

Scandinavia and “the Land of UnSwedish Freedom”: Jonathan Franzen, Susanne Bier and Self-conceptions of Exceptionalism in Crisis

The chapter deals with self-conceptions of exceptionalism in the United States and in Northern Europe. The notion that one nation, one region or one group is exceptional, conflicts with globalization theory. Because of migrating people, goods and ideas, the world is understood to become more homogeneous (Appadurai 2008; Comaroff & Comaroff 2012). However, globalization incorporates a globalization of risks, conflict (Beck 2007) and uncertainty (Bauman 2000), too. As contemporary Western societies are increasingly characterized by crisis and insecurity, there appears to emerge a need to highlight the unique features of the "Self". Phrases like »American Exceptionalism« and »Nordic Exceptionalism« have become common in political discourses from the 2000s, and are at once subject to a critical negotiation within popular culture, literature and film. In the following discussion, I will show how the American and the Scandinavian self-conceptions of exceptionalism are interdependent. The analysis starts in America with an examination of a satirical television show by American stand-up comedian, Wyatt Cenac. Together with Jonathan Franzen's novel "Freedom", it serves as an example of artistic approaches to a discursive strategy, which uses images of Scandinavia as a category of distinction in order to consolidate the libertarian idea of »American Exceptionalism«. The second part of the chapter concerns Scandinavian visual arts' current reevaluation of the narratives, which form the basis for notions of »Nordic Exceptionalism«. Here, I will demonstrate how Susanne Bier's feature films "Efter Brylluppet" (»After the Wedding«) and "Hævnen" (»In a Better World«) contribute to the critical negotiation of a Nordic self-conception, characterized by altruism and ethical and moral superiority.

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