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Svein Ivar Angell & Eirinn Larsen

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Introduction: Reimagining the Nordic pasts

Svein Ivar Angell^a and Eirinn Larsen^b

^aDepartment of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion, University of Bergen, Norway;

^bDepartment of Archaeology, Conservation and History, University of Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

This is an introduction for a special issue “History and Nation-Branding in the Nordic Region”. All articles are published and/or finalized.

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Introduction: Reimagining the Nordic pasts

National and regional identities are not just products of history and time: changing perceptions of the past also impact national and regional identity-making and branding efforts. The countries of the Nordic region – in this special issue represented by Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland – constitute no exception to this rule, and at the same time represent an interesting case through which to explore the interrelation between the nation and the region in terms of the political use of history. The Nordic countries and region have in several ways a joint or shared history. At the same time, however, the national historiographies of these countries have been constructed through contrasts with each other, particularly in the cases of Norway and Finland owing to their roles as subordinates in the unions and conglomerate states that have come to characterize the history of the Nordic region. Indeed, the construction of specifically *national* historiographies has long been at the core of nation-building processes within the Nordic region. But, how and to what extent do national historical imaginings shape the commemoration and branding of nations?

Since the early 2000s, Nordic states and institutions have used modern principles of marketing in their foreign communication. As a result, an old but highly contingent tension has become apparent: between, on the one hand, seeing the Nordic region as a joint ‘model’ and, on the other, viewing the Nordic region as a geographical area consisting of different countries. Similar tensions are also uncovered in the fast-growing literature on efforts to portray and politically communicate the Nordic region and the Nordic countries abroad since World War II. In fact, in the institutionalized efforts to represent the Nordic countries, the notion of a ‘Nordic exceptionalism’ has served as a strategic resource. This was certainly the case in the branding of Norden as representing a third way between the communist East and the capitalist West during the Cold War.¹ The notion that there exists such thing as a joint Nordic welfare ‘model’ also fits into such a frame.² The image of the Nordic countries as ‘gender champions’ is another expression

of 'Nordic exceptionalism', one that is increasingly used by the Nordic Council to position the entire region globally.³ On other occasions and under other conditions, however, 'Nordic exceptionalism' has been seen as more expedient to portray the images of individual Nordic countries – for instance, to promote them as tourist destination, or for political reasons.⁴

Nordic exceptionalism is often treated – or tested – as a fact and explained with reference to the uniqueness of the history, location and interests of the Nordic region and individual countries. Christopher Browning argues, for instance, that the notion of Nordic exceptionalism has suffered a decline since the end of the Cold War because the Nordic elites have forsaken the brand and Nordic interests have merged with European interests.⁵ In scholarship, there is no shortage of glowing descriptions of the region's global performance. The Nordics are 'moral superpowers' (Dahl, 2006), 'agents of a world common good' (Bergman, 2007), 'havens of gender equality' (UN-CEDW 2003) and the 'referent' for welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990).⁶ Correct or not, however, such statements can themselves be treated as research objects, something we might study. How and why did these ideas and narratives of exceptionalism emerge? Who drove their development? And how are they used strategically in politics, law and practice? Such questions formed the core of the research project 'Nordic Branding: Politics of Exceptionalism' at UiO:Nordic in the period 2017–2021, from which the articles in this special issue developed.

Entitled 'History and Nation-Branding in the Nordic Region', the aim of this special issue is to shed light on the uses and roles of history in past or more contemporary efforts of Nordic reimagining. It does so by combing two different fields or ways of understanding and researching the Nordic region and countries for mutual benefit: research on various portrayals of the Nordics, including Nordic exceptionalism and Nordic nation- and region-branding, and research focusing on the use of history and collective memory. In short, the articles presented examine the strategic use of history and historical memories in the imagining of the Nordic countries as different from or similar to each other or because the contexts where these notions of the past were being constructed and used demanded it.

In the first article, Ida Lunde Jørgensen and Mads Mordhorst analyse the joint exhibition of Danish Golden Age painting in 2019 at the National Museum (Nationalmuseumet) in Sweden and the National Gallery of Denmark. Their article, 'Producing History, (Re) branding the Nation: The Case of an Exhibition on the Danish Golden Age', reveals how historical narratives of the Danish Golden Age were fabricated in very different ways within these two national contexts in order to mediate images of this period of Danish history that would be more in accordance with the needs and values of different audiences. A similar process is identified by Eirinn Larsen, Ulla Manns and Ann-Catrin Östman in their comparison of the celebrations of the centenary of women's right to vote in Finland, Norway and Sweden between 2006 and 2021. Their findings, presented in the article 'Gender-Equality Pioneering, or How Three Nordic States Celebrated 100 Years of Women's Suffrage', highlight how the various histories of women's suffrage produced and used during these events matched foreign notions of the Nordics as exceptionally gender equal. This made the commemorations of women's right to vote also useful for nation-branding purposes. In 'Beacons of Nordicity: Nordic Conservation Day 1970 and the Reimagination of History', however, Hallvard Notaker deals with the reverse aspect of national imagining and the use of history when he analyses the effort in 1970 to portray

Norden – that is, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland – as a coherent union during the Nordic Nature Conservation Day. In this case, the choice of the organizers to use flaming beacons to underscore the alarming effect of environmental destruction evoked a past when the Nordics were not cooperating but at war with each other. Svein Ivar Angell's article 'Imaging Norway by Using the Past' provides an in-depth analysis of Norway's efforts to modernize its foreign image after World War II, analysing the historical narratives produced for this purpose between 1945 and 1970 and the difficulties faced in efforts to renew them in accordance with changing times and needs.

Nordic nation-branding

The first two articles in this special issue deal with Nordic nation-branding efforts from the 2000s, a period when national brands had become what was claimed to be 'a necessary marker of identification on a global scale'.⁷ *Nation-branding* became a new policy field from the mid-1990s.⁸ As a phenomenon, nation-branding stems from the commercial field of marketing, aiming to help countries succeed in attracting foreign investors, tourists or simply a chair at the table of powerful organizations. Nation-branding can also be seen as part of a historical transformation from *nation-states* to *competition states*, the first aiming at supervising the market, the latter being under the supervision of the market.⁹ How states rely on or use history when competing for global recognition, however, is less emphasized by scholars.

Most of the literature dealing with nation-branding was originally recipe-oriented, in the sense that it sought to describe how states could best promote their images internationally.¹⁰ Over the last decade, however, a substantial amount of critical research on nation-branding has also been published. In a volume dealing with nation-branding from a historical perspective, Viktorin, Gienow-Hecht, Estner and Will define nation-branding as a deliberate 'collective effort by multiple constituencies to generate a viable representation of a geographical–political–economic–social entity'.¹¹ In this special issue, both the analysis of the joint exhibition of Danish Golden Age painting in Sweden and Denmark and the comparative analysis of the celebrations for the centenary of women's suffrage in Finland, Norway and Sweden deal with nation-branding as a historical phenomenon with political aims. The starting point for Jørgensen and Mordhorst's article is the myth of the Danish Golden Age in the second half of the 19th century, when the construction of the modern Danish nation-state coincided with a period of flourishing art and culture. This myth has been and continues to be an essential part of Danish national identity. The authors elaborate how the myth of the Danish Golden Age has been used for nation-branding purposes within different contextual settings represented by the exhibitions at the National Gallery of Denmark and Nationalmuseum in Sweden. On one hand, the article points at the relationship between nation-building and nation-branding. On the other hand, it illustrates how nation-branding also provides a lens through which to understand and elaborate how nation-building and the construction of national identity is a continuously unfolding process.

The point of departure for Larsen, Manns and Östman's article is the external image of the countries of the Nordic region as gender champions and how the Nordic states mobilized this image during recent commemorations of 100 years of women's right to vote. The article analyses how the individual Nordic countries aimed to differentiate

themselves from each other by evoking a past that helped them appear as global pioneers of gender equality in the present. The article highlights the Nordic region as an area of competing national imaginings, or brands, and shows how the differences between national commemoration and branding have become increasingly blurred.

The question of whether the nation-branding efforts they scrutinize had any effect is not addressed either by Jørgensen and Mordhorst or by Larsen, Manns and Östman. However, critical historically oriented research on nation-branding over the last decade or so has problematized the notion that nation-branding campaigns – for instance, the one launched by the Danish government in the aftermath of the 2005 cartoon crisis – have any effect at all.¹² In addition, historians have studied how nations have portrayed themselves historically. Indeed, there is now an extensive body of research on portrayals of Scandinavia and the individual Nordic countries from the interwar period up to the present day.¹³ This research covers the institutional setups involved in the fabrications of national images, how images of individual Nordic countries have been created and directed towards specific countries, and in-depth studies of particular aspects of the ways in which national images have been constructed – for instance, through educational exchange programmes.¹⁴ The most recent contribution in the field is an edited volume dealing with the role of the gender image in the branding of the Nordic nations.¹⁵

As Viktorin, Gienow-Hecht, Estner and Will have pointed out, strategies on nation-branding are focused ‘less on mutual understanding and more on image management’.¹⁶ In fact, much of the historical research in the field deals with how institutionalized efforts to portray countries in the outside world has involved multiple motives, seeking, on the one hand, to promote positive images and, on the other, to facilitate mutual understanding and good relationships between countries. Such multiple motives are encapsulated in concepts such as ‘cultural diplomacy’, ‘public diplomacy’ and ‘soft power’ that are often encountered in research on how countries seek to promote themselves, as well as in the statements of political and diplomatic actors. Such terms serve at the same time as ‘catch-all devices’ that are not always capable of identifying the complexity of a country’s historical context.¹⁷ As Angell’s contribution to this special issue demonstrates, Norway’s Office for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, a state agency established in 1950, aimed both to promote a positive image of Norway abroad and to help the country maintain good international relations with other states.

Constructing and promoting national images is a complex process, and the main advantage of studying nation-branding from a historical perspective is that it allows us to elucidate this complexity. In addition, it gives us an opportunity to study how national images have developed over a long time-span and within different historical contexts, and how different memories and narratives of the past have been mobilized, by whom and for what purpose.¹⁸ The significance of historical context is demonstrated in Notaker’s article. Notaker takes as his case the Nordic Conservation Day of 1970, which formed the climax to the European Conservation Year in the Nordic region. The central event within these proceedings was the synchronized lighting of 600 beacons in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. This was intended to showcase Nordic unity in the struggle against environmental damage. However, the use of this old historical symbol for such a purpose proved problematic, as historically beacons had mostly been used to warn against enemies from the other Nordic states. The event thus required that the region ignore its violent history of intra-Nordic warfare. This was because the effort to portray the

historical harmony in Norden clashed with the divergences between the geopolitical positions of the Nordic countries that resulted from the ongoing Cold War, which caused problems for Finland in particular.

Another issue that also highlights the complexity involved in the portrayal of countries in the outside world concerns the dynamics between domestic and foreign perceptions in the construction of national images. Kazimierz Musiał has shown how national 'autoster-eotypes' are constructed in relation to 'xeno-stereotypes' in the international community.¹⁹ As has been elaborated in several studies, national images of the Nordic countries in the postwar period were constructed through a combination of foreign perceptions and national imaginings. The co-creation of national images was dependent on how the countries were understood and perceived by foreigners – and how they were supposedly understood and identified domestically.²⁰ Among the Nordic states, Sweden has been seen as a pioneering and progressive society and the foremost representative of what has been labelled as the 'Nordic model'. Such an image was to a large extent constructed by US intellectuals in the interwar period, but has gradually become an essential part of Sweden's self-image.²¹ As Larsen, Manns and Östman's article shows, the celebration of the centenary of women's right to vote in Sweden prioritized the country's contemporary political situation over the historical memory of women's struggle and subsequent entry into Swedish politics.²² In contrast, Norway's self-image has been oriented towards tradition, built on an understanding that the country's historical heritage laid the foundation for democratic values in a particular sense. Such a self-image was also related to how Norwegian diplomacy perceived the country in the postwar period, as Angell's article demonstrates.

Given the above, when studying portrayals of the Nordic countries historically, it is necessary to take the interaction between internal and external perceivers into account. There are no terms such as 'public diplomacy' or 'nation-branding' that will serve as a catch-all device. At the same time, however, it is important to emphasize that nations do have brand images. In fact, the nation-building processes of the 19th century turned nations into some of the strongest and most stable brands we know.²³ A key point of departure for Jørgensen and Mordhordst's article is that the myth of a Danish Golden Age is in fact a blueprint for the Danish nation that was and continues to be an essential part of its brand. This also demonstrates how history, historical narratives and historical memories serve as a reservoir for branding the nation. The next question, then, is how the relationship between imaging the nation and the use of history might best be elucidated.

History as a mobilizable resource

According to Pierre Nora, the *land*, the *cathedral* and the *court* were the fundamental building blocks in the construction of French identity. This is because they have accumulated 'a certain weight of historical images and representations' that continue to summarize the collective French national imagination.²⁴ As national symbols, all three date from the 19th century and for the most part, Nora's influential studies deal with how the collective memory of French society has been constructed and maintained.²⁵ In our context, the perspectives derived from his research remain relevant. All modern nation-states have a set of traditions that serve the nation and the national imagination. As symbols, these traditions are inextricably linked to the nation-building processes of the

19th and early 20th centuries. Under certain conditions, they also contain a reservoir of elements that could be mobilized and used in imaging the nation or certain aspects related to it. In this special issue, the myth of the Danish Golden Age provides a pertinent example. This myth and other key symbols such as the memory of the Norwegian Constitution that was signed on 17 May 1814 form part of or summarize key aspects of national historical narratives and illustrate how history and historical narratives are resources that can be used to underpin, clarify, and contextualize or reinforce national images.²⁶ At the same time, history and historical narratives can be used to diversify, and even function as counter-narratives to, traditional or conventionally accepted national images.

As a concept, the *use of history* refers to how the past is used for present purposes – politically, commercially, pedagogically or more existentially.²⁷ Uses of the past can be both academic and non-academic. The use of history is related to two other concepts: *historical consciousness* and *historical culture*. Historical consciousness refers to how our understanding of the past shapes our sense of the present and our expectations for the future.²⁸ Historical culture refers to concrete manifestations of historical consciousness in different settings. As a concept, historical culture enables us to identify why particular historical artefacts with references to the past are used in concrete settings and to analyse the motives behind and implications of such use.²⁹ With this understanding of historical culture, it could be argued that the use of history in strategic portrayals of a country is closely related to the country's main historical narratives.³⁰ This point is also illustrated by the article by Larsen, Manns and Östman. The historical narratives produced and used during the centenary celebrations of women's suffrage in Finland, Norway and Sweden mirrored to a large extent those countries' different ways of identifying and imagining the nation during the 19th and early 20th centuries, with Sweden as the old monarch of Norden, Norway the old historical state, and Finland the new nation.

The articles in this special issue provide several examples of how dominant historical narratives and key symbols of the Nordic countries serve as a resource in the construction of national images. At the same time, the articles also identify how major differences in the use of the past are related to differences in the historical cultures of the individual Nordic countries, which are inextricably linked to the construction of their respective national historiographies. These national historiographies had different points of departure. Denmark and Sweden were the dominating powers in the Nordic region historically. The history-writing of these countries originally served to legitimize the old regimes, while in Norway and Finland, by contrast, the main purpose was to legitimize the existence of the *nation*.³¹ Still, the history-writing of the individual Nordic countries during the period of nation-building in the 19th century involved several similarities, first and foremost in relation to the intellectual impulses forming historical consciousness. Aronsson, Fulsås, Haapala and Jensen have suggested that their 'shared impulses were Germanic: Romantic, Hegelian and/or historicist'.³² Such impulses materialized in the concept of the 'folk', but in a way that was more socially inclusive than in the German case. However, this concept served different purposes in each country. In Norway, the main purpose was to establish a historical continuity between the free yet old historical state of the Middle Ages and the contemporary struggle for national independence. In Sweden, the concept of the folk became identified with the state, while in Finland folk culture had to take the state's place. In Denmark, the folk was used as a concept in order to identify what constituted the

Danish people as opposed to the German.³³ In fact, the Danish example also reveals how the definition of the 'folk' was dependent on how the nation's 'other' was defined. In Denmark, it was Germany; in Sweden, it was Russia; in Finland, it was Sweden and Russia; while in Norway, it was Denmark and Sweden.³⁴

The point of departure for the construction of national historical narratives in the Nordic countries influenced the subsequent development of the history culture of these countries during the 20th century. In Norway and Denmark in particular, academic historians continued to write national history for a larger public. In Sweden, academic historians withdrew from the public, leaving the master narrative to popular publishers. Such differences were also due to different experiences during World War II. In Norway and Denmark, the narratives of German occupation fuelled the impact of the national narratives. In Sweden, the country's neutrality, together with its rapid industrialization, laid the grounds for a modernistic history culture. In Finland, the country's complicated legacy from the Civil War (1918–1920) and World War II necessitated a consensus-oriented history culture.

In this special issue, there are several examples of how these different aspects of the history culture of the Nordic countries have affected the use of history for nation-branding purposes. What differs between the Nordic countries is *the impact* of the past when history is being used to brand the nation. In the case of Sweden, as shown by Jørgensen and Mordhorst, as well as by Larsen, Manns and Östman, the main intent of Sweden was to brand the country as progressive. Within such a context, the past is more of a closed chapter than in the Danish and Norwegian cases. In Denmark and Norway, the history culture has been strongly influenced by historiographical efforts to portray the two countries as modern nation-states, which is also a determinant for how history is currently being used for branding purposes. The article by Jørgensen and Mordhorst, as well as in Angell's article, demonstrate this. The impact of the complicated and consensus-oriented historical legacy in Finland as it unfolded during the Cold War is demonstrated in Notaker's article. In Finland, the historical legacy is also related to the memory of national independence. From a branding perspective, this has become more obvious in the last decades, as demonstrated in the article by Larsen, Manns and Östman.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue help us to understand the similarities and differences between the Nordic countries in their use of history for nation-branding purposes, as well as how they compete to be seen and recognized abroad as the most 'Nordic' country in the world in ways that match their own and foreign expectations and narratives of Nordic exceptionalism. At the same time, the articles reveal how the past is used as a resource for portraying countries in a more general sense. Historians have long served states and nations at the same time as they – or we – have helped to identify and communicate national belongings and identities to broader audiences. Today, nations are not only built but increasingly branded. So where do we draw the line for the work of historians? Rising globalization and commercialization of the public sector, in combination with new digital media and communication platforms, have blurred the boundaries between nation-building and nation-branding. The striking and consistent descriptions of the Nordics as exceptionally 'progressive' in terms of welfare or gender equality emerged especially in a global environment characterized by political and economic competition and rankings. This seems to have opened the space between history and memory, and thus helped the reimagining of Nordic pasts at the national and regional level. Nation-

and region-branding, which draw on modern marketing principles and techniques, have also changed the premises of historical work, along with the role of historians in society and in relation to national commemoration events. Narratives created by historians are easily appropriated and used both in politics and in practice, as several of the articles of this special issue demonstrate. This is also why new approaches are needed to advance the study of Nordic models and exceptionalism in our time.

Notes

1. Browning, "Small-State Identities," 283.
2. Kettunen, "The Power of International Comparisons".
3. Larsen, Moss, and Skjelsbæk, "Introduction".
4. Ibid., Angell, "The Office for Cultural Relations".
5. Browning, "Branding Nordicity".
6. Dahl, "Sweden: Once a Moral Superpower, Always a Moral Superpower?"; Bergman, "Co-Constitution of Domestic and International Welfare Obligations"; Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*; UN-CEDW 2003 (see <https://www.un.org/press/en/wom1377.doc.htm> [accessible with password only]).
7. Aronczyk, "Nation Branding," 233.
8. Viktorin et al., "Beyond Marketing and Diplomacy," 5.
9. Mordhorst, "The History of Nation Branding," 246.
10. Angell and Mordhorst, "National Reputation Management and the Competition State," 187.
11. Viktorin et al., "Beyond Marketing and Diplomacy," 1.
12. Ibid.
13. Scandinavia includes Norway, Denmark and Sweden; the Nordic countries are the Scandinavian countries plus Finland and Iceland.
14. Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model*; Musiał, "Reconstructing Nordic Significance"; Glover, *National Relations*; Marklund, "The Social Laboratory, the Middle Way and the Swedish Model"; Marklund, "The Nordic Model on the Global Market of Ideas"; Clerc and Glover, "Representing the Small States of Northern Europe"; Angell and Mordhorst, "National Reputation Management and the Competition State"; Hellenes, "Fabricating Sweden"; Jezierska and Towns, "Taming Feminism?"; Larsen, Moss and Skjelsbæk, *Gender Equality and Nation Branding in the Nordic Region*; Larsen, "The Gender-Equal Nordics"; Anderson and Hilson, "Images of Sweden and the Nordic Countries".
15. Larsen, Moss, and Skjelsbæk, "Introduction".
16. Ibid., 10.
17. Clerc and Glover, "Representing the Small States of Northern Europe," 4.
18. Glover, *National Relations*; Hellenes, "Fabricating Sweden".
19. Basic elements in the self-images of the Nordic countries are that they are at the forefront of progressiveness, peacefulness, egalitarianism and solidarity with the Third World, and that they represent a 'third way' between the capitalist West and the communist Eastern Bloc; see Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model*.
20. Glover, *National Relations*, 16–19; Clerc and Glover, "Representing the Small States of Northern Europe," 3–6; Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model*, 236. In promoting the Nordic countries, the image of them as modern welfare states – representing a 'middle way' or 'third way' manoeuvring between capitalism and totalitarianism – was frequently used. The image of Scandinavia as following a middle way – Sweden in particular – had been presented from the interwar period onwards. In fact, the image of Sweden as a third way was constructed by American intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s. During this process, the journalist Marquis W. Childs's book *Sweden: The Middle Way* (1938) was a particularly important contribution. See Marklund, "The Social Laboratory, the Middle Way and the Swedish Model," 268. See also Marklund and Petersen, "Return to Sender," 246.

21. Marklund, "The Social Laboratory, the Middle Way and the Swedish Model".
22. Andersson and Hilson, "Images of Sweden and the Nordic Countries".
23. Mordhorst, "The History of National Branding," 251.
24. Nora, "Introduction," ix–x.
25. *Ibid.*, xi.
26. Angell, "... en investering for framtiden".
27. Karlsson and Zander, *Historien är närvarande*.
28. Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*.
29. Ryymin, *Historie og politikk*; Bryld, "Fra historieskrivningens historie til historiekulturens historie?," 87.
30. Hellenes, "Fabricating Sweden," 14.
31. Aronsson et al., "Nordic National Histories," 257; Berger, "Nordic National Histories in Comparative European Perspective," 68.
32. Aronsson et al., "Nordic National Histories," 257.
33. *Ibid.*, 258.
34. *Ibid.*, 259.

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Notes on contributors

Svein Ivar Angell, born 1967, is a professor of history at the University of Bergen. His publications span studies on nation-building processes, nation and place branding, use of history, history didactics, regional and local history as well as resource management. In the period 2017–2019 he took part as Professor II in the interdisciplinary project 'Nordic Branding' financed by the UiO: Nordic initiative.

Eirinn Larsen, born 1969, is a professor of history at the University of Oslo. Her publications span the history of capitalism and entrepreneurship, European management education, suffrage rights and democracy, higher education and minority rights, science policies and modern historiography. Larsen leads the interdisciplinary research project 'Nordic Branding', financed by the UiO:Nordic initiative (2015–2023).

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