

## **Contesting Nordicness**

# **Helsinki Yearbook of Intellectual History**



Edited by Heikki Haara and Koen Stapelbroek

## **Volume 2**

# Contesting Nordicness

---

From Scandinavianism to the Nordic Brand

Edited by

Jani Marjanen, Johan Strang and Mary Hilson

**DE GRUYTER**  
OLDENBOURG

ISBN 978-3-11-073501-7  
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-073010-4  
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-073015-9  
ISSN 2698-6205



For details go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2021948486**

**Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2021 Jani Marjanen, Johan Strang, Mary Hilson and the chapters' contributors. Published by Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston  
This book is published with open access at [www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com).

Cover illustration: The Brooklyn Museum's 1954 „Design in Scandinavia“ exhibition launched „Scandinavian Modern“ furniture on the American market, Installation view from Design in Scandinavia, April 20, 1954 through May 16, 1954. [[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Design\\_in\\_Scandinavia\\_exhibition.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Design_in_Scandinavia_exhibition.jpg)]  
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

# Table of Contents

## Acknowledgements — VII

Johan Strang, Jani Marjanen and Mary Hilson

**A Rhetorical Perspective on Nordicness: From Creating Unity to Exporting Models — 1**

Ruth Hemstad

**Scandinavian Sympathies and Nordic Unity: The Rhetoric of Scandinavianness in the Nineteenth Century — 35**

Merle Weßel

**The Nordic in the Scientific Racial Discourses in the United States and Northern Europe in the Interwar Period: The Passing of Greatness — 59**

Mary Hilson and Tom Høctor

**From the “Middle Way” to *The Nordic Way*: Changing Rhetorics of the Nordic Model in Britain — 81**

Johan Strang

**The Rhetoric of Nordic Cooperation: From the *Other* Europe to the *Better* Europe? — 103**

Pirjo Markkola

**Nordic Gender Equality: Between Administrative Cooperation and Global Branding — 133**

Tero Erkkilä

**Transparency and Nordic Openness in Finland: Ideational Shift, Invented Tradition, and Anders Chydenius — 153**

Lily Kelting

**New Nordic Cuisine: Performing Primitive Origins of Nordic Food — 175**

Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen

**Nordic Noir: Branding Nordicness as British Boreal Nostalgia — 197**

**Bibliography — 219**

**Contributors — 253**

# Acknowledgements

This book draws from discussions that began at the University of Helsinki's Centre for Nordic Studies and its networks. Largely inspired by Henrik Stenius, we wanted to develop a way to analyse *Norden* as culturally constructed, while at the same time acknowledging that the region is constantly redefined in political debate. Instead of looking for the essential features of Nordic political culture, we shifted our perspective towards an examination of the many different things that were rhetorically coupled with the Nordic countries, as well as the reasons and motives for this in various historical situations.

These debates developed into the idea for this book, which was first discussed at a seminar organised by Jani Marjanen and Johan Strang in 2015. We would like to thank Letterstedtska föreningen and the Finnish Institute in Berlin for supporting this initial meeting, and the Centre for Nordic Studies and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Helsinki for sponsoring a follow up seminar in Helsinki in December 2016. After these meetings, the book matured as a dialogue between the editors and the individual authors of the chapters in this book. We also want to direct our warm thanks to those colleagues who attended these earlier meetings and made valuable contributions to the discussion, especially Matti La Mela, Jussi Kurunmäki, Malcolm Langford, Haldor Byrkjeflot and Kazimierz Musiał. We are also grateful to Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, Nils Edling and two anonymous referees for suggestions and comments that helped improve the individual chapters. The foundation of the Helsinki Centre for Intellectual History and the launch of its Yearbook series provided a final impetus to complete the book. We thank the series editors and the publisher for including this volume in the series.

Andreas Hansen, Ilana Brown and Mark Shackleton provided us with valuable assistance with preparing the final manuscript.

Acknowledgements are also due to the Academy of Finland (grant number 323489), Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (grant M19-0231:1), the Independent Research Fund Denmark (grant number 8018–00023B), UiO:Nordic, and the University of Helsinki three-year project “Vernacularization and nation building” for their support of our research. Publication of the open-access edition of this volume was made possible by a grant from the NordForsk university hub ReNEW (Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World).

Helsinki and Aarhus, May 2021

Mary Hilson, Jani Marjanen and Johan Strang





Johan Strang, Jani Marjanen and Mary Hilson

# A Rhetorical Perspective on Nordicness: From Creating Unity to Exporting Models

In 2020 the dairy company Arla launched a new range of plant-based drinks. Marketed under the brand name “JÖRD” with allusions to Old Norse mythology, the products were described as an “oat drink from Nordic nature... made by Nordic wind, rain and sun.” The term “Nordic” featured prominently in the company’s own descriptions of its product, with references to “Nordic flavours such as barley and hemp,” and to oats “grown in the Nordics for hundreds of years.”<sup>1</sup> This apparently trivial example picks up on real and mythical sediments of meaning at the same time as it tries to convey an image of something modern and humorous. The brand itself may be full of contradictions, especially as the Nordic countries are known for their high levels of consumption and production of dairy products, but the notion of Nordicness clearly carries a lot of rhetorical appeal in this type of marketing.

There are many other examples of the use of “the Nordic” to evoke interest in the politics, society, and culture of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – the five countries, which together with the three autonomous regions of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland make up the Nordic region.<sup>2</sup> In this book, we explore the appeal and flexibility of the rhetoric of Nordicness. What, if anything, do the different uses of “Nordic” have in common, and are there any particular circumstances or historical periods in which the rhetoric has been particularly popular? The starting point for our book is our perception that there has been an upsurge in a new rhetoric of Nordicness since about 2010, which so far has not been discussed in scholarly literature in any great detail.<sup>3</sup> What accounts

---

1 Arla Foods, “JÖRD Oat Drink | Fresh & Organic,” accessed December 13, 2020, <https://jord-plantbased.com/en-gb/oat-drink/>.

2 Examples include *The Economist*’s 2013 special issue on “The Nordic Countries: The Next Supermodel”; and the wave of literature on the Nordic way of life and political culture – see Anu Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016) or Brontë Aurell, Anna Jacobsen, and Lucy Panes, *North: How to Live Scandinavian* (London: Aurum Press, 2017). There are also examples of attempts to brand design as Nordic (e.g. <https://www.warmnordic.com/>) and there is even a local brewery in Tampere that makes “Nordic beers” (see: <https://www.gastropub.net/brewery/>).

3 We are, however, aware of the fact that the rising appeal of “the Nordic” is also a feature of academic policy that has generated funding opportunities for scholarly research on Norden. This publication and its authors are therefore, at least to some extent, part of the phenomenon we

for the recent rise of “the Nordic” in politics, culture and marketing, and how does this new Nordicness relate to the history of the adjective?

If one were to describe what makes the Nordic countries Nordic a wide range of characteristics could be listed. These include notions of sparsely populated societies living in close relationship to nature, comparatively peaceful and consensual political cultures, or the strong, even dominant role of the state and the weak position of the family in societal affairs. One could also highlight some of the many paradoxes of Nordicness: the strong but secularised position of religion in society, the political traditions of equality against the competitiveness of the Nordic economies, or the peripherality of relatively poor peasant societies surviving in harsh conditions against rich and modern societies blessed with an abundance of natural resources. The list of distinguishing features might draw on geography, language, culture or politics, but cannot really be complete. Indeed, definitions of “the Nordic” seldom aim at being exhaustive but are more likely to provide different sets of characteristics that produce tailored descriptions of the region. They represent competing visions of what the Nordic region is or should be.

It is also legitimate to question whether any of the defining features associated with “the Nordic” can be said to be *exclusively* Nordic. The Nordics share historical legacies with the Baltic States, and many political features with other small and medium-sized states, such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, New Zealand or Scotland. Many cultural, religious and political traditions in the Nordic region have a German origin, while since the Second World War, the Nordics have oriented themselves heavily towards the Anglo-American world. In their peculiar outside/inside perspective on “Europe,” Nordic societies are very similar to other semi-peripheries of Europe, such as the Balkans.<sup>4</sup> When it comes to climate and nature, the Nordics might look like parts of Canada or Russia.

Moreover, it is seldom the case that all Nordic countries share the same characteristics, a realisation that has led welfare state scholars to refer to a Nordic welfare model with five exceptions.<sup>5</sup> This perspective highlights tensions present

---

study. We wish to thank the Academy of Finland (grant 323489), the NordForsk-funded university hub ReNEW, the Independent Research Fund Denmark (grant number 8018–00023B), and UiO: Nordic for their support of our research.

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Nygård, Johan Strang, and Marja Jalava, eds., *Decentering European Intellectual Space* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Niels Finn Christiansen and Klaus Petersen, “Preface,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 26, no. 3 (September 2001): 153–156, doi:10.1080/034687501750303828; see also Jóhann Páll Árnason and Björn Wittrock, eds., *Nordic Paths to Modernity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).

in any notion of the Nordic.<sup>6</sup> The old kingdoms (Sweden and Denmark) can be contrasted with the younger nation states (Norway, Finland and Iceland). The historical legacies of the early modern monarchies can be found in differences between East *Norden* (Sweden and Finland) and West *Norden* (Denmark, Norway, and Iceland), while the core Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Denmark, and Norway) may be contrasted with Iceland and Finland, or the large countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway) with the much smaller Iceland. There is also the notion of the more continental European Denmark versus the more peripheral parts of *Norden*. International political affiliations are also complex, with divisions between the NATO members (Denmark, Norway, and Iceland) and the non-aligned (Sweden and Finland); and between EU members (Denmark, Sweden, and Finland) and non-EU members (Norway and Iceland). As well as the five nation states the Nordic region also includes the autonomous territories of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland, the transnational Sápmi region, which spans the northern parts of the Nordic countries and the Kola Peninsula of Russia, and border regions such as the Torne valley, the Øresund region and Southern Jutland/Schleswig.

Linguistic divisions can be made between the three Scandinavian languages, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish – which have various degrees of mutual intelligibility – and Icelandic and Faroese, which are insular versions of Scandinavian languages no longer comprehensible to speakers of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish. Finnish is of completely different origin, though it has been claimed that there are semantic similarities between Finnish and Swedish as political languages.<sup>7</sup> Other non-Scandinavian languages in the region include Greenlandic and the Sámi languages.<sup>8</sup> But there are also many languages – such as Arabic, English, and Russian, to name only a few of the most important ones – that may be widely spoken in the region, even though they are not always associated with it. Indeed, intra-Nordic communication is to an increasing extent taking place in English, which further complicates the idea of language being the core and essence of Nordicity.

---

<sup>6</sup> Jani Marjanen, “Nordic Modernities: From Historical Region to Five Exceptions,” *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 3, no. 1 (March 2015): 91–106, doi:10.18352/22130624-00301005; Pauli Kettunen, “Review Essay: A Return to the Figure of the Free Nordic Peasant,” *Acta Sociologica* 42, no. 3 (July 1999): 259–269, doi:10.1177/000169939904200306.

<sup>7</sup> Henrik Stenius, “The Finnish Citizen: How a Translation Emasculated the Concept,” *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 8 (2004): 172–188.

<sup>8</sup> Michael P. Barnes, “Linguistic Variety in the Nordics,” 2019, <https://nordics.info/show/artikel/linguistic-variety-in-the-nordic-region/>.

Regardless of the complicated answers to what makes *Norden* Nordic, there is one point that remains: throughout at least the past two hundred years or so, many actors have invested heavily in the notion of *Norden*. Because of this, there is a long and complicated history of defining the Nordic region and talking about things as Nordic. The aim of this book is to analyse the broad variety of ways in which “Nordic” has been used as an adjective both within and outside the region. We explore the use of the term “Nordic” – and the related term “Scandinavian” – in conjunction with concepts such as race, openness, gender equality, food, crime fiction, Nordic cooperation, and the Nordic model, from historical and contemporary perspectives. The leading idea is that all of these uses of the term Nordic have been crucial in negotiating what the region stands for, its identity or brand. By analysing the background, context, and rhetorical struggles for the claims for specific “Nordic” characteristics in different discourses, this book sheds new light on the debates on the cultural construction of the Nordic region,<sup>9</sup> as well as the broader international discussion on regionalism and transnational history.<sup>10</sup>

This book is part of a recent wave of volumes on Nordic societies and cultures, covering topics such as the Nordic model, Nordic egalitarianism, Nordic human rights, Nordic democracy, Nordic gender equality, Nordic literature, and Nordic design.<sup>11</sup> Some volumes even explicitly focus on the discourse and

---

**9** Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, eds., *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997); Árnason and Wittrock, *Nordic Paths to Modernity*; Johan Strang, ed., *Nordic Cooperation: A European Region in Transition* (London: Routledge, 2016), doi:10.4324/9781315755366.

**10** See e.g. James Casteel, “Historicizing the Nation: Transnational Approaches to the Recent European Past,” in *Transnational Europe: Promise, Paradox, Limits*, ed. Joan DeBardeleben and Achim Hurrelmann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 153–169, doi:10.1057/9780230306370\_9; M. Middell, L. Roura Aulinas, and Lluís Roura i Aulinas, eds., *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi, eds., *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Diana Mishkova, Balázs Trencsényi, and Marja Jalava, eds., “Regimes of Historicity” in *Southeastern and Northern Europe, 1890–1945: Discourses of Identity and Temporality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), doi:10.1057/9781137362476; Stefan Troebst, “Introduction: What’s in a Historical Region? A Teutonic Perspective,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 10, no. 2 (2003): 173–188, doi:10.1080/1350748032000140741; Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Maria Todorova, “Spacing Europe: What Is a Historical Region?” *East Central Europe* 32, no. 1–2 (2005): 59–78, doi:10.1163/18763308–90001032.

**11** Anu Koivunen, Jari Ojala, and Janne Holmén, ed., *The Nordic Economic, Social and Political Model: Challenges in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2021); Synnove Bendixsen, Mary Bente Bringslid, and Halvard Vike, eds., *Egalitarianism in Scandinavia: Historical and Contempo-*

conceptualisation of these phenomena, like the recent *The Changing Meanings of the Welfare State: Histories of a Key Concept in the Nordic Countries*.<sup>12</sup> However, the scholarly emphasis in all of these volumes is on the Nordic version, and the appropriation or conceptualisation of particular phenomena, rather than on the explicit historical discourses in which these phenomena have been labelled Scandinavian or Nordic. As such, our volume is most closely related to the 2010 book *Rhetorics of Nordic Democracy*, which tried to describe not only the elements that are so often seen as key features of Nordic politics and culture, but also the tensions that are present in the historical and discursive construction of them as Nordic.<sup>13</sup> In comparing the rhetoric of Nordicness in a wide variety of discourses, our book is the first scholarly volume to put the focus on the adjective “Nordic” rather than the nouns that are used following it.

The starting point for the volume is the simple observation that “Nordic” and “Scandinavian” are flexible and contested concepts that have been, and continue to be, used in many and often contradictory ways. They have been associated with political projects and institutions (Scandinavianism, the Nordic Council) while also functioning as categories of analysis in academic research (the Nordic model, Nordic welfare states). Moreover, they have been used to pinpoint a regional identity, based on shared historical and cultural legacies, which is often said to complement, rather than compete with, the national identities in the region. “Nordic” and “Scandinavian” have often – though not always – had positive connotations. As such, they have to an increasing extent become resources for commercial and cultural branding, as in the examples of Nordic noir, New Nordic Food or Scandinavian design. The chapters of the book discuss in-

---

*rary Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), doi:10.1007/978-3-319-59791-1; Hanne Hagtvedt Vik et al., eds., *Nordic Histories of Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2021); Nicholas Ay-lott, *Models of Democracy in Nordic and Baltic Europe: Political Institutions and Discourse* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014); Eirinn Larsen, Sigrun Marie Moss, and Inger Skjelsbæk, eds., *Gender Equality and Nation Branding in the Nordic Region* (London: Routledge, 2021); Steven P. Sondrup et al., eds., *Nordic Literature: A Comparative History*, Vol. 1, *Spatial Nodes* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017), doi:10.1075/chlel.xxxi; Tobias Hoffmann and Bröhan-Museum Berlin, eds., *Nordic Design: Die Antwort aufs Bauhaus = Nordic Design: The Response to the Bauhaus* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, 2019); Byrkjeflot, Haldor, Lars Mjøset, Mads Mordhorst and Klaus Petersen, eds. *The Making and Circulation of Nordic Models, Ideals and Images* (London: Routledge, 2021) doi:10.4324/9781003156925.

<sup>12</sup> Nils Edling, ed., *The Changing Meanings of the Welfare State: Histories of a Key Concept in the Nordic Countries* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Jussi Kurunmäki and Johan Strang, “Introduction: ‘Nordic Democracy’ in a World of Tensions,” in *Rhetorics of Nordic Democracy*, ed. Jussi Kurunmäki and Johan Strang (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2010), doi:10.21435/sfh.17.

dividual cases, but this introduction will present our methodological starting point, discuss a number of key tensions in the rhetoric of Nordicness, and, finally, highlight a number of key turning points and historical layers in this rhetoric.

## “Nordic” as a contested concept

The overwhelming appeal of the term “Nordic” during the twenty-first century has made it an object of political struggle between various groups who seek to claim the term for their own purposes. During the 2010s, for example, the Nordic model was at the centre of such disputes between Social Democrats and Conservatives across the region (see Hilson and Hoctor in this volume). At the same time another rhetoric of Nordicness with nationalist, anti-immigration and even racist overtones also flourished: at the time of writing in 2021 the populist party group in the Nordic Council calls itself “Nordic Freedom” (*Nordisk frihed*), while extreme right-wing movements such as the “Nordic Resistance Movement” (*Nordiska motståndsrörelsen*) make frequent use of Old Norse mythology. Yet, Nordicness also continues to be evoked in the name of international solidarity, humanitarianism and solidarity, as for example with the *New Nordic Peace* report published by the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2019.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in May 2015 the Finnish Social Democrat Erkki Tuomioja criticised a government decision to make record-breaking cuts in foreign aid by claiming that “Finland is no longer a Nordic country.”<sup>15</sup>

If notions of Nordicness are contested in the present, they were certainly never fixed in the past. As shown in Merle Weßel’s chapter, the concept of a Nordic race was widespread among scientists and politicians in the United States, Europe and Scandinavia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The adjective “Nordic” was used politically in the 1930s by the German National Socialists as well as by the far right within the Nordic region. The Swedish National Socialists of the 1930s, for example, called their youth organisation “Nordic Youth” (*Nordisk Ungdom*). At the same time, the 1930s saw the dawn of a rhetoric of “Nordic democracy” by which Social Democrats and others sought to portray the region as a democratic haven in a Europe threatened by totalitarianism.<sup>16</sup>

---

14 Anine Hagemann and Isabel Bramsen, *New Nordic Peace* 524, TemaNord (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019), doi:10.6027/TN2019–524.

15 Cecilia Heikel, “Vi använder vår yttrandefrihet för att säga ifrån,” *Svenska Yle*, July 28, 2015, <https://svenska.yle.fi/artikel/2015/07/28/vi-anvander-var-yttrandefrihet-att-saga-ifran>.

16 Kurunmäki and Strang, “Introduction: ‘Nordic Democracy’ in a World of Tensions.”

Rhetorical struggles are most apparent in the field of politics. This book suggests, however, that it is important to take stock of the plurality of usages of the term “Nordic” and analyse the complex interplay between political, academic, cultural and commercial rhetoric. The fact that similar notions of efficiency, simplicity, and age-old traditions of liberty can be evoked in discourses claiming to defend Nordic ethnic homogeneity, promoting Nordic democratic values, creating a Nordic cuisine or selling Nordic crime fiction points towards a certain transferability of the rhetoric of Nordicness from one discourse to another. For example, in his chapter on Nordic noir, Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen argues that the appeal of Nordic crime fiction in the UK from the late 2000s lay precisely in its complex relationship with utopian and dystopian images of the Nordic welfare state.

In emphasising the contested nature of the adjectives “Scandinavian” and “Nordic” the book distances itself from the struggles to define the essence or true nature of the Nordic region and its political and cultural characteristics. Instead, we embrace a constructivist approach akin to the theoretical premises of the discussion on “historical regions.”<sup>17</sup> As such, we build on previous studies of the Nordic region such as the seminal *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, the studies of the “images” of *Norden*, as well as the more recent discussion on “Nordic branding.”<sup>18</sup> Our ambition, however, is to advance beyond a quest for structures or elements that made the Nordic region (the free Nordic peasant, egalitarian education, Lutheranism or Social Democracy), or the ways in which these elements or others were promoted as part of a Nordic brand, and to focus instead on the “speech acts” through which these elements were appealed to (or reject-

---

17 Troebst, “Introduction;” Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*; Todorova, “Spacing Europe”; Diana Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism, the Scholarly Politics of Region Making* (London: Routledge, 2018); Mishkova and Trencsényi, *European Regions and Boundaries*.

18 Sørensen and Stråth, *The Cultural Construction of Norden*; see also Árnason and Wittrock, *Nordic Paths to Modernity*; Peter Stadius, *Resan till norr: Spanska Nordenbilder kring sekelskiftet 1900* (Helsingfors: Finska Vetenskaps-societeten, 2005); Jonas Harvard and Peter Stadius, “Conclusion: Mediating the Nordic Brand – History Recycled,” in *Communicating the North: Media Structures and Images in the Making of the Nordic Region*, ed. Jonas Harvard and Peter Stadius, *The Nordic Experience* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 319–332; Christopher S. Browning, “Branding Nordicity: Models, Identity and the Decline of Exceptionalism,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 42, no. 1 (2007): 27–51, doi:10.1177/0010836707073475; Louis Clerc, Nikolas Glover, and Paul Jordan, eds., *Histories of Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding in the Nordic and Baltic Countries: Representing the Periphery* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Svein Ivar Angell and Mads Mordhorst, “National Reputation Management and the Competition State: The Cases of Denmark and Norway,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 8, no. 2 (2015): 184–201, doi:10.1080/17530350.2014.885459.



ed) through the use of the adjective “Nordic.”<sup>19</sup> As such, it is not the making of *Norden*, but the political and cultural struggles over “the Nordic” that lie at the heart of the book.

We suggest that the rhetoric of Nordicness needs to be analysed by unpacking the historical layers of experiences and connotations present in language. We do this by bringing together scholars working in various disciplinary backgrounds under a common framework inspired by the tradition of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*).<sup>20</sup> Our starting point is that referring to something as “Nordic” or “Scandinavian” is both a reflection of how something Nordic is seen at a given time and a way of forging a specific view on something as Nordic. Paraphrasing Reinhart Koselleck, we see concepts as both mirrors of and vehicles for historical change.<sup>21</sup> Together, the historical struggles for defining Nordicness form different layers of meaning that are available for actors who can choose to claim, reject or redefine them in order to make new assertions and form future visions for “the Nordic.” Our focus is on phrases where “the Nordic” is used in order to make an explicit claim about Nordic exceptionalism or difference from other regions (“the Nordic model” and “Nordic Noir”). It is, however, important also to acknowledge that even when “the Nordic” is used as a neutral marker indicating merely the geographical extension of its noun (as in “Nordic cooperation” or “The Nordic Society for Phenomenology”), the adjective adds something evaluative or substantial to the noun. It might allude to a wide range of positive features associated with the adjective “Nordic,” such as democracy, welfare, pragmatism, openness, but it might also potentially evoke different forms of negative associations: arrogance, self-righteousness, or xenophobia. The rhetorical perspective allows for a more detailed analysis of how particular

---

19 Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511790812.

20 Reinhart Koselleck, “Einleitung,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972); Reinhart Koselleck, “A Response to Comments on *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*,” in *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte*, ed. Hartmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1996); Skinner, *Visions of Politics*; Jan Ifversen, “About Key Concepts and How to Study Them,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 1 (2011), doi:10.3167/choc.2011.060104; Willibald Steinmetz and Michael Freeden, “Conceptual History: Challenges, Conundrums, Complexities,” in *Conceptual History in the European Space*, ed. Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden, and Javier Fernández Sebastián (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), doi:10.2307/j.ctvw04kcs.9.

21 Koselleck, “Einleitung.”



agents have seen the Nordic region, thus acknowledging that agency belongs to particular persons and institutions and not discourses as such.

## Tensions of Nordicness

In analysing the motives of individual speech acts that have framed different cultural, social and political items as “Nordic”, this book takes stock of many different instances of more or less inventive rhetoric. As noted above, standard accounts of what makes *Norden* Nordic usually present a number of incongruities and contradictions. In shifting the perspective to a study of the rhetoric of Nordicness, these can be identified and analysed more clearly as tensions arising from the various purposes for which the historical actors use the concept.

## Contested Nordic geographies

The geographical extension of the terms “Scandinavian” and the “Nordic” is, of course, a contested issue in itself. Within the region, the adjective “Scandinavian” (*skandinavisk*, *skandinaavinen*, *skandinaviskur*) is usually, but not always, used to denote something Danish, Norwegian and/or Swedish, whereas “Nordic” (*nordisk*, *pohjoismainen*, *norraen*) tends to include Finland and Iceland as well. In other languages and contexts, including in English, “Scandinavian” might be used of all five Nordic nations, or sometimes of just some of them. Historically, the geographical extension of *Norden* (“the North”) has been disputed. In nineteenth-century travel literature, Russia was often included in “the North,”<sup>22</sup> while Iceland had an ambivalent position as an example of what Guðmundur Hálfðanarson has labelled “boreal alterity” – on the edge of European civilisation but at the same time associated with the European and Nordic past preserved in its Old Norse literary traditions.<sup>23</sup>

For much of the twentieth century, Sweden was indisputably at the core of the region, the most Nordic of all the Nordic countries.<sup>24</sup> For Denmark and Nor-

---

<sup>22</sup> Stadius, *Resan till norr*.

<sup>23</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Iceland Perceived: Nordic European or a Colonial Other?” in *The Postcolonial North Atlantic Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands*, ed. Lill-Ann Körber and Ebbe Volquardsen (Berlin: Nordeuropa-Institut der Humboldt-Universität, 2014), 39–66.

<sup>24</sup> Jenny Andersson and Mary Hilson, “Images of Sweden and the Nordic Countries,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 34, no. 3 (2009): 219–28, doi:10.1080/03468750903134681.

way, being Nordic has largely been equally self-evident, despite these countries' slightly more continental European and transatlantic orientations. By contrast, for Iceland, the turn to *Norden* was more controversial and demanded a conscious effort in the interwar period.<sup>25</sup> For Finland, the country's position as a Nordic country was far from evident in the first half of the twentieth century, until the rhetoric of Nordicism gradually became an essential tool to assert its status as part of the West from the 1930s onwards.<sup>26</sup> Claims to a Nordic identity have at times formed part of the political rhetoric in Estonia and the Baltic region as a whole, and more recently also in Scotland.<sup>27</sup> The recent wave of (New) Nordicism, in turn, seems to point in different directions. On the one hand, geopolitical developments and the increased usage of "the Nordic" for branding purposes have furthered the idea of a fixed region consisting of only five Nordic countries and three autonomous regions.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, as "the Nordic" has become a brand it refers increasingly to qualities and values rather than geographical location or cultural community, and as such questions of the geographical extension of "the Nordic" have become increasingly irrelevant (see Kelting and Stougaard-Nielsen, both in this volume).

The relationship to the outside is, of course, a central aspect of defining the Nordic region, though this demarcation has always been fluid. In the nineteenth century, "Scandinavia" functioned as a means of distinguishing the Danish and Swedish monarchies from other northern powers such as Prussia/Germany and Russia. In early twentieth-century racial discourses, we find the idea of a common Nordic-Germanic people, as opposed to Alpine or Southern races (see Weßel in this volume). From the 1930s, and especially after 1945, *Norden* was

---

25 Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, "For Equality or Against Foreign Oppression? The Politics of the Left in Iceland Leading up to the Cold War," *Moving the Social* 48 (2012): 11–28, doi:10.13154/mts.48.2012.11–28; Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, "Facing the Nation – Nordic Communists and Their National Contexts, from the 1920s and into the Cold War," in *Labour, Unions and Politics under the North Star: The Nordic Countries, 1700–2000*, ed. Mary Hilson, Silke Neunsinger, and Iben Vyff (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

26 Max Engman, "Är Finland ett nordiskt land?" *Den Jyske Historiker* 69–70 (1994).

27 Mikko Lagerspetz, "How Many Nordic Countries?: Possibilities and Limits of Geopolitical Identity Construction," *Cooperation and Conflict* 38, no. 1 (2003): 49–61, doi:10.1177/0010836703038001003; Mart Kuldkepp, "The Scandinavian Connection in Early Estonian Nationalism," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2013): 313–338, doi:10.1080/01629778.2012.744911; Andrew G. Newby, "In Building a Nation Few Better Examples Can Be Found: *Norden* and the Scottish Parliament," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 34, no. 3 (2009): 307–329, doi:10.1080/03468750903134749.

28 Browning, "Branding Nordicity"; Johan Strang, "Introduction: The Nordic Model of Transnational Cooperation?" in *Nordic Cooperation: A European Region in Transition*, ed. Johan Strang (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1–26, doi:10.4324/9781315755366–1.

often construed against a German or a European conservative other, or as an exceptional region representing a third way between Western capitalism and Eastern communism.<sup>29</sup> These uses of “the Nordic” bear a strong similarity to what Reinhart Koselleck called “asymmetrical counter-concepts,” that is, conceptual pairs that are defined solely by one part. In Koselleck’s heavily laden examples “Hellenes and barbarians,” “Christians and heretics,” and “humans and non-humans” the second term of the pair receives its meaning from lacking a quality present in the former. “Barbarian” was simply a generic classification put against the specific name of a Hellene.<sup>30</sup> When it comes to “the Nordic,” this use of asymmetrical counter-concepts was most extreme in the racist discourse analysed by Weßel in this volume. But, as shown by Strang, it was also strikingly apparent in the asymmetrical usage of “Europe” to define Nordic cooperation, Nordic democracy or the Nordic welfare state. In the field of culture, the asymmetrical other is usually not articulated (e.g., in the example of Nordic design), but appears in a similar way as something that *lacks* perceived distinctive Nordic qualities.

## Nordicness as simultaneously age old and progressive

Closely related to these spatial connotations are the temporal dimensions of Nordicness. Recent work on the history of geo-spatial concepts has highlighted how the formation of geographical entities is deeply entrenched in ideas about progress, lagging behind and catching up.<sup>31</sup> As a whole, the Nordic region has at various points in history been conceived of either as a laggard at the outskirts of European modernity, or as a progressive region at the vanguards of human de-

---

**29** Bo Stråth, “The Swedish Image of Europe as the Other,” in *Europe and the Other, Europe as the Other*, ed. Bo Stråth (Wien: Peter Lang, 2010); Lars Trägårdh, “Sweden and the EU: Welfare State Nationalism and the Spectre of ‘Europe,’” in *European Integration and National Identity: The Challenge of Nordic States*, ed. Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver (London: Routledge, 2002); see also Strang in this volume.

**30** Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

**31** Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi, “Introduction,” in *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History*, ed. Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi, “Conceptualizing Spaces within Europe: The Case of Meso-Regions,” in *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History*, ed. Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Marja Jalava and Bo Stråth, “Scandinavia/Norden,” in *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History*, ed. Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

velopment.<sup>32</sup> As such, the rhetoric of Nordicness has involved a wide range of seemingly contradictory temporal speech-acts. On the one hand, as emphatically shown in Lily Kelting's chapter on New Nordic Food, Nordicness is often used in order to refer to historical, even primordial, features of the Nordic region, relating to nature and landscape. The Viking legacy is often evoked as an "original" pre-nation-state Nordicness. On the other hand, at least since the late nineteenth century the rhetoric of Nordicness has – as indicated above – also often been used to allude to progress, modernity, or even the avant-garde, as opposed to a more traditionalist Europe.<sup>33</sup> This progressive turn can be dated to "the modern breakthrough" associated with authors like Georg Brandes, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg in the late nineteenth century,<sup>34</sup> to the rise of Social Democracy in the 1930s, or to the designation of the functionalist architecture and modernist design of the mid-twentieth century as "characteristically Scandinavian."

Perhaps it is precisely this combination of tradition and progress that provides the rhetoric of Nordicness with its suggestive appeal.<sup>35</sup> The 1930s rhetoric of Nordic democracy is a case in point. The Social Democrats furnished their own progressive political vision of the future with allusions to its long historical roots.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, Nordic rhetoric touches upon another Koselleckian theme, the gap between "the space of experience" and "the horizon of expectation."<sup>37</sup> Today, we see a similar combination of historical tradition and modern solutions in the discourse of gender equality, in which a notion of the strong Nordic woman in early peasant societies is presented as the background to the contemporary position of women in working life, at home and as being in charge of their own bodies (see Pirjo Markkola's chapter in this volume). Building on the French historian François Hartog, it can be suggested that "the Nordic" has be-

---

32 Stefan Nygård and Johan Strang, "Conceptual Universalization and the Role of the Peripheries," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 12, no. 1 (2017): 55–75, doi:10.3167/choc.2017.120105.

33 Tania Ørem, *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1925–1950*, vol. 1–3 (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Jenny Andersson, "Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic Light: The Swedish Model as Utopia 1930–2007," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 34, no. 3 (2009): 229–245, doi:10.1080/03468750903134699.

34 Julie K Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity: Georg Brandes and Asta Nielsen* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2012).

35 Carl Marklund and Peter Stadius, "Acceptance and Conformity: Merging Modernity with Nationalism in the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930," *Culture Unbound* 2, no. 5 (2010): 609–634, doi:10.3384/cu.2000.1525.10235609.

36 Kurunmäki and Strang, "Introduction: 'Nordic Democracy' in a World of Tensions."

37 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*.

come increasingly presentist.<sup>38</sup> Notions like Nordic Noir, Nordic food or even the Nordic model allude to a past that legitimates the present, but do not carry within themselves a promise of a radically better future in the same way as Scandinavianism in the nineteenth century, Nordic democracy in the 1930s, or Nordic cooperation in the Cold War period.

The rhetoric of Nordicism has also been a way of *synchronizing* the Nordic countries with each other, bringing them together at the same level of development.<sup>39</sup> It is well known that Nordic comparisons in domestic political debates are often used in order to show that one's own country lags behind the others in some aspect or another, with the purpose of urging political action. Pauli Kettunen, for example, has argued that the notion of the Nordic welfare state in Finland was a matter of immanent critique of Finnish society, where the temporalised rhetoric of "Nordic" represented a horizon of expectation modelled around the Swedish example. If Finland purported to be a Nordic country, it had to follow and catch up with developments in the rest of the region, particularly in Sweden.<sup>40</sup>

In this way, Nordic rhetoric has seldom been a matter of negotiating an average Nordic state of development, but instead it usually refers to the most progressive and advanced solutions in the region. For many decades during the post-war period, Sweden was conceived of as being ahead and by virtue of this defined "the Nordic," giving direction to developments in the other Nordic countries. More recently, this position has been challenged in at least two different ways. On the one hand, it seems as if the other Nordic countries have caught up with and even overtaken Sweden in various fields. As such, "the Nordic model" often appears in international debate as no longer synonymous with the Swedish welfare state, but as the aggregate of cherry-picked features from the different Nordic countries.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, there has also been a shift in the political landscape which has meant that an increasing number of people in the region (and abroad) have begun to frame the Swedish example less as a

---

38 François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

39 Helge Jordheim, "Europe at Different Speeds: Asynchronicities and Multiple Times in European Conceptual History," in *Conceptual History in the European Space*, ed. Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden, and Javier Fernández Sebastián (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 139–174, doi:10.2307/j.ctvw04kcs.9.

40 Pauli Kettunen, "The Nordic Welfare State in Finland," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 26, no. 3 (2001): 225–247, doi:10.1080/034687501750303864.

41 Carl Marklund, "The Nordic Model on the Global Market of Ideas: The Welfare State as Scandinavia's Best Brand," *Geopolitics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 623–639, doi:10.1080/14650045.2016.1251906.

utopian and more as a dystopian vision of the future. This view has been expressed especially in connection with immigration policy, but in 2020 also with the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has raised concerns that the Swedish welfare state has been wrecked by neoliberal reform.<sup>42</sup>

## The interchangeability of “the Nordic” and the national

It is often argued that the Nordic identity is special because it is complementary, not opposed, to the five different national identities. In other words, Nordicism does not challenge, but is an integral part of Finnishness or Danishness, for example.<sup>43</sup> This means that there is a certain interchangeability of national adjectives (Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish) with the word Nordic. Using “Nordic” instead of national adjectives can be an attempt to present something as more primordial than the modern nation-state (see Lily Kelting’s chapter in this volume). In Finland, the rhetoric of Nordicism can be a way of incorporating into national history traditions, events, and individuals from the country’s long shared history with Sweden. In his chapter on Nordic openness, Tero Erkilä shows how in 1990s Finland the clergyman and economic thinker Anders Chydenius (1729–1803) was branded as the father of Nordic openness, at least in part because it would have sounded awkwardly anachronistic to label him Finnish.

The substitution of Nordic for the national adjectives may also be a way of associating with the favourable image of the neighbouring countries, or even

---

<sup>42</sup> Mikael Jalving, *Absolut Sverige: En rejse i tavshedens rige* (København: Jyllands-Postens Forlag, 2011); Bjarne Riiser Gundersen, *Svenske tilstander: En reise til et fremmed land* (Bergen: Vigmostad & Bjørke, 2019); Jeanette Björkqvist, “Både Finland och Norge öppnar för att hjälpa,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.svd.se/finland-redo-att-hjalpa-sverige-med-coronavard>; Anton Ösgård, “How Privatization Hobbled Sweden’s Response To Coronavirus,” *Jacobin Magazine*, 2020, <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/11/sweden-coronavirus-covid-nordic-scandinavia>; Peter S. Goodman and Erik Augustin Palm, “Pandemic Exposes Holes in Sweden’s Generous Social Welfare State,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/08/business/coronavirus-sweden-social-welfare.html>; Johan Strang, “Kommentar: Vår älskade dystopi,” in *Sverigebildens i Norden: En studie i Danmark, Finland, Island och Norge* (Stockholm: Svenska institutet, 2021), <https://si.se/app/uploads/2021/03/bilden-av-sverige-i-norden.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g., Norbert Götz, “Norden: Structures That Do Not Make a Region,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 10, no. 2 (2003): 323–341, doi:10.1080/1350748032000140822; Lene Hansen, “Conclusion,” in *European Integration and National Identity: The Challenge of the Nordic States*, ed. Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver (London: Routledge, 2001), 212–225.

hiding more troublesome aspects of the image or reputation of a particular Nordic nation.<sup>44</sup> For example, at various points in Finnish history the rhetoric of “Nordic democracy” was not only a way of connecting Finland with “the West”, but also of smoothing over domestic political tensions and disarming threats from extremist political factions on the right and the left.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the rhetoric of Nordicness has also been a way of avoiding explicitly nationalistic rhetoric. In the 1930s, Social Democrats used the same rhetoric of Nordic democracy in order to associate with contemporary trends towards cultural nationalism, without aligning too closely with extreme nationalist voices.<sup>46</sup> From the 1980s, Swedish Social Democrats mobilised the concept of a Nordic model in response to rising neo liberalism, while references to a Nordic model in the 2010s allowed centre-right politicians to distance themselves from the (Social Democratic) ideological connotations of the Swedish model.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the interchangeability of “Nordic” with national adjectives, the rhetoric of Nordicness has usually included some kind of reference to the other Nordic countries. Especially during the Cold War period, “Nordic” was customarily used either with representation from, or as an appeal to, the other Nordic countries. In an era of nation branding in the new millennium, such references have become less important and the “Nordic” is increasingly used as synonymous with Danishness or Finnishness for example, rather than as a transnational Nordic space.

There are clearly also limits to the interchangeability of the Nordic and the national. It is, for example, unusual to see athletes presented as Nordic, because they are primarily thought of as representing the nation and often in explicit opposition to Nordic “arch-enemies.” In general, *Norden* seems to have become an

---

<sup>44</sup> Marklund, “The Nordic Model on the Global Market of Ideas.”

<sup>45</sup> Petri Koikkalainen, “From Agrarian Republicanism to the Politics of Neutrality: Urho Kekkonen and ‘Nordic Democracy’ in Finnish Cold War Politics,” in *Rhetorics of Nordic Democracy*, ed. Jussi Kurunmäki and Johan Strang (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2010), doi:10.21435/sfh.17.

<sup>46</sup> Niels Kayser Nielsen, *Bonde, stat og hjem: Nordisk demokrati og nationalisme fra pietismen til 2. verdenskrig* (Aarhus: Aarhus universitetsforlag, 2009); Kurunmäki and Strang, “Introduction: ‘Nordic Democracy’ in a World of Tensions”; Nikolas Glover and Andreas Mørkved Hellenes, “A ‘Swedish Offensive’ at the World’s Fairs: Advertising, Social Reformism and the Roots of Swedish Cultural Diplomacy, 1935–1939,” *Contemporary European History* 30, no. 2 (May 2021): 202, doi:10.1017/S0960777320000533.

<sup>47</sup> Andreas Mørkved Hellenes, “Tracing the Nordic Model. French Creations, Swedish Appropriations and Nordic Articulations,” in *The Making and Circulation of Nordic Models, Ideals and Images*, ed. Haldor Byrkjeflot et al. (London: Routledge, 2021); Marklund, “The Nordic Model on the Global Market of Ideas;” see also Hilson and Høctor in this volume.



increasingly irrelevant framework for sports. Nordic championships are rarely arranged, and Nordic records in various sports are no longer registered or simply deemed irrelevant. Even the Miss Scandinavia beauty pageants were discontinued in 2008. Internal rivalries remain, however, and important clashes between athletes or teams from different Nordic countries can still be framed in the media as “battles of Scandinavia/*Norden*.” That said, even in sports the rhetoric of Nordicness can sometimes be a way of expressing sympathies with (or claiming the success of) an athlete from another Nordic country, as in the case of the Icelandic football success in the 2016 European Championship.

### “The Nordic” in different parts of the region

The rhetoric of Nordicness is used differently and for different purposes in different parts of the region. Sometimes this can cause misunderstandings and frictions between people who all claim to represent “true” Nordicness. In Denmark for example, “the Nordic” has been invoked to stress the distinctiveness of Denmark from the European mainstream, whereas in Finland Nordicness has been a way of cementing Finland’s status as a (West) European country. It is beyond the scope of this volume to explore the different uses of Nordicness within the sub-national regions of the Nordic countries, but one might expect “the Nordic” to have a different significance in West Jutland, Northern Karelia, Skåne or the Harparanda/Tornio border regions, say, compared to Copenhagen or Helsinki.

Historians of the Nordic welfare state have documented how Nordic cooperation often functioned as an arena where particularly Danish and Swedish politicians quarrelled with each other on various social political issues, thus effectively engaging themselves in a struggle to define “the *Nordic* welfare state.”<sup>48</sup> The rhetoric of Nordicness is thus connected to power hierarchies in the region, where the tendency of monopolising “the Nordic” as a designation for something Danish or Swedish has often generated some irritation in Finland, Iceland and Norway. Examples range from the establishment of the “Nordic Museum” (*Nordiska museet*) in Stockholm in 1873 to the advertising campaign “Stockholm – the capital of Scandinavia” in the first decade of the 2000s. Similarly, in 1874

---

<sup>48</sup> Pauli Kettunen, Urban Lundberg, and Mirja Österberg, “The Nordic Model and the Rise and Fall of Nordic Cooperation,” in *Nordic Cooperation: A European Region in Transition*, ed. Johan Strang, (London: Routledge, 2016), doi:10.4324/9781315755366; Klaus Petersen, “National, Nordic and Trans-Nordic. Transnational Perspectives on the History of the Nordic Welfare State,” in *Beyond Welfare State Models*, ed. Klaus Petersen and Pauli Kettunen (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011), 41–64, doi:10.4337/9781849809603.00009.



Henrik Ibsen complained that Georg Brandes was using “Scandinavian literature” as a name for a small circle of intellectuals in Copenhagen, ignoring writers from other parts of the Nordic region.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as shown by Ruth Hemstad in her chapter, in nineteenth-century Norway there was a strong suspicion that the cosy rhetoric of Scandinavia or *Norden* served only to conceal Swedish and Danish imperialist ambitions, a suspicion that lived on as a Norwegian scepticism of Nordic cooperation throughout much of the latter half of the twentieth century (see also Strang in this volume). More recently, however, Norway has become an enthusiastic promoter of both “the Nordic” and of Nordic cooperation.<sup>50</sup> This might be related to a fear of being left out when Finland and Sweden joined the EU in 1995 and when the discourse on Baltic Sea cooperation was most intense.<sup>51</sup> Simultaneously, a case can undoubtedly be made that the oil-generated economic prosperity of recent years has enabled Norwegian actors to indulge in the rhetoric of Nordicism with the self-confidence that was previously confined to Danes and Swedes.<sup>52</sup>

The ambivalent relationship to “the Nordic” is perhaps a more enduring feature of Icelandic political rhetoric, the latest Nordic country to reach full independence (1944). Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir has convincingly argued that the Icelandic Social Democratic movement was severely hampered by its “Nordicism” and closeness to its Danish sister party. This meant it remained largely in the shadow of political movements such as the conservatives, agrarians and socialists, who could more easily flourish in a political landscape thoroughly permeated by nationalist discourse.<sup>53</sup> To be sure, there was also (and continues to be) a similar nationalist hesitation towards the Nordic in Finland, but more

---

49 Stefan Nygård, “The Southern Prism of the Northern Breakthrough: Georg Brandes and Italy” in *Georg Brandes. Pioneer of Comparative Literature and Global Public Intellectual*, ed. Jens Bjerling-Hansen, Anders Engberg-Pedersen, and Lasse Horne Kjøeldgaard (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

50 See e.g., Thorvald Stoltenberg, *Nordic Cooperation on Foreign and Security Policy*, Proposals presented to the extraordinary meeting of Nordic foreign ministers (Oslo, February 2009), <https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/ud/vedlegg/nordicreport.pdf>.

51 Kazimierz Musiał, “Reconstructing Nordic Significance in Europe on the Threshold of the 21st Century,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 34, no. 3 (2009): 286–306, doi:10.1080/03468750903134723.

52 A phenomenon examined and exemplified by the multi-million kroner programme UiO:Nordic at the University of Oslo, which facilitates studies of Nordic issues and the Nordic region from a social science and humanities perspective. See <https://www.uio.no/forskning/satsing-er/norden/forskning>.

53 Kristjánsdóttir, “For Equality or Against Foreign Oppression?”; Kristjánsdóttir, “Facing the Nation – Nordic Communists and Their National Contexts, from the 1920s and into the Cold War.”

often than not this has been overridden by the geopolitical imperative to keep at a safe distance from the eastern neighbour Russia. For example, while Urho Kekkonen, as a young nationalist intellectual of the Agrarian League had been sceptical of associating Finland with Scandinavia, he was, as President of the Republic during the treacherous Cold War years, eager to emphasise Finland's Nordicness.<sup>54</sup>

In the autonomous regions of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Åland, the Nordic discourse has at times had the almost reverse function of strengthening autonomy and weakening the relation to the host countries Denmark and Finland. While the Faroe Islands and Greenland remain underdogs within the Kingdom of Denmark, the Nordic context may provide them with an arena for exerting sovereignty. In concrete terms, the Nordic Council, where the Faroe Islands and Åland have been members since 1970 and Greenland since 1984, has become an important institutional arena for (para-)diplomacy for these autonomous regions.<sup>55</sup>

## The rhetoric of Nordicness within the region and abroad

The rhetorical appeal of Scandinavia outside the region can be traced to the nineteenth century in certain contexts,<sup>56</sup> but became firmly established from the 1930s on. It has even been argued that the very idea of *Norden* as a distinct region has been produced abroad, or at least in close dialogue with foreign discourses.<sup>57</sup> From the 1980s this was expressed in references to a Scandinavian or

---

<sup>54</sup> Koikkalainen, "From Agrarian Republicanism to the Politics of Neutrality."

<sup>55</sup> Sarah Stephan, "Making Autonomies Matter: Sub-State Actor Accommodation in the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers. An Analysis of the Institutional Framework for Accommodating the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland within 'Norden,'" *European Diversity and Autonomy Papers EDAP* 3 (2014), <http://www.eurac.edu/edap>; Hasan Akintug, "The Åland Islands Meet European Integration: Politics of History and the EU Referendums on Åland" (MA diss., University of Helsinki, 2020), <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/318984>.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Newby, "'One Valhalla of the Free': Scandinavia, Britain and Northern Identity in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in *Communicating the North*, ed. Jonas Harvard and Peter Stadius (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 147–169.

<sup>57</sup> Kazimierz Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model: Images of Progress in the Era of Modernisation* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2002); Carl Marklund and Klaus Petersen, "Return to Sender – American Images of the Nordic Welfare States and Nordic Welfare State Branding," *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* 43, no. 2 (2013): 245–257, doi:10.1515/ejss-2013–0016; Norbert Götz and Heidi Haggrén, eds., *Regional Cooperation and International Organizations: The Nordic Model in Transnational Alignment* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Nordic “model” (or models) available for emulation or export (see Hilson and Hoctor in this volume). Here too, notions of Scandinavia or *Norden* were often used interchangeably with national labels, with close affinities between the Swedish and Scandinavian models in particular.<sup>58</sup> While such images were often positive, they were never exclusively utopian: “Scandinavia” could also be used rhetorically to convey dystopian images, such as high rates of taxation or social control on the one hand, or the decadence of secularism and sexual liberation on the other.

In serving highly local purposes abroad, the rhetoric of Nordicness often refers to pointed ideal types – whether utopian or dystopian – where the actual state of affairs in the Nordic countries is almost irrelevant. It may be argued that external circulation sometimes serves to conserve obsolete ideas of what the Nordic countries are. Examples of this might include references to high rates of suicide or the debates on “Scandinavian socialism” in connection with the 2020 US Presidential elections.<sup>59</sup> The Nordic social democratic welfare state also continues to live on in foreign political debates, despite the fact that its foundations have been transformed in the past decades, particularly in Sweden.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, in our volume, Mary Hilson and Tom Hoctor show how the idea of the Nordic model has been used positively by both the left and the right in UK politics since the 1990s. Sometimes these foreign uses boomerang back to the Nordic countries themselves, becoming part of branding initiatives or political campaigns based on simplified stereotypes of innate Nordic cultural traits. The Swedish centre-right government’s initiative *The Nordic Way* at the 2011 World Economic Forum in Davos is a case in point.<sup>61</sup>

While it is self-evident that the images of *Norden* within the region and outside it are not the same, the rhetorical perspective can be a useful way of exploring the connections and interplay between foreign and domestic visions of Nordicness. If notions like the Nordic model are invented to serve particular local purposes in British, German or American contexts, the Nordic appropriation of this rhetoric shows that the reception is not passive and that actors in the region actively use the brands for their own purposes. More recently, terms like Nordic

---

<sup>58</sup> Hellenes, “Tracing the Nordic Model.”

<sup>59</sup> Carl Marklund and Byron Zachary Rom-Jensen, “Vanishing Scandinavian ‘Socialism’ in the 2020 US Election,” 2020, <https://nordics.info/show/artikel/scandinavias-vanishing-socialism-in-the-2020-us-election>.

<sup>60</sup> Jenny Andersson, “Drivkrafterna bakom nyliberaliseringen kom från många olika håll,” *Respons*, no. 1, 2020, <http://tidskriftenrespons.se/artikel/drivkrafterna-bakom-nyliberaliseringen-kom-fran-manga-olika-hall>.

<sup>61</sup> Harvard and Stadius, “Conclusion: Mediating the Nordic Brand – History Recycled.”