

ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI -The Nordic Region in Europe. The Nordic Identity from a Historical/Philosophical perspective

Speech at the Foreign Ministry in Stockholm. 12. October 1992.

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## **The Nordic Identity - Past, Present and Future**

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me first congratulate Finland on her 75th anniversary as an independent nation. Let me also express my gratitude for being invited to make a speech on this occasion.

I am perhaps invited to this distinguished celebration more or less on a formal basis, as a representative from Norway and as academic head of the Institute for Sociology at the University of Oslo. No doubt the idea is that I should say something about the identity of Finland and of the Nordic Region, preferably from a sociological point of view. But before I try to say something about Nordic Identity - past, present and in prospective - I would like to say a few more personal words on this occasion.

The word "Finland" has had a somewhat special and symbolic meaning in my own personal development. The first time I can remember "Finland" being mentioned in my family was in March 1940, and that is about as far back I am able to remember anything at all in a meaningful connection. From a morning that month I can recall a dark picture of my father's face when he said, very seriously: "Finland has given up". This meant, of course, that Finland's valiant struggle against the giant, the Soviet Union, was for the time being at an end. I was five years of age at that time and did not understand the full import of the sentence. What I did understand, however, was that something dreadful had happened and that other bad events, out of our control, were to come. The message was received as a prelude to disasters. That is probably why I remember the sentence.

The prelude proved to be right. One month later we in Norway were at war and my father was called in for mobilization. I also remember other events from that year with a connection to Finland. During the summer of 1940, I was shown the thoroughly bombed houses of my family's town of Elverum, and someone commented: "This is like Finland!". I then think I understood that Finland had gone through a terrible amount of suffering.

Some twenty years later, when I first visited Finland in person, I remember the impression of Helsinki as a very new and modern city; the central buildings seemed to have been built quite recently. I also recall my host at that time saying in triumph: "we made it!" - vi har lyckats! - indicating that Finland had managed to build her industries up again and meet the enforced deliveries after the wars, so that no big power could legally claim new negotiations threatening Finland's national status.

This reminds me of some words by Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, given to me by the Disabled War Veterans Association: " We have fought a hard war which has left deep wounds, both in our society as a whole and in individuals. Only gradually and with effort can we heal the mental and material damage, and only by hard work and all pulling together can we give future generations the opportunities which we ourselves have enjoyed. We shall reach this goal, we shall achieve this objective, if we only try our best, purposefully and unanimously".

My first memories of Finland are now more than 52 years old, they are nevertheless a part of my present self. When I start telling you this, it is in some way to say that I feel I have known Finland for as long as I can remember. Today Finland is among the established countries in the world. 75 years of independent life is indeed a mature age, Finland belongs definitely to those grown up. And yet, I can remember her at an age when she was not more than 23, meaning that I have more or less known her in all her adult life. It also means that Finland is, historically speaking, a new nation. Not new as a cultural nation, but new as a political nation.

What can be said about the youthful age of Finland, can also be said about other Nordic nations. Of the five presently independent Nordic Nations three of them got their political independence in this century. Politically speaking the Nordic nations consist of two old and three new nations, even if they all have national histories going centuries back.

### *An approach to the understanding of collective identity*

Now to the announced topic for this session: "The Nordic Identity from the Historical/ Philosophical perspective". The phrase "historical/ philosophical perspective" probably means that we, in this session, should be more concerned with the cultural dimensions of the Nordic countries and less with the economic and political dimensions. But even this limitation could give room for many different approaches to the topic. I presume that I am expected to say something about the Nordic identity as seen from a sociological point of view. This might limit the sector of possibilities considerably, but there are still many things to be said about the subject which I do not intend to discuss here. Since it is impossible to give a comprehensive professional presentation of studies of identities and their applications during a fairly short address, I might as well renounce the purely professional claims and rather speak in general terms about: What do we mean when we talk about "identity" in a supra-national way? And why should we be concerned about identity on this level - what practical purpose can it have in a world becoming more and more international?

If we consult a dictionary and open it at the word "identity", we will probably find something about the latin root of the word, something about similarity, indication that different entities belong to a common category; maybe it will also say something about identification, or recognition. Identity is not only a phrase used to indicate individual concepts of whom we are. The word is commonly used to indicate collective equality or belongingness as well.

I will not go into the deeper philosophical questions as to whether an individual can be imagined to have the same identity as a collectivity of which he is a part. I will rather take it for granted that we are all individually originals, but that we all identify, not with one, but with several collectivities on different levels. We may be part of a family, a working group, a local community, a nation, a region of nations and of a civilization, besides being member of a species. We identify with various collectivities and we put different names on them.

The very sense of belonging to a "we" presupposes an organized or imagined community. But whether the community we are referring to is concrete and composed of persons we know well, as in the case for the family, or has a more abstract and imagined character, as is the case of the nation, an inclusion of a "we" will always presuppose an exclusion. If "we" are to be a meaningful category of individuals, there must also be some people or someone who is a "not-we", a "they".

A strong inclusion will also mean a strong exclusion; and here starts the dilemma. Some moral philosophers have claimed it as morally wrong to make inclusive collectivities that automatically exclude others, as all individuals are supposed to possess equal moral qualifications. An axiomatic moral position of this kind may be stated with the best of intentions. Nevertheless, on this point an empirical social scientist must make some objections. As individuals, we have not got our moral qualities independently of the collectivities to which we belong. The development of social morality depends upon our identification with collectivities and their authority. Different types of collectivities promote different moral qualities in the individual, and not only vice versa. The tension between inclusion and exclusion is universally one of the main forces motivating individuals to moral behaviour.

Philosophical statements that all human beings are born with the same rights and that they therefore should be regarded as equal, rational and ethical individuals, may be a precondition for claiming that each of us has the same responsibility for everybody else, but such statements have serious intellectual and practical weaknesses. As human beings we all belong to some sort of society and culture. It is this belongingness that makes social and moral life possible. But the societies and the cultures we belong to can vary a great deal. These variations of belongingness are the cause of for various identities. The variations between different cultures and societies are at the same time an important guarantee against a total collapse of mankind when societies from time to time make dysfunctional adjustments. The variation between civilizations and national cultures is not only a source for conflicts, it is also a necessary condition for our survival as a species. For this reason the claim for universal moral rights on behalf of all individuals needs a contradiction. The development and preservation of various supra-individual entities, which are not supposed to include everybody, are both legitimate and necessary.

If we accept that the search for both national and other forms of collective identity is legitimate, the next question could then be: What characterizes such collective identities? What standards should we use to understand the phenomenon?

The answer is easiest to give when we are concerned with smaller collectivities, such as families and groups of friends, people who know each other from many sides. Identification with organizations having economic, political or other interests is not so easy, since the members of such organizations will only have some parts of their lives in common. When it comes to nations, and clusters of nations, the foundation for a collective identity might appear to be even more difficult to explain, since most members of these entities do not know each other concretely, and conflicting interests between the citizens of a nation sometimes appear more predominant than their common interests.

However, nations are not primarily founded upon "interests" as a common category for solidarity. Nations are rather founded upon common history, common language, religion, customs and common ethnicity. The common culture of a nation has usually a primary status compared to what socialized individuals might see as their interests. But even here we find exceptions.

The culture of a nation usually seen as the common denominator. National culture in this respect cannot, however, be solely understood as literate and artistic products made by creative individuals within the nation. A national culture is not to be understood primarily as the most brilliant symbolic achievements created by individuals within that nation. Neither can it be understood in a completely anthropological way, as the values and beliefs or way of life that statistically dominate a certain population. The statistical average of behavioural patterns does not lead directly to an understanding of the cultural meaning and collective identity of an actual nation. A national culture should rather be understood as a set of common symbols which all recognized members of a nation orient themselves in relation to. Such a national culture serves as a reference for both orientation and identification, and for the mobilization of collective actions, which is not to say that all citizens of a nation always live up to the national virtues. Even a national majority may from time to time take part in deviant behaviour, and still be regarded as carrier of the national culture.

Let me make an inference from another field of social research to illustrate the difference between cultural belongingness and social behaviour: Some thirty years ago I worked together with Nordic criminologists to map the extent of unregistered figures outside the official juvenile criminal statistics. I would like to present a result from this research program since it can illustrate the argument I just made. We found at that very many 18 year old men admitted smaller violations of the law, such as petty thefts, when we asked them to fill in an anonymous questionnaire at their first meeting with the enrollment officers one year before their national service should take place. As regards young men in Oslo at that time, I remember that a majority admitted, at least once or twice, to have committed such crimes. But such an admission did not mean that theft had become a part of national culture, or even of a teenage culture for young men in the capital. On the contrary, the majority of respondents strongly expressed the view that thefts should be punished more severely than the general practice as they perceived it. This apparent contradiction between a need for strengthening the moral sanctions in the nation and an admittance of having broken certain moral norms should not be interpreted as hypocrisy. The young boys did believe in the official norm system and wanted it strengthened. They apparently obeyed the norms also, most of the time. It was just that temptation and group pressure could sometimes be too strong. The national culture was

there as an important reference, it was just not the only dominating system of cultural influence in the nation.

A contrasting power to the national culture could of course be a deviant subculture of some kind, but the perceived contrasting expectations could also be interpreted as indirect, and unintended, consequences of the mass media presentations of Modern Youth. We know that youth have their peers as a reference group, even when they know these peers very superficially. We also have research, based upon individual interviews with representative samples of youth, which indicates that a lasting media presentation of what is "typical" for youth in general will have a normative effect upon young people. They try to live up to the symbols because they think it is expected of them as youth, not because they necessarily like to do it.

This example can illustrate that collective identification can be manipulated. In this case by the mass media, in other cases by political agents. Identifications with large social units, like a peer group or a nation, has to be based upon symbols and a trust in the truth of the symbols of what has been called "imagined communities". If these images are distorted, in one direction or another, making us see our reference group as more virtuous or less virtuous than they actually are, such distortion can have some sort of "self-fulfilling prophecy" for our actual behaviour.

Since the cohesive element in national cultures is transmitted through tradition and understanding, through common symbols and patterns of interpretations, the spokesmen for the national code can be powerful persons. Sometimes they might deliver interpretations serving their own class and group interests more than the interests of the nation as a whole. Sometimes they may, with the best of intentions, select interpretations that are not the most adequate for a certain period or for a realistic understanding of historical challenges. Not only deviant interpreters, like the media presentation of contemporary youth attitudes, may give false impressions of a collectivity, but also official national elites may encourage interpretations that leads to false consciousness in a population.

For these reasons a democracy should always have institutionalized some sort of critical correction to official ideologies. This could come from internal sources or from sources external to the state. Both types are necessary, and an institutionalized correction should not logically lead to an intellectual erosion of collective creed and national cohesion.

### *Nationalism and Pan-Nationalism*

For many years now it has been fashionable amongst radicals to express fear of "nationalism", at least in Europe, supposing it could lead to repetition of the totalitarian rule of the kind we had during World War II. I will not deny the possibilities of such exaggerations in some countries, especially if they are multi-ethnic and have disputed boundaries. But on the whole I think the fear of violent nationalism is greatly overestimated in the more developed countries of the world.

In the past, before the second part of the twentieth century, collective identity could take a totalitarian character more easily than it can today. In stable societies, dominated by traditions and hierarchical organizations around agricultural and industrial occupations; people could

identify with lasting and comprehensive social units. Most people belonged to a family, a local community and to a nation. Other communities and other nations were easily seen as competing entities. A nation was an entity for identification in opposition to other nations, and in opposition to a total loyalty for the local community or for an identity with international units. An overwhelmingly national identification, an overwhelmingly religious identification and an overwhelmingly class identification could lead to a state of competition and to ardent political tensions.

The conditions for these kinds of total and opposing identifications have changed considerably in recent decades. Not only do contemporary citizens have a greater number of social units to relate to, but the identification with each of the units has also changed considerably. We have more information about other perspectives and interests and, for good or bad, we live under a constant cross-pressure from different agents. Such conditions do not create a fertile soil for a total localism or total nationalism. In contrast to the pattern of either/or-identification contemporary cultural conditions will rather favour a multiple set of complementary identities, for instance in concentric circles from the small-scale family to the big-scale units of civilization and species.

The danger for tomorrow is more likely to be a too segmented identity, and for the individual, an identity with no guiding core. The challenges of authoritarianism and totalitarian identities may be replaced by the challenges of amorphous structures and an individual egotism with few balancing standards. Instead of fearing the mighty political leader, with expressive and all-inclusive ideologies serving their interests, we should perhaps be more concerned about the hidden ideologies in the messages from the mass media and the commercial market, making elements from all kinds of cultures to symbols and stimuli for individual choice and emotional experience.

In such a situation there may be only few psychological objections to a supra-national or a pan-national identification. "Nordism" is in this respect a type of pan-nationalism, even if it might appear as a rather innocent type, compared to, for instance, pan-slavic or pan-arabic movements.

People with a great concern for national culture in this part of the world might be positive to a further development of pan-Nordic cooperation and institutions, as they clearly see that Europe as a whole, or EC as a whole, are in many ways too big for effective management, and even for a direct identification. Even if the Nordic countries have different interests in several economic respects, and even if not all of us understand the native language of all the others, there are much similarity in the cultural traditions in our part of Northern Europe.

We have all heard the English expression: "I can't define an elephant, but I know him when I see him". Something like this could also have been said about a common Nordic identity. We all know it is there, we have the feeling of "we-ness", but it is not quite easy to define it.

This may have several causes. We are not accustomed to put labels on the obvious. Ideologies from the past, stressing national differences rather than similarities, may be another reason. If these images of differences were purely descriptive, as a way to exemplify various cultural idiosyncrasies and statistical differences between the countries, they could certainly have served a useful purpose even today. But, as we all know - not least the Swedes and Norwegians who have participated in the joke-war between the two countries - national differences are generally told in such a way that intelligence become a virtue of one's own

country-men and stupidity a trait of the others. A Danish historian has figured out, according to the author Lars Lindeberg, that Sweden and Denmark were fighting each other militarily for altogether 134 years, which is supposed to be a record among neighbours. Norway and Finland were drawn into many of these wars; and, by the way, that has been one basis for the struggle for national independence to be found in these countries. The worst thing about the many and lasting wars, was that they were not generally wanted by the ordinary soldiers on each side. I know something about this, as my ancestors come from both sides of the Swedish-Norwegian border.

This leads, then, to the question whether it is in fact the leaders, of one kind or another, who have originally determined many of our concepts about what is typical of the different nations. The ideology of a determining elite and the mentality of the ordinary people might often be quite different. Another kind of difference, or contradiction, can be observed between the behavioural appearance and the deeper mentality of people living in a nation. The motivating mentality of a Finn can hardly be deduced from some public drinking habits or from some supra-athletic activities in a sauna. Nor can the Swedish mentality be pinned down to certain forms of reserved formalism, exhibited by Swedish salsemen during their first hour of business contact. Nor are the Danes to be understood by analyzing the content of their ironic humour, or the Norwegians by analyzing examples of boastful behaviour at sport arenas. Rather than paying too much attention to any of these traits, or on journalistic presentations of their typicalness, I find it more accurate to regard these forms of behaviour as different forms of a culturally determined pattern of disguise. I will not hesitate to say that the deeper mentality in the North is characterized by a certain form of social shyness, compared to Americans or Mediterranean people. But, I will also add, there are considerable cultural variations in the Nordic countries, between them and within them.

In order to understand a culture, you probably have to be a part of it, and that in turn may makes it difficult to see the same culture from outside. Anyhow, we all know an elephant when we see him. We also know that the Nordic countries are characterized by, relatively speaking, homogeneous people, and people with a - again relatively speaking - a great moral concern for equality, democracy and social welfare. These elements probably hang together. It is not so obvious that all people, with different cultural histories, will share these values. Nor is it obvious that our heirs will let their tax money be spent on collective welfare service in a future, not so homogeneous, society, where all members of this society may not appear as part of the same "we".

American social scientists have made comments in this direction when comparing America, Scandinavia and other European states. A multicultural state like Switzerland does function well, but here the different cultures are separated in a confederate system of relatively autonomous districts. The multicultural mixing of Bosnia Hercegovina does obviously not function in one independent state. The experiences from the United States fall somewhere between these two; the relativity of the American success depends upon whether we will measure technological dynamics or we will measure cultural realism and social solidarity. This could be noticed as a reminder of the cultural and structural prerequisites for the rather unique Nordic societies that has not only political and economic reasons for their calm existence.

*Prospects for the future*

We have no guarantee of a gradual growth in our present societies, let us say for the next 75 years, the next three generations. Many things could happen that are outside our control. But, we should be more conscious of the social and cultural conditions determining both the good and the not so good qualities of our social life. This would be to follow the line of modernity. The main idea of modernity has been to increase our control over our lives. Tradition should be replaced by theory, rational models for guiding our choices.

Some economically, politically and culturally oriented ideologies have achieved a historical status as the progressive ones for this development. It can also be argued that a mutualism between liberal and socialist ideologies has been rather functional for the historical development during the period of democratic and industrial "take-off". When the challenges in modernity could be described as those of forming production according to standards of efficiency, forming social distribution according to standards of equality, and forming a culture according to standards for human freedom, these ideologies, and the agents promoting them, could be seen as progressive.

It is not so certain that the same standards will prove equally adequate for the decades to come, when other challenges will be on the agenda. In the years to come a culture for individual freedom will probably have to be balanced by a culture for social cohesion and motivational meaning, if we want to promote a sustainable society without too big social budgets. This change, necessary for modernity, will be a challenge for most countries in Europe, perhaps specially for some Scandinavian intellectual elites who have been so accustomed to regard freedom, not in a dialectical relation to order, but as a progressive standard in contrast to the reactionary forces of coercion and suppression.

Another challenge which may be even harder to face in the near future, is the ecological one, the lesson of limited resources and vulnerability of natural processes for recreation. Not only will our economic attitudes and actions have to be altered, but also our standards for making progress, a very central part of contemporary Nordic identity.

Finally, let me also mention the demographic challenge that will appear on the political agenda of tomorrow, in a radically different way than at present. Today we look at reproduction mainly as a matter of privacy, and provide necessary social services for the families when they have had their children. "Population policy" is an expression with a rather unpleasant connotation for us. And yet, this may be a prime concern in the future for societies with a present reproduction rate of 60 to 80 % of what is needed for a population replacement. If we are to preserve our cultural heritage by renewing our population base, we will most certainly find out that this challenge cannot be solved either by immigration nor by economic means alone. Demography will represent a profound challenge for a society geared on economic and technical production rather than on biological, social and cultural reproduction. This change will also affect the content of our future identity.

When I mention these kind of challenges, it is to say that our Nordic traditions do not automatically guarantee that we will find adequate responses to the challenges of tomorrow. Our identities may be tied to ideologies with few potentialities for securing a sustainable future.

To face the relativity of our contemporary ideologies may be the best way to start cultivating our common ideas and make them more relevant and solid. In this respect I think there are reasons to have some faith in the common sense and serious attitudes in the people of the

North, perhaps more so than in the dominant ideological traditions in contemporary societies. Progress does not always come from established political elites, nor from the self-selected elites of the media.

If we wanted to take more advantage of the cultural capital in the Nordic nations for a common Nordic enterprise, we should certainly do so on many levels, not only on the level of humanistic art and literature. Intellectual literature has not been really included in the concepts of culture, according to what the Nordic Council has been supporting every year. Neither has the cooperation between the Nordic TV-companies been very successful. Even if a third of all Norwegians can take in the late news as presented on Swedish Television, only a small percentage of Swedes has direct access to Norwegian perspectives on the issues of the day.

The title for this session is "the Nordic REGION in Europe". Region is not a very precise term. It is often used to mean a district of communities within the national state. In this connection I take it to mean a set of nations or national areas within Europe. Still, it can mean Scandinavia, the historical Nordic states, or the northern part of Europe, including Northern Germany, or maybe even the Baltic states. Some people would even like to see a modern revival of the Hanseatic League. This could have its advantages for people in this part of Europe, and, maybe, also for the balance of Europe. A German political leader, I think it was Björn Engholm, has said that contemporary Europe has its strong poles in the West and in the South, and might even have it in the East. But the Northern pole, with its cultural characteristics, is still too weak.

It is not easy to predict what form a Nordic Region will have in Europe of tomorrow. But whatever form it will take, its creators should remember that they represent traditions with some uniqueness.

Let me end this speech by quoting from memory the Icelandic president Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, (since no speaker from Iceland is presented here). She said in an interview some years ago: "A nation without a national culture is nothing. If, on the other hand, you do have a genuine culture, you will also have the rest".

The cultural element is of great importance for making practical political arrangements run, even on a regional basis. Without some sort of distinct and common culture, it will be difficult to get public support for whatever prospects politicians are proposing. Cultural traditions can make many things run, even if this does not in itself guarantee that they will run in positive directions. A culture has to be criticized and corrected. For that reason even a theoretical reflection over conditions for cultural identification might have some political relevance.

Thank you!