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Uses of the Past;
Nordic Historical Cultures in a Comparative Perspective

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Norden Unbound

The representation of Nordic cultures has a historical reputation that stretches from an older bellicose layer to a modern welfare dimension. Images and narratives span the Vikings and the Thirty Years' War to a Nordic welfare state characterised by a generous public sector, gender equality, strong child protection and so on – all of which are communicated within Norden and abroad. A strong and long prevalent idea of cultural similarity based on a shared Nordic culture can be argued.

Yet, history in Norden is, like elsewhere, marked by differences in class, gender and regional affluence which are negotiated by cultural representations. This is done everywhere, but at different nodes and with different means. *Lieux de memoires* such as memorials, museums and rituals combine mental and material spaces with reference to a meaningful past (Nora & Kritzman 1996). Chronotopes, like the Viking Age, create a unity of values, space and time (Bachtin 1981). The stories and representations reaching hegemonic strength hence look very different in different countries. The Nordic states themselves have had relatively varied experiences of state-making and violence which, in spite of contemporary similarities in political culture, are accordingly reflected in different historical cultures. Perhaps there is less in common than the Scandinavian rhetoric suggests?

For over a decade studies of the uses of the past have been a prominent trait of cultural research when it comes to fields such as nationalism, monuments, museums, commemoration and popular culture. Quite surprisingly, reflections on public historical culture have not been de-nationalised by comparative approaches to the same extent as research on nationalism. The competence needed for analysing public historical culture is multidisciplinary and thus easily fragmented. There is therefore a pressing need for trans-national and trans-disciplinary action to connect research and knowledge.

Relevant research does exist and is brought together in anthologies, although these have rarely been utilised to answer cross-disciplinary and comparative questions. Investigations into monumental representations in historical culture, the *lieux de memoire*, have been ignited by Pierre Nora and others following in the lead, but rarely have Nordic experiences been related to European cases (Nora &

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Kritzman 1996; Isnenghi & Agosti 1997; Csáky 2000; François & Schulze 2001; Adriansen & Schartl 2006; Frykman & Ehn 2007; Aronsson 2009).

Two exceptions to this rule are Holocaust studies and research on national museums (Karlsson & Zander 2003; Knell et al. 2010). These reveal a new drive for comparative reflection – something that this special thematic section seeks to reinforce with contributions (by research) on the uses of the past with instances of both intra-Nordic and international comparative potential. The invited themes were:

- images of Nordic history produced in Europe and overseas;
- institutionalised historical culture in museums negotiating politics and knowledge;
- public debates on uses of the past, construction of canons and curricula;
- the public role of the past in celebrations, jubilees and education; and
- the popular uses of the past in re-enactments, local societies and theme parks.

Hence the contributions were invited to test the long-standing tension between a shared Nordic culture against the existence of a strongly nationalised historical culture as well as challenges from a constructivist attack on both as part of a post-modern situation, relativising both or at least adding multi-cultural and post-colonial discourses.

The priority for institutionalised culture emerges because in those cases a more thorough negotiation has to precede the realisation and hence entail and reveal the social embeddedness of historical culture. The power of commercial popular cultural might be stronger but is less marked by the quality of negotiation across political, cultural and economic logics to reach for existential desires.

This thematic section will add to the conversation on the dynamics of historical cultures with its articles on Nordic experiences of uses of the past in a European and international context. It has never been exactly clear what to incorporate in the Nordic, Scandinavian or Baltic area. How are unity construed and difference dealt with to reconstruct and renegotiate national identity? This ambivalence has been productive and transported images and values across borders and spheres. Different images and definitions have been connected to various goals.

Musealised Landscapes

Norden has been portrayed in narratives, images and public representations as a region and as a concept over a period of more than 200 years. Images from outside communicate with self-produced images and so-called factual history in several interconnected cultural negotiations (Grandien 1987; Stråth & Sørensen 1997; Raudvere et al. 2001; Arvidsson et al. 2004; Stadius 2005; Sørensen & Nilsson 2005,). A communal past of two belligerent conglomerate mediaeval states wrestling between a complex union and attempting hegemony through war sets the

long-term scene where ideas of the impact of the cold climate, brutal Vikings, strong women and a protestant and democratic culture set the frame. Somewhere in the 18th and 19th centuries harsh competition on the battlefield was changed for the cultural negotiation of shared brotherhood, strong enough to live through a series of secessions, creating Norway, Finland and Iceland without internal war. Yet Sweden is the only state not sharing the Second World War experience of occupation, making its nationalism the least articulated.

We may ask how images of both national and regional identity have been utilised in the periphery of rapid change from very poor to affluent conditions, during a period when the region has had to adapt to challenges in a changing world, namely by deploying culture and history to negotiate and communicate new understandings of political and cultural identity. How important has the whole idea of a Nordic community been in creating relatively egalitarian and non-aggressive neighbourhoods? Are the various elements in the historical cultures drawing on the same – or on different – directions in these respects?

International perspectives in the field are still mainly caught in the circle of nationalism and heritage understood as either unique but parallel processes in each country or as parts of a universal modernisation trajectory. Several weighty readers provide perspectives on museums, nations and nationalisms (e.g. McIntyre & Wehner 2001; Preziosi & Farago 2004; Bennett 2004; Carbonell 2004). In the Nordic context, the literature is slight but growing and, with a few exceptions, operates only within national contexts (Amundsen et al. 2003; Ingemann and Hejlskov Larsen 2005; Alzén and Aronsson 2006; Eriksen & Jón Viðar 2009; Ekström 2009; Kayser Nielsen 2010). The literature on memory and nationalism is more comprehensive (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1992; Nora & Kritzman 1996; Gellner 1999; Hroch 2000; Smith 2001). The discussion of the relationship between history proper and the public cultural heritage has been animated by both questions of vulgarisation and ownership (Lowenthal 1996; Barkan & Bush 2002; Hodgkin & Radstone 2006). Analyses of narration and performance range from narrative theory to visitor evaluation (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Ricoeur 2004). Lately, the contributions of popular and commercial culture have been investigated (De Groot 2009).

Whilst the national dimension has quite understandably been emphasised and analysed by researchers of national history in the 19th and 20th centuries, the actual national cultural homogeneity and state control has been exaggerated and to a varying degree been more of a programme and utopia. The state control over public images, in part through the formation of cultural policies, heritage institutions and museums, is far from total: the narratives and functions must have a more negotiating character in praxis in order to be nationally integrative. Already in the early 19th century, museums worked within a complex setting of "hybrid" forms of cultural representations: the market place, wax cabinets and funfairs, industrial exhibitions, private collections, and dedicated associations for regional culture

were clearly visible. From the citizen's perspective, as well as for museum reformers, the public landscape was fluid and hybrid – prefiguring a post-modern description. As to content, it had to negotiate difference to foster unity, where class disparity, gender inequality and foreign ambitions and claims were at play. The creation and persistence of a transnational cultural heritage provides a vital platform for integrative and sometimes expansionist endeavours to negotiate historical change: to what (changing) extent is a Nordic, European and global dimension present in historical culture?

The carriers of Norden as an idea are manifold: political rhetoric, landscape paintings, artists, authors, cultural institutions, the branding of places. To what extent are they working within the same framework or general idea of Norden, exploring different facets and reinforcing the general imaginary by adding to the concert? To what extent is Norden a "*Mädchen für alles*" allowing for the construction and exploitation of any message from Aryan dreams of burning violence as well as acting for world consciousness and peace negotiations? Together, they create a traditional "archive" of "frames" that can be activated as actual "wrappings" for narratives and cultural artefacts presented and communicated internally and externally.

As parts of cultural policy, museums have played an important role as officially sanctioned arenas for the establishment of national unity. Today, they are part of the re-negotiation of what it means to be a nation in a late-modern world of migration, internationalisation, and globalisation and, in Europe, a growing community: namely the EU. As vital elements of public historical culture, museums interact intensively with the creation of a political community. This is especially true of national museums that negotiate, sanction and perform visions of kinship, uniqueness, destiny and borders.

Since the late 20th century a strong discourse of post-modern developments has called for cultural policy to overcome the essentialist and naturalist national ethos of many cultural institutions. Contrary to contemporary self-understanding of a radical shift in national cultural strategies, cultural heritage and museums are still dealing with similar opportunities and dilemmas in an effort to navigate and negotiate integration within and between communities, including national entities. The differences and communities in need of being negotiated might shift slightly, but not nearly as radically as the discourse of a post-national rupture suggests.

By observing the persistence of a Nordic dimension in the construction of national ideology since the 17th century, energising this interplay is a dynamic public history which appears and reappears in various conceptions of Norden over the centuries, be it the Vikings, Goths, Norse Saga, Scandinavism or the Nordic model. This line of thought is open to alternative nationalisms *and* internationalisms; interplaying with power struggles between the Nordic countries and, later, as a force in the negotiation of other political communities such as NATO and the EU.

Framing Norden

The political organisation of Norden has a story that is parallel to that of the European Union. The free movement of people, capital and cultural exchange developed earlier and has survived the expansion of the EU without Norway and Iceland and taking part as full members. Research collaboration has a standing organisation in place but also takes on larger ad hoc commitments. The aim of one of these, the International research programme *Nordic Spaces: Formation of States, Societies and Regions, Cultural Encounters, and Idea and Identity Production in Northern Europe after 1800* is to generate new research on Northern Europe and research collaboration within the region. In that sense, it is also a child borne out of the force of the Nordic imagery that is still alive, although more energy and funds are allocated to pan-European collaboration.

Several of the nine research projects have questioned the uses of the past and are contributing to this special section. *National History – Nordic Culture: Negotiating Identity in the Museums* is co-ordinated by the author of this introduction. Stuart Burch, Magdalena Hillström, Peter Stadius and Egle Rindzeviciute are participants in the same project.

Stuart Burch is troubled by the persistence and formlessness of claims covered by Nordic, especially as used in the art scene. Using the concept of "frames" and "metaframes", he presents a novel way to think about the capability of a concept to survive and be implemented in a very different context, without being completely devaluated. Norden has been established as a frame that makes it possible to present a unity for very different sceneries in contemporary society.

This means that the presence of Norden is not equally persistent at all times and all contexts. Magdalena Hillström argues that Norden not only presented an extra layer of cultural meaning which was interplaying with the political nationalisms in the 19th century, but that it was in fact the primary form of identification for the innovative institution created by Scandinavian museum founders of cultural museums in Sweden and Norway. The people and culture to be represented was the Nordic people. This view became increasingly contested with the growth of nation-state nationalism and turned into museum policy by pragmatic actors who, at the turn of the century, got the upper hand with sharper controversies leading to the dissolution of the union of Sweden and Norway.

This argument can perhaps be expanded to understand the general question of a tendency to solve intra-Nordic conflicts peacefully and the early and deep co-operation that also evolved in the 19th and 20th centuries. The cultural museum not only reflected that mentality but actively constructed, materialised and proved its existence.

Peter Stadius and Carl Marklund also undertake an international comparison, this time on a core dimension of the Nordic welfare state, the rapid and high-profile introduction of modern aesthetics, functionalism, at an exhibition in Stockholm in 1930. Comparing it with the world's fair in Chicago 1933-34, they

argue that even though this trend was international and driven by architects in Germany and France, there was indeed a thorough and deep implementation in the Nordic countries, utilising ideas of a historical tradition of pragmatism and functional solutions to real-life problems, while simultaneously arguing against the power of any heritage of bourgeoisie or nostalgic aesthetics. The format should be radically revamped while the essence of national culture was liberated in the modern welfare state. In Chicago the contemporary exhibition was more of a defence of a century of achievements, whereas the Swedish one was anticipating the century to come. While Stockholm might have hoped for political support for the vision of a single road to modernity, Chicago tried to defend the value of autonomous markets and technology-based science, that are best left alone to promote progress: "While the Swedish backers of modernism came up against the challenge of marrying nationalism with rationalism in order to make modern aesthetics palatable to a traditionalistic majority, the American proponents were more concerned with the task of combining industry with science in order to defend modern capitalism in the eyes of a more radicalized American working class." The modernisation process is thus nationalised with these cultural representations, and made to fit dominating political directions for the future based on the version of the past they represent. Part of the progressive message was very explicit, the parallel racist discourses were more implicit, but helped normalise the activist version of the white male majority culture of both countries, marginalising both ethnic minorities and (perhaps the majority of) people.

The experience of peace for 200 years sets Sweden apart from most countries in the world, including its Nordic neighbours. The country does, however, share the consequences of the end of the Cold War. In *Swedish Military Bases of the Cold War: The Making of a New Cultural Heritage*, Per Strömberg maps dimensions and forces in the process of changing the valorisation of military secrets to assets in the experience economy. They show striking similarities with the parallel process of the creation of industrial heritage (being historically important but ugly, huge structures that are difficult to preserve) but are marked by their strict state provenience. A mixture of scientific arguments of representation, nostalgic desire of former employees and local entrepreneurs are more decisive than formal decisions of heritage authorities on whether or not and how the road to heritage is to be pursued.

Nordic Culture Unbound

Where does Norden stop? The term is preferred here because it unambiguously comprises Iceland, Denmark (with Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Norway, Sweden and Finland (with Åland). Scandinavia is sometimes used to mean the same territories in English but can also designate the geographical Scandinavian Peninsula (Sweden and Norway) with Denmark. Historically as well as in con-

temporary politics the delimitation has opened up again. Are not the Baltic countries also part of Nordic history and culture? What about Russia? Northern Germany? The diasporas in Northern America and elsewhere?

Egle Rindzeviciute treats the representation of history in national Lithuanian museums to analyse how trans-national concepts are utilised. Creating a Lithuania nationhood itself has been dependent on tuning down or forgetting the role of German and Jewish communities. The Baltics have had a stronger appeal with ideas of heathen culture and amber as 20th century constructs. Scandinavia has transformed from a source of destruction and oppression during Soviet rule to a source of possible affinity. In Soviet and post-Soviet Lithuanian museums the North played an increasingly important role in the discursive and material articulations of the regional situation of Lithuanian national identity. Baltic and Northern dimensions seemed to get closer to each other at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty first centuries. The idea of Baltic Vikings is one of the most telling inventions. The options are manifold and so are the challenges.

Yet when the Baltic countries have knocked on the door to the more formal institutions of Norden during the last decade, they have not been welcomed. Such requests have upset the balance among the old countries: with Estonia being regarded as more of a regional question of interest mainly to Finland; the multitude of religions as problematic, the provocation of Russia as a possible cost etc.

Images of Norden are used to a significant extent to communicate outside the Scandinavian area, to contrast and identify communities. In *Nordic Spaces in the North and North America: Heritage Preservation in Real and Imagined Nordic Places* ethnologists, folklorists and theatre scholars collaborate to bring forward the dynamics of Nordic identities in the North American diaspora as an act of reconnecting the distance created by migration. In this volume, Lizette Gradén, who leads the project mentioned above, analyses the roles gifts can play in creating and recreating connectivity between the old world and the new. By describing the transfers and transformation of a transatlantic gift in both institutional and individual life, she sheds light on how people perform their identity as hybrid Nordic-American, *Värmland-Minnesota*, when national relationships might be more strained. The "heritage gift", where the prime object is a bridal crown, acts both as part of a museum collection and as a central object in performances of actual and symbolic marriage. These performances not only negotiate territorial belonging, but also the past and present to secure a vision of futures, male and female imaginaries, in reviving the relationship established by a collective act of giving and receiving a gift.

In the Nordic Spaces project *Arctic Norden: Science, Diplomacy and the Formation of a Post-War European North,* Anders Houltz is examining the role of musealised memory in promoting different national ideals of what it is to be a "polar nation". In "Captives of Narrative, Scandinavian museum exhibits and polar ambitions" the interaction between national master-narratives and the public

performance of heroes like Fridtjof Nansen and S.A. Andrée locks the musealisation process into very different trajectories. The Fram museum of Oslo is an icon in a cluster of heroic, national and male maritime museums, while the legacy of Andrée as a scientific endeavour has had trouble finding its symbolic place both because of its tragic ending and tug-of-war between several museums in the capital and the museum of his birthplace in Gränna, Sweden. They do produce narratives of the polar dimension in the Nordic countries, but are likewise formed by the national narratives that frame the institutionalisation of memory.

The Nordic framing is extended and challenged in two contributions from outside the Nordic Spaces programme. One compares the hegemonic national narrative in Norway with China and the other the universalised and yet localised hero of Raoul Wallenberg in an international historical culture. What is the legitimate role of historians, politics and popular culture in the creation of heroic icons of the past?

All nations tend to emphasise the unique qualities of their own historical trajectory. This also goes for regional ideas of identity such as the Nordic one. At a narrative level of the plot, this is of course true as much as any two individuals do not share the same life story. Yet changing the perspective to the more grammatical level of narration changes this. Marzia Varutti makes a breath-taking comparison in *Using different pasts in a similar way: Museum representations of national history in Norway and China,* suggesting for Norway that in its core plot "Museum displays of national pasts in Norway develop around a set of themes including myths of ancestry and descent; epics of resistance leading the embryonic nation through a dark era and towards a 'Golden Age'; a core of moral and aesthetic values; notions of national modernity; and selective amnesia". China is not all that different in spite of the comparative strategy coming close to one of selecting the "most-different" case in order to explore deep structural commonalities. A genre of national and museum narratives seems to set the story in a similar manner in very different settings: a truly global "coagulation" of museum representation is suggested by Varutti. However, the two countries are dissimilar in size and geographies not so estranged when it comes to state-making. An early autonomous culture becomes ruled from abroad and only in the 20th century set within its own political sovereignty. Within the grammar of national narrative and representation in national museums this produces a similar stress on glorious pasts, struggle and successful modernisation as parts of a coherent and comprehensive whole. This pattern might produce another national representation than a long history of being an empire or a small independent state (Aronsson 2010). Further, the comparison goes beyond the observation of Nordic similarities and distinctions and produces a perhaps provocatively more universal pattern for understanding the creation of national narratives.

A significant frame for European and Western historical culture during the last decade has been the remembrance of the Holocaust. It connects the West by way

of a mutually shared trauma, also producing a setting for distinct national variations (Young 2000; Carrier 2004; Karlsson & Zander 2006).

Tanja Schult presents an analysis of how one man has been contextualised and nationalised differently with a rising status as a hero, in *Whose Raoul Wallenberg is it? The Man and the Myth: Between Memory, History and Popularity*. The circulation of images of the Swedish hero has been intensive and it is not possible to exclude the mythical dimension in any of them. The need for a hero is too strong to be disregarded in analysing the role of a historic person. It thus becomes an example of the intrinsic relationship between myth and history, politics and knowledge – when the past does matter in contemporary society. The usual confrontation between myth and history does not hold. The two are mutually dependent and claiming science to launch one version might in fact be an abuse of the power of legitimacy.

Norden – The History of a Productive Myth

The mythical North lends itself to both degrading and saluting varieties. Evolutionary narratives blend with universalist ethics, whether the North harbours the absolute evil or a Golden Age of natural order. Tacitus already contrasted civilisation with the barbaric North in an ambiguous mode: it was both inferior in civilisation but more robust in its constitution and values. Civilisation, or at least the version of a just Welfare State, is today claimed to be defined by the North while the Orient or the South is still used as mirrors.

Distinctions are one of the main tools of cultural researchers. Yet this productive perspective might overemphasise difference and change. It is possible to compare narratives in museums in Norway and China and find strong similarities. Every distinction creates new exclusions. Where in the Baltics does the North end? Which elements are to be counted as characteristics? The very idea of Norden has a strong prevalence and useful to make a defence against the unwanted, be it contemporary neighbours in the USA or Catholics in 17th century Germany. It does create a frame for collaboration and sometimes mobilisation across borders within an expanding Norden. One price to pay is the contrast with the Others outside and the other is flexibility in content. Corollaries are that the more inclusive a narrative is, the more of a metaframe, and the less mobilising it becomes. Further, the more definite, less inclusive the more directly political conclusions follows out of the narrative.

This is the same game played within more successful nationalisms, but also and more surprisingly in the construction of strong field of gender studies from the 1970s, understood as boosted by a specific Nordic culture and network, later questioned for its implicit assumptions of a we excluding other subject positions (Manns 2009). The dynamic is contradictory, but not futile. By having this level of cultural representation in the arsenal, ethnic nationalism and cultural under-

standing of community becomes somewhat more open-ended, but always creating new boundaries. The success of the concept of Norden in cultural practice and politics might be measured with the lack of military conflict where that might have been the case. Sweden did not reclaim Finland. War did not break out in 1905. The conflicts around Åland were dealt with through international reconciliation. Nordic citizens in diaspora have integrated fairly well, collaborative welfare states have evolved in the Nordic Space. I argue this is partly due to the plastic prevalence of a frame represented as Nordic Culture. However, this act has had a price. The idea of a Nordic race can be perverted into racism or a mere reluctance to allow new members into the family, which has been the case with the Baltic neighbours.

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