



## **Nordic exceptionalism<sup>1</sup>**

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What the Nordic countries have in common, especially in the twentieth century, is that they have pursued common or similar policies that often represent a unique path in European or global comparison. Narratives and self-images accompany the historical and political circumstances: a special or exceptional position is asserted, claiming that the “Nordic way” is particularly successful, good for the people, progressive, and worthy of imitation. Although an exception can only exist if there is also a rule from which it deviates, the assertion of a special position often denies comparison; instead, narratives are passed on that emphasize positive features.

The term exceptionalism is increasingly used to describe both actual specificities and the narratives and mechanisms associated with them. However, the suffix *-ism* refers to the ideological character, the constructed nature of the phenomena underlying the concept. In this sense, exceptionalism does not primarily refer to the affirmation of an actual specific or exceptional position, but rather, as a cultural-analytical term, to world views, self-images, and hetero-images that are based on ideas of uniqueness and thus become the object of cultural and social scientific investigation, analysis, and criticism.

In the United States, the term “American Exceptionalism” has been in use for a long time and refers to the claim to global - not least military - intervention derived from the allegedly special position of the USA, with the aim of defending and expanding the status of the USA and ideas of a world order oriented towards allegedly American values. Nordic exceptionalism is situated in opposition to, if not as a category of distinction from, American exceptionalism (Jansson 2018; Volquardsen 2014): the countries see themselves as great humanitarian powers, peacemakers, and representatives of a politics of solidarity and equality, a self-image that remains in discursive circulation and is reinforced not least by its widespread

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adoption as a hetero-image - i.e. the associations that the Nordic countries evoke outside the region itself.

For the Nordic region, the term was first used in political science to describe the specifics of the Nordic welfare state, which became known and promoted as the "Nordic model". Especially during the Cold War, the region stood out for its characteristic "third way" between the great powers and between capitalist and socialist models of society. In a seminal article, Browning (2007) questions the extent to which the exceptionalism inherent in the Nordic brand of the postwar decades persists. The fact that the concept is now widely used in Northern European studies is underscored by a 2018 conference of the International Association of Scandinavian Studies (IASS) on "Scandinavian Exceptionalisms", the papers of which were published in an edited volume (Bjerring-Hansen, Jelsbak & Mrozewicz 2021).

The discussion of the concept of exceptionalism has proved particularly fruitful in research on Nordic colonialism (Fur & Ipsen 2009; Jensen & Loftsdóttir 2012; Naum & Nordin 2014; Körber 2021; Volquardsen & Körber in this volume). An exceptionalist self-image of a uniquely peaceful and benevolent region stands in direct contrast to the fact that Scandinavians have been involved in many forms of colonial exploitation of people and resources, including the transatlantic slave trade, the oppression of indigenous Sámi and other national minorities, and the involuntary deportation of Greenlandic children to Denmark.

The fact that people inside and outside Scandinavia react with astonishment, justification, or rejection to information about such events that challenge established narratives is itself a sign of the region's exceptionalist image. Habel (2011) describes such reactions as "sanctioned ignorance" when, for example, the mere mention of colonialism and racism triggers indignant defensive reflexes on the part of majority societies. Characteristic of Scandinavian societies is the assertion of "colorblindness", which places Scandinavians in a position of double superiority: on the one hand, over those whose concrete experiences of discrimination are not recognized, and on the other, over those who are accused of continuing such racialization (ibid.). What are the claims of Nordic exceptionalism based on and related to?

## Universal welfare

The so-called "Nordic model", whose ideas and practices peaked in the 1960s to 1980s, is based on the principles of universal and individual welfare,

solidarity-based redistribution, and equality (Hilson 2008). Outside the region, it serves as either a utopian vision or a horror scenario, depending on one's political perspective. This became clear in the 2016 US election campaign, when Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders called for the US to become "more like Denmark", to which the camp around his intraparty rival Hillary Clinton replied that Scandinavia could not be copied. Not to mention the Republican political opponent, for whom the "Nordic model" embodied unacceptable encroachments on civil liberties, in the sense of the dystopian ideas of a "welfare dictatorship" (Huntford 1971) that have been raised repeatedly since the 1970s.

In the North itself, it is questionable to what extent the "Nordic model" still holds. Since the 1990s, there has been a noticeable dismantling of the welfare state in favor of a growing confidence in the self-regulating forces of the market economy. Although the declared goal in the post-war decades was to eradicate poverty, the gap between rich and poor is widening in the North as well. In addition to the collapse of the so-called Eastern Bloc, which initially made the capitalist order appear to have no alternative, another geopolitical development in recent decades has influenced the "Nordic model": immigration on an unprecedented scale in the region. In Denmark, in particular, politicians have responded with a series of tightened immigration and asylum laws that continue unabated to this day; across the region, nationalist and right-wing populist parties and groups are on the rise.

Indeed, global migration is challenging the Scandinavian welfare state by forcing policymakers to rethink who qualifies for generous state benefits. The supposedly universal welfare system reaches its limits when it is denied to many. At the same time, the demarcation from those who are denied the privileges of the welfare state becomes more contoured, thus counteracting the characteristics supposedly inherent in the region's exceptionalist self-image, such as solidarity, openness, and colorblindness.

### **International solidarity**

During the decades of the Cold War, a specific Nordic approach to foreign policy became apparent. Governments - as well as non-governmental organizations and grassroots movements - succeeded in maintaining a neutral position between the blocs and actively shaping an alternative space for action. Since then, these countries have been among the most generous donors in international cooperation. Sweden, in particular, supported liberation movements in southern

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Africa, such as the South African ANC, at a time when other Western governments were still referring to them as terrorist organizations (Sellström 2002). Scandinavians were also appointed to prominent positions in international organizations, including UN Secretaries-General Trygve Lie and Dag Hammarskjöld. Sweden's Social Democratic Prime Minister Olof Palme pursued a decidedly anticolonial and antiracist policy in the 1970s and 1980s, which at times led to diplomatic disputes with other Western powers, especially the United States.

Scandinavia's foreign policy positioning has led to a consolidation of its image as a "humanitarian superpower" and global peacemaker. The latter is supported by the fact that the Nobel Peace Prize, which is awarded in Oslo, gives a Norwegian jury the sovereign right to interpret global peace policy and thus an ethically and morally prominent position. In recent years, however, the notion of ethical-moral superiority has been subject to critical revision. One example is the discussion of the Second World War and its aftermath: in addition to Sweden's neutrality, the occupation of Denmark and Norway, and heroic narratives of resistance and the rescue of Danish Jews, less recognized aspects are gradually coming to the fore, including various forms of collaboration with Nazi Germany and violence against women (and their children) who had relationships with German soldiers.

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By participating in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Denmark has proven to be a reliable ally of the US, but at the cost of human casualties and a possible contribution to destabilization and escalation. A third context in which the global engagement of the Nordic countries is critically examined is the legacy of colonial structures and power relations. Fur (2013) notes that Sweden has moved directly from a phase in which the country's colonial past was considered comparatively harmless, insignificant, and negligible, and thus erased from the collective memory, to a phase of solidarity with struggles against the consequences of colonialism elsewhere: "from no colonialism to post-colonialism, without stopping in between" (26), i.e. without coming to terms with its own colonial history. Like Sweden - and the other Nordic countries - Palme, Hammarskjöld and others could be perceived as "untainted by the legacy of colonialism" (18) and maintain their positions, which contributed to the North's reputation as the "good West".

Many recent initiatives scratch at the exceptionalist claim of innocence and call for a reappraisal of colonial policies and practices. In 2014, Denmark refused to participate in a Reconciliation Commission (2014-2017) initiated by Greenland to address the injustices committed during and after the colonial period. In

2017, many observers expected an official apology for the consequences of colonialism and slavery in Denmark's former Caribbean colony, as it was the centenary of the handover of the former Danish West Indies to the US. During the state visits of Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen to St. Croix and Queen Margrethe II to Ghana - where Denmark also once had possessions - no apologies were offered. The Norwegian state, on the other hand, established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the same year to deal with the oppression and assimilation of the Sámi, Kven and Finnish minorities. The political processes and events show that there never was such a thing as Nordic "exceptional innocence", that the majority still finds it difficult to accept responsibility, and that the emphasis on good intentions still serves as justification. But they also show that exceptionalist self-images are beginning to falter.

### Homogeneity

An often-cited factor in the successful development of Scandinavian welfare societies is the exceptional demographic homogeneity of the countries. Homogeneity in this context refers both to the comparatively small class differences and to the ethnic and cultural composition. An asserted similarity of people, which is expressed, for example, when the media and politicians invoke the "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995) of a national "we" and speak of "the Danes, Swedes, or Norwegians" instead of citizens or residents, is often seen as a prerequisite for public spirit and a successful community. From the perspective of minorities, however, the homogeneity invoked, which is based less on facts than on the construction of national and regional identities, sounds threatening, since Jews, Roma, and Sámi have been forced to assimilate for centuries. When Norway was constituted as an independent nation in the 19th century, a rarely acknowledged part of nation-building was the forced Norwegianization of the Kven and Sámi.

Today, representatives of national minorities, autonomous regions and black Scandinavians are raising their voices on an unprecedented scale. The idea that membership in national communities is defined by ethnic and cultural "sameness" is being criticized; genuine recognition of diversity is being demanded. Research is also critical of the fact that "being Nordic" is equated with "being white" in the minds of many people within and outside the region (Lundström & Teitelbaum 2017). While the political majority in Denmark still seems to defend the idea of a homogeneous national community, Sweden has taken a new path:

exceptional homogeneity is giving way to an equally exceptional self-representation as particularly diverse and antiracist. Whether this new kind of exceptionalism will last, however, seems at least questionable in light of recent developments. Since the fall of 2022, Sweden has been governed for the first time by a minority government based on the votes of the far-right Sweden Democrats. This brings the country into line with Denmark, Norway and Finland, where right-wing parties have been directly or indirectly involved in government alliances for some time, a development that has contributed to legitimizing their positions and shifting the overall political discourse.

## Egalitarianism

In Nordic societies, characterized by a large middle class, class differences do not seem to be an acute zone of struggle. Migration and mobility call for a reexamination of the idea of rights and benefits based on origin. What a majority has been able to agree on for decades, however, is the question of gender equality and the rights of people with queer sexual orientation and identification. Family-friendly policies and reproductive assistance regardless of marital status are just a few elements of a particularly broad equality for which the Nordic countries are famous, and which is seen as a sign of progressiveness. At the same time, however, this image is instrumentalized to distance Nordic societies from supposedly less progressive groups, such as Muslim immigrants.

The exceptionalist self-image as the vanguard of equality is also being challenged. The *#metoo* movement has shown that even in Scandinavia today, power and sexual violence are intertwined and commonplace, not least in the media and cultural industries. Another line of conflict came to light with the impeachment of former Danish Integration Minister Inger Støjberg. Under the pretext of wanting to protect “child brides”, Støjberg had forced underage couples who had fled Syria to be housed separately from each other without individual case assessment, thus violating laws on the protection of private and family life. The political staging as a protector of supposedly oppressed Muslim women fits into a policy of resistance to migration that Dietze (2019) calls “sexual exceptionalism”. The central motif is the “assumption of a general sexual backwardness of migrants”, which the dominant discourse opposes with a “superior occidental modernity” (ibid.).

The claimed specificity and uniqueness of the region raises questions about its internal nature, power relations and inequalities. From a Sámi or

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Greenlandic perspective, universal values and rights have never been equally valid in all parts and for all inhabitants of the region. Where languages and cultures have been suppressed, people have rightly been ambivalent about claims that Scandinavia is characterized by non-violence, solidarity and egalitarianism. The recognition of diversity and heterogeneity in the North thus implies the end of the interpretive sovereignty of the white majority and thus of exceptionalist grand narratives. As an international brand, however, the North remains largely untouched by tensions and conflicts at home and can continue to draw on an arsenal of exceptionalist elements: Scandinavian design, "Inga Lindström" films and the concept of *hygge* continue to herald peaceful comfort.

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