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Scandinavism: Wiring Nationalism in the North

Scandinavism. Overlapping and Competing Identities in the Nordic World, 1770–1919

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Pan-nationalism is one of the intellectual products of romantic thinking that in my experience has been most poorly understood by modern scholarship. Methodological nationalism rears its ugly head: in most cases the pan-national movements failed to realize the (political) pan-nation and they accordingly represent a ‘road not taken’ in the history of modern state formation, as Joep Leerssen has phrased it.¹ In the definition of the American historian Louis L. Snyder, the pan-movements were ‘politico-cultural movements seeking to enhance and promote the solidarity bound together by common or kindred language, cultural similarities, the same historical traditions, and/or geographical proximity. They postulate the nation writ large in the world’s community of nations’.² When confining ourselves to Europe, the ethnolinguistic argument seems to have been guiding Pan-Germanism, Pan-Slavism, Pan-Latinism, Celticism, Illyrianism, Turanism, and Greater Netherlandism; all these movements shared the goal of bringing geographically-dispersed groups speaking related languages or dialects closer together, be it politically or otherwise.³ Overgrown and largely abandoned, these pan-national roads appear to be invisible from the perspective of the present-day map of nations; the subject has for this reason garnered only meagre attention from students of nationalism. In my

1 Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe. A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 18.

2 Louis L. Snyder, *Macro-Nationalisms. A History of the Pan-Movements* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1984), 5.

3 For an introduction to these various movements and suggestions for further reading, see the thematic articles in the second volume of the *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, 2 vols., ed. Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018) or visit the website: www.ernie.uva.nl.

dissertation on Scandinavism, I show that there is more to this particular pan-national movement than a preconceived story of political failure. Pan-Scandinavian cultural activism would have a significant impact on the trajectories which the separate national movements in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were to take. Simultaneously, Scandinavism proved to be highly successful in creating an overarching Scandinavian identity that suffused and overlapped the individual national identities.

Beyond Political Failure



Fig. 1: Coat of Arms, Schleswig-Holstein.

Scandinavism, as a proper movement, emerged from student circles in the 1830s and 1840s and continued to have a great appeal, primarily, but not exclusively, in the intellectual milieu, during the next two decades. Visions of pan-Scandinavian political cooperation, in whichever shape or form, were grounded on ideas of common tribal origins and shared culture, history, language, and religion. Denmark's conflict with the burgeoning national movement in Schleswig and Holstein served as a catalyst for discussions on a future Scandinavian union, which was seen as a necessary protective shield against possible Prussian (or Russian) aggression. Despite the celebration of pan-Scandinavian brotherhood and solidarity perpetuated by decades of Scandinavist activism, Norway and Sweden did not offer Denmark any meaningful military support once the Second Schleswig War broke out in 1864. The – for Denmark – traumatic outcome of the war – both duchies were lost in their entirety – did much to break the back of political Scandinavism according to the customary portrayal of the movement in national histories and encyclopaedia-entries. The older literature focusing on Scandinavism contributed to sustaining this image of a failed political project.

These monographs by Åke Holmberg (published in 1946), John Sanness (1959), and Henrik Becker-Christensen (1981) are furthermore affected by their limited thematic, temporal, and geographical approach, as they focus primarily on political Scandinavism during the decades of the Schleswig question in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark respectively.⁴

The main problem with the narrative of political failure lies in the fact that it obscures the significant impact of Scandinavism outside the realm of politics. Over the last decade and a half, scholars have started to take an interest in the cultural implications of Scandinavian thought. In her dissertation from 2008, Ruth Hemstad minutely dissects the resurgence of Scandinavian activism in the decade around 1900, showing that the movement had a prolonged ideological attraction after 1864, thus laying strong foundations for the Scandinavian cooperation that has existed until this very day. *En passant* Hemstad demonstrates that dreams of a political union ultimately foundered in 1905 with the break-up between Norway and Sweden – four decades later than commonly accepted.⁵ That the investigation of Scandinavism is a highly dissertation-driven affair is once more exemplified by Kari Haarder Ekman, who in her doctoral thesis from 2010 convincingly argues that the Modern Breakthrough – the literary movement that propelled Scandinavia into the limelight of the world republic of letters – can be understood as yet another manifestation of cultural Scandinavism. Most importantly, by turning Scandinavia into a shared literary space, the otherwise marginal individual languages could enlarge their cultural capital on the world stage, which contributed to the success of such authors as Ibsen and Strindberg.⁶ That Scandinavism indeed impacted a wide-ranging number of different fields is furthermore illustrated by two anthologies on the subject that came out in 2012 and 2018, of which the chapters address such diverse subjects as art, literature, media, science, church life, women's rights, and popular culture.⁷

4 Åke Holmberg, *Skandinavismen i Sverige vid 1800-tallets mitt (1843–1863)* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri, 1946); John Sanness, *Patrioter, Intelligens og skandinaver. Norske reaksjoner på skandinavismen før 1848* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1959); Henrik Becker-Christensen, *Skandinaviske drømme og politiske realiteter – den politiske skandinavisme 1830–1850* (Aarhus: Arusia – Historiske skrifter, 1981).

5 Ruth Hemstad, *Fra Indian Summer til nordisk vinter. Skandinavisk samarbeid, skandinavisme og unionsoppløsningen* (Oslo: Akademisk Publiserings, 2008).

6 Kari Haarder Ekman, 'Mitt hems gränser vidgades.' *En studie i den kulturella skandinavismen under 1800-talet* (Göteborg & Stockholm: Makadam Förlag, 2010).

7 Magdalena Hillström and Hanne Sanders eds., *Skandinavism. En rörelse och en idé under 1800-talet* (Stockholm & Göteborg: Makadam Förlag, 2012), and Ruth Hemstad, Jes Fabricius Møller and Dag Thorkildsen eds., *Skandinavismen. Vision og virkning* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2018).

Cultural Incubator and Significant Other

Combined, the studies discussed above have done much to reevaluate Scandinavism's multifarious and highly impactful position in nineteenth-century life. One vital aspect of Scandinavism that to my mind had nonetheless remained underexposed concerned the entanglement between Scandinavism on the one hand and the three individual national movements on the other. How did Scandinavian identity formation interact with the various nationally-specific manifestations of cultural nationalism? That was my main research question. I found that Scandinavism wired the nation-building projects in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden on a very fundamental level, stimulating the articulation of well-defined national identities in both a positive and a negative way.

On the positive side, I build on Haarder Ekman's conceptualization of Scandinavia as a literary space by widening the scope and defining Scandinavia as a cultural sphere, a concept which pairs the infrastructure of the emerging Scandinavian public sphere to a shared repertoire for cultural cultivation. The elementary components of this common cultural repertoire are primarily memory sites from Scandinavian history. Historicism – the use of history in the formulation of collective identities – was the one area where national and Scandinavian identity-making would most fruitfully intersect. Norse Antiquity and the Viking Age were considered a shared historical mainspring and a Golden Age, offering ample material for narratives of brotherhood and rapprochement. Arguably more interesting is the inventive way in which cultural producers dealt with memories from Early Modernity – an era that was notoriously tainted by almost incessant inter-Scandinavian warfare and conflict. Novelists, poets, painters, and others engaged in an activity which I have termed the 'defusing of memory sites': stories of conflict were creatively turned into stories of reconciliation by highlighting the unnaturalness of war between brother nations or by introducing an alternative enemy (Germans, Russians, *Snaphanerne*, a seventeenth-century, pro-Danish guerrilla movement) or a social opposition that exceeded the national conflict. Such narrative interventions made it possible to celebrate national achievements and national heroes without upsetting the harmonious relations with the Scandinavian neighbours, while enforcing both strains of identity – the national and the pan-national – in the process. In its capacity of cultural sphere, Scandinavia accordingly functioned as a cultural incubator: the realization that they were embedded in a larger and more prestigious cultural community provided the individual nations with a greater cultural self-confidence, giving them the opportunity to boast a stronger profile towards the outside world.

On the other side 'Scandinavia' also stimulated nationalist self-silhouetting in a negative sense. Especially from the Norwegian perspective – the culturally less-developed country of the three – Scandinavia was regularly seen as a threat

to national authenticity and the hard-won and still precarious sovereignty. This reactionary self-articulation became most obvious during the infamous clashes between the Norwegian History School – presided over by P.A. Munch and Rudolf Keyser – and primarily Danish historians concerning the ownership of the saga literature. Munch argued that Scandinavism was a Danish ruse to claim as their heritage what was truly Norwegian, and Norwegian only. A similar logic underpinned the Danish-Norwegian tug-of-war concerning such latter-day memory sites as the eighteenth-century naval hero Tordenskjold.⁸ As a general point throughout the nineteenth century, a Norwegian national identity was formulated while constantly negotiating its perceived ‘otherness’ or ‘sameness’ vis-à-vis Scandinavia at large.

To sum up: in Scandinavia, national, and pan-national identity formations were entangled in multiple and complex ways. This makes clear that the pan-national movements played an intricate and hitherto underappreciated role in the development of romantic nationalism. Hopefully, my findings can be useful for the study of the other European pan-movements as well. To quote the very last sentence of my thesis: ‘it is high time to re-evaluate pan-nationalism’s role in European history’.

8 I wrote about this in an earlier issue of this journal, see Tim van Gerven, ‘Whose Tordenskjold? The Fluctuating Identities of an Eighteenth-Century Naval Hero in Nineteenth-Century Cultural Nationalisms’, in: *Romantik: Journal for the Study of Romanticisms* 7 (2018): 17–46.

