

Árnason, Jóhann Páll, and Björn Wittrock, eds. 2012. *Nordic Paths to Modernity*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books. 298 pages. ISBN: 978-0857452696.

Across different disciplines (history, sociology, political science, economics) the concept of “The Nordic Model” has flourished since the 1930s. It has mostly dealt with an alleged Nordic *Sonderweg* of modernization in the twentieth century, sometimes tracing its origins back to the nineteenth and even the eighteenth century, but this book argues that “a long-term historical-sociological perspective is needed to make sense of the Nordic paths to modernities; of their significant but not complete convergence in patterns” (back cover). The book is a result of cooperation for at least a decade between a group of distinguished Nordic scholars and brings three important strands together: the question of “the Nordic Model” (mainly a theme among Nordic scholars); the question of globally diverging paths of modernization and civilization (an international theme of recent decades); and deconstructions and critical reinterpretations of the national histories (going on in all Nordic countries as a part of European developments).

The introduction by Jóhann Páll Árnason and Björn Wittrock and the first article on “Nordic Modernity: Origins, Trajectories, Perspectives” by Bo Stråth outline a comprehensive account of the multiple paths of modernization taken by the five Nordic countries highlighting the historical conditions and developments that have brought them together into a region. They emphasize that most of the Nordic area had fewer feudal traits than much of the rest of Europe. In the general liberation from feudal structures in the eighteenth century this condition helped bring about a class of independent farmers/peasants in all countries. This class of farmers played an important role in the dissolution of absolute monarchy in the nineteenth century and in the class-compromises of the first decades of the twentieth century. The social composition of the Nordic countries was perhaps the most important condition of the specific traits of Nordic modernization that in turn paved the way for the Nordic Model, which can in short be defined as a welfare state based on the cooperation between social classes and political parties of the left, centre and right. However, the authors stress that this outcome of historical processes should not be seen as conclusively determined. Among other important things, the authors stress that threats from neighbours in the east, south and west pushed forward the Nordic cooperation that helped shape these five different countries in similar ways. This “red thread” of the book is interwoven with threads of cultural, ideological and political developments

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(reformist, enlightenment, etc.) and many examples of great divergences between the nations at different times are demonstrated both in these overview articles and in the articles on single countries.

A reader should pay special attention to the accounts given in the book of the different mergers, alliances and compromises of liberal, conservative and socialist ideas in the different national contexts. Two among several examples provided, for instance, are that the Swedish Social Democrats “stole” the idea of “The People’s Home” (*Folkhemmet*) from the conservatives, and in all the Nordic countries the social development of the 1930s brought about a reconciliation between independent farmers/fishermen and the industrial perspectives of capitalists and workers. These developments should be seen as central to a Nordic Model of modernization. However, the political and ideological elements are most often overemphasized in these accounts and the importance of labour relations is too often missing. The Nordic social contract of the 1930s, spearheaded by the Danish *Kanslergadedeforlig* and the Swedish *Kohandel* in 1933, was a double tripartite contract: namely between the three classes—capitalists, independent farmers and the working class—and between employers, employees and the state. Later, in the different Nordic countries, when the political parties have been unable to renegotiate the contract, the labour market triad has managed to carry out the reforms necessary to ensure economic and social stability.

The attention of the reader should also be directed to the accounts of popular movements and involvement that come up in various forms in different articles. The basis of the Nordic paths to modernity in popular movements should have been emphasized more strongly in the syntheses and overviews, which too often focus on politics and ideology. These accounts deconstruct effectively the widespread myth of Social Democratic hegemony as the core of the Nordic model, but this reconstruction should have been extended more clearly into the realms of the extensive mobilizations of ordinary people in public actions and the labour relations that have laid a strong foundation for a stable social contract in the Nordic countries.

While the articles, taken together, provide an exciting picture of the diversity that is unified in the Nordic region, only Risto Alapuu and Henrik Stenius deliver articles on a single Nordic country (Finland) in a Nordic comparative perspective—exemplary articles indeed! Alapuu’s article is the only article of the book that manages to include the importance of the labour relations in this development. The Icelandic writers have chosen to stress Icelandic anomalies while what rather needs to be explained is why Iceland is as Nordic as is the case. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson does not approach that question and Jóhann Páll Árnason exaggerates the Icelandic deviation from the Nordic model. He emphasises the missing Social Democratic hegemony and lesser welfare benefits redistribution and closes his eyes to the similar labour relations, universalistic educational policy

and other traits that make “the Icelandic way” a variation of the Nordic model rather than a deviation from it.

History as an academic subject has been closely linked to a demand for national narratives, and even though older narratives are deconstructed, national perspectives remain strong and tend to prevail in this study. Therefore it is not surprising that the Swedish, Norwegian and Danish articles are confined to Swedish, Norwegian and Danish history. From a Danish perspective it can seem justifiable to focus on the transformation from the composite Danish middle power into a small nation state and the ideological importance of Grundtvig (who is untranslated and untranslatable to other languages). From a Nordic perspective and for an international audience this may not be the best choice. The Swedish and Norwegian contributions also combine broad macro-historical narratives with narrow micro- and meso-narratives and are largely framed within the question of multiple modernization processes while the Danes are more preoccupied with “the national question.”

This reviewer laments the absence of Nordic perspectives in the articles from Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—the promises of Nordic perspectives given in the introductory chapters and the title of the book are not carried out well enough. The long-term sociological-historical perspectives on different societal levels are intriguing examples of the diversities of modernization but they add very little to the conception of the Nordic Model. However, given the above-mentioned corrections about labour relations and popular mobilization, the introductory chapters and the exemplary Finnish chapters contribute to the discussions on the Nordic Model and the book as a whole is a significant contribution to the discussion of multiple modernities.

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