4 The utopian trap

Between contested Swedish models and benign Nordic branding¹

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Introduction

While the Nordic countries are generally considered comparatively calm, they occasionally attract more intensive attention. For example, the image of Sweden became highly contested internationally as former US President Donald Trump in mid-February 2017 referred to a television program aired by Fox News that described Sweden in general, and the city of Malmö in particular, as disproportionately troubled by the allegedly negative effects of immigration and multiculturalism (Rapacioli, 2018; Truedson, 2018).² Trump's statement quickly spread across the world, leading also to heated exchanges in Sweden itself on the actual status of Swedish society domestically as well as the image of Sweden abroad, *Sverigebylden*, reflecting growing internal political polarization while highlighting the importance of transnational circulation of ideas and images: While most observers refuted the negative imagery as mostly based on 'fake news' and 'alternative facts,' others claimed Fox News' uncovered the realities of Swedish multiculturalism.³

There are naturally demonstrable social problems in Sweden today, just as in most societies and recent studies commissioned by the Swedish Institute confirm that the country's international reputation remains largely positive (Swedish Institute, 2019). Yet, there is also a growing trend identifying Sweden as an example of misguided, if not failed, integration, in combination with liberal or progressive values. This view is gaining currency in established news outlets as well as on social media and alt-right circles (Traub, 2016; Swedish Institute, 2017), recently complicated by the Swedish response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Baldwin, 2021; Swedish Institute, 2021, Auctante, forthcoming). This negative attention is not just motivated by more or less newsworthy events in Sweden itself. It is also driven by Sweden's long-time reputation as a policy 'model' for liberals and progressives across the world – not least in the United States as Democratic politicians such as Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Kamala Harris have expressed support for Nordic welfare policies. The recent wave of critical attention has naturally contributed to further cement this close association

between ‘Sweden’ and ‘progressive’ values generally, and the welfare state model in particular (Godeanu-Kenworthy, 2020).

Today, these progressive values as well as the welfare state model are generally *positively* connoted with all the Nordic countries, overtaking previous focus on Sweden (Nedergaard and Wivel, 2018; a recent example is Dorling and Koljonen, 2020). However, there have been rather few cases of comparable *negative* international media attention toward the other Nordic countries: The world reporting on the 2008–2011 Icelandic financial crisis (Chartier, 2011); the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy in 2005; and the protests against Norwegian sealing, whaling, and oil extraction from the 1980s and onward may be cited as such examples (see also Chapter 13 by Mads Mordhorst). But they appear both more limited in scope and less sweeping than the recurrent and often vague ‘Sweden-bashing’ which the ‘last night in Sweden’-imbroglio plays into. Nevertheless, these contentious images do share some important features (Marklund, 2017).

First, they would probably not generate as much global interest if they did not explicitly contrast with the preexisting and generally positive images of the Nordic countries as prosperous, peaceful, and open welfare states ranking high in various socio-economic indexes. Second, there is the idea that the welfare state model – either ‘Nordic’ or named after individual Nordic countries – not only embodies certain specific progressive values but has done so in a generally profitable way, not the least with regard to satisfaction with life and human development (Andersen, 2007; Greve, 2010; see also Marklund, 2013b).

Regardless of whether these rankings reflect reality very accurately or not, evidence as well as imageries of socio-economic problems in Nordic societies tend to appear more newsworthy and interesting than similar reports from other societies, as they contrast with the internationally widely held assumption that social ills would be marginal, if not entirely absent in such advanced welfare states (Pred, 2000). In a sense, Trump’s 2017 statements derived from a generally positive image of Sweden of the past, preconditioning the negative image of Sweden of the present. This mechanism can be described as a kind of ‘utopian trap,’ where the possibly exaggerated expectations of the absence of social problems can be rhetorically contrasted with the continuous persistence of old and generation of new social problems, even if relatively minor in international comparison (Marklund, 2013a).⁴

As such, the Nordic countries have played not only a number of contested but also remarkably stable roles on ‘the global marketplace of ideas’ (Åsard and Bennett, 1997), in a pattern of global circulation and media representation, where purposive ‘nation branding’ strategies have played a significant but often overstated role. These images reflect both domestic individual Nordic political needs, intra-Nordic rivalries, and collaborations and political and rhetorical purposes abroad. Here, the concept of ‘model’ has played a key discursive role, with a long history preceding its deployment with the Nordics (Alasuutari et al., 2018). In tracking the circulation of various

‘Nordic models’ – asking what political and social needs this ‘modelizing’ of Nordic societies have answered to – this explorative study seeks to provide a mapping of communication of conceptual usages of Nordic models, both national and interregional, in a selection of different types of materials, ranging from English language printed books via US press to English language academic journals.⁵ Second, the study seeks to analyze how and why Sweden has taken on a lead in this ‘modelization’ as illustrated by its evolution in US public debate. Third, the study outlines how this legacy of joint Nordic and Swedish models is used as a rhetorical resource in Nordic regional or transnational branding and individual Nordic national public diplomacy (Aronczyk, 2013; Valaskivi, 2016), highlighting its function infusing the globally circulating images of Nordic progressivism on the one hand and Nordic models on the other hand.

Mapping models

When taking an interest in the role played by these small peripheral Nordic countries on the global market of ideas, it is necessary to first track the scope of this attention to different national Nordic models – i.e., ‘Danish model,’ ‘Finnish model,’ ‘Norwegian model,’ ‘Swedish model’ – as well as other possibly competing international policy models. One way of mapping the field is provided by the Google Books Ngram Viewer, which charts frequencies of any set of comma-delimited search strings in Google’s text corpora, in this case in English language, due to its centrality in global communication (see Figure 4.1).

While this basic overview appears to confirm the disproportionate interest in the Swedish model, first taking off from circa 1970 and further increasing from circa 1980 and onward, we can also track a rapidly rising interest in the ‘Scandinavian model’ from circa 1975 to the early 1980s. Then it rapidly declines, rising again around 1990, followed by a minor decrease.

Figure 4.1 Graph of frequency of various ‘models’ between 1900 and 2000 from the corpus English with a smoothing of three.

Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer

From the mid-1990s, the references to the Swedish model go down, relatively speaking, while the references to the Nordic model as well as the Danish, Finnish, Norwegian models increase. A comparison with a general interest in the Nordic countries, *sans* the model, also confirms the disproportionate interest in the *Swedish model* above *Sweden itself*, while clearly indicating the steep increase in attention to Finland and Norway, not only due to their geopolitical and military significance during the Second World War but somewhat preceding the war (see Figure 4.2).

A more detailed survey of three influential and internationally highly circulated American nationwide newspapers – *The New York Times* (1851–2007), *The Washington Post* (1877–1994), *The Wall Street Journal* (1889–1993) illustrate these oscillations, at least in US debate (see the first column in Table 4.1). Many of these references are unrelated to the socio-political model and rather concerned with fashion models and classified ads for car dealers, kitchen appliances, furniture, etc.

How are we to understand this statistic? First, it does not include television, radio, internet, and film as arenas for circulation, means of communication, and sources of information. Neither does it isolate the socio-political model from other conceptual constructions coupling ‘Nordic’ with ‘models’ such as for example the frequent associations between the ‘model’ and various products as well as individuals, as mentioned above. It does not record relevant qualified phrases such as, for example, the ‘welfare model,’ the ‘social model,’ or the ‘political model.’ Furthermore, it does not cover other ways of expressing a coherent image of society which may resemble the Nordic model – such as the ‘Norwegian system,’ for example – or various ways of expressing exemplarity – such as ‘method,’ ‘way,’ ‘prototype,’ ‘alternative,’ ‘ideal,’ ‘experiment,’ or ‘example.’ Neither is it possible to determine without looking into greater detail whether a reference to the Nordic national or regional model is primarily normative or descriptive.

Figure 4.2 Graph of frequency of Nordic countries between 1900 and 2000 from the corpus English with a smoothing of three.

Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer

Despite these obvious limitations, the popular conception of the relative Swedish dominance vis-à-vis the other Nordic countries in US parlance can be verified with some degree of certainty. At the same time, the Nordic countries have not been widely overrepresented as *models* if compared to 'other' relevant socio-economic models, at least not in the nationwide news outlets selected for study here (see the first column in Table 4.1).

However, the Nordic models are comparatively more prevalent in English language academic publications, as listed in the JSTOR database (see the second column in Table 4.1). The first search presented in the second column below is inclusive, including all indexed titles to ensure basic compatibility with the searches of the newspapers. The results give only some 60 hits for the Nordic model (first mentioned in 1975), but 200 for the Scandinavian model (first relevant mention in 1946, followed by the next occurrence in 1968), and 362 for the Swedish model (first relevant mention in 1943, pertaining to the Swedish collective bargaining system on the labor market). Most of these instances refer to socio-political or welfare state models, confirming the notion that the international social science discussions on Nordic models as well as their various national embodiments have been considerable, reflecting their function in comparative political and social sciences. Yet, these figures must be compared with the far higher numbers for the American, Soviet, British, German, Chinese, and Japanese models, reflecting the centrality of these countries in the context of the global Cold War and evolving post-industrial society.

These usages of the model concept in conjunction with the Nordic countries refer to a wide range of different scholarly perspectives and social science theorizing – from 'varieties of capitalism,' 'corporate culture,' and 'worlds of welfare' via 'forms of political system' to 'multiple modernities.' The conceptualizations sometimes pertain to the economic, political, and social organization of the society under discussion. But in most cases, these phrasings concern some specific aspect of that society. The Swedish model, for example, is typically activated in analyses of the country's political system, referring to its administration, constitution, democratic system, forms of government, political parties, parliament, or to the socio-economic organization of the labor market, health system, social policy, and gender policy. This kind of modelization becomes demonstrably more common than the former usage from the 1970s and onward. A similar shift – away from concerns with democracy as to specific social affairs – is also visible in references to the Nordic and Scandinavian models in the same time frame. Throughout, however, there is a recurrent reference to Nordic policies as the result of purposive design and application of social science evidence in these academic applications of the model metaphor to describe Nordic societies.

To better track the shifts within this socio-political charge in the modelization of Nordic societies, the second search of JSTOR has been limited to key social science disciplines where model references pertaining to socio-economic models and specific social institutions are likely to

Table 4.1 Occurrences of various models in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and JSTOR database

	NYT, WP, WSJ	JSTOR (All Titles)	JSTOR (Selected Fields)
Danish model	50	49	33
Finnish model	9	37	26
Nordic model	8	59	44
Norwegian model	14	31	26
Scandinavian model	28	200	166
Swedish model	137	362	274
American model	1,568	1,707	969
British model	613	912	649
Chinese model	-	836	296
German model	533	886	492
Japanese model	347	633	363
Soviet model	604	1,634	882

Sources: ProQuest; JSTOR.

occur: The result of the search of economics (149 titles), history (294 titles), political science (146 titles), and sociology (121 titles) is presented in the third column in Table 4.1. The search shows that the Nordic model, the Scandinavian model, and the Swedish model are comparatively more common in these fields than either the Danish model, the Finnish model, or the Norwegian model, while the other models typically occur about half or less, with the notable exception of the British model which reaches the same level as the Nordic, Scandinavian, and individual Nordic models (see the third column in Table 4.1).

The Swedish model has thus been in *more* common usage than either the Nordic or the Scandinavian model in both English language academia and media. Also, the Nordic countries have been slightly overrepresented as *socio-economic models* if compared with other relevant models, raising the question of what political and social needs this modeling of Nordic societies have answered to and followed from.

New deal and middle way

How are we then to understand these shifts in modelization of the Nordic countries? Arguably, the Nordic countries did not feature very prominently internationally until the 1930s, neither individually nor as a group, except for the attention they generated in the context of certain international crises – such as in 1905, 1917, 1918, 1920/1921 – as well as diplomatic agreements, exhibitions, jubilees, and state visits. During the height of the Great Depression, however, public intellectuals, journalists, and politicians in the West, not the least in the United States, began to question capitalism and liberalism, generating a new genre of looking for policy-oriented solutions in other societies. Many American intellectuals and politicians looked

to totalitarian states, such as Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union (Pells, 1973; Schivelbusch, 2006; Patel, 2016). Yet others took an interest in the Nordic countries, as they appeared to combine a controlled form of capitalism with parliamentary democracy. As Kazimierz Musiał (2002) has shown, this interest also focused on the Nordic countries for joining modernity and tradition, progress with moderation. While interest in the Nordic countries took off already in the early 1930s, Sweden moved to the fore in US debate from the mid-1930s with the 1936 publication of American journalist Marquis Childs' book *Sweden: The Middle Way* (1936; see also Kastrup, 1985: 43–45; Ohlsson, 1992; Ottosson, 2002; Marklund, 2009a).

The concept of the 'middle way' as employed by Childs to analyze the Nordic countries had already been activated as a byword for US President Franklin D. Roosevelt so-called Second New Deal in 1935. In the early years of the New Deal, the pragmatic attitude of the Roosevelt administration toward mitigating economic and social crisis received widespread public support. However, as the 'Brain Trust' of Roosevelt advisers proposed universal health care, unemployment benefits, increased labor market regulation, state-trade union collaboration, and higher taxation on interstate trade, business circles, and conservatives attacked the administration's efforts as 'un-American' totalitarianism. In this context, the New Dealers sought new ways of presenting the Administration's proposals as being small-scale, local and pragmatic, far removed from any totalitarian planning. For example, John Dickinson, a prominent lawyer close to the administration published in 1935 a book entitled *Hold Fast the Middle Way*, arguing that the New Deal embodied American values of moderation and pragmatism (Dickinson, 1935; see also Schlesinger, 1960: 647ff). Childs' book served to pin Dickinson's rather vague concept to the tangible results of the small Nordic countries in controlling capitalism without imperiling democracy (Kastrup, 1985: 61; Hilson, 2006; Marklund, 2010; Stadius, 2013).

Looking back at the Nordic euphoria of the 1930s, American-German political scientist and sociologist Dankwart A. Rustow argued that 'Sweden's economic and social policies appeared to have realized the fondest dreams of large masses in Western civilization' (Rustow, 1955: 3). While even the most enthusiastic US proponents of Nordic policy exemplarity usually emphasized that the Nordic countries were too small, too homogeneous, and too unique to provide direct models to the United States, the generally positive image proliferated. In fact, this enthusiastic reporting somewhat worried the press officials at the American-Swedish News Exchange (ASNE) in New York (Markham, 1932). They feared that overly positive accounts could generate unrealistic expectations which in its turn could easily turn into liabilities as they attracted hyperbole, jealousy, and ridicule, an early example of the risks presented by the utopian trap (Kastrup, 1985: 62).

Others embraced the positive views. Swedish social reformer Alva Myrdal (1941) suggested, for example, that Swedish population and family policy

could be generalized to combat the spread of totalitarianism. Her husband, Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal (1941), relied upon this interesting interplay between exemplarity and experimentality associated with the Nordic countries when he called Sweden his ‘population laboratory’ (Sellin, 1938). While marginal, the ideas on Nordic exemplarity became influential enough for skeptics to emerge: Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter (1976 [1942]: 325) – then in the United States – suggested in 1941 that it would be ‘...absurd for other nations to try to copy Swedish examples: the only effective way of doing so would be to import the Swedes and to put them in charge’ (see also Joesten, 1943).

Cold War and Swedish model

Naturally, the Second World War affected the US images of all the Nordic countries in fundamental ways, as evidenced by the graph in Figure 4.2. Danish and Norwegian information activities in the United States largely succeeded in relaying positive images of resistance and non-collaboration, while Finland’s case was decidedly more complicated. Sweden’s reputation declined following US criticism of Swedish neutrality. It became a delicate task for Swedish post-war public diplomacy to combine the positive ‘middle way’ imagery of interwar Swedish domestic policies with wartime and post-war Swedish foreign policy (Undén, 1947).

Nils Andrén and Yngve Möller (1990: 69–70; see also Nilsson, 1950) have described this as an attempt at ‘ideologically motivating Sweden’s choice of role between the two blocks, launching the Swedish model as an alternative of a particular value as an image to copy.’ While Undén did not explicitly speak of the Swedish model, Swedish officials at the time sought to align internal and external policies with one another through the unifying lens of the generally positive foreign views of the former (Hedin, 1946; Lindblom, 1948). In fact, Swedish US-based public diplomacy played a key role in modeling Sweden, as the ASNE collaborated in publishing University of Alabama professor Hudson Strode’s (1949; see also Kastrup, 1985: 154) book *Sweden – Model for a World*, which explicitly spoke of Swedish society as exemplary, even though the author somewhat distanced himself from this conclusion in the preface.

Generally, the Nordic countries enjoyed moderate, if mostly positive, press in the United States at the time. Yet, increasingly negative reporting on the domestic policies of Sweden also began to emerge arguing that Sweden had moved away from middle way of the 1930s into full-fledged socialist planning. These accounts of Swedish domestic policies were now firmly located in the Cold War security universe. While US military observers in the late 1940s conceived of Sweden as well equipped to guarantee the security of NATO’s Northern flank, Swedish attention to economic planning and social welfare was now assumed to make Sweden less prosperous and thus militarily weaker.

In view of the need to present the Nordic countries to an educated Anglophone audience globally, the Nordics themselves identified the interwar reputation for progressive social policies as a unique selling point, as evidenced in the publication of *Freedom and Welfare* (Nelson, 1953). While rejecting the accusations of socialism, *Freedom and Welfare* reconfirmed the interwar association with pragmatism, prosperity, and peacefulness, claiming that ‘the Northern peoples are realists, and in their “social engineering” they have never followed any one general formula’ (Nelson, 1953: 38–39). In US 1950s social science literature, the Nordic societies gradually evolved into ideal types of both the welfare state and compromise politics, which both the American and the Soviets were expected to converge with (Rustow, 1955; Myrdal, 1960).

While there is little evidence for any Soviet interest in Nordic models at the time, actual Nordic policies did interest policymakers at least in the United States, where ASNE continued to promote information on how peaceful labor relations had evolved in Sweden. The 1959 Swedish pension reform, the subsequent establishment of investment funds in 1960 to boost the productive sectors of the economy (pursuant to the Rehn-Meidner Model, as developed in 1951), and the almost complete labor peace seemed to support the idea of the welfare state as the superior method by which to guarantee stable economic growth. These policy models interested Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy in preparation for the 1960 elections. Naturally, this made contemporary US perceptions of Sweden as a prosperous society a problem for Kennedy’s opponents. President Dwight Eisenhower made passing comments about ‘a very friendly country’ – initially believed by many to have referred to Denmark – which follows ‘a socialist philosophy and whose rate of suicide has gone up almost unbelievably.’ In a clever rhetorical reversal, the President claimed the interwar ‘middle way’ for Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon, while pinning socialism to the Nordics and, by extension, the Democrats (Wiskari, 1960; Tumin, 1961; Andersson, 2009; Rom-Jensen, 2017).

A *wealthy* and *socialist* Nordic country, such as Sweden, thus proved rhetorically more dangerous to the welfare state critics in the 1960s, than Nordic *freedom* and *welfare* had been in the 1950s, confirming yet again the salience of the utopian trap. After winning the 1960 presidential elections, the Kennedy Administration did, in fact, take a closer look at Swedish taxation and labor policies, described as the policies ‘a free-enterprise welfare state,’ rather than socialism – this formulation, in fact, originating with the ASNE (Kastrup, 1985: 299–300). The study trips of US administrators as well as British trade unionists to Sweden in 1962 resulted in a great deal of attention toward Swedish policies as well as the establishment of the Advisory Committee on Labor-Management which received several Swedish labor and business delegations. While it is difficult to assess the actual policy impact of these relations, contacts established in this context proved fruitful, especially with Walter Reuther, which later led to policy exchanges between Tage Erlander and Olof Palme with Hubert Humphrey, Lyndon

B. Johnson's Vice President (Rom-Jensen, 2017). Policy attention was also reflected in academic analysis. For example, Andrew Shonfield's *Modern Capitalism* (1965) influentially included Sweden as a case in his analysis of different types of capitalism, which exercised a strong impact on comparative politics and comparative political economy for years to come, eventually influencing the more recent Varieties of Capitalism literature.

Welfare state criticism

While the other Nordic countries perhaps did not attract as much positive attention as Sweden in the United States during the early 1960s, they did not suffer from the gradual reversal of this reputation by the early 1970s either. Despite all the efforts of the ASNE to the contrary, Sweden was increasingly perceived in the United States as socialist, mostly as a result of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme's critique of the American military involvement in Vietnam, the social democrats' ideological emphasis upon 'economic democracy,' and American social science radicals, actively looking for 'socialist' alternatives to US policy models (Fleischer, 1967; Rosenthal, 1967; Jenkins, 1968; see also Tomasson, 1971). Emerging US counter-culture elites took an interest in 'progressive' or 'radical' alternatives to US capitalism and consumerism in Western Europe, including Sweden, thus reinforcing the socialist stereotype, possibly beyond its actual reach, as noted by Susan Sontag in 1969 (Marklund, 2009b). Originally rather vague and often bemused themes on Swedish boredom and Swedish sin in the 1960s, sometimes explicitly following from the 1960 'Eisenhower-hypothesis' on the allegedly negative social consequences of the welfare state (Arnberg and Marklund, 2016), gradually fused into more alarmist reports on 'Sweden's surrealistic socialism' by the mid-1970s (cf. *Time*, 1976). These accounts primarily referred to heavy taxation and bureaucratic regulation as systemic faults of the welfare state, and by this time, Sweden had transformed in US debate as epitomizing the archetypical welfare state.

At the same time, serious international academic interest in the Nordic countries boomed by the mid-1970s due to the centrality of the welfare state in shaping these societies, a factor which also played a significant role as the Swedish model gradually entered domestic political usage in Sweden itself, from the mid-1970s and onward (see Chapter 5 by Andreas Mørkved Hellenes). The concept of the Scandinavian model became a standard reference for the fiscal, taxation, and labor market policies of the Nordic countries, which were often somewhat misguidedly conceived of as following Swedish precedents. However, as Sweden and the other Nordic countries – as most of western Europe – experienced economic downturn, re-assertive business interests, and recurrent labor market conflict from the late 1970s and culminating in the early 1980s – the relative absence of which had been one of the Scandinavian/Swedish model's unique selling points in the past – the reputation of Sweden's successful combination of prosperity and security began to wane internationally, not the least in the eyes of Swedish observers

(Downie Jr., 1981; see also Korpi, 1980), but this view appears also somewhat exaggerated as Sweden hardly experienced a more severe crisis than comparable western societies, in what appears a replay of the utopian trap.

These oscillations confirm the close association between perceived and expected performance in the global circulation of Nordic models. Again, as Sweden and Finland suffered from an economic downturn in 1991, American economic and political commentators often referred to the former country as having succumbed to ‘a particularly virulent form of Eurosclerosis,’ to paraphrase an expression of Walter Korpi’s, while Finland’s crisis was more directly associated with the fall of the Soviet Union (Samuelson, 1993). Having been used as a model in the past also contributed to Sweden’s usefulness as a warning example in the present: In the early 1990s, numerous articles in *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* argued that the Swedish model produced similar shortcomings as communism, often relaying statements by Swedish economists, such as Assar Lindbeck and Anders Åslund (e.g., Frankel, 1990; Hoagland, 1990; Horowitz, 1990). Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson (1990) responded with an open letter in *The Washington Post*, protesting the view of the Swedish model as ‘socialist,’ pointing out that the country had always had an ‘open market economy.’

While Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s (1990) academically highly influential *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* clarified both the association between the Nordic welfare states and *capitalism* as well as *social democracy*, the framing of the Swedish model as *socialism* had become firmly established in global public discourse by this time. *The Wall Street Journal* (1991) regarded the bourgeois electoral victory that year, otherwise marked by financial turmoil in Finland and Sweden, as evidence of ‘Swedish voters are finally tiring of something the world’s left has long praised, the “Swedish model” of socialism.’ Instead, the newspaper noted, ‘talk of the “Danish model” of economic recovery has replaced the “Swedish model” of a cradle-to-grave welfare state,’ arguing that ‘the Danish experience also could set a precedent for states such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia looking for ways to develop their small economies’ (Forman, 1991). While Sweden’s reputation was fading by the early 1990s, the notion of Nordic exemplarity had become so firmly established that the decline of one Nordic model society – Sweden – quite naturally transformed into the expected rise of another – Denmark.

Branding Nordic progress

Exemplarity – the Nordic model and its derivatives – has thus been both an asset and a liability in the global circulation of the image of Nordic countries as indicated by the recurrence of utopian traps detailed in this study. Today, by contrast, Nordic nation branding professionals apparently assign a considerable degree of significance of the model as a brand in itself. As the Nordic Council of Ministers decided to launch in 2014, a new strategy for the ‘international profiling of Scandinavia’ globally under the joint initiative

‘Team Norden,’ ‘the Nordic perspective,’ and ‘the Nordic model’ is explicit to be presented to the world in international fora such as G20, IMF, and the World Bank. The reason for this initiative is to be found in global interest in the Nordic countries, as ‘we appear to have answers to some of the questions the world is posing itself right now – how to build an open society capable of progress and of coping with crises,’ concluding that ‘[w]e should respond positively to this curiosity and use it as a source of inspiration for further social improvements’ (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2014).

Again, as in the early 1950s, it is thus the alleged foreign interest that promotes the joining of forces to present the Nordic countries to the world. In the 60 years that have passed, the joint Nordic values of freedom and welfare have been replaced by concepts such as progress and openness. A complicating factor, however, is that the Nordic countries are today being used (positively) for rather different ends by different actors internationally (*The Economist*, 2013; Moody, 2016).

While the Nordic countries quite predictably attract criticism from populists and conservatives due to the esteem they enjoy among progressives and liberals, there is another complicating factor in branding the Nordic countries jointly today: there is a wide-ranging debate within the Nordic countries as to the more precise character of the recent domestic transformations of the Nordic model. Some view the typically liberal reforms of the 1990s and 2000s as the main reason for continued Nordic economic success. Others conclude that the Nordic model has, in fact, been substantially weakened by deregulation, New Public Management, privatization and now needs to be ‘rebuilt’ or ‘renewed’ (Greve and Kvist, 2011; Kananen, 2014; Ivarsson Westerberg et al., 2014; for contrary views, see Lindbom, 2011; Rothstein and Ahlback Öberg, 2014).

While positive accounts still abound, there is also a marginal but growing international and not necessarily right-wing discussion as to whether the Nordic countries – despite their high ranking in numerous indexes – do live up to their global reputation of being good, open, and safe societies for all, following recurrent reports on rising inequality, growing right-wing populism, increasing crime rates, and persistent structural discrimination, to not mention the ecological footprint of the Nordic countries (Brown, 2008; Booth, 2014; Moore, 2014). This genre reflects also a vague sense of self-doubt proliferating within the Nordic countries too, to some extent echoing commonplace concerns with post-truth politics, populism, and protectionism in the face of the challenges of globalization, concerns which conceivably contrast with the Nordic countries overall socio-economic performance (Koivunen and Ojala, 2021). In addition, there appears to be a sense of disparity among the Nordic countries on several issues, especially their different public responses during the 2015 European refugee crisis, where Sweden is often cited as an outlier in terms of ‘generosity,’ even if actual policies have tended to converge toward more restrictive levels since (Eakin, 2014).

How may then the Team Norden branding effort deal with such internally Nordic as well as inter-Nordic fragmentation? Allowing for the possibility

of divergent Nordic *policies*, the strategy of choice this far has been to concentrate the framing of the branding narrative upon largely shared Nordic *values* – quite irrespectively of how the individual Nordic societies seek to politically approximate these values.⁶ Similarities with regard to values obscures divergences with regard to policies. In the strategy document for the international branding of the Nordic region for 2015–2018, entitled *The Nordic Perspective*, the focus is upon promoting five specific Nordic values: Openness, trust, creativity, sustainability, and compassion/tolerance/equality (see the left figure in Figure 4.3) (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015).

The Nordic values as outlined in the Team Norden effort are to some extent coterminous and even interchangeable with the Swedish ‘core values’ [*kärnvärden*] which have since 2008 been placed at the center of Swedish public diplomacy and branding efforts under the aegis of the Nämnden för Sverigedokumentation utomlands. Departing from the observation that earlier Swedish public diplomacy has lacked a clear thematic stand, passively reacting to whatever positive or negative opinions which may circulate in global views on Sweden, liberal editor, politician, and former Director General of the Swedish Institute, Olle Wästberg (2011), commissioned the search for a more proactive platform for Sweden information abroad. The resulting platform, launched in 2008, identified four core values as characteristic for Sweden: Openness, authenticity, care, and innovation (see the right figure in Figure 4.3). These values in their turn provide the basis for the ‘position’ of ‘progressivity – a will to improve’ [*progressivitet – en vilja att förbättra*] which is assigned a key role in this post-modern search for a common denominator of Swedishness (Swedish Institute, 2008: 7–8).

Figure 4.3 The Nordic perspective and Swedish progressivity.

Sources: Nordic Council of Ministers, *The Nordic Perspective* (2015); Swedish Institute, *Sverigebilden 2.0* (2008)

While the Swedish platform from 2008 was explicitly stating that these values were unique to Sweden, they resemble closely the later Nordic perspective. Here, the branding effort appears to reflect Nordic social values, at least as reflected by the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS confirms the existence of a Nordic sub-region of 'Protestant Europe,' with Sweden as the most profiled case – characterized by exceptionally low traditional-survival values and exceptionally high secular-rational-self-expression values (Figure 4.4) – a predilection which is also underscored by the recent mapping of the shifting, more liberal values of recent migrants to Sweden (Institute for Future Studies 2019). In this mental mapping of sorts, these shared values apparently underpin the possibly divergent policies which constitute the welfare state and Nordic model. The joint political as well as branding appeal is obvious, as may be evidence from the consistently high rankings of 'soft power' accredited to the Nordic countries in international lifestyle magazine *Monocle's* (2017) annual Soft Power Survey.⁷

Conclusion

The strong connection between the welfare state, progressive values, and the Nordic countries has increasingly been used also in the international outreach efforts of the Nordic countries. This association is frequently invoked in commercial contacts between Nordic producers and service providers and increasingly environmentally and socially oriented consumers globally, not the least in Asia (Arup, 2010). Reversibly, semiofficial attempts at public diplomacy during the Swedish center-right governments of 2006–2014, respectively, tended until recently to refer to the Nordic model rather than the Swedish model, positively embracing novel concepts such as the 'Nordic Way' launched at the World International Forum in Davos 2011.

The welfare state appears to have become less Swedish and more Nordic throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In the same way that the welfare state had assumed a 'socialist' hue due to its Swedish associations in the 1960s, its Nordic connection has been used to somewhat dilute its social democratic veneer in Sweden. While at least the Swedish labor movement has viewed the previous center-right government's interest in the 'Nordic' welfare state as an attempt to obscure the social democratic origins of the welfare state and to claim a share in its rise, both the Moderate Party and the Social Democratic Party brand the Nordic model as a viable response to the challenges of globalization (cf. Sandberg, 2013; Dølvik et al., 2014).

It is, therefore, interesting to note how the leading party of the preceding center-right government, the conservative Moderate Party, used the concept of *Sverige – Föregångslandet* (Sweden – The pioneering country) in its ultimately unsuccessful 2014 election campaign. Similarly, the incoming red-green coalition's Prime Minister Stefan Löfven drove home the same point in the government policy statement after having won the elections,

Figure 4.4 World Values Survey 2015.
Sources: World Values Survey (2015)

specifying that the *Swedish* model should be presented before the world, while the Moderate Party in April 2019 offered its political platform under the caption of the ‘new’ Swedish model, signifying the continued domestic importance of this originally externally oriented concept.

The image of the Nordic model, the individual Nordic countries, as well as the welfare state as such are becoming jointly politically recharged again, at the same time as there are tendencies toward competition and fragmentation remaining in between the Nordic countries with regard to exemplarity. Attracting attention abroad serves as evidence of success for politicians at home. There appears always to be at least one Nordic country excelling on one parameter of socio-economic performance or another – thus facilitating the Nordic countries’ serving as each other’s ‘branding lifebuoys’ – at least as long as the group altogether performs comparatively well (Marklund, 2013a). This may, in fact, serve as an independent factor in explaining the region’s continued policy attractiveness and modelization potential: Even if individual Nordic countries may conceivably suffer from problems and exhibit less successful policy choices, the multiple experiments conducted by Nordic countries as a group serve as an opportunity to reconfirm the paleofuturological stereotype on the global market

of ideas of the Nordic countries as imaginary testing grounds, social laboratories, and experiment stations for future politics. For this reason, and irrespectively of which figure of thought appears attractive in confronting common political and social challenges – the middle way in the 1930s and 1950s, the welfare state model in the 1940s to the 1990s, or progressive values in the 2000s – the utopian trap appears to be continuously at work, especially with regard to Sweden, attracting negative attention where there is positive expectation.

Notes

- 1 This work was supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (Project 8018-00023B).
- 2 ‘Stockholm Syndrome’, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rqa-IgeQXQgI> [accessed April 13, 2021]
- 3 For example, the Swedish condition – *svenske tilstand* – became a feature of Norwegian public debate in the 2017 parliamentary elections.
- 4 This is also a primary reason for why Swedish cultural diplomats often sought to moderate the high hopes associated with the middle way imagery in the 1930s and why Swedish public diplomats and politicians expressed sometime caution with regard to the Swedish model imagery in the 1970s and 1980s. With regard to the latter, see Chapter 5 by Andreas Mørkved Hellenes.
- 5 This part is a reduced sample of a pilot study in digital humanities, tracking the concept of the Nordic model as well as other relevant policy models, entitled “Mapping Models: The Shifting Fates of the Nordic Model on the Global Market of Ideas,” originally presented at Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies 103rd Annual Meeting May 2–4, 2013, San Francisco Hilton Hotel and the UiO:Norden conference on Global Challenges, Nordic Experiences, University of Oslo, 20–21 March 2017. During the finalization of this chapter, it has come to my attention that a similar research design is employed by Koivunen et al. (2021) in their chapter ‘Always in Crisis, Always a Solution? The Nordic Model as a Political and Scholarly Concept’, in A. Koivunen and J. Ojala (eds.), *The Nordic Economic, Social and Political Model: Challenges in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge), 1–19.
- 6 Personal communication with Bodil Tingsby, 23 September 2015.
- 7 In the 2017/2018 ranking Finland reached position 18, Norway 15, Denmark 11, and Sweden 8.

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