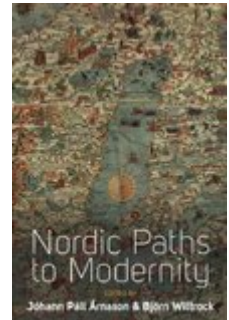


Jóhann Páll Árnason, Björn Wittrock. *Nordic Paths to Modernity*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012. 288 S. ISBN 978-0-85745-270-2.



Reviewed by Mary Hilson

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The idea of the “Nordic model” seems to have experienced a renaissance in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The Nordic economic and social model – rejected by some twenty years ago as too inflexible for the neo-liberal age – is once again cited as a source of inspiration for governments and policy-makers seeking solutions to the global economic crisis that began in 2008. See for example: “Why the world should look at the Nordic countries”, special report, *The Economist*, 2–8 February 2013. Despite the crisis, the Nordic countries seem to perform enviably well in international indicators of welfare, human development, “happiness” and the like. At the same time, scholars of the Nordic model have become more interested in the history of the region over the *longue durée*. Swedish historians have debated the early modern roots of a political culture of consensus, while historians of the Nordic welfare state have emphasised the historical legacies of Lutheran Protestantism and the strong centralised state. See for example: Börje Harnesk, *Den svenska modellens tidigmoderna rötter?*, in: *Historisk Tidskrift* 1 (2002), pp. 78–90; on the welfare state see the publications of the Nordic Cen-

tre of Excellence “The Nordic Welfare States: Historical Foundations and Future Challenges (Nord-Wel)”, <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/nord-wel/> (05.03.2013). It would be hard to disagree with the editors of this volume that, seen over a long historical period, the Nordic region possessed “a high, and in a European context arguably unique, degree of commonality in terms of traditions, cultural habits, institutional structures, languages and closeness of co-operation” (p. 1). These commonalities have included for example the lack of feudalism, the traditions of strong local self-government and the completeness of the Lutheran Reformation.

The twelve chapters in this volume explore these and other themes, portraying the common features of the Nordic paths to modernity while at the same time acknowledging that these were also “multiple modernities”. There were important differences between the “west Nordic” kingdom which had its capital in Copenhagen and included the territories of modern-day Denmark, Norway and Iceland, as well as the north German duchies; and the “east Nordic” kingdom, centred on Stock-

holm and governing much of the eastern Baltic, including what is now Finland, at its height. Another dividing line could be drawn between the two modern states which succeeded the composite monarchies Denmark and Sweden; and Finland, Iceland and Norway which became independent nation states in the early twentieth century. The editors have decided to approach these similarities and differences from a national perspective: following their introductory chapter and a broad survey of Nordic modernity by Bo Stråth, two chapters are devoted to each of the five countries: on Denmark (Uffe Østergård and Niels Kayser Nielsen); Sweden (Björn Wittrock and Peter Hallberg); Norway (Rune Slagstad and Gunnar Skirbekk); Finland (Risto Alapuro and Henrik Steinius) and Iceland (Jóhann Páll Árnason and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson).

The contributors to this volume are supremely well-qualified to explore these themes; most of them have spent long and distinguished careers researching these or similar questions. Indeed, the book could be read in some respects as a follow-up to the influential 1997 volume *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, to which many of the authors in the present volume also contributed. Øystein Sørensen / Bo Stråth (eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, Oslo 1997. As one might expect, the book impresses above all with the weight of scholarship displayed here. In some cases the arguments will be familiar from the authors' earlier work, and indeed some of the chapters are reworked versions of articles that originally appeared in the journal *Thesis Eleven* in 2004. One gets the impression that the book has been a long time in the making, and some chapters would have benefitted from further updates to minor matters of detail before they went to press.

It is particularly pleasing to find that Iceland, which is so often overlooked in "Nordic" anthologies of this kind, is given equal treatment to that of the larger, better-known, Nordic countries. As

Árnason suggests, "the idea of a Nordic world would be incomplete without reference to the only country that produced a distinctive literary tradition during the formative medieval phase of Nordic history" (p. 229). With some justification then, Árnason includes a detailed discussion of the medieval period, making a strong case for understanding Iceland as part of the Nordic world, though it also showed many distinctive features, some of them similar to more recent Anglophone "settler" societies in other parts of the world. The tension between these two legacies was apparent in the distinctive features of Icelandic nationalism, as Guðmundur Hálfðanarson shows, and in the recent neo-liberal expansion and 2008 financial crash, on which both authors offer some very interesting and welcome reflections. I found these two chapters some of the most enlightening and interesting in the book.

The other Nordic exception is often assumed to be Finland. Risto Alapuro engages explicitly with the argument in Bo Stråth's overview that Finland, given the strength of early twentieth-century social conflict that came to a head in the 1918 Civil War, illustrates the contingencies of the Nordic case. Instead, Alapuro argues, Finland's twentieth century was shaped by its Nordic path dependency; what was surprising was not the Civil War, but that social conflicts failed to trigger a fascist coup d'état similar to those experienced in so many other parts of Europe. The attempted coup of 1932, "rather than revealing a high degree of indeterminacy... showed the strength of Nordic structural and institutional factors" (p. 199).

Peter Hallberg's chapter on moralising enlightenment discourses in mid-eighteenth century Sweden makes a welcome contribution to the English-language literature on Sweden's "Age of Liberty". The other chapters are rather broader in their focus, by contrast, but offer many interesting insights, particularly in Uffe Østergård's discussion of the "two Denmarks": the extensive composite pre-1864 state and the small, homogeneous

post-1864 nation state. Gunnar Skirbekk's discussion of the Norwegian popular movements draws on a local case study though it is not entirely clear where this is, and it would have been helpful to have had a map to illustrate both this and some of the other contributions.

Overall, the volume is probably best read as a stock-taking by a generation of highly distinguished Nordic historians. Many of the chapters here will make welcome contributions to the reading lists of students of Nordic history within the region and beyond, though with that in mind, it would have been helpful if some of them could have been more comprehensively referenced to guide students to further reading in the field. Although the approach adopted here is national, all the contributors demonstrate the importance of looking beyond Norden's borders to understand the history of the region. One omission, perhaps, is the lack of attention given to the role of the early modern European expansion in shaping Nordic modernity, and conversely the role which the Nordic countries played in that expansion. The Danish presence in the West Indies, West Africa and elsewhere is mentioned briefly by Uffe Østergård (p. 50) but not discussed elsewhere. For a recent anthology see Leos Müller / Göran Rydén / Holger Weiss (eds.), *Global historia från periferien: Norden 1600–1850*, Lund 2010.

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