Chapter 12

A Swedish Norden or a Nordic Sweden?

Image Politics in the West during the Cold War

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Introduction

Today, the Nordic countries – known as Norden in the Scandinavian languages and Pohjola in Finnish – are sometimes described as an ‘elite club’ among the countries of the world. In international comparisons of competitiveness and productivity, as well as global indices of quality of life and social equality, the Nordic countries are often placed in the top percentile. While a 2007 Finnish report on the ‘Nordic model’ warned that one should be careful when interpreting these rankings, it concluded that the abundance of ‘similar evidence’ proves that the Nordic model is consistent with ‘a good business climate’.

Given that the Nordic countries are prosperous, high-performing and socially stable, it is perhaps no wonder that they attract renewed international interest in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007–8 and the subsequent Great Recession. But ‘the success of the Nordic countries is a mystery’, according to a group of Norwegian researchers based at the research institute ESOP, the centre for the study of equality, social organization and performance in Oslo. Traditional economic theories – often developed and tested in economic models based on the premises of the American free-market system – cannot accurately explain how the Nordic countries can combine high growth with social equality and high taxes, the ESOP researchers asserted, arguing that ‘the Nordic experience constitutes a social laboratory of general interest’.  


3 Equality, Social Organization, and Performance (ESOP), ‘Confronting Theory with Nordic Lessons: An Application to Establish ESOP as a New Research Centre at the...
Communicating the North

The Nordic countries’ reputation as social laboratories is not new. They have attracted international attention as model societies since the interwar years for a number of different reasons and in a variety of ways. Today, globalization, neoliberalism and the recession may, of course, challenge the Nordic reputation for exemplary success and its status as an elite club. Iceland’s 2008–11 financial crisis may be a case in point.

Yet, it is precisely the Nordic countries that are often said to have adapted to globalization quickly and to have handled the financial instability of the post-Cold War years relatively well. They seem capable of fast recovery, as indicated by Finland and Sweden in the mid-1990s and Iceland in the early 2010s. Also, American political scientist Christine Ingebritsen has argued that ‘the small European states provide an appropriate social laboratory to study these changes [that is, globalization] precisely because of their economic openness and long-held strategies of coping with the world around them.’ According to Ingebritsen, the Nordic countries have not merely adapted to globalization; they have also sought to actively shape globalization by playing the role of ‘norm entrepreneurs,’ using the ‘diversity in the strategies of small states’ as a means to ‘influence the agenda in world politics.’

Three main reasons, then, seem to explain the renewed interest in the Nordic countries in the early 2000s. First, the Nordic countries appear exemplary simply because they are achieving a better-than-average economic performance while simultaneously topping the ‘beauty contests’ of the emerging global ‘audit society.’ Second, in combining economic growth with social equality, despite high taxes and generous public expenditure, the Nordic countries provide a model because they may function as a social laboratory of progressive social policies. Third, the Nordic countries have consciously marketed themselves as such.


See, for example, Kazimierz Musiał, Roots of the Scandinavian Model: Images of Progress in the Era of Modernisation (Baden-Baden, 2002); Jenny Andersson and Mary Hilson, ‘Images of Sweden and the Nordic Countries,’ Scandinavian Journal of History, 34/3 (2009): 219–228; Carl Marklund and Peter Stadius, ‘Acceptance and Conformity: merging modernity with Nationalism in the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930,’ Culture Unbound, 2 (2010): 609–634. See also Lindholm Narváez’s, Stadius’s, and Musiał’s and Chacinska’s contributions to this volume (Chapters 9, 11 and 13 respectively).


‘Beauty contests’ is an expression used by Finnish political scientist Olli Kangas. See also Michael Power, The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification (Oxford, 1997).
innovators and providers of solutions to global challenges. As such, the concept of the ‘Nordic model’ involves not only the results of Nordic economic, political and social development, but also the methods by which this development has been brought about.8 The Nordic success is, in other words, usually not seen as automatic, coincidental or predetermined, but as the result of conscious business innovation and progressive social policy experiments.

This chapter will discuss the shifting reasons for interest in the Nordic countries abroad, how the ‘image’ of the Nordic countries has developed since the interwar years, and how it has been promoted by the Nordics themselves, not least by the Swedes. Due to the importance of American public opinion in shaping Western views during the Cold War, as well as global outlooks in its aftermath, the chapter asks how the ‘Swedish model’ gained pre-eminence over the other Nordic countries during the Cold War years. Finally, it analyses how the Nordic identity served as a common resource for the smaller democracies of northern Europe, including Sweden, during the interwar and immediate post-war years, tracking its increasing ‘Swedification’ in the 1960s and the 1970s, and highlighting the substitution of the ‘Swedish model’ for the Nordic model since the 1990s. But, first, it is important to track the origins of this outside interest in these admittedly minor powers as models for others to learn from or be warned by.

Norden in the News

Except for certain jubilees, state visits and commemorations, the Nordic countries did not generate much more press than comparable smaller nations, either in terms of newsworthy events or in terms of more long-term socio-economic development, before the 1930s. The 1930s marked a sharp contrast, as the great Depression generated a wave of publications on Denmark and Sweden and, to a lesser extent, Finland and Norway, throughout the world’s industrialized societies.9

This interest reached a peak in the United States, as American public intellectuals, journalists, and politicians began to question American capitalism, turning to other parts of the world for comparison and contrast, as well as inspiration and concrete policy alternatives. While many Americans looked to how the other leading powers, notably France and Great Britain, dealt with the economic and social crisis, intellectuals and progressives took a greater interest in the Nazi, fascist, and Soviet experiments, usually without turning

8 For a recent study of the Nordic model, see Mary Hilson, The Nordic Model (London, 2008).
9 Musial, Roots of the Scandinavian Model. See also Stadius, Chapter 11 in this volume.
totalitarian themselves.10 Here, the Nordic countries could attract a broader
American audience as they seemed to combine capitalism with democracy,
unlike Germany, Italy and Russia, and were apparently better at doing so than
either France or Great Britain, or the United States itself for that matter.11
While the broader interest in the Nordic countries had already emerged in
1932–33, Sweden moved to the fore as a result of the publication of American
journalist Marquis Childs’s book Sweden: The Middle Way in 1936, as is widely
known.12 On the one hand, the popularity of Sweden, as well as of the other
Nordic countries, hinged upon the way in which they could provide concrete
easy for limited policy reforms and specific measures that could be used by
the experimentalist New Deal. On the other hand, they represented a more
general image, holding out the hope that others, too, could escape
uncompromising conflict between capitalism and socialism, between freedom and security. The concept of the ‘Middle Way’ as employed by Childs to analyse the Nordic countries, had already been activated as a byword for Franklin D. Roosevelt’s so-called Second New Deal in 1935.13 Roosevelt referred to Childs’s book and sent a commission to study the cooperative movement in the Nordic countries.14


13 The Second New Deal relied more on Keynesian economics and aimed at a longer-range recovery programme than the First New Deal had done.

The Second World War affected the American impression of all the Nordic countries in fundamental ways. Primarily, these impressions were determined by the American perception of the relationships between the Nordic countries and the two great totalitarian powers in their vicinity: Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. At the end of the war, Danish and Norwegian representatives in the United States noted how Sweden had emerged in the forefront of American interest in the Nordic countries. A crucial factor for explaining this shift seems to have been the existence since 1921–22 of a Swedish news service – called the Svensk-amerikanska nyhetsbyrån in Stockholm and the American-Swedish News Exchange (ASNE) in New York – and its energetic efforts to provide the American press with information about Sweden and the Swedish press with information about the United States.15

ASNE had been set up in the aftermath of the First World War when a Swedish delegation sent to the United States to negotiate food imports was met with suspicion due to the perceived close ties between Sweden and Germany. In response, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the newly established Sweden–America Foundation, founded in 1919, proposed jointly that a permanent institution should be formed to facilitate news exchange between Sweden and the United States. The information service was to be privately funded, but was instructed to steer clear of all propaganda, as wartime experience had shown that the American press held strong antipathies towards any overt or covert attempts at influencing it.16

ASNE began its activity by distributing articles and telegrams to much of the American daily press, reaching about 2,700 newspapers and concentrating primarily on topics such as design, culture and the arts in conjunction with the exhibitions in Gothenburg in 1923 and Stockholm in 1930. But ASNE also took a more active role in cooperating with the organizers of the Stockholm Exhibition in inviting a score of American journalists – including Marquis W. Childs – which resulted in some 100 largely positive articles in the American press on ‘Swedish Modern’ architecture and design.17

Through ASNE, Sweden thus already possessed a network and a channel of information dissemination before the outbreak of the Second World War. For example, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs observed in 1938 that while all the Nordic countries enjoyed widespread admiration in the United States, the Swedes had spent considerable resources on ‘enlightenment work’ (oplysningsarbeide) and had channelled it through a single, dedicated bureau

16 Ibid., p. 31.
17 Ibid., p. 47.
of information, ASNE, which the other Nordic countries either had a lesser 1
version of or lacked entirely. During the Second World War ASNE joined the score of national 2
information agencies circulating a wealth of information in the United States on various aspects of life in their respective homelands, as part of the war effort. Across the entire United States, newspapers, large and small, in need of easily readable material and stories from around the world would often reprint the articles spread by ASNE without editing or comment, thus contributing to the proliferation of information about Sweden. The war also necessitated increased Danish and Norwegian information activity in the United States, headed by Caspar Hasselriis and Torolv Kandahl, respectively. Despite some suspicion towards the Swedes during the war years, especially on the part of the Norwegians, these activities were to some extent coordinated with ASNE from 1943 onwards. Through his establishment of the American Friends of Danish Freedom and Democracy in 1940, Hasselriis is considered to have been instrumental in maintaining a positive American opinion about Denmark even after the German invasion of Denmark and Norway in April 1940. Like the Norwegian information services in the United States, Hasselriis and his associates coordinated their efforts with the Office of War Information and the press section of the US State Department. In 1945, the Danish newspaper Politiken reported that Denmark was widely perceived in the United States as an ally rather than a collaborator, thanks largely to Hasselriis’s wartime activities. The Swedes, on the other hand, experienced considerable difficulties in preserving a positive image of Sweden in the American press during the war. The American press quite regularly criticized the treatment of German-Jewish refugees in Sweden and the insufficient Swedish support to Finland in the Winter War of 1939–40, as well as Swedish iron ore exports to Germany, despite the country’s declared neutrality. Largely as a consequence of these American perceptions, Swedish export industries that were active in the American market united to establish the Swedish Industries Fund in order to support ASNE from 1941 onwards. As noted by Swedish historian Nikolas Glover, Swedish observers became increasingly concerned with the Sweden’s reputation abroad immediately after

18 From 1937 onwards, ASNE was reorganized and became less dependent on Swedish business interests for its financing. Ibid., p. 64.
19 Ibid., p. 97.
20 Ibid., p. 91.
the First World War, not least in the United States. Likewise, Swedish business 1 interests understood during the 1940s that Sweden’s image abroad must be 2 improved in order to secure new contracts for Swedish industry in the fierce 3 competition of the expected post-war slump, promoting the creation of the 4 private-cum-public Swedish Institute. 21
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6 Unscathed by war, Sweden was, in many ways, better equipped than the other 6 Nordic countries to meet the challenges of post-war reconstruction. In addition, 7 and as noted during the war by the Swedish social scientists and social reformers 8 Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, Sweden still had a capital of goodwill in the United 9 States which hinged upon the image of Sweden as a politically democratic and 10 socially progressive country that had evolved during the 1930s. While Sweden 11 certainly shared this capital with the other Nordic countries, it could also be 12 regarded as a national resource in forging a stronger link with American post- 13 war public opinion. 22
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15 Sometime later, high-level Swedish politicians did seek to connect what 15 can be called the inner middle way (that is, the welfare state) with the outer 16 middle way (that is, neutrality) in the expectation that the international respect 17 afforded to the former could be utilized for improving the international image 18 of the latter. At a strategic moment, on the occasion when Sweden became a 19 member state of the United Nations on 19 November 1946, Sweden’s Social 20 Democratic Minister of Foreign Affairs Östen Undén gave a speech in the 21 General Assembly in New York which drew precisely upon the parallel identified 22 by the Myrdals. 23 In his speech, Undén referred to Sweden’s reputation in the 23 United States as ‘the country of the Middle Way’, due to Swedish methods of 24 solving ‘inner social problems’. The Swedes, Undén stated, have readily accepted 25 this characterization, but would also like to see it applied to the Swedish attitude 26 towards international problems — that is, to its neutrality. 24
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28 Historians have noted how Undén thereby conceptually reconnected 28 Swedish domestic policy with Swedish foreign policy, emphasizing Sweden’s 29 peaceful labour relations over the progressive social policies of its nascent 30 welfare state. 25 For example, Undén’s formulations — repeated in March 1950 —
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34 22 Alva Myrdal and Gunnar Myrdal, Kontakt med Amerika (Stockholm, 1941); and
35 Gunnar Myrdal, Amerika mitt i världen (Stockholm, 1943).
36 23 Ottosson, ‘Sverige som förebild’.
37 24 Östen Undén cited in Förenta nationernas generalförsamlingens första ordinarie mötes
38 andra del, New York 1946, m.m. (Stockholm, 1947), p. 9.
39 25 Nils Andrén and Yngve Möller, Från Undén till Palme: Svensk utrikespolitik efter
40 andra världskriget (Stockholm, 1990); Ottosson, ‘Sverige som förebild’; Hans Lödén, ‘För
41 säkerhets skull’: ideologi och säkerhet i svensk aktiv utrikespolitik 1950–1975 (Stockholm,
42 1999).
have been interpreted by Nils Andrén and Yngve Möller in 1990 as an attempt
at ‘ideologically motivating Sweden’s choice of role between the two blocks,
launching the Swedish model [although Undén spoke only of the Middle Way]
as an alternative of a particular value as an image to copy’, although Undén did
not explicitly suggest Sweden as a model or an example, but merely stated that it
has earned the reputation of providing a middle way.26 Again, the interest in the
cooperative movement and various concrete social policies, which had motivated
American interest in the Nordic countries during the ideological tension of the
1930s, could be associated with the wider problem of labour relations in an
industrialized society, namely Sweden, as a kind of domestic reflection of the
larger geopolitical tension between the superpowers in the 1940s.27

It has not been possible here to determine how the General Assembly and the
international press reacted to Undén’s alignment of the inner middle way with
the outer middle way, if at all. At home, though, the Foreign Minister’s speech
was criticized by some Swedish conservatives as a sign of hubris on the part of the
Social Democrats, who apparently imagined that ‘little Sweden’ would be able
to act as a ‘bridge-builder’ between the emerging superpowers. Yet, the Minister
was certainly right in that there was a broad reputation to build upon, exactly as
the Myrdals had suggested. The number of publications on Sweden and the 19
Nordic countries had fallen off during the war years, but a second wave emerged
at the end of the 1940s, among which David Hinshaw’s Sweden: Champion of 21
Peace (1949) and Hudson Strode’s Sweden: Model for a World (1949) deserve
special mention as they point to two main themes in the image of Sweden as 22
representative of Norden, namely peacefulness and exemplarity.28

In the latter, the author – a professor of English Literature at the University
of Alabama – became one of the first to explicitly speak of Swedish society in
general as model for others. Earlier observers had instead seen specific aspects of
Swedish politics and social life, most notably the cooperative movement and the
wage-bargaining system, as examples worthy of following or study.29

26 Andrén and Möller, Från Undén till Palme, pp. 69–70. See also Arne Nilsson,
Sweden’s Way to a Balanced Economy (Stockholm, 1950).
27 ASNE actively supported this drive; see, for example, Naboth Hedin, ‘What Can
the United States Learn from Sweden’s Past Labor Pains?’, Commercial and Financial
Chronicle, 23 May 1946, p. 1ff (reprint); and Tage Lindblom, Sweden’s Labor Program
(New York, 1948). ASNE also organized a study and information trip for Swedish labour
leaders to the United States in April 1950, co-sponsored by the LO, Folket i bild, and the
labour movement’s own press (A-pressen), where they met with American trade union
representatives of the AFL–CIO.
28 David Hinshaw, Sweden: Champion of Peace (New York, 1949); Hudson Strode,
29 Marklund, ‘The Social Laboratory’.
ASNE, for its part, was closely involved in the production of Strode’s book, and its director, Naboth Hedin, was a close friend of Strode’s. But the Swedes working at the news exchange in New York were sceptical of the title suggested for the volume. They tried to convince Strode to change it to Sweden Makes Sense, but his publisher Harcourt Brace stuck with Sweden: Model for a World. Under this title, the volume would eventually become a key reference for notions of the ‘Swedish model’ in the English language.

In a somewhat dry understatement, Allan Kastrup (a co-worker of Hedin’s and later Hedin’s successor as ASNE’s director) noted in his 1985 report on Swedish information in the United States that the title suggested by ASNE would hardly have had the same long-lasting impact as the title insisted on by the publisher.

From a Nordic Sweden to a Swedish Norden?

At the time of publishing Sweden: Model for a World, ASNE was deeply involved in commissioning other books on Sweden. However, these texts failed to attract the interest of commercial American publishers, as they detected a growing ‘boredom’ with the flood of enthusiastic accounts presenting Sweden as the perfect paradise.

While Sweden as an individual Nordic country may then have begun to suffer from overexposure in a genre that seemed to be on the wane, the Nordic or Scandinavian countries as a group apparently remained fairly popular and were widely reported as ‘model democracies’ by the late 1940s. The Swedes, at least, were determined to use this reputation.

In 1949, for example, a group of American newspapermen visited Scandinavia shortly after the breakdown of negotiations on a Scandinavian Defence Union between Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Funded by the Economic Cooperation Administration in Washington, an organization within the Marshall Plan framework, the American journalists focused strongly on the Scandinavian

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30 Kastrup’s 1985 report must be treated with some caution, as he is keen to depict American interest in Swedish matters as largely spontaneous, but it nevertheless gives a very valuable insight into the Swedish attempts to shape that interest. Kastrup, Med Sverige i Amerika, p. 154.

31 Ibid.

32 In the mind of some Swedish observers, by the late 1940s Sweden enjoyed ‘publicity in America comparable to that of a great power’, as the chief editor of liberal daily, Dagens Nyheter, Sten Dehlgren, himself an ASNE promoter, is said to have claimed in 1947. Dehlgren, cited in Kastrup, Med Sverige i Amerika, p. 183.

countries’ participation in the Marshall Plan, as well as their defence and foreign policies.

Only two months after the trip ended, ASNE published a richly illustrated booklet – *Report on Sweden by American Newspapermen, 1949* – containing some sixty articles from the visit that dealt with Sweden, thus ignoring visits to the other Scandinavian countries, which led to some consternation in the Danish information services. According to Kastrup, who had been instrumental in bringing about the ‘Report’, the Swedes defended their enterprising initiative to the other Scandinavians by referring to Sweden’s more ‘exposed’ position, which ‘forced’ them to use any positive publicity for ‘continued information services’ more actively than the other Nordic countries.34

The determination of the Scandinavian countries to defend themselves impressed the American audience of the McCarthy years, making it an obvious focal point for Nordic marketing in the United States. At the same time, McCarthyism turned against the social welfare provisions and public health programmes of the New Deal. Nevertheless, when the Nordic countries sought again to capitalize on the trust they had accumulated just before the First World War in conjunction with the establishment of the Nordic Council at the beginning of the 1950s, they chose to focus on the social policies of the Nordic welfare states. The resultant book, *Freedom and Welfare* (1953), authoritatively restated the relevance of the Middle Way as the most appropriate metaphor for understanding how the Nordics sought to combine democracy and market freedom, on the one hand, with social planning and social welfare on the other. The key to this unlikely combination was ‘a common background and ideology’ in the ‘Northern countries’, leaning towards ‘tolerance and compromise’. This set-up has caused the Nordics in recent times to attempt ‘to build a new social structure, providing more equal opportunities for all and better utilization of available resources, with an improved standard of living and a wider scope of social security as the main goals’.36

By pointing at these features of Nordic social policy, *Freedom and Welfare* emphasized that cooperation in ‘Northern community life’ does not amount to any ideological or totalitarian planning of the socialist kind. Rather, ‘the peculiar combination of individualism and social solidarity which would appear to be an outstanding feature of Northern mentality’ is reflected in the way in which ‘the Northern peoples’ are realists: ‘In their “social engineering” they have never followed any one general formula. Planning has been carried out on a strictly

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35 The Nordic Council was established in 1953 by Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, while Finland joined in 1956.
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1 pragmatic basis, drawing upon past experience but freely adapting it to changing circumstances,’ the book continued.37

The political struggles that can be assumed to have preceded the establishment of this vision of a ‘common goal’ were conspicuously absent in Freedom and Welfare: except for a four-page sub-chapter called ‘Government’ (notably followed by four pages on ‘Popular Movements’) political conflict was obscured in favour of continuous references to the efficient implementation of consensual popular will. Accordingly, in Freedom and Welfare, the Nordic countries are presented as if they have managed to bypass another central dichotomy of modern democracy, alongside the tensions between capital and labour, tradition and modernity: namely, the divide between popular will and individual interest.37

14 The Making of Sweden

16 The Swedish ‘hijacking’ of the trip made by American newspapermen in 1949 was repeated in conjunction with the publication of Freedom and Welfare, in what appears to be another Swedish attempt at bandwagoning the coordinated Nordic or Scandinavian information efforts: ASNE’s publication in April 1953, of a 128-page booklet entitled The Making of Sweden, written mostly by Kastrup.38 This sleek booklet effectively accompanied the massive and more academically inclined Freedom and Welfare, competing for its readership and, to some extent, capitalizing on the general interest in Nordic affairs to the benefit of Swedish marketing.39

This little booklet took the same tack as the volume on the Nordic countries. Indeed, navigating between capitalism and socialism guaranteed the Swedes both freedom and welfare. Again, it was emphasized that Sweden by no means represented socialism and should neither stir up utopian aspirations nor arouse dystopian fears. While noting that ‘American observers have often paid tribute to Swedish progress in social welfare’, the booklet also stated that ‘some undoubtedly have gone too far. Critics have also been heard, and sometimes they, too, have seemed to overshoot the mark.’ Continuing, the booklet drove home a point well suited to clear up any American confusion with regard to Sweden and socialism:

Swedish social reforms have never aimed at eliminating a sound individualism or robust self-reliance, and, on the whole, there have been no such effects. The

37 Ibid.
39 ASNE managed to distribute 20,000 copies of the little volume – partly through commercial sales and partly through distribution to journalists and editors – which effectively meant that Sweden would become the archetypical ‘Northern country’ among American journalists in the 1950s.
reforms are based on the conviction that all citizens are entitled to a certain basic protection, and that society itself will gain by providing such aid. Poverty and distress, unemployment and slums have never been democracy’s friends. By concerted efforts to solve those and similar problems, the productive capacity of the nation should also be improved. Immense benefits to the national economy will result particularly from better protection of the people’s health and the common battle against disease.40

In this representation, the social welfare of neutral Sweden was no more socialist than the social welfare of the United States’ Nordic allies, Denmark and Norway. 40 In fact, Sweden resembled the United States more than the rest of Scandinavia, in being more industrialized and slightly more prosperous. Swedish social welfare also sought to promote some core American values, guaranteeing the independence, self-reliance and democratic participation of citizens, not unlike the well-known American policy proposals of the late 1940s.41

In the Swedish information provided to the United States, then, freedom was described as welfare and welfare as freedom. Yet, this combination could not be expected to come about automatically, either in Sweden or anywhere else. It had to be built on the basis of conscious and planned effort on the part of society, as indicated by the title The Making of Sweden.42

This emphasis on economic prosperity, rational planning and consensual politics in the making of a modern society would play a key role in the shift from a general interest in the Nordic countries towards a stronger focus on the Swedish experience from the late 1950s and onwards. Despite the very close contacts between Norwegian and American social science scholarship – as well as American reports on the subject, such as that the Norwegian welfare system was just as generous and progressive as the Swedish one – Sweden gradually evolved into the archetypical welfare state in American social science during the 1950s and 1960s.42

In the early 1960s the American press reported that concrete examples of Swedish social policy, especially the 1959 pension reform, interested the Kennedy administration and the Johnson administration, not the least because the pension funds could be used for supporting a more active investment policy on the part of the government.43 This high tide of American interest in Sweden

41 For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Second Bill of Rights in 1944 or Harry S. Truman’s Point Four Program of 1949.
42 For contacts between American and Norwegian social scientists, see Fredrik W. Thue, In Quest of a Democratic Social Order: The Americanization of Norwegian Social Scholarship 1918–1970 (Oslo, 2006).
43 See Carl Marklund, ‘Nordic Models, American Mirrors, and Swedish Self-Portraits’ in Louis Clerc, Nikolas Glover and Paul Jordan (eds), Public Diplomacy in Context: The

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1 peaked in the early 1960s, coinciding with a Swedish information campaign 1 in the United States that included the Face of Sweden television series aired in 2 1962, as well as visits by prominent Swedish politicians and representatives of 3 trade unions and employers’ organizations.44 The growing interest in Sweden 4 and the increasing availability of information about it caused some alarm 5 among American conservatives, who feared that socialism could be introduced 6 by stealth into the free-market United States by using Swedish precedents. To 7 some extent, these fears were exacerbated by the so-called convergence theory, 8 which held that the differences between the blocs were diminishing as scientific 9 rationality and welfare provision evolved into common goals of both Soviet and 10 American development.45 The proponents of the convergence theory sometimes 11 referred to Sweden – or perhaps, rather, to what British historian Stewart Oakley 12 in 1966 called the ‘Swedish Image’46 – as a showcase of both the technologically 13 advanced welfare state and the possibly exotic behaviour patterns of the future.47 14 Gradually, Sweden evolved into the prototypical modern society of the 1970s – 15 that is, a potentially universal, yet exotic, image of a modern society bypassing 16 the dichotomies of Cold War rivalry.48

Soon this image of Swedish modernity morphed into a distinct policy 18 alternative for industrialized countries. As such, it needed a descriptive label, 19 and the ‘Swedish model’ emerged in the late 1960s as an alternative to either the 20 American or the Soviet way.49 In part, this shift corresponded to a more activist 21 Swedish foreign policy with regard to both Cold War tensions and the rise of 22 the Third World. In part also, it reflected the increasingly schematized pattern 23 of Swedish domestic policy, in particular the so-called Rehn–Meidner model 24 of 25

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44 See Glover, National Relations, p. 96, n. 390.

45 For discussions on the convergence theory, see, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith 29 and Stanislav Menshikov, Capitalism, Communism, and Coexistence: From the Bitter Past 30 to a Better Prospect (Boston, MA, 1988); Clark Kerr, Industrialism and Industrial Man: 31 The Problems of Labor and Management in Economic Growth (Cambridge, MA, 1960); 32 and Gunnar Myrdal, Beyond the Welfare State: Economic Planning and Its International 33 Implications (New Haven, CT, 1963).


47 See, for example, Jenny Andersson, När framtiden redan hänt: socialdemokratin och 37 folkhemsnostalgin (Stockholm, 2009).


of the early 1950s, with its aim of ensuring full employment through an active
labour policy.\textsuperscript{50}

But the Swedish model could only serve this role if it actually proved to be
distinct from other alternatives. As an explicit hybrid of capitalism and socialism,
difficult to pin down in the geopolitical contests of the Cold War years, Sweden
puzzled contemporaries, attracting both praise and criticism. Combining in
complex ways the Swedish image of neutral non-ideological modernity and
the Swedish model of highly ideological and presumably leftist, yet corporatist,
progressivism proved provocative to foreign observers, on both the left and the
right.\textsuperscript{51} To the American right, Sweden could also be appropriated as a scarecrow
as the international reputation for ‘Swedish sin’ began to proliferate from the
late 1950s onwards.\textsuperscript{52}

Here, it is also interesting to see how the Swedish model parted company
with its Nordic setting, reflected in the introduction of the ‘Scandinavian model’
as a new concept during the 1960s. While the Swedish model evolved during the
1960s into a more politicized concept, indicative of a left-leaning welfare state, the
Scandinavian model emerged in American academia as an analytical concept
to denote the social policy providing for this welfare, quite irrespective of its
ideological characteristics.\textsuperscript{53}

While these conceptualizations seem to have reinforced one another over the
next decades, they also split in important ways, as socialism became pinned
to Sweden while welfare became associated with Scandinavia. As a consequence,
‘Sweden’ could be used to decry the welfare state as socialist, while ‘Scandinavia’
could not. In effect, the Swedish model earned much of its international
reputation among both friends and foes from being the only prosperous ‘socialist’
state. But this fame would also prove to be one of its liabilities, as we will see.

\textbf{From the Swedish Model via the Danish Model to the Nordic Model}

This understanding quickly became part not only of Swedish self-identity, but also of intra-Nordic self-perceptions. While other Scandinavians and Finns

\textsuperscript{50} See Carl Marklund, ‘The Social Laboratory’ and Marklund, ‘Nordic Models’.


\textsuperscript{52} The myth of the Swedish sin – especially manifested in the production of pornography for export – appears to be another Nordic feature that has become more closely associated with Sweden than with any other individual Nordic country. See Klara Arnberg, ‘Synd på export: 1960-talets pornografska press och den svenska synden’, \textit{Historisk tidskrift}, 129/3 (2009): 467–486.

\textsuperscript{53} See Marklund, ‘Nordic Models’.
may regard the international exemplarity of Sweden as somewhat overstated, few Nordic observers would deny that the Swedes themselves have taken their perceived exemplarity very seriously. Interestingly, the Swedes themselves seem to have become victims of a kind of ‘utopian trap’: whenever utopian Sweden appeared less than perfect, social problems which Sweden shared with other modern societies were easily exaggerated.

For example, as the 1979 energy crisis generated labour conflicts across the industrialized countries, including a big strike in Sweden in 1980, one of Sweden’s leading dailies, the liberal *Expressen*, ran a series of articles on the ‘failure’ of the Swedish model. Prominent Social Democrats warned that the reputation of Sweden as a model society was in danger due to the inability of the then bourgeois government to handle the crisis.54

But the problems persisted even after the Social Democrats came back into power in 1982, despite the attempt at relabelling the Swedish model as the ‘Third Way’. The ominous warnings of the early 1980s were followed by a long series of research reports, as well as several titles by Swedish academics, on the impending fall of the Swedish model, primarily intended for the international scholarly community.55 These reports culminated in 1985, incidentally the same year the Swedish model was celebrated in an ambitious exhibition at Nordiska museet (the Nordic Museum) in Stockholm, entitled ‘modell Sverige’ (‘Model Sweden’).56 By the mid-1980s the international reputation of the Swedish model had apparently not only evolved into a strong source of self-identification on the part of the Swedes, but had also become a central concern of the Swedish economic and political elite, as indicated by the December 1986 commissioning of a government study on the task of providing information on Sweden abroad.57

However, Swedish reporting on the death of the Swedish model in the early 1980s appeared slightly exaggerated, at least to foreign observers. To American


55 Incidentally, the Conservative Party embraced the idea of ‘systemic shift’ (*systemskifte*) as the goal for its election campaign in the same year as the exhibition was held, in 1985.


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1 journalists and academics, for example, the Swedish crisis was not very different
2 from, or much worse than, the crisis suffered by other industrialized societies
3 when Keynesianism failed to control stagflation. But American sociologists,
4 long interested in Sweden as the prototypical modern society and archetypical
5 welfare state, noted the increased sense of self-doubt and bewilderment on the
6 part of the Swedes. By the 1980s Sweden, long a destination for American social
7 scientists looking for political solutions, had become a place where international
8 academics went to study social problems.58
9 American economists also noted a shift in perceptions of Sweden: from
10 having symbolized a pragmatic and vigorous hybrid of capitalism and socialism,
11 the Swedish model had, by the end of the 1980s, fossilized into either a
12 corporatist or a socialist welfare state, depending on a critic’s point of view. In
13 either case, it was seen as paralysed by its own structural set-up, and was widely
14 diagnosed with a particularly virulent bout of ‘Eurosclerosis’.14
15 Regardless of the actual severity and the real causes of social problems, Sweden had developed into a byword for stagnation and socialism, both at home
16 and abroad. While the information about Sweden provided in the United States
17 had sought to disprove the association between Sweden and socialism since
18 the early 1950s, as we have seen above, it also embraced the socialist epithet
19 elsewhere, especially in information relayed to the Third World. This made the
20 association difficult to do away with once it had become a liability.59
21 Indeed, the bourgeois victory in the 1991 elections signalled to the Wall
22 Street Journal – which had been rather positive towards Sweden throughout the
23 1980s – that ‘Swedish voters are finally tiring of something the world’s left has had
24 long praised, the ‘Swedish model’ of socialism’.60 As the fall of the Swedish model
25 made the international news in the early 1990s, the Swedes seemed to abandon
26 their earlier model in favour of EU harmonization, confirming that Sweden
27 was becoming a ‘normal’ country – neither a scarecrow nor a peace dove. In any
28 case, the end of Cold War tension also suspended the need for any middle way
29 between capitalism and socialism. Now, all that mattered was efficiency.
30 Internationally, however, the demise of Sweden spelt the rise of Denmark, 31
32 as evidenced in the following report, also found in the Wall Street Journal, 33
34 from November 1991: “Talk of the “Danish model” of economic recovery has 33
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1 replaced the “Swedish model” of a cradle-to-grave welfare state. The newspaper continued: ‘To its northern neighbors Denmark long seemed a smaller sibling, if not a weaker cousin. But now its neighbors can use Denmark’s advice. Norway, Sweden and Finland are in recession, and are trying to find ways to solve domestic economic problems and raise exports.’ While noting that Sweden – long a viable alternative to eastern European dissidents on the quest for a ‘socialism with a human face’ – could no longer provide guidance to others, the Wall Street Journal predicted that ‘[t]he Danish experience also could set a precedent for states such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia looking for ways to solve their small economies.’

61 Since the 1990s Denmark has been praised for its ‘flexicurity’, as well as its high levels of subjective well-being and quality of life. However, there are dangers in being praised, as the Danes would learn, too: just as the Swedish model was once called into question by accusations of socialism and paternalism, so Danish exemplarity today is troubled by allusions to xenophobia and parochialism. As the economic situation stabilized from 1995 onwards, and Finland and Sweden settled into their new roles as small members of the European Union (EU), the relative similarities between the Nordic countries – if compared with the other member states – reappeared as an asset vis-à-vis the wider Union. Significantly, the Swedish model has virtually disappeared from international news reporting, having been effectively replaced by the concept of the Nordic model, discussed at the beginning of this chapter. While the Swedish model is today used mostly in defensive positioning – for example in the so-called Växholm case – the Nordic model has taken over much of the positive and promotional meaning once held by the Swedish model.

60 Most recently, the concept of the ‘Nordic way’ popped up at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2011. In a brief text commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers, Investor and the Norden Association, we are told that while Norden may not possess a crisis-free model transferable to other societies, ‘Nordic experiences’ – the Nordic way of crisis management, social trust, and radical individualism – may prove inspiring to others. The foreword explains that ‘[m]any people see the Nordic countries as some kind of compromise between socialism and capitalism. This is not at all the case ... Instead, it is the combination of extreme individualism and a strong state that ...’


62 See, for example, Bent Greve (ed.), Happiness and Social Policy in Europe (Cheltenham, 2010).

63 The Växholm case concerned a conflict between Swedish labour law and European free movement of services, where the latter was widely seen as threatening the Swedish model.
has shaped the fertile ground for an efficient market economy.\textsuperscript{64} Not only has ‘socialism’ been stripped from the Swedish model; even the very ‘model’ has been disassociated from the new, yet strangely familiar, Nordic way presented as an alternative path to a world in crisis.

This liberal rebranding of the Nordic model has been politically appropriated by Sweden’s governing bourgeois Alliance, most recently at the Northern Future Forum which gathered the leaders of the nine countries of northern Europe (excluding Ireland) in Stockholm in February 2012.\textsuperscript{65} Again, Sweden is marketing itself as the leading proponent of the Nordic welfare model. But this time it is a question of ‘liberalizing’ a model that has previously been ‘socialized’.\textsuperscript{10} Nevertheless, Nordic social democracy has certainly not capitulated. In January 2012 SAMAK – the forum for Nordic cooperation between the Social Democrats and the trade union movement – launched the research project NordMod 2030, which is to identify future challenges to the social democratic welfare model. In December 2011 the Swedish Patent and Registration Office approved the joint application of SAMAK and the Swedish Social Democratic Party to register ‘the Nordic model’ as a protected trademark for ten years.\textsuperscript{66} The struggle continues.

\section*{Conclusion}

This chapter has attempted to show how Nordic exemplarity – the image of the Nordic countries as model societies – has grown out of a complex interplay between national needs of the Nordic countries and domestic public debate in other countries. In vying for positive reviews in the United States in the early stages of the Cold War, the Nordic countries coordinated their efforts in presenting themselves as welfare states, relying on the reputation of the Middle Way of the 1930s in conceptually combining freedom and welfare in the 1950s. Here, Sweden actively and successfully took on the role of the archetypical welfare state.

Apparentely, however, Sweden also suffered from its success as the only obvious accusation which could be directed at a prosperous and egalitarian Sweden would have to hone in on its ‘socialism’. The country’s supposedly unique, yet potentially universal, combination of prosperity and progressiveness – the very struggle continues.


\footnotesize\textsuperscript{65} Göran Eriksson, ‘Slaget om Norden’, Svenska Dagbladet, 9 February 2012.

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{66} Jan Söderström, ‘Socialdemokraterna har fått den nordiska modellen varumärkesskyddad’, Aktuellt i politiken, 12 February 2012.
same element that made Sweden a resource for American liberals – could be turned into a liability if conservatives could succeed in branding it as socialism. But why did Sweden and the Swedish model gain pre-eminence over the other Nordic countries in these Cold War image politics? For much of this time, Denmark and Norway also had social democratic governments successfully combining elements of capitalism and socialism. Danish political scientist Hans Mouritzen has suggested that Sweden's relative hegemony as a model during the Cold War resulted from being larger and more economically, technologically and politically independent than the other Nordic countries. It consciously marketed itself as a neutral state during the Cold War. As such, it served as a bandwagon for the other Nordic countries during the period, according to Mouritzen. As the Cold War ended and the Swedish economy faltered in the early 1990s, the Swedish political elite abandoned the Swedish model in favour of making Sweden 'European', leaving it up to the other Nordic countries to construct alternative Baltic or Nordic identities.67

In a less rational actor-oriented and more culturally essentialist explanation, Swedish historians Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh – who contributed to The Nordic Way – have sought the answer to Swedish hegemony in what they call Swedish ‘statist individualism’.68 To Berggren and Trägårdh, Swedish statist individualism presents a moral and political paradigm which goes beyond political divisions, according to which true freedom, independence and self-determination can only cohere if every individual is guaranteed not only a basic level of welfare but also – as far as possible – the tools by which to independently improve his or her standing. As a social investment, welfare spending is not an obstacle to freedom or an onerous cost to business: instead, it becomes a precondition for freedom. Without generating the high social costs of American society, according to Trägårdh and Berggren, the Swedes manage to produce most of the core values – such as competitiveness, entrepreneurship, individualism, innovation and prosperity –used by American conservatives to excuse the social exclusion and inequalities of American society. This is why Sweden has been admired by critics of America and loathed by its supporters. As such, it has played a certain role in the ideological contest of the Cold War.

This argument happens to be exactly the basic theme for most Swedish, as well as most Nordic, self-promotion in the United States since the penning of Freedom and Welfare in 1953. Hence, it can hardly explain why Sweden would have gained precedence over the other Nordic societies.

68 Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, Är svensk människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige (Stockholm, 2006).
Other observers, such as Swedish historian Hans Lödén, have sought an explanation to Swedish pre-eminence in the ‘active’ foreign policy of Sweden during the Cold War and its support of Third World interests. Lödén argues that Sweden used the emerging North–South polarity, decolonization and détente in the early 1960s to ‘activate’ a global role for itself as a ‘third power’. In this context, the Swedes themselves began to market Sweden as a model for others in explicit competition with the American way, particularly from 1971 onwards.

However, other small and middle-sized states also attempted to adopt a more activist global role in the shadow of the Cold War, notably Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Yugoslavia, for example. Lödén argues that these countries adopted only some specific policy areas, while ‘Sweden developed a radical policy within all areas ... offering itself as a model for the states of the world’.

Judging from the American press reports and the American academic studies that provide the mainstay of the material surveyed here, some very basic and rather concrete conditions seem to have been more important for making Sweden pivotal: Sweden was, at the time, more prosperous than the other Nordic countries, its economy grew faster, and it was widely perceived as being more unambiguously neutral – unlike Finland or Yugoslavia, for example – while its ‘independent’ interpretation of this neutrality made it a key player in the so-called ‘Nordic balance’ during the Cold War.

Combining this independent neutrality – which already worried the Americans during the Undén era but could be made a valuable asset if tilted more towards the West – with progressive economic and social policies, which apparently generated fast growth, simply made Sweden marginally different from its Nordic neighbours. Like the others, it combined freedom and welfare, capitalism and socialism. Unlike the others, however, it combined welfare and neutrality. Sweden, in other words, was understood in America as being different from the other Nordic countries in important ways, without being so different that it could no longer represent the others in a general context.

Judging from the material surveyed here, this is not only the decisive element for the Americans’ stronger interest in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries in the past. It can also explain why Sweden spent more energy on shaping its own image in the world.
image abroad than the other Nordic countries did: the ‘Western’ understanding of Swedish neutrality, with all its implications for Swedish business, hinged on whether Sweden was seen as truly neutral and not too socialist, in an illustration of how domestic policy and foreign policy coincided in the pressure chamber that was the Cold War.

As such, it is worth asking whether the Swedish image and the Swedish model simply mattered more to the Swedes themselves than to the world at large. It is tempting to argue that the Swedish preoccupation with the Swedish image abroad reflects a deep-seated national uneasiness about the identity and position of Sweden in the world. The nervous and somewhat premature reporting of its first demise in the early 1980s would seem to indicate this. But the sheer mass of the reporting on the second fall of the Swedish model does seem to vouch for its international function during the Cold War.

Even though all Nordic countries are not successful all the time, a given Nordic country may be so at one point or another. The Nordic countries may thus take turns in supporting and maintaining the international image of Nordic exemplarity. During the Cold War, Sweden, for specific reasons, quite consciously adopted this role. During the 1990s Denmark stepped in to become the most exemplary Nordic country. Today, Finland and Norway are perhaps the next most likely candidates. But they will probably draw upon the Nordic model for their legitimacy rather than launch novel notions of a ‘Finnish model’ or a ‘Norwegian model’, except for specific references to particular policy areas in which these countries are said to do exceptionally well, such as education, innovation and resource management. Taken together, the diversified, yet distinct, brand of the combined Nordic countries appears stronger today than the reputation of any individual Nordic country. As such, it also eases the conscience of promoters of ‘Nordicity’, traditionally wary of nationalistic chauvinism.

While marketing strategies, image politics and close attention to the needs of the intended audience may have played an important role in telling and selling the story about the success of the Nordic countries, the three central elements of this story remain rather constant and commonsensical, perhaps even banal. Yet, they are likely to remain important markers of Nordicity, at least as long as they are not widely shared globally. They are equality, peacefulness and prosperity.

As long as the Nordic countries remain relatively good at providing these three basic elements of the good life, international observers are likely to continue to express an interest in Nordic experiences of freedom and welfare, no matter whether they are primarily capitalist or socialist, unique or universal, still running the risk of getting stuck in the ‘utopian trap’. But that may be a small price to pay for the relative success of the Nordic countries.

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