



‘Nordic Nineties’: Norwegian and Swedish self-understanding in the face of globalization

By

Andreas Mørkved Hellenes, Haakon A. Ikonomidou,
Carl Marklund & Ada Nissen

In her New Year’s Eve Speech on January 1, 1992, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland drummed up a bright future scenario for her country: “The football girls, the handball girls, the ski boys, the Oslo Philharmonic. They’re in the world elite. In the same way we will show that Norwegian business performs at an international level. Perhaps we need a new slogan? ‘It is typically Norwegian to be good’” (Brundtland 1992). The contrast could not have been starker with the message broadcast to the Swedish people from crisis-ridden Stockholm in April 1993 at the public media event “En dag för Sverige” (*A day for Sweden*) – an 8-hour long televised dissection of all that was wrong with contemporary Swedish society in economic, political and cultural terms (Hellenes 2019). While Brundtland promised glory for Norway on the world stage through its sports heroes and export commodities, “A day for Sweden” presented a “slaughter of Swedish holy cows” deemed necessary to avoid national systemic collapse and in order to get the country back up on its feet again (Krantz 1993).

While these historical glimpses may be extreme, social scientists and historians have suggested that the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall should be understood as a watershed in the formation of Nordic identity – a “period of genesis” on par with the 1930s (Andersson & Hilson 2009). The end of the Cold War implied a dissolution of the region’s geopolitical position between the superpower blocs, and internal differences such as different economic growth rates as well as diverging foreign political aspirations became more noticeable. These differences were reinforced by the Nordic countries’ diverse experiences from the 1980s onwards, including Cold War détente, welfare state reform, financial crisis, and the question of EU membership. This provided occasions for intense public debates about national and regional exceptionalism, European belonging and

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international engagement. Indeed, it points towards the wider socio-economic, political and cultural shifts which characterize the transformative period of the “long 1990s” from the late 1980s to the early 2000s (Ivarsson Westerberg, Waldemarson & Östberg 2014).

This special issue concentrates on Norway and Sweden, which both experienced long-lasting debates on their relationships to Europe and positions in the wider world, reflecting a strategic shift in the position of advanced small states under a rapidly shifting globalization. Through seven historical case studies we conceptualise and contextualise these shifts in order to create openings for further research on Scandinavian identity formation in the face of globalization and neoliberalization. As a framing of these contributions, we propose two hypotheses that are meant as invitations to ‘think with us’, rather than claims to be definitely confirmed or refuted: firstly, that state-business promotional ventures and popular cultural mega-events are among the clearest expressions of Swedish and Norwegian ‘self-understanding’ at the cusp of the 1990s and, secondly, that such efforts were consciously reimagining the two countries in response to globalizing forces and served as a constitutive language encapsulating far-reaching structural-institutional reforms, or remodelling efforts, that transformed the region more broadly.

In the late 1980s, a growing concern with the viability of the social democratic welfare state under globalization and neoliberalization led to intensified academic discussions on the characteristics and future of the so-called ‘Scandinavian model’ (Alestalo & Kuhnle 1986/1987, Hernes 1991). Previously “reluctant Europeans” of Nordic political elites (Miljan 1977, Turner & Nordquist 1982, Gstöl 2002) began eyeing the option of closer integration with the European market (Nelsen 1993, Ingebritsen 1998, Einhorn 2002, for a discussion, see Grøn & Wivel 2018). While international as well as regional collaboration, exchange and solidarity has a long tradition in the Scandinavian labor movement (Misgeld 1997, Granadino & Marklund 2021, *fc*), ‘Europeanization’ at the time also activated deep-seated skepticism with ‘Europe’ within wide segments of Nordic social democracy (Stråth 1993, Ingebritsen 2001a). Taken together, the ideological and political shifts caused by the end of the Cold War called for a reconsideration of Scandinavia’s relations with the ‘New Europe’ (Strøm 1992, see also Wæver 1992). The contributors to a special issue of *Scandinavian Studies* in the Fall of 1992, for instance, contemplated issues such as ‘strategic adjustments’ (with regard to Norway and Sweden, respectively, see Vibe 1992, Dörfer 1992), ‘a crossroads on the middle way’ (Mjøset 1992) as well as ‘culture shock and democratic deficit’, signaling the sense of urgency and momentous change of the early 1990s (Alapuro 1992). But it also coincided with a reconfirmation of culture, history and values as important factors for social change and identity formation, as exemplified as in

the wide-ranging public and scholarly debate on the Norwegian EU referendum and its aftermath (Huseby & Listhaug 1995, Valen & Todal Jenssen 1996, Tamnes 1997, Claes & Tranøy 1999). According to some scholars, this return of culture and identity played a significant role for Nordic political decision-making (Lapid & Kratochwil 1996, Ingebritsen 2001b, Axelsson 2006). Others have argued that these logics corresponded to a wider shift towards a knowledge-based and mediatized global economy, increasingly governed by neoliberal scripts where Nordicness could be remodelled into an asset for ‘competitive identity’ (Browning & Ferraz de Oliveira 2017, Marklund 2017).

According to established accounts, then, the Scandinavian welfare state model and its related progressivism faced numerous challenges in the immediate post-Cold War period, unbalancing the paradoxical combination of *exceptionalism* – the notion that Scandinavian welfare states had unique qualities, and *exemplarity* – the notion that Scandinavian welfare state could serve as model societies. In the main, this shift can thus be interpreted as following from: 1) the experience of economic and financial *crisis* in various forms since the late 1980s; 2) gradual Scandinavian policy adaptation to international developments at the close of the Cold War, including *globalization* as well as Europeanization; and 3) increasingly ideologically as well as pragmatically founded *neoliberal* challenges against the welfare state, based in a complex set of criticisms of the political culture and social policies of the welfare society, for alleged inefficiency and intrusiveness.

Politically, this shift was pioneered by Denmark which experienced financial downturn in the 1970s and served as a bridge between policy development in Scandinavia and the EEC from 1973 on (Olesen 2015). Indeed, Denmark was also the first of the Nordic countries to experience neoliberal populist mobilization (Olsen 2020a, 2020b). Academically, these changes were prominently addressed in the Norwegian ‘power investigation’ (*Maktutredningen*, 1972–1982), and later followed up in all the Nordic countries (Marklund 2016). Culturally and intellectually, the assumed “death” of the most profiled of the Scandinavian models – the Swedish model – was frequently discussed nationally and internationally from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, with a distinctively new ‘openness’ serving as a key trope for reimagining the position of the country in the world (Marklund 2015).

The reduction in the Swedish model’s appeal was strongly related to the Swedish banking crisis in the early 1990s and its subsequent economic recession, including a jump in unemployment not seen since the 1930s. (At the same time, Swedish society was shaken by the emergence of extreme-right movements – including the entry into parliament of xenophobic populists – and the racist serial killings of immigrants in 1991-1992.) While the most profound consequences of this crisis were domestic, it also affected foreign policy. One example of this was

Sweden's temporary reduction in aid budgets and withdrawal from Third World development projects during the tenure of Carl Bildt's Liberal-Conservative Government (1991-1994). Another example was the crisis' contribution to a reputational damage on Sweden's international standing and to a reinforced discussion among Swedish policy makers, diplomats and business actors on how to rethink and improve this standing – not least by increasing business and partnership activities in Western Europe and the Baltic region (Musiał 2009, Åkerlund 2016, Hellenes 2019).

The other Nordic countries were also affected by the financial crisis, although to a varying degree. Whilst Finland was hit hard, Denmark avoided a systemic crisis partly because the deregulation of Denmark's financial system started earlier and was more mature than in the other Nordic countries (Vastrup 2009). Norway for its part, experienced significant losses of capital in the entire banking sector, but since the crisis was not as severe as in Finland or Sweden, the country managed to obtain fiscal surpluses again faster than its neighbours (Moe et. al. 2004). In terms of international standing, Norway did not experience the same reputational problems as Sweden. This probably owed to the fact that Sweden, the Swedish model and Sweden's role as a "moral superpower" of human rights and democracy during the Cold War, were more internationally renowned than Norway. Whereas Sweden temporarily reduced its international engagement to concentrate on domestic problems and relations with Europe, Norway's global involvement increased (Nissen 2021a). Overall, Norway's immediate post-Cold War experience was marked by a much stronger optimism than Sweden's.

It is significant that it was in this context that Norwegian intellectuals first articulated the notion of a 'Norwegian model of society' (Thonstad 1991) analogously to how the concept was being used in Sweden, and on the Scandinavian level (Hellenes 2021, *fc*). This is not to say that a Norwegian system of macroeconomic policies specifically developed as a response to the country's geographical structure, population, industry and political governance had not existed during the Cold War era, but the term 'Norwegian model' had not previously been widely used (Fagerberg, Cappelen & Mjøset 1992). Francis Sejersted suggests that Sweden and Norway switched positions as the 'rich country of Europe' – an exchange that came with corollary shifts in policies, taking over Sweden's role as the rich country that could afford to remain outside of the European Union (Sejersted 2011: 480). However, as several of the contributions to this special issue show, it was not a question of 'switching' positions; rather, it was a complex, jointly negotiated and relational effort at reimagining each (others) position(s), one being somewhat in the ascendancy (Norway) and the other in relative decline (Sweden). Accordingly, these were relative perceptions, at a time

when Norway was ‘catching up’ to Sweden measured along purely economic parameters (Fellman 2019, Hull et al. 2011).

Nonetheless, while the Swedes were temporarily occupied with rescuing the domestic economy, Norway embraced global engagement and reinforced its efforts within peacemaking, human rights advocacy and sustainable development. New epithets such as ‘humanitarian superpower’ and ‘the Norwegian peace model’ appeared on the scene. Israel’s and the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) signing of the Norwegian-brokered Oslo Accords on the White House lawn in September 1993 seemed to bolster the nation’s self-esteem on the international stage (Waage 2004, Nissen 2015, 2021a). This was further reinforced with the Norwegian town of Lillehammer hosting the 1994 Olympic winter games. Both of these events were significant in a situation in which Norway’s importance to the US had declined after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and quite a few policy makers, civil servants and voters had begun to fear potential marginalization in the outskirts of Europe after the electorate’s rejection of EU membership in a 1994 referendum (Nissen 2015, Ikonomou 2015, Ikonomou 2016, Rye 2019). Although Norway was a member of the European Economic Area (EEA), which essentially granted access to the internal market of the EU without requiring formal membership, this arrangement was still inferior to full EU membership, especially seen from a democratic perspective (NOU 2012: 2). Hence, in the mid-1990s it was uncertain how this new dynamic with Norway outside and Sweden, Denmark and Finland inside the EU would affect the Nordic countries’ coherence in important decision-making processes in Brussels, Washington D.C. or in global multilateral arenas such as the United Nations (Olesen 2011, Olesen & Strang 2016, Rye 2017, Ikonomou & Gehler 2019).

In sum, the circumstances outlined above constituted the backdrop for a reimagination of Scandinavian – and particularly Swedish and Norwegian – exceptionalism. An important clarification with respect to this analytical starting point is that although changing external conditions and domestic structural changes put pressure on the different elements in the national, Scandinavian and Nordic models, making them partly unable to maintain the welfare schemes and the goals of equality that had been institutionalized during the first decades after the Second World War, this was not matched by a decrease in global interest in their qualities. Rather, global attention remained stable or even grew (Koivunen, Ojala & Holmén 2021, Marklund 2021, *fc*), but became increasingly concerned with whether the models would withstand the test of globalization and whether they could or should be reconceptualized. As the Scandinavian countries struggled with financial crises, geopolitical shifts and the information revolution, not only foreign observers, but also domestic intellectual and political elites across the political spectrum, sought to discern and rethink the relevance and position

of Scandinavian socio-political solutions or ‘models’ under changing global conditions, especially vis-à-vis the more deeply integrated European Union and to a lesser extent towards the Global South.

From today’s vantage point of looming ‘de-globalization’ (Link 2018), we believe it is timely to begin historicizing the grand narrative of ‘globalization’ that in the 1990s swiftly came to dominate academic debates, global politics and national policies (Cerny 2010, James & Steger 2014). Our interest here lies in what impact this omniscient narrative and reality had on concrete relationships between state actors, businesses and the public sphere, and how this fuelled a reimagination of national identities and notions of Scandinavian progressivism. If indeed, as Philip Cerny has argued, the globalizing processes at the end of the 20th century transformed the underlying rationality of states, from *raison d’État* to *raison du Monde*, then there is a need for empirical studies of how this process towards ‘competition states’ (Cerny 1997) was articulated and used by individuals and groups experiencing it. A characteristic feature of this development is thus how states engaging in global competition for foreign direct investments, tourists, skilled workers and export interests transform in order to accommodate new foreign political ambitions, where “national interests’ are increasingly defined in economic terms” (Varga 2013: 448-449). Therefore, it is the overarching aim of this thematic issue to provide an improved understanding of the link between the Swedish and Norwegian societies’ re-positionings in the globalizing international arena post-1990, and their simultaneous search for and renegotiation of national and regional identities. The connections between these processes are not very well researched, especially not in a comparative perspective.

Our *first* hypothesis, then, is that the reimagination of Sweden and Norway found its clearest material and ideational articulation in the organization of two sets of interlinked activities spurred by the seeming inescapability of globalization – state-business joint promotional ventures towards foreign markets, and popular cultural mega-events such as World Expos and Olympic Games (Roche 2000).

Accordingly, the relationship between state and business actors is of particular interest in our case studies due to increasing global economic integration and the opening of markets, and new forms of collaboration and initiatives aimed at publics abroad. Through the 1990s, there was a growing sense that corporations and states should actively “take on each other’s roles” in international outreach efforts to promote the nations (Olins 2000) resulting in an innovative triangle of cultural sponsorship, corporate diplomacy, and corporate social responsibility. Ada Nissen, in this special issue, examines Statoil’s response to some of Norway’s moral and ethical aspirations in the post-Cold War global arena. In that particular case, the apparent conflation between the state-owned oil company and the Norwegian government proved problematic for Norwegian self-understanding

and (inter)national identity, as marked tensions arose between Norway's international ambition to be an early mover for sustainable development and a human rights advocate on the one hand, and Statoil's approach to environmental problems and human rights violations in opening overseas markets on the other. A similar tension is evident in Nikolas Glover's article dealing with the launch of a mutually beneficial bilateral partnership with South Africa in 1999 as part of the Swedish government's "New Africa Policy". The envisioned partnership was to combine both collaborative and competitive logics, supporting everything from democracy activism and the principles of human rights, to entrepreneurship, venture capital investments and arms exports, and explicitly sought to capitalize on Sweden's history of committed support to the anti-apartheid struggle. As such, these articles provide valuable case studies of the complex relationship between foreign policy principles and corporate interests in the Nordic context and highlight how that relationship adapted and reinterpreted the "Third World friendly" identity that the countries had established during the Cold War.

The issue of state-market relations is evident – although in different specific contexts – also in Carl Marklund's, Andreas Hellenes' and Kristian Bjørkdahl's articles. They all investigate how major public events contributed to accelerate ongoing renegotiations of the relationship between business, politics and culture in Swedish and Norwegian foreign promotion and cultural diplomacy as the countries adopted 'competition state' logics. Marklund's study of *New Sweden '88* argues that renegotiations of Swedish self-identity in the late 1980s reflected a growing doubt about the future of the Swedish welfare model, foreshadowing the far-ranging reforms but above all reimaginings of Swedishness which followed during the globalized 1990s. *New Sweden '88* represented something akin to an Indian Summer of official usage of the Swedish welfare state as an international selling point in a slightly complicated relation with Swedish business interest's presentation of Sweden as a technologically advanced and competitive market economy. Hellenes' study of the large-scale Swedish promotional campaign *Le Soleil et l'Étoile du Nord (The Sun and the North Star)* in Paris during the spring of 1994, meanwhile, reveals that the page by then had definitely been turned on the 'Swedish model'. Taking shape in midst of the Swedish 1990s crisis, *Le Soleil et l'Étoile du Nord* represented an ambitious new national identity project seeking to establish Sweden as a European nation which was deeply entangled both in the European expansion strategies of Swedish companies like Volvo and IKEA and the approaching Swedish EU membership. Against a backdrop of displays and narratives of Swedish-European history, Hellenes analyses the French campaign as an occasion for the strongly pro-European Bildt government to promote the vision of a new, *normal* Sweden, rising from the ashes after the crisis that ended a half-century of Swedish social democratic exceptionalism.

Together with Glover's study, Marklund's and Hellenes' articles provide an exploration of how Swedish public diplomacy during the long 1990s entered a new, paradigmatic era: that of national promotion (*Sverigefrämjande*). As such they detail the shift to a Swedish competition state, marked by the combination of continued corporatist elements and significant new means of integrating corporate sponsorship. In terms of national imagery, they illustrate the relative downplaying of Sweden as a social democratic welfare state. This marked a clear break with previous decades of Swedish cultural diplomacy and overseas communication efforts (Glover 2011; Glover 2015; Marklund 2015; Hellenes & Marklund 2018).

A similar dynamic is identified in Kristian Bjørkdahl's rhetorical analysis of the Norwegian pavilion at the World's Fair in Sevilla, 1992 – an occasion for *nouveau riche* Norway to leave behind traditional national imagery and embrace a new global identity. As Nissen does in her article, Bjørkdahl demonstrates how state and business elites tried to grapple with the particular Norwegian conundrum recently analysed by Peder Anker (2020, see also Nissen 2021b): combining the role of petroleum producer with the reputation for being an 'environmental pioneer.' Statoil, Bjørkdahl, points out, was the official pavilion's main corporate sponsor. Taking this as his point of departure, he identifies the introduction in Sevilla of what would become a lasting *topos* – a key element of the main argument structure deployed by Norwegian politicians and oil administrators over the coming decades. In this *topos*, Norway was presented to the world as a "pragmatic combination of environmental frontrunner and (petro-)industrial spearhead".

At the same time, at the zenith of the long era of tabloids and television (before the Internet Age), businesses, the state and the (national) public were absorbed in hyper-mediatized moments of active and orchestrated reimaginations of Norwegian and Swedish exceptionalism. These were both expressions of uniqueness (even resistance) and manifestations of the countries' globalized imagery and existence. Although the cases dealt with in this special issue are limited to Norway and Sweden, we suggest that similar dynamics of linking national public cultures, shifting national identity and international positioning of the countries were at work in the other Nordic countries as well. Examples like Finland's victory in the 1995 Men's Ice Hockey World Championship and Denmark's completely astonishing success in the 1992 Men's European Championship in football (both taking place in Sweden) might prove interesting comparative cases to those brought forth in this special issue.

These were all instances of surprising international success and spontaneous national celebration experienced in real-time by large crowds. Martin Johansson's study of media coverage of the 1994 Olympic games addresses a crucial dimension of the public mediation of such sports events, namely their layered nature, functioning on a set of scales from local to international, and – in the

Scandinavian context – regional. The sports competitions and Lillehammer imagery were not only diffused by the ether media, also the printed press constituted an important arena – as a condensed sequence of intense attention – for renegotiations, contestations and affirmations of inter-Nordic friendship and rivalry. As a timely supplement to retrospective descriptions of the 1990s as one of ‘Nordic nostalgia’ when the future of Nordic institutional cooperation was being questioned (Wæver 1992, Olesen & Strang 2016), Johansson shows how emotional Nordism concomitantly could thrive in popular culture, on the sports pages of evening tabloids and morning dailies alike.

Haakon A. Ikonomou, meanwhile, explores this tension from a different perspective: through a temporal and scalar investigation of the two mediatized and jointly experienced events of the Lillehammer Winter Olympic Games (February 1994) and the Norwegian ‘no’ in a popular referendum to join the EU (November 1994). Ikonomou argues that ‘1994’ marked a symbolic climax and watershed moment for Norwegian (cultural) patriotism and the globalization of what ‘Norway’ meant in a national, Nordic, European and world context. But the climax’ meaning was fragmented across time and space, and the monolithic *moment* was at the time, and has increasingly since then come to be, filled with silences, anxieties and frustrations. Indeed, while the Lillehammer Olympics are essentially gone and impossible to recreate, an exasperated expansion of the parenthesis due to a desire to recreate this moment of Norwegian climax, is attempted by many actors in Norwegian society. Meanwhile, the most ardent ‘yes’ and ‘no’ segments of society ritually recreate their foundational narratives about Norway’s place vis-à-vis Europe as part of two mutually exclusive, centuries old historical processes. This makes the negative 1994-referendum into a kind of *non*-moment. The simultaneous resurrection and burying of these twin events of the 1994-climax, Ikonomou concludes, can be understood as catalytic: Producing a specific Norwegian mode of cultural and political myopia through a period of hasty, tumultuous and troublesome globalization.

Both the overseas promotional campaigns and the popular-cultural mega-events, combining the political and economic goals of emerging Scandinavian competition states, served as attractive sites for identity experimentation for shifting constellations of national political, economic and cultural elites. The dynamic interplay between these two arenas of international communication and domestic reimagining of national and regional identity is therefore at the core of this thematic issue. By examining such processes at work in the 1990s, the articles provide empirical input that help us contextualize histories of public diplomacy and nation branding in Scandinavia, where scholarly interest has focused primarily on either overseas information and cultural activities during the Cold War decades or the 2000s’ arrival of nation branding in the Nordic region (Glover

2011, Angell & Mordhorst 2015, Clerc, Glover & Jordan 2015, Ingimundarson & Magnúsdóttir 2015). Our *second*, more prodding, hypothesis is that these conscious efforts at reimagination, were part of a more concrete – nuts and bolts – *remodelling* of Norwegian and Swedish society. While these institutional, political and socio-economic reform efforts fall partly outside the remit of this special issue, we want to invite the reader to reflect upon the triptych of: (1) the context of post-Cold War globalization; (2) the active reimagination work of multiple state, commercial and media actors, and; (3) the far-reaching reforms of the various Scandinavian models going into the 1990s. The contributions to this special issue will mostly speak to the middle part of the triptych but suggest that the efforts at active reimagination in Sweden and Norway both emerged *from* and were constitutive *of* the other two elements.

In this sense, the special issue's critical analyses of processes of Swedish and Norwegian aligning of national image, international presence and 'success' – foreshadowing the 2010s preoccupations with international rankings and competitive performance – represent an important step in opening up the tumultuous Nordic 1990s for historical research.

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