1 Sustainable modernity and the architecture of the “well-being society”
Interdisciplinary perspectives

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In 1914 Graham Wallas – the co-founder of the London School of Economics – published his influential *Great Society*: a study of the ways in which industrial revolution was transforming and distorting human relations. “If I try to make for myself a visual picture of the social system which I should desire for England and America,” Wallas wrote, “it would be a harmonious society like the one in Northern Europe.” In a rhapsodic exultation, he confided:

There comes before me a recollection of those Norwegian towns and villages where everyone, the shopkeepers and the artisans, the schoolmaster, the boy who drove the post-ponies, and the student daughter of the innkeeper who took round the potatoes, seemed to respect themselves, to be capable of Happiness as well as pleasure and excitement, because they were near the Mean in the employment of all their faculties. I can imagine such people learning to exploit power from their waterfalls, and the minerals in their mountains, without dividing themselves into dehumanized employers or officials, and equally dehumanized ‘hands’. But I recollect also that the very salt and savour of Norwegian life depends on the fact that poets, and artists and statesmen have worked in Norway with a devotion which was not directed by any formula of moderation.


Wallas’s pastoral vignette is arresting in a double sense. Though 21st-century Norway is the antithesis of the virtuous rural community he envisioned over a hundred years ago, some of its salient values – such as equality, reciprocity and basic humaneness – seem to live on. It is as if the spirit of the Norwegian harmonious, egalitarian village has been trapped, like a genie, in a capsule of time and guides the citizens of one of the richest and yet also most egalitarian democracies in the world.

But there is yet another dimension to Wallas’s fascination with an exemplary society in the North. It belongs to an intriguing tradition of the outsiders’ “romance” with Scandinavia, which has been a leitmotif of both early and late modernity. Already in the 19th century, romantic pilgrims – such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Maurycey Mochnacki – travelled to the North in search of
a prototype of a free and egalitarian “nature tribe” (Witoszek 2013).\(^1\) A century later, in the turbulent 1930s, with Marquis Childs’s publication of his bestseller *Sweden: the Middle Way* (1936), the world would be galvanized again by a vision of a caring state and a cooperative national community on the margins of Europe. And in 2013, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, international economists and policy-makers set out to crack the code of the surprisingly affluent and altruistic modern “Vikings” mark 2.0.\(^2\)

How is it that the Northern passage from rags to riches has resulted in societies that have managed to restrain the growth of Wallas’s “dehumanized employers and […] equally dehumanized “hands”, and minimize the social distance between “shopkeepers, artisans and schoolmasters”? What have been the mechanisms – and who have been the actors – that have forged a seemingly non-hubristic Nordic modernity?

**Three stages of Nordic modernization**

One of the arguments of this book is that modern Nordic welfare societies owe their prosperity as much to their natural resources as to a cumulative build-up of cultural, value-charged, institutional and economic choices made at various stages of modernity,\(^3\) each with its own gains and hazards. The first stage – that of techno-economic modernity – boasted spectacular technological innovation, industrial revolution and unprecedented productivity. The second stage – that of socially sustainable modernity – introduced the ethos of social care and partnership into the techno-economic dynamic. The third stage – what we call “eco-modernity” (Midttun and Witoszek 2016) – has emerged to address mounting environmental and climate challenges.

Needless to say that each stage of modernization had its liabilities tied to a progressive depletion of human and environmental resources. But one could also say that each subsequent phase was a corrective to the preceding one: the social excesses of early industrialization were tempered by socially sustainable modernity, while the dawn of eco-modernity has started adding environmental amendments to the carbon age. This endless process of self-correction has been a testimony to modernity’s self-reflexivity; an attempt not to completely throw out the old “baby” of industrial and emancipatory modernity with the polluted bathwater, but to salvage some of the core achievements of human development.

As techno-economic modernizers at the periphery of Europe, the Nordics were relative latecomers, following the British first wave, and then the German and American second wave of industrialization. However, since the end of the 19th century, they were bold and precursory drivers of inclusive, socially sustainable modernity. This was due to a number of well known and well studied historical and political factors, such as the relative lack of feudal structures, a strong community of free peasants and fishermen, early literacy, and simultaneous modernization driven both by the grassroots and the elites (e.g. Østerud 1979; Seip 1997; Slagstad 1998; Sejersted 2011). This socio-cultural legacy
was drawn upon by the labour movement, which, through confrontations and compromises with industry, co-created the welfare state.

But, as we argue in this volume, there are two, less explored drivers of the Nordic model in its current form. The first one is the shared Nordic humanism, which goes back to the 18th- and 19th-century founding tradition of a vibrant Christian Enlightenment, with its ideas of Samaritanism and social solidarity (see Chapter 3). The other derives from a cache of practical, local knowledge and “sustainability thinking”, which – in Norway, Sweden and Finland in particular – constituted an inbuilt reflex and unwritten codex of prudent action. This storehouse of wisdom was especially relevant in regions whose citizens struggled, for a long time, to eke out a livelihood in the harsh environment – particularly along the rugged North Sea coast, and in barren, sunlight-starved agricultural terrains. There, a community’s survival depended on an enduring tradition of social partnership and cooperation rather than unhinged competition. Long-term thinking, “ahead of a crisis”, predisposed the expedient resolution of social conflicts, as well as the ability to live with – and adapt to – unpredictable elemental forces (Witoszek 2011).

This was an early industrial North, as portrayed by Wallas. In the second half of the 20th century, the Nordics underwent a rapid techno-economic transformation to make a quantum leap into successful, modern welfare states: a position that they have held rather consistently, in spite of numerous obituaries announcing their demise. Judged by international comparative indexes, the 21st century has marked their renaissance. Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland now rank on a par with the top drivers of techno-industrial modernity, while also scoring highest as exemplars of socially sustainable modernity. In the past ten years, the United Nations has ranked them as the “world’s best countries to live in”, the best countries for mothers and – if we are to believe the latest assessment of the Norwegian via fortunata – also places with a surprisingly high coefficient of gross national happiness.4 This is a combination that few, if any, other countries can match.

It remains an open question whether the Nordics can equal their socio-economic success with a transition to eco-modernity. It is worth noting that, when the environmental sustainability agenda became a global programme, the Nordic countries were early pioneers, capitalizing on their “ecological” cultural memory and leading seminal initiatives advancing environmental concerns (see Chapter 11). In the 21st century, however, together with many other industrial nations, they have struggled to square the new climate objectives with economic growth. So far, they have certainly been impressive as modern myth makers. In Norway especially, the emergent, electrifying narrative of success – combined with prosperity and unspoiled beauty of nature – has been so potent, that even the country’s high, oil-lubricated ecological footprint has been eclipsed by upbeat “green stories”. One hears rhapsodies about Arne Naess’s Deep Ecology and the Brundtland Commission’s idea of sustainable development, not to mention the record number of peace missions and humanitarian initiatives in developing countries. As this volume
will show, while the Norwegian economy has yet to live up to the country’s green mythology, other Nordic countries, Sweden in particular, aim at climate front-runnership. The discovery of green growth heralds a new synthesis, where socio-economic sustainability is no longer a question of austerity, but an opportunity for novel business models.

Self-limiting modernity

In a panoramic take on Western modernity’s central theme, Daniel Bell has pointed to the relevance of the word beyond: imagining a limitless world that was beyond nature, beyond culture, beyond humanity and God (Bell 1991: 353). The beyondness of modernity has been expressed in mobilizing stories and images, such as the powerful American frontier mythology, the British “civilizing mission” towards “savage species”, German ideas of Übermensch and Lebensraum and the French Jacobin project of inventing a brave new world from scratch – without false gods and idols. In the Nordic countries, modernity’s hubristic temptations seem to have been largely kept in check. As our volume will show, the Nordics are interesting examples of “self-limiting modernity”: one, which has kept measure with regard to economic, social and ecological excesses. They have evolved gradually, through a refolution (a mixture of reform and revolution) rather than revolutionary change, and their most meaningful, world-changing texts, habits and routines show the workings of a pragmatic and cooperative ethos. This, we argue, is also the basis of the relative resilience of the Nordic model; the fact that its architects have managed to balance political and economic innovation with norms and values that have boosted community, identity, conciliatory ways of resolving conflicts and non-coercive strategies for monitoring human behaviour. In Chapters 3–7, we show how non-hubristic Nordic modernity has been supported by a set of strong behavioural and normative patterns. Here the capitalist homo economicus – a rational, profit-seeking protagonist – has been counterbalanced by strong educational ideals stressing public-mindedness and social cooperation. Interestingly, these ideals have tended to be oriented towards what is achievable, rather than wishful thinking. The overarching goal of the homo nordicus has never been to build an ideal society; rather, since the beginning of the 20th century, the Nordics have got on with the task of building what Peter Corning has called a “fair society”, based on equality, equity and reciprocity (Corning 2011).

Evolutionary and socio-cultural underpinnings of the Nordic model

The strong tradition of teamwork which underlines the Nordic model has been the subject of numerous studies that focus on specific institutions, politics and industrial relations, (e.g. Sejersted 2011; Wahl, A. 2011, Dølvik et al. 2014; Engelstad 2015; Törnquist and Harriss 2016). We contend that these arrangements reflect deeper societal and behavioural principles that lie at the
core of social and evolutionary theory. As Chapter 2 will show, by exploring the Nordic model through the combined evolutionary and socio-cultural lens, we are able to uncover novel facets of both the mainsprings and inner workings of Nordic sustainable modernity.

Our broad, inter-disciplinary approach has been inspired by a dialogue with evolutionary science and its findings on the role of multi-level selection and collaboration in human evolution. As opposed to the often crude and simplified Darwinism, “the third wave” of evolutionary biology has gathered evidence to the effect that collaborative behaviour may carry equal, if not stronger, weight than competition in forging resilience and adaptability in human evolution. Wilson and Wilson (2007), in their theory of multi-level selection, have shown how prosociality provides behavioural underpinnings for a doctrine of the competitive advantage of collaboration. There is evidence to the effect that, while unselfish individuals might be vulnerable to exploiters and free-riders within their own group, groups of individuals that behave prosocially will robustly outcompete groups handicapped by selfish exploitation and free-riding. The shortest rendition of this idea has been the legendary dictum: “Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups. Everything else is commentary” (Wilson and Wilson 2007: 346). Translated onto the societal level, multiple-level selection theory implies that competitive advantage in the international economy can be fostered by collaborative behaviour at national and sub-national levels. But it also implies that the efficacy of domestic collaborative behaviour is critically dependent on external competition.

The evolutionary work on the efficacy of small prosocial groups chimes with the Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom’s studies of the mechanisms of governance for sustainable resource management. Ostrom explored communities that successfully managed to overcome the tragedy of the commons by a fair distribution of the pool of natural resources (Ostrom 1990). She singled out eight design principles of such efficacious management, including clearly defined boundaries and strong identity, collective decision-making, effective monitoring of group behaviour, graduated sanctions and swift and fair conflict resolution (Ostrom 1990; see also Chapter 2). While Wilson illuminated the basic evolutionary mechanisms of successful prosociality, Ostrom codified the governance conditions necessary to put this mechanism into practice in human societies. In a joint article, Wilson, Ostrom and Cox (Wilson et al. 2013) go as far as to argue that the design principles can be generalized and have the potential to explain the success or failure of social groups independent of their scale: a thesis which is tested and discussed in the successive chapters of this volume.

Applying multi-level selection to societal analysis involves scaling up from groups to large social systems. Such systems typically involve specialization into social domains, including normative/cultural, socio-political, productive and redistributive/caring. At this level, the dynamics of competition and collaboration become more complicated than in a small group. Overall societal
efficacy now depends on the ability to strike a balance between competition and collaboration within the aforementioned domains as well as in relations between them (Figure 1.1). In this perspective, Nordic success (or efficacy) is predicated on the ability to forge a difficult, competitively challenged collaboration both within and across domains or realms.

Analysing the Nordics through the holistic lens of our evolutionary and socio-cultural perspective, we first argue that Nordic uniqueness is not merely the outcome of one particular set of historical institutional or political arrangements or sheer historical luck; rather it has to be approached as an integrated and tightly orchestrated ecosystem – a complex interplay of cooperative and competitive strategies within and across several domains: normative-cultural, economic, socio-political, economic and redistributive. In short, we contend that the basis of social sustainability of the Nordic countries has been a drive towards a balance of competition and collaboration in culture, economy and politics, both inside and outside national boundaries.

Inscribed into a project like ours is an inquiry into the eternal question of why nations fail or succeed. Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) believed they had solved the riddle by emphasizing the role of social institutions and underplaying cultural values, norms and taboos. Our research shows that that it is often uninstitutionalized, cultural, value-charged innovation – sparking new ways of seeing the world – that plays a vital role. In the chapters that follow we ask how the cooperative ethos has been established and solidified through Nordic cultural routines, religious beliefs, literature and schooling: the incubators of what Tocqueville called the “habits of the heart” and the “habits of the mind”. It is these habits that have subsequently informed economic and political spheres and penetrated into gender relations.
What has been striking about the canonic, “sacred” texts and practices (symbotypes) in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish cultures is their consistent and strong advocacy of the ideal of a cooperative, tolerant and inclusive community, which is seen as superior to a competitive, hierarchic one (see Chapter 3). This ideal – replicated with great fidelity both in national literatures and in religious and secular pedagogy – has provided a blueprint for an imagined moral community that has valued teamwork and prosociality and, for a long time, looked down on selfishness, extravagance and explicit signs of individualist struggle for prestige and domination.7 Witness the socio-political and economic consequences of the initially marginal Swedish feminist movement, which advanced the concept of the state as a “home”, or the broad impact of Norwegian and Danish visions of alternative religiosity, which foregrounded cooperation, altruism and responsible entrepreneurship. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, cultural innovation – both top-down and grassroots – has had a pivotal impact on political and economic processes in Norway and Sweden. Though it has not eliminated conflict, it has discouraged disruptive, self-serving behaviours and reinforced symbiotic associations and collective work to achieve a common good. In addition, as argued in Chapter 6, it has had a bearing on the unique social democratic model of gender partnership, which – in contrast to a more self-centred, liberal feminism – seems to have yielded a more woman- and mother-friendly state and welfare system. The ideal of life as a cooperative effort to forge a common good has also affected social perceptions of the generous social benefits system. Contrary to the prevalent mythology, there is evidence to the effect that the so-called Norwegian “social clients” (or NAVErs) are far from relishing their dolce far niente; rather they deplore their status as beneficiaries of unemployment benefits and are troubled by the sense of not contributing to the welfare of others (see Chapter 7).

We argue that this strongly cooperative and pragmatic ethos, when transposed into economic and political realms, has yielded an “alchemical brew” of political cooperation, strong welfare provisions and a relatively prosocial model of capitalism. It has also solidified the deliberative aspect of the “Nordic way of doing politics” (Chapter 9); It has been pervasive in work life, where high unionization and tripartite negotiations between labour, industry and the state have produced agreements that allow the parties to pursue common interests in value creation in spite of diverse interests as to how that value is subsequently distributed; it has surfaced strongly in the leading role of Nordic companies as champions of corporate social responsibility (CSR); and, last but not least, it has featured in the self-imposed Nordic mission to support international institutions that promote human rights and “civilized capitalism” (Chapter 10).

We contend that it is the interplay of these diverse realms and their mutual cross-pollination with the ideal of prosociality that gives the Nordic model its regenerative potential, one that goes beyond specific institutions and domains. As in a “relay model” (Midttun and Witoszek 2016), if one institutional
stronghold for social sustainability is overridden (e.g. by international regulation), other domains may step into the breach and generate new solutions, so that the prosocial, cooperative modus is reclaimed. What is also intriguing about the modern Nordic “regime of goodness” is not just its strong entrenchment in the national Bildung of the Nordic countries themselves, but the manifold attempts to export it abroad via either political or business initiatives. Such export, we argue, is not exclusively a sign of idealism; it is also part of a pragmatic calculus of small countries that stand to win more by nudging the world to adopt their cooperative norms than by shifting to a disruptive dog-eat-dog worldview.

The pragmatic basis of Nordic cooperation

While acknowledging that cooperation has been one of the strongest propellers of Nordic sustainable modernity, we take issue with Richard Sennett’s (2013) tribute to the pivotal importance of teamwork and collaborative relations in fostering exemplary welfare states. Taking a more balanced view, our evolutionary socio-cultural perspective highlights the need to add the dynamic impulse from competition which prevents stasis. Thus, the high welfare creation inherent in the Nordic model has been predicated on a long and durable tradition of social cooperation, which has meshed with global competitive forces. Furthermore, being small, high-trust societies with strong states, the Nordics have ample organizational capacity for forging prosocial collective arrangements. This is exemplified in several chapters in this book (those on work life, eco-modernity and CSR engagement), which argue that Ostromian principles of a small-group self-governance appear to have been successfully scaled up to the welfare state. While scale, cohesion, trust and transparency facilitate Ostromian good governance and limit the erosion of prosocial arrangements from below, a strong focus on productivity has served to harmonize prosociality with international competitiveness – in most cases by finding win–win solutions, but sometimes, as in early-stage climate policy, by limiting collective responsibility until win–win solutions can be found.

To sum up: Nordic social sustainability is pragmatic through and through. It rests not just on the capacity to build welfare, but also on the ability to use welfare arrangements to enhance productivity. As Chapter 8 shows, the so-called flexicurity mechanism creates efficient human resource management to the benefit of industry (which gains flexibility), the worker (who gains security) and the state (which harvests benefits of increased productivity and competitiveness). A similarly pragmatic combination of prosociality and productivity can be observed in the Nordic endorsement of green growth in climate policy. In spite of their role as early advocates of environmental legislation, the Nordics started to embrace policy action to bring down CO₂ emissions only when it became clear that climate mitigation could be combined with continuous welfare and value creation through green growth. The 21st-century transition to eco-modernity has hardly been a “big-bang operation”,
especially in oil-rich Norway. On the contrary, it rests on a sober, business-like calculation which, in a malign interpretation, may appear as cold-hearted or hypocritical. But on closer inspection it shows traces of the Nordic “adaptive opportunism”, which, paradoxically, has been as much part and parcel of a pragmatic peasant culture as the basis of a socially sustainable modernity.

The Nordic model on trial

Can the Nordic countries uphold the balance of competition and cooperation and reproduce their resilience in the age of globalization, cultural collisions, the digital economy, the fragmentation of the work/life division and often intrusive EU regulation?

In the 21st century, the egalitarian and cooperative ethos is increasingly under siege. It is challenged by the often sectarian values of immigrant communities, a predicament which leads to a cultural polarization among the indigenous population and the resurgence of populism. It is diluted by the ideal of individual excellence entering school programmes and subjugated to the tyranny of global educational rankings. It is diminished by outsourcing and digitalization in work and life, which pulverizes communities’ coherence and individual responsibility. Last but not least, it is dismantled by the intrusion of the media logic and the technocratic mindset in political processes.

Our book explores the manifold ways in which the Nordic countries have responded and adjusted to these challenges. One of the most conspicuous attempts to re-establish Nordicity has occurred in the cultural sphere, where an ongoing debate in the mainstream and social media, framed in terms of the “battle” for Norwegian/Swedish/Danish values, points to signs of polarization of Nordic societies into “nationalist” and “cosmopolitan” camps. This debate has become especially vigorous in the second decade of the 21st century and illustrates the dilemmas faced by a region which has, for a long time, represented a constellation of small “Ostromian” communities. Increasingly, the design principles which made them efficacious are confronted by hybrid identities, dissolved boundaries and the clash of nationalist and cosmopolitan aspirations. While Denmark, Finland and Norway have been outspoken guardians of their national boundaries – both through their restrictive refugee policies and through the inclusion of the populist parties in political coalitions – Sweden was for a long time a warm defender of generous transnationalism and the “open door” policy. But even here, at the time this book is written, things are changing. The Swedish public sphere – for a long time incarcerated in the politically correct discourse of an inclusive and prosocial community – is coming to the realization that the ideal of the human rights-based identity has led to a split into “two Swedens” (Chapter 5). The challenge of reimagining and solidifying cultural-economic and political institutions under a cosmopolitan regime is accompanied by a set of new questions which have surfaced as a result of the massive cultural transformations of the last decades.
At the level of work life, the Nordic model has been challenged on several fronts: Chapter 8 illustrates how the Nordic collective wage bargaining and the exclusivity of welfare arrangements have been questioned, and in some cases eroded or rejected, in order to further a common European market. With the ascension of post-communist East European countries into the EU and the subsequent opening-up of free access to European labour markets, salaries less than one quarter of those in the North have posed a major challenge to egalitarian Nordic work life.

The Nordic model has been further exposed to new modes of commercial organization, capitalizing on a combination of technological innovation and new market-enhancing regulation. Many of these developments diminish labour’s influence on strategic decision-making and dilute its bargaining power, thereby weakening one of the pillars of Nordic inclusive egalitarianism. This being said, while digitalization and the sharing economy have put the Nordic model under pressure, advanced segments of Nordic industry have thrived. This is partly due to the compatibility of Nordic work life organization and welfare arrangements with the need for flexible specialization in the context of the new innovation economy.

Eco-modernity, with its climate agenda, poses yet another challenge. As already mentioned, in the first decades of the 21st century, there has been a striking discrepancy between advanced Nordic environmental ideals and those countries’ overall mediocre climate practice. To the extent that environmental and socio-economic sustainability collide, the Nordics face a dilemma. Their inherent prosocial orientation allows for strong collective action in both domains, but when the pursuit of one is seen as undermining the other, it is socio-economic sustainability that prevails. However, Chapter 11 shows how the emergence of green growth opportunities has created greater potential for a broader synthesis of socio-economic and ecological sustainability. The increasingly accepted green growth agenda allows the Nordics to translate their environmental idealism into eco-modernity, where climate policy supports, rather than limits, their socio-economic endeavour.

Another challenge springs from the new modes of capitalism, which have increasingly included CSR in business and market agendas. Some have argued that the predominantly business-driven CSR platform is antithetical to the politically driven welfare state tradition of the Nordic countries. The Nordic welfare state tradition emphasizes universal rights and duties, extensive state engagement in the economy and negotiated agreements to regulate labour relationships. In contrast, the CSR tradition – with its neoliberal, Anglo-American dossier – emphasizes corporate discretion, voluntarism and market-based policy solutions. However, as shown in Chapter 10, the Nordic countries have managed to turn the challenge to their advantage. Here, CSR has become a joint project, promoted by industry and the state alike. Nordic companies, as well as governments, have pragmatically appropriated CSR in areas where traditional welfare state policies lack resources or outreach.
The quest for a good society

Modernity’s potential as a locus of “good society” has been a subject of contention, and yielded dramatically opposing visions, where Pollyannas clash with Cassandras.

In 1992 Fukuyama published his scenario of the end of history and triumph of market economy and liberal democracy (Fukuyama 1992). This vision was part of a trend advocating market-based globalization by many Western mainstream economic and political elites. It was vigorously propagated by institutions like the OECD and IMF, and codified in GATT and the so-called “Washington Consensus”. The promise was to deliver more wealth and welfare to ever more people through growth and innovation. There is even research to the effect that, in spite of terrorism and savage wars in the Middle East, the world is getting better educated, better fed, healthier and richer than ever before (Kenny 2015).

At the same time, however, at the end of the 20th century, a vocal Cassandric camp – with influential thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman, John Gray and Naomi Klein – came to the fore with contrasting apocalyptic visions of soulless consumer democracy, “disaster capitalism” and the looming age of global anarchy. In John Gray’s noir-voyant study The False Dawn (2015), social democracy is incompatible with global markets, ergo the project of forging a liberating and sustainable modernity is utopian. Free markets codified by the Washington Consensus and the IT revolution produce new transnational elites, but they also marginalize masses of redundant people. The outcome of this process, Gray concludes, is the awakening of the hinterland and the growth of populist, xenophobic, fundamentalist movements, which threaten retribalization of the world (Gray 2015: 20).

While we cannot entirely discount these dark prognoses, we take issue with their central premises. As we see it, market-based, globalized modernity has been over-hyped by both its proponents and its opponents. In fact, the modern global market economy combines extensive national and regional variation, as described in an extensive body of literature (Whitley 2000; Hall and Soskice 2001). In this perspective, various models of political economy, embedded in different cultural traditions, co-exist, clamour for space and mutually influence one another. In this global theatre, the Nordics position themselves as pragmatic dualists: ardent market-globalists when it comes to trade of goods, but proponents of national, collective prosociality when it comes to work conditions and welfare provision. This dualism, which is embedded in their culture, institutions and social organization, is more hospitable to the mixed – altruist and egoist, cooperative and competitive – potential of human nature. Thus the problem with both the Cassandras and the Pollyannas of our time is that, while sculpting their visions of social improvement or apocalypse, they overlook the inherent dualism of human nature. The dominant Cassandric projections tend to
emphasize inherent selfishness and predatory competitiveness, and, predictably, are incompatible with the transition to a more sustainable future.

Is the Nordic model of a “well-being society” exportable?

Being an interdisciplinary exercise, this book gestures towards two different answers. On the one hand, historians and social scientists, focused as they are on difference and nuance, insist that the success of the Nordics is due to a combination of multiple factors, such as the common founding tradition of Christian Enlightenment, high state capacity and high trust, and relative homogeneity. The complex anchoring of productive prosociality in the interplay of several domains – culture, techno-economy, politics and welfare – would indicate that the Nordic model’s replicability in other cultures should be treated with caution. On the other hand, the social scientists and historians agree with evolutionary scientists that the Nordic countries are cases of societies that have managed “a successful projection of the control mechanisms of a small village to the ‘national village’” (Wilson and Hessen 2014). According to Wilson and Hessen, evolutionary theory casts new light on the Nordic countries as exemplars of good governance. “Norway and the other Nordic countries function as cooperators on the world stage providing a moral example for other nations […] Any large-scale society, at any period of human history, functions well or poorly to the degree it succeeds at scaling up the Core Design Principles (CDP)” (Wilson and Hessen 2014). Even in large scale societies, good governance is possible once human groups are divided into small units according to the model of polycentric governance.

While this bold postulate is open to debate – and would need resources to replicate Ostroms’s research programme – many of the chapters in our volume show the strength of CDP as one of the fundaments of the modern Nordic welfare state. There is yet another consideration. One of the advantages of globalization is the very velocity with which social ideals and blueprints are being circulated and shared. There is an ongoing diffusion and translation of innovative social visions and arrangements and, as the example of Bernie Sanders’s America shows (see Afterword), the attraction of the social-democratic good society is unabated. The Nordic model itself has borrowed vastly from other traditions, including British Parliamentarianism, the ideals of the French Revolution and the visions of the American Founding Fathers. Even the green growth agenda, which the Nordic countries have taken on board in the 21st century, was first strongly advocated in South Korea before it was embraced in the global North.

When seen through a prism of evolutionary thought, the struggle for a good society springs from the unselfish and cooperative side of human nature and successful social organization. This means that, though the Nordic model is culturally specific, the dream of welfare, security and fairness is universal. Nations, regions and communities that have managed to get the “well-being formula” right will always be attractive role models.
And although they cannot be mechanically copied, the Nordic countries are compelling because they seem to have addressed the general condition of homelessness at the heart of modernity. This homelessness, as has been argued, springs from a triple alienation: from nature, history and community (Nisbet 1953 ix–xi). In the North this alienation seems to have been partly stymied by transposing the idea of “home” to the modern welfare state. Nowhere has this “domestication” of the state been more conspicuous than in modern Sweden, whose early 20th-century social democrats united the nation around the idea of Sweden as the “people’s home” (folkhemmet). However ironized in the Age of Cynical Reason, the myth of the state as a fatherly protector of individual autonomy, and the perception of society as a “family”, constitute a strong legacy, which tempers modernity’s uprooting and disinheriting thrust.

In 1974, the German poet and writer Hans Magnus Entzensberger wrote an intriguing study, Norsk utakt (loosely translated as “Norway’s Out of Stepness”), where he claimed that the country was Europe’s biggest folk museum, but also the biggest laboratory of the future. Its museum-like, anachronistic mien lay in its penchant for Spartan life in the bosom of nature, its dislike of extravagance and proclivity in favour of peasant frugality, and its premodern tradition of a community’s dugnad (collective work for a public good). Its precursory, “futuristic” dimension stemmed from early peasant and workers’ emancipation, its antecedent, “natural” feminism (as exemplified in Ibsen’s plays), and its early versions of sophisticated, deliberative democracy (Entzensberger 1974).

The 21st century is a stress test for a model which has not quite broken its traditional moorings but rather has tried to tie them to a future-oriented, innovative thinking. The Age of Anthropocene and the array of swift, social and techno-economic changes mean that the Nordic home cannot survive in a cocoon of its own goodness; it has to renew itself in more dramatic ways than it has done so far. Its 20th-century version was designed to regulate and provide welfare under conditions of mass production in a mature industrial society. In the transition to the digitalized economy, with its more specialized and flexible work life, the Nordic model has to transform its architecture in tandem with the underlying techno-economy and socio-cultural innovation. The main challenge is thus to embark on regulatory and social innovation without losing social coherence and the potency of the Ostromian regulative principles. As we argue in this volume, one of the guarantors of this coherence are cultural norms, values and unifying stories replicated from generation to generation. It is the well entrenched ethos of fairness, care and prosociality that keeps being reactivated in situations where the IT economy’s tax havens, or the sharing economy’s insecure work relations, are in glaring breach of Nordic rules. Even a cursory glance at the ongoing value debates in the Nordic public sphere shows how scrupulously noted – and publicly condemned – is every
case of industrial or political violation of the community’s “sacred norms”.

What is also interesting are public calls for visionary and creative ingenuity that address these issues “on Nordic terms” and “up to Nordic standards” in a globalized (or increasingly Europeanized) economy. At the 21st-century crossroads, culture strikes back – and often in unpredictable ways.

To sum up: One of the arguments in this book is that in the 19th and 20th centuries the Nordic welfare states – each of them in its own way – managed to organize and mythologize themselves as cooperative, inclusive families. The “Nordic homes” – with their norms, routines, taboos – are now disrupted by the metamorphosis of the world (Beck 2017), where change no longer happens in the world of certainties; rather it takes place in a maelstrom of ever new beginnings, where what was unimaginable yesterday becomes possible today. The Nordic welfare states are, not for the first time, at a critical juncture. Ultimately, their resilience is yet to be proven, but in the first decades of the 21st century they seem to be doing what they have always been rather good at: keeping a balance between the encroachment of a cosmopolitan, borderless Zeitgeist and the safeguarding of their identity as “fair societies”.

What is intriguing is the degree to which modern Norwegians, Swedes and Danes have interiorized the image of their countries as the loci of good life, humanitarianism and well-being. Norway in particular, partly due to its extraordinary petroleum wealth and partly due to national skills in positive neuro-linguistic programming, boosts the image of itself as a “peace-and-nature tribe” amidst a world of upheavals, catastrophes and decline. In a 2008 study of the Norwegian idea of happiness (Hellevik 2008), a team of researchers concluded that the Norwegians, having obtained most things they desired, are now more aware of the colossal gap between their affluence and the genuine need and misery in other parts of the world. They feel moral discomfort, accompanied by concerns about climate change and environmental crisis. And though it is difficult to generalize from the virtual tsunami of debates in the mainstream media, there are indications that the majority of Norway’s citizens are convinced that they have reached – at least in the current moment of history – a eudaimonic condition: the apex of human flourishing and happiness on earth. As one young journalist put it in 2008 (the year that Wall Street crashed):

Thanks to good management and a great deal of good luck, Norway is the first society in the history of humanity which can afford a welfare system that can really make everybody free. Those of us who live today are closer than any previous generation to realizing our dreams. Our productivity exceeds anything the world has seen before. We have both more money and more spare time than our fellow brothers in the rest of the world. Why not take seriously the ideal of freedom linked to pleasant life?

(Sandbu 2008)
And in 2017, Jan Egeland, secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, wrote the following words in the biggest national daily:

There has never in humanity’s history in or outside our country been a people that were richer, had more consumption goods and enjoyed more social security and personal safety. This should imply that the 2017 Norwegian election should focus less on increased consumption or purchasing power at home and more on the bottom billion whose lives have been wrecked by catastrophes and crises the likes of which we have not experienced for the past 70 years. This would be in line with the Norwegian ideals and interests we insist we stand for – and with our Christian, humanist legacy that we want to teach our new countrymen.

(Egeland 2017)

Egeland’s coruscating cri de cœur is not just an extended version of Norwegian prosociality and the call for a national dugnad to help the underdogs; it reveals glimpses of the old Lutheran guilt at being happier and better off than the rest of the world. And, although the scope of this study does not allow us to probe the subject, the half-euphoric, half-embarrassed awareness of one’s own good fortune is typical of most middle-class Scandinavians. Whether Nordic modernity represents the peak of the well-being society, or only its beginning, remains to be seen. It is certainly a fragile construction, the catastrophists might say. And the ironists might add that it sometimes morphs into an unsavoury, narcissistic philanthropism, whose nature has been captured by W.H. Auden: “We are here on earth to help the others. What the hell the others are here for, God only knows.”

Whatever the conclusion, the Nordic countries are an experiment – very much like this volume. But the book’s radical interdisciplinarity invites us to look at the Nordic model telescopically, joining evolutionary insights with cultural, political and economic analysis. Like any experimental journey, our volume is explorative and tentative in its nature. It has been co-written by a group of scholars with widely divergent backgrounds and perspectives, and has fostered wide discussions and disagreements. The juxtaposition of studies of education and cultural history with business models and political analysis, as well as biology, involved a clash of languages, concepts and interpretations. However, we would like to believe that it has also fostered richer and broader insights than those ingrained within disciplinary silos. After all, in writing this book, we could not but follow Fridtjof Nansen’s bon mot: “The difficult we do immediately. The impossible takes a little longer.”

Notes

1 Madame de Staël, Herder, Heine and, later, Baudelaire were fascinated by the North as the quintessence of the Romantic idea of freedom and nature-inspired spirituality. For them, the true nature religion, hidden in mysterious runes, was to be found North of the Mare Balticum.
Witoszek and Midttun

2. See the issue of The Economist from 27 April 2013, devoted to the Nordic model.

3. Following Eisenstadt (Eisenstadt 2000), we see Western modernity as stemming from an emancipatory cultural programme – with a salient ideal of individual autonomy and independent inquiry – which yielded scientific breakthroughs and the industrial revolution.


5. Human social systems are nested hierarchies of groups within groups within groups. The logic of relative fitness operates at every tier of the hierarchy: What’s good for the family can be bad for the clan. What’s good for the clan can be bad for the nation. The general rule is: “Adaptation at any level of a multi-tier hierarchy of groups requires a process of selection at that level and tends to be undermined by selection at lower levels.”

6. A number of scholars have defined society as consisting of functional attributes, institutional or societal domains, with different goals, foci and logics (see e.g. Parsons (1964) and Luhman (1995)). The classification varies, and our domains represent an indicative typology that merely serves as a heuristic device.

7. The fate of Peer Gynt – an exemplary protagonist dreamt up by Henrik Ibsen – represents a cautionary tale of the nemesis that awaits those ruthless individualists who lust for fame, power and glory. As a result of his excesses, Peer lands in a mental asylum and finally returns home, where humility, equality and compassion prevail.

8. Sweden is an exception here. See Chapter 10 on “Eco-modernity Noridc style”.

9. Examples abound: Corruption scandals in Telenor and Telia, worker safety in Hennes & Mauriz’s supply chain, etc.

References


