magnum opus.

Generalization of the model since the 1990s

In the wake of troubles in the 1970s/1980s, converging groups of economic experts played crucial roles in reforms of tax/pension systems and other

structural reforms, bringing economic management on a new footing, with fiscal rules, central bank autonomy, European integration, and a focus on external surplus.

The macroeconomic interpretation mentioned above has been used to shore up both the two non-radical interpretations distinguished in Table 3.1. An upgraded liberal-conservative version argues that there were no alternatives to the cuts and austerity measures pursued during the periods of high unemployment since the 1990s. Austerity measures adapted the Nordic economies to the new external realities of EU single market integration, financial deregulation, and transition to a European single currency in the Eurozone. All five countries did well in the China boom, particularly 2001–2008.

The new mainstream expert consensus was blessed by the EU and the OECD (Sapir, 2006). In the early 2000s, it was generalized as a Nordic capacity for adjustment to whatever external shocks that might emerge. The revised model implied increased inequalities in income and wealth and higher average unemployment rates but was still celebrated as a liberal-democratic Nordic model of trust, consensus, and discipline. Unlike Anglo-American liberalism, the model was founded on trust in the state, and unlike continental models, it ‘defamilializes’ society by generalizing the dual-income family (cf. Trägårdh’s triangle). First confined to expert circuits, this interpretation gained more general attention after the 2008 financial crisis. It was also re-interpreted in line with liberal political philosophy and spread via liberal think tanks (Sanandaji, 2015; Gissurarson, 2018).

Since the profiles of economics and humanities interpretations are so different, cooperation is unusual. But we shall cover one striking attempt at synthesis. Klas Eklund has a prominent background on Sweden’s ‘bureaucrat right’ (*Kanslihögern*). He was earlier linked to SAP, state secretary under Feldt, author of economics textbooks, and is now a chief bank economist. In a pamphlet (Eklund, 2010) presented to the Davos World Economic Forum January 26–30, 2011, he outlined the new mainstream expert consensus. His analysis was shored up historically by Berggren and Trägårdh (2010).

Their main claim was that the self-realization/autonomy inherent in Nordic statist individualism (now dubbed ‘strong,’ ‘extreme,’ ‘radical’) equals the main principles of the market (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010: 13). Not solidaristic institutions, but rather such individualism explains why Nordic people are ‘more willing to accept the market economy both as consumers and producers.’ Nordic development in the twentieth century is here reduced to one goal: ‘to liberate the individual citizen from all forms of subordination and dependency within the family and in civil society.’ Thus, all main institutions, such as the welfare state, the health care, and educational systems, are expressions of ‘a long history of investing in individuals and providing access to resources that allow them to maximize their value in the

market place' (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010: 14, 17). The main difference from classical liberal political philosophy is that a strong state balances civil society.

While praising 'the fundamental coherence and vitality of Nordic capitalism,' their discussion of what other countries can learn is timid. They warn that reference to 'values' and 'culture' only will not be helpful, suggesting instead 'down-to-earth analysis of concrete institutions and policies' (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010: 24). They are sure that the Nordic 'social contract' sustains a resilient type of capitalism but consider it an empirical question whether that contract is 'strong enough to withstand the polarizing impact of immigration and increased diversity' (Berggren and Trägårdh 2010: 23). It is not the end of history after all; the model may still be under pressure.

As always, Iceland is interesting here. The cultural preconditions emphasized by cultural turn historians (reformation, the peasant figure) apply to Iceland too. But Eklund's analysis – as most analyses of Nordic common traits – did not include Iceland. Once Iceland is taken seriously as a case, it is plain that it did *not* display a strong adaptive capacity in the 2008 global financial meltdown. Its financial system crashed miserably. Thus, shared Nordic historical preconditions do not always translate into superior adjustment capacity, contrary to Gissurarson's (2018) claims.

Economists and cultural turn-oriented historians represent two different styles of decontextualizing generalization (standard and social-philosophical in Mjøset 2009). Their disciplinary profiles are both adverse to strong comparisons. These disciplines were inclined to formal or cultural generalizations, incompatible with a case-based, contextual strategy of generalization. Economists' generalizations come as toy economy models with questionable external validity. Their concepts are definitive (in Blumer's sense) only inside of the mathematical model. Cultural turn historians came up with formulas (freedom and solidarity/statist individualism) intended to tap a deep-seated political culture. They do not reflect on their epochal terms as boundary terms, thus failing to treat them as sensitizing concepts. Instead, they combine loose comparisons (mostly only external) with more or less idiosyncratic interpretations of the present pieced together from historical terms, political-philosophical concepts, and sociologies of modernity.

These economists and historians seem to end up in similar dilemmas. If Stråth wanted to link his analysis of the present to a radical political position, he would have to realize that a very similar analysis can be used to shore up a liberal position (cf. Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010, discussed above). As for the economists – as we saw – their modeling cannot decide whether one should regard the Nordic model as a template for third world countries or as a case of cuddly capitalism. The research is simply not sufficiently contextualized. Abstract and general frameworks fit all.

Conclusions

Circulating as a boundary term, the Nordic model attracted wider interest. Table 3.2 summarizes the interaction between science sphere developments (diversification in disciplinary attention within social science and the humanities) and political sphere developments (ideological divisions, administrative concerns).

The generalization of the cautious Swedish model to a Nordic model marks the turn into the second period. The transition between the second and third periods spanned all of the 1990s. Since then, we find historical, geographical, and disciplinary extensions in the science sphere, and a larger share of decontextualized generalizations. In political terms, the Nordic model was no longer considered exclusively as a social democratic one.

Although terms circulate from political public spheres to the science sphere, conceptions of the Nordic model within the science sphere are also affected by factors internal to that sphere. In social science and the humanities, various conceptions are increasingly insulated within different disciplines. Few scholars have the urge to discuss across disciplines. Those engaged in political and cultural disputes in public spheres outside of science can pick and choose from whatever discipline in the science sphere that legitimates the arguments they favor.

Our survey yields a rough guide to three main positions in contemporary debates. They parallel the three interpretations of the Swedish model in Table 3.1, and each position relates to the Table 3.2 periodization.

The radical interpretation turns Swedish social democracy at the peak of its power – Rehn/Meidner model to the 1976 WEIF proposal – into a norm (examples: Dow and Higgins 2013; Therborn, 2018; Andersson, 2015). In this view, the Swedish model is now a neoliberal one, the early post-war version at most survives as a political ideal on the socialist left.

The second, social democratic/centrist interpretation still traces the origins of the model to the 1930s, emphasizing the labor parties' influence in all Nordics. This reflects the second period. Although that model faced major challenges, and at times failed to mobilize new voter support for the catch all labor parties, it has still proven resilient under recent external challenges (cf. the SAMAK/FAFO-project, Dølvik et al., 2015).

The third interpretation is the revised liberal one exemplified not only by Trägårdh's synthesis but also by mainstream economic experts' statements. It emphasizes resilience since the 1980s but brackets the historical importance of the labor movements. Some varieties may even argue that the period of social democrat dominance was the cause of the 1970s/1980s troubles (Gissurason, 2018). To the extent it is extended historically, the main claim is that the most important specificities of the Nordic countries emerged before labor had any political influence (Fasting et al., 2011; Sanandaji, 2015). In this interpretation, any element of threats to the model is played down. There is no need to search for a new model.

Table 3.2 Emergence and circulation of synthetic Nordic model claims

Period (model claims made)	Science sphere		Politics	Communication across public spheres (Nordic model as a boundary term)	
	Historical extension of the model	Geographical extension			Science/disciplines
1 Swedish model (to mid-1970s)	1940s to 1960s	Sweden only	Economics early. Sociology/political science (pioneers) insulated in the science sphere	Social democratic networks	Mainly between Swedish social democratic administrators, LO, and party. 1970s: politics driven
2 Social democratic model (to late 1980s)	1930s to early 1980s	First Scandinavia, then Finland added, then all Nordics (SAMAK members)	Sociology/political science pioneers and followers. Early new wave research	Social democratic model, non-socialists critical	Social science conceptualization relatively insulated from politics and administration. Since mid-1980s, spread of the boundary term from politics into science
3 A model claimed by all (since 1990s)	Extension of time period forward and backward. Early modern period to present	All Nordics	All disciplines, particularly economics and history. New wave type research dominates	All parties, ideologies and interest groups embrace the model	A variety of controversies involving three main interpretations: left wing (cf. period 1), social democrat/centre (cf. period 2), liberal-conservative right (period 3)

But the celebration of resilience may not last long. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, a number of other new challenges appeared: a new economic cold war, decreasing capacity of great power cooperation, and multiple setbacks for EU integration. While the liberal-conservative Davos enthusiasm of the early 2010s still could count on China as the growth engine of the world economy, the new friends of the Nordic model will surely have to think twice. Even for the politicized claims to a Nordic model, proper periodization and contextualization of both external and internal challenges are unavoidable.

Note

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