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This is the accepted version of a paper published in *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Marklund, C., Petersen, K. (2013)

Return to sender: American Images of the Nordic Welfare States and Nordic Welfare State Branding.

European Journal of Scandinavian Studies, 43(2): 245-257

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ejss-2013-0016>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-19897>

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Return to sender – American Images of the Nordic Welfare State and Nordic Welfare State Branding

Abstract: In this article, we study the relationship between the United States of America and *Norden*, first showing how images of the Nordic model were constructed and reproduced in the United States from the 1920s until the 1960s. We find both utopias and dystopias in these narratives. Second, the article argues that these American images, narratives, and stereotypes did not only fulfill a function in the American debate, but were also relayed back to *Norden*, and affected debate, nation-branding strategies, and self-understandings there. During the Cold War, furthermore, the Nordic welfare state image gained a new currency which reached well beyond national borders, far into transnational space.

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Introduction

While the welfare state may not be *Norden's* gift to humanity, it is nevertheless a very strong Nordic brand internationally. Historians have traditionally seen the welfare state as the outcome of a series of national political processes and socio-economic conditions. However, recent research has underscored that the welfare state has not been formed in a closed-off national container. It should rather be regarded as a national project that has evolved in an intense and continuous dialogue with the world around us (Kettunen & Petersen 2011). The welfare state is instead the result of a series of processes of diffusion, conjunctions, and reflections with the wider world.

Nordic countries have always been strongly influenced by the United States (Sørensen & Petersen 2005). Already in the 1940s, the relatively prosperous and modern Nordic countries were seen by some scholars as more 'Americanised' than most other European countries (Myrdal & Myrdal 1941, O'Dell 1997). Broadly speaking, the Nordic societies became Americanised in the post-war

period. We got Donald Duck, jeans, and Coca-Cola. Self-service shops sprang up and there were rationalisations within the sphere of production. Continuous contacts through transatlantic emigration as well as international circulation of scientific knowledge among professional and progressive networks have underpinned this American-Scandinavian exchange (Rodgers 1998, Thue 2006, Petersen, Stewart & Sørensen 2013).

At the same time, Americans have taken an interest in the Nordic countries as examples of modern and prosperous countries whose welfare state policies distinguished them from the American route towards modernization through free market liberalism. The American debate on the welfare state was especially heated in the late 1940s and 1950s when the black and white logic of the Cold War, to a large degree, made nuanced understandings of the Social Democratic welfare reforms in the Nordic countries impossible (Bell 2004). Welfare state entered the American political vocabulary but was mainly used by critics of social reform. “Reactionaries were haunting for a new phrase” as the American trade unionist George Meany concluded at the time.¹ In this debate references to European countries and European experiences played an important role.

In this article, we focus specifically on the relationship between the United States of America and *Norden*, first showing how images² of the Nordic model were constructed and reproduced in the United States from the 1920s until the 1960s, finding both utopias and dystopias in these narratives. Second, this article argues that these American images, narratives, and stereotypes did not only fulfill a function in the American debate, but were also relayed back to *Norden*, and affected debate and self-understandings there. During the Cold War, furthermore, the Nordic welfare state image gained a new currency which reached well beyond national borders, far into transnational space.

¹ Quote from Les Procter, *The Welfare State*, Austin 1950, p. 115.

² We use the term “images” as the focus is on the various portrays, descriptions and understandings of Nordic societies in the US and not on the Nordic societies per se. However, these images might (or might not) be affected by the Nordic countries actively engaged in “branding” themselves internationally. On branding strategies see Keith Dinnie, *Nation Branding. Concepts, Issues, Practices* (Oxford 2008). Eventually, these images and branding processes might (unintended) influence the national identities of the Nordic societies. See Nikolas Glover, *National Relations. Public Diplomacy, National Identity and the Swedish Institute 1945–1970* (Lund 2011) for a very interesting discussion on this.

American Images of Scandinavia in the Interwar Period

During the height of the Great Depression, in the early 1930s, American intellectuals, journalists, and politicians took a greater interest in alternatives to American capitalism and its cultural component, “rugged individualism.” Here, the Nordic countries provided practical examples of democratic policy reforms. Also, they represented an escape route from the conflict between capitalism and socialism which threatened to tear democracy apart elsewhere (Marklund 2009b).

In the 1930s, we find a number of popular books explaining the historical, cultural, economic, political, and social particularities of the Nordic countries to an American readership. At first, the American interest in the Nordic countries drew upon Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and, to a lesser degree, Finnish experiences of moderating the effects of modernity. This genre of literature, perhaps labeled as ‘welfare political guide books’, were presentations of the Nordic countries and went hand in hand with portraying them as societal role models of modernity. In this category we find books such as Frederic Howe’s *Denmark: The Cooperative Way* (1936) celebrating the modernization route of a farmer’s country into a cooperative and progressive democracy. Agnes Rothery in *Finland: A New Nation* (1936) dwelled less on the socio-economic structure but still found space for chapters on feminism, nationalism, and democracy.

Best known in this genre of welfare state guide books was the American journalist Marquis Childs’ *Sweden: The Middle Way* (1936) which put special focus upon Sweden as a textbook example of moderation and success in the face of economic and political turmoil. It is worth noticing that these were best-selling books that exercised influence on both the broader population and in the political sphere. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt referred to Childs’ writings and sent a commission to study cooperatives and labour market relations in the Nordic countries (Norgren 1941, Vann Woodward 1997, Ohlsson 1992, Ottosson 2002, Musiał 2002).

Nordic and American social scientists attracted the interest of each other, which lead to study trips, research exchanges, and personal contacts (Eyerma & Jamison 1992, Larsson 2001, Thue 2006). Swedish social reformer Alva Myrdal (1941) and her husband, social scientist Gunnar Myrdal (1940), often relied upon the exemplarity of Nordic, and particularly Swedish, social policies when lecturing in the United States.

In 1938, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs observed that all the Nordic countries enjoyed widespread admiration in the United States. Generally,

however, the Swedes spent more funds – both public and private – on ‘enlightenment work’ in the United States, while unlike their Nordic colleagues, the Swedes channeled their efforts through a designated institution, the American-Swedish News Exchange, ASNE (Kastrup 1985, 64). While the Nordic countries did not coordinate their attempts at image construction, the relative similarity of Nordic functionalist architecture, design, and handicrafts, as showcased at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, underlined the connection between the Nordic countries and ‘modernity’ (Marklund & Stadius 2010, Mattsson & Wallenstein 2010). Even so, Sweden took on a special position in the generally positive US interest in Nordic countries during the interwar period.

Scandinavian Image Construction Before 1945

The Scandinavian countries were from very early on actively utilizing their position as welfare state pioneers as part of international country branding strategies. Hence we find references quite similar to the stereotypes produced by childs and others in public diplomacy related texts origination in Scandinavia in the 1920s and 1930s. At national pavilions at the world exhibitions social issues and social policy institutions were on display together with other distinct national features (Glambeek 1997). Even in tourist brochures democracy and social progressiveness could be found as a selling point vis-à-vis the world. In a 1934 brochure “Social Work” was mentioned as one of Denmark’s contributions to history, and four years later another brochure published in four languages stated that, “for those interested in social problems Denmark is a place of great interests,” not because the Danes were especially challenged but due to the fact that the Danish social security system that was “known everywhere” and “serve [d] indeed as models to the world.”³ This was not an exclusively Danish phenomena and at the second Nordic Travel Meeting in 1937 it was concluded that “in our propaganda also our social development must be taken into account. We have in Norden much to offer and it is not wise always to talk about ourselves as being the small ones.”⁴

World War II affected the images of all the Nordic countries in the United States in fundamental ways. Primarily, the American perceptions were deter-

³ See the brochures *See Denmark* (1934) and *Denmark* (1938) both published by the Danish Board of Tourism.

⁴ The Danish National Business Archives, Archive of Danmarks Turistforening [Danish Board of Tourism], Tourist brochures 1923–1968, Box: 489.

mined by the relationships between the Nordic countries and to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. For example, the positive US views on Sweden evolved into criticism due to Swedish treatment of prewar German refugees, Swedish policies towards Finland during the Winter War 1939–1940, and the iron ore exports to Germany. These negative views worried the Swedish export industry, especially with regard to the risk of losing market shares in the expected post-war bust. In response, the Wallenberg financial family decided to channel more resources to the ASNE beginning in 1941 and onwards (Kastrup, 1985, 91).

Throughout the occupation years, Danish and Norwegian information activities in the United States, headed by Caspar Hasselriis and Torolv Kanda hl, respectively, grew substantially. Hasselriis' establishment of the American Friends of Danish Freedom and Democracy in 1940 was instrumental for the positive American opinion about Denmark after the German invasion in April 1940. Both the Danish and Norwegian information services in the United States coordinated their efforts with the US Office of War Information and the press section of the US State Department. From 1943 and onwards, the Danes and Norwegians also cooperated with the Swedish ASNE, despite some initial suspicion, especially on the part of the Norwegians.

Constructing Images of Scandinavia in the Early Cold War

At the close of the war, the Swedes still experienced difficulties in preserving the positive interwar image of Sweden in the American press. Hasselriis' information work, by contrast, had contributed, at least according to Danish newspaper *Politiken*, to the US view of Denmark as a Western ally rather than a Nazi collaborator (Kastrup 1985, 97).

The flow of publications on the Nordic countries trickled down during the war years, but as post-war reconstruction took off in the late 1940s, the Nordics sought to rekindle the market for 'welfare political guide books', reconnecting to the familiar image construction of the 1930s. Most of these works underlined the balanced, peaceful, and prosperous character of the Nordic countries. One of the earliest explicit references to a Nordic country being available as a "model" can be found in Hudson Strode's *Sweden: Model for a World* (1949). Strode's culturally determined balance was directly associated with the balancing of the economy – akin to Childs' middle way – as explored in books written for the American market such as Arne Nilsson's *Sweden's Way to a Balanced Economy* (1950).

But the advent of the Cold War had also made the situation more complicated. In response, the Nordic countries tried to place their third way model as an acceptable alternative in the black and white world of the Cold War. Here, the Nordic countries could rely upon their long tradition of close social political cooperation for the new task of image construction (Petersen 2006). Using this as a basis, the Icelandic Prime Minister Stefán Jóhann Stefánsson recognized in 1947 that Iceland lagged behind the general Nordic social political development. He continued to propose, that there was a need for “a comprehensive account for the social political development in the Nordic countries, which could be comparative, and other countries might benefit from. I, for my part, think the Nordic countries are the highest ranking when it comes to social political legislation”.⁵

Six years later, Stefánsson’s suggestion was realized, as the volume *Freedom and Welfare* (1953) was published. The aim of the book was to present the Nordic welfare states to the world. However, the main audience was the United States. The editor, George R. Nelson, was not only a leading civil Danish servant with detailed knowledge about social policy, but he had also spent time in the early 1950s working for the United Nations in New York. Hence, he was well orientated in American political debates. Indeed, the book emphasized how “Northern community life” did not resemble socialist or totalitarian planning as some American observers may have feared. Rather, “the peculiar combination of individualism and social solidarity which would appear to be an outstanding feature of Northern mentality,” reflected an almost American affinity for pragmatism:

The Northern peoples are realists, and in their “social engineering” they have never followed any one general formula. Planning has been carried out on a strictly pragmatic basis, drawing upon past experience but freely adapting it to changing circumstances. This approach may be lacking in drama, but it has proved well suited to the psychology of these nations and has yielded practical results (Nelson 1953, 38–39).

The American orientation also becomes clear when analyzing the concepts used — and not used — in the book. At first it is surprising that the word ‘Nordic’ is rarely used. Instead the book prefers the much more imprecise and strange concept of ‘the Northern Countries’. The explanation is most likely due to the fact that in the United States the word Nordic had in the interwar period been infected by racist connotations when used in quasi-scientific studies of the origins of white supremacy.⁶ In reviews of these books in leading US journals this Nor-

⁵ Minutes from the 1947 Nordic Social Political Meeting, p. 18. National Archives Copenhagen, Ministry of Social Affairs, Papers of Johan Strøm, A7.

⁶ There exist no genuine study of the concept “Nordic” in the American context but a pilot study based on the academic text database J-Store (using “Nordic” and “race” as search words) shows a vivid debate in the 1920s and the 1930s. Books such as Hans F. K. Günther, *The Racial*

dic-racist link is referred to critically as “Nordomaniac”, the “Nordic Guard”, “Nordic superiority”, “the Nordic alarm again”, “the Nordic Propaganda”, and as “occasional outbursts from the Ultra-Nordics”. Still today we find American academics (in journals and books) prefer the term Scandinavian welfare state. However “Scandinavia” was not an option for the Nordic initiators of the book as Scandinavia geographically excluded Finland and Iceland. Hence “Nordic” became “Northern”. This was also the case in the American reviews of the book which received overwhelmingly positive reviews from critics, who celebrated the “Northern countries” for not only being able to combine “freedom and “welfare” but also for the strong tradition for inter-Nordic cooperation:

[...] the painstaking and persistent effort with which, over the years and despite keen national rivalries inherited from the past and tensions engendered by World War II, devoted men and women have pursued common welfare objectives.⁷

Similarly, the Nordic Council, established in 1953, changed its name to “the Northern Council”.⁸

The second strange omission in the book is the term ‘welfare state’. Instead the book uses the more American concept of ‘social security’ (Béland 2011). The term ‘welfare state’ is only used once in *Freedom and Welfare* and then almost at the end of the book in a rather defensive way (p. 518):

Some, including many of the more skeptically minded, see it as the modern Welfare State, thus emphasizing the role of government against that of the individual members of the community.

Despite this caution, the book proved highly influential in confirming the view of the Nordic countries as archetypical welfare states. In his *The Constitution of*

Elements of European History, New York 1928; Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*; Earnests S. Cox, *White America*; Richmond 1923 are examples of books referring to the Nordic race as part of a pseudoscientific defense for white supremacy. See the reviews in *Man*, Vol. 21, April 1921: 64; *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 1925: 259–260; *Journal of Social Forces*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1925: 315–319; *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 1925: 192–193; *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1929: 165–166.

⁷ Quote from Helen Fisher Hohman’s review in *Social Service Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1956: 229–232. Other similar positive reviews include: *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 1955: 279–280; *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1954: 133–134; *Population Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1954: 192–193; *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 295, September 1954: 203–204.

⁸ It is noteworthy that the Swedish social scientist Åke Elmér in his Swedish language review without any hesitation translated back and used the heading: “Nordisk Socialpolitik” (Nordic Social Policy). See *Ekonomisk Tidsskrift*, Vol. 56, No. 4, 1954: 313–315.

Liberty, Friedrich Hayek used *Freedom and Welfare* as an example of “governmental propaganda” in favor of the welfare state ([1960], 416).

While *Freedom and Welfare* is an early example of Nordic cooperation in image construction, alongside co-branding of “Scandinavian Design” and the cooperation of national institutes (Hansen 2006, Christiansen 2009), there was also some intra-Nordic competition in image construction. At times, the Swedes would use their larger organization to ‘hijack’ cooperative Nordic information efforts. In 1949, for example, the ASNE speedily selected the reports of American journalists on a joint visit to Scandinavia which dealt with Sweden, to some consternation of their Danish colleagues. The Swedes explained their action by pointing to Sweden’s greater need for positive publicity, noting that Denmark already enjoyed a favorable public opinion in the United States (Kastrup 1985, 180–181). Furthermore, in April 1953, the ASNE published an accessible and richly illustrated summary, entitled *The Making of Sweden*, which accompanied the more academically inclined *Freedom and Welfare*. In this widely distributed booklet, Sweden was promoted as the epitome of the Nordic achievements described in *Freedom and Welfare* (Kastrup 1953, Marklund forthcoming 2013).

American Images After 1945

US views on the Nordic countries remained generally positive throughout the 1950s, focusing on the successful combination of tradition and modernity in these societies. While Danish and Norwegian resistance during the occupation years ensured a favorable view, some accounts of Sweden, such as David Hinshaw’s *Sweden: Champion of Peace* (1949), claimed that this country’s admirable welfare policies also had been made possible due to economic gains made during the war. Some Austrian and German observers who had spent the war as refugees in the United States turned a critical eye to the possibility of learning from Nordic examples, mostly due to the alleged conformism and social anomie of these societies (Kastrup, 1985, 100). Yet another critical perspective centered on secularization and sexual liberalism in the welfare state (Brown 1955, Lennérhed 1994, Hale 2003, Glover & Marklund, 2009).

In 1960, US President Dwight Eisenhower relied upon some of these critical assessments of Sweden and the Swedish society when he made his famous comment about a “friendly European country” that follows “a socialist philosophy and whose rate of suicide has gone up almost unbelievably. [...] Lack of ambition is discernible on all sides” (Eisenhower 1960, Andersson & Hilson 2009).

The vague phrasing incensed both Danes and Swedes until it became clear that the President's remarks concerned only Sweden (Thorsell 2004, 64). However, Eisenhower's diatribe was rather directed at Democrat Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy's reputed interest in Nordic social policies, than at any specific Nordic country. Yet, Eisenhower's rhetorical identification of Sweden as "socialist" would go on to play a political role in the USA as the incoming Kennedy Administration begun to look to Nordic and Swedish economic and social policies for inspiration, in particular the Swedish pension system and labour relations (Ohlsson 1992, 298–299, Kassman 1989–1991, Marklund 2009b).

In response to the interest of US Democrats in Nordic policy-making preceding the 1960 US elections mentioned above, the ASNE promoted information about peaceful labour relations in Sweden. For example, in spring 1960, the news exchange distributed a speech by prominent Swedish trade union leader Arne Geijer on the lessons for American trade unions based on Swedish experiences. Geijer's speech received a lot of attention in the United States, and was even aired on NBC's nationwide network of radio stations (Ohlsson 1992, Glover 2011).

While Swedish nation-branding strategists rather willingly accepted the association between Sweden and "sin" in the wake of 1960s radical liberalism, Swedish politicians on tour in the United States usually took great pains to underline that the Swedish welfare state of the early 1960s did *not* equal socialism, just as little as the other Nordic countries had been in the early 1950s (see also Glover & Marklund 2009).

The study trips of American administrators to Sweden in 1962 resulted in a great deal of attention towards Swedish policies, but it is difficult to evaluate their political impact. In pursuing a new US labour policy, the Kennedy Administration established the Advisory Committee on Labor-Management and received a delegation of representatives of Swedish trade unions, employers' organizations, and the government in October 1963. *The Washington Post* took note of this interest, explaining that "A small Scandinavian country is fast becoming an economic model for the world's most prosperous nation and its 185 million population. The country is Sweden ..." (The Washington Post, 1963).

But at the same time as the Nordic countries began to serve a positive rhetorical function for Democrats in American domestic political debate, it also became important for the Republicans to show how Nordic welfare policies in fact either equaled socialism or served as a cover for it.

Thereby, the image of the Nordic countries took on a tension between utopian and dystopian perspectives it had previously lacked.

Still widely reputed of travelling the middle way, Sweden in particular, suffered attacks from both left and right on account of its attempt to combine ca-

pitalism with socialism. While some American radicals such as Susan Sontag (1969) regarded Sweden's putative socialism as a sham, conservatives such as British-South African journalist Roland Huntford (1971) saw the freedom of private business in Sweden as an illusory trick of the "new totalitarians" he felt governed Sweden (Marklund 2009a).

Concluding Reflections: Return to Sender – Circulation of Images

To varying degrees, the Nordic countries individually launched more or less ambitious branding strategies seeking to promote a favorable public opinion in the United States after World War II. Early on, Danish and Norwegian representatives in the United States noted how Sweden took the lead in this inter-Nordic rivalry for American attention, a rivalry which presented both opportunities for cooperation as well as conflict. The co-branding efforts of the Nordic countries in the early 1950s emphasized the Nordic pragmatism in combining 'freedom' and 'welfare' and attracted positive US interest, an interest the Swedish nation-branding strategists sought to directly associate with Sweden.

While the Nordic countries were often characterized in similar ways in American press in accordance with the well-known themes established already in the 1930s, Sweden generated more polarized views in the United States from the 1960s and onwards than the other Nordic countries. Also, Nordic, and particularly Swedish, protests against the US involvement in the Vietnam War in the late 1960s caused mainstream American press to take a more critical view of the Nordic welfare states generally. By the 1970s, the Swedish welfare state — and by inference the Nordic welfare states as well — had largely become 'socialist' in mainstream American conceptions, despite vigorous denial on the part of Swedish public diplomacy (Marklund forthcoming 2013).

These shifts in the American images of the Nordic welfare states did not take place in isolation. Also in the Nordic countries, national self-image moved more to the left, but a left that was equally appealing to emerging American counter-culture as it was repelling to American conservatives (Marklund & Glover 2009). This self-image could thus not only be confirmed by growing conservative American antipathy in the perspective of Cold War tension. It could also draw upon successive attempts by the Scandinavians themselves in constructing favourable images of themselves and their societies in the liberal American public opinion.

Nordic self-images of the Nordic model have thus been constructed in inter-play with outside views (Musiał 2002). But these outside views were partly con-

structed due to Nordic branding. As a result, images have to be studied as something transnational: The Nordic countries try to export images and our images are formed by how the outside world portrays them and vice versa. This article attempted to approach this circulation of ideas while also showing how Sweden came to dominate the image of the Nordic model by attracting attention and by doing so more actively. In conclusion, branding the Nordic welfare model was a cooperative effort based on a tradition for Nordic cooperation – and the Swedes won.

But winning the attention can sometimes also raise the risk of losing the attraction, as Swedish image managers have experienced. While the theme of freedom and welfare remained a strong tangent in the national Nordic self-representations abroad for a long time to come, it has also made American welfare state critics exceptionally wary of Nordic examples – to the extent that their political opponents in the US took any interest in them. Unlike the other Nordic countries, then, Sweden has evolved into an image of a ‘socialist’ nightmare in US conservative rhetoric, perhaps ironically so, as this is at least partly due to its success in marketing itself in rivalry with the other Nordic countries.

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