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## Fantasy, Distinction, Shame

### The Stickiness of the Nordic "Good State" Brand

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## 1.1 Introduction

The idea of the Scandinavian or Nordic countries as benevolent actors on the world stage is well entrenched. As a group they are frequently referred to as "norm entrepreneurs" (Ingebritsen 2006), "moral superpowers" (Vik et al. 2018), or just plain old "good states" (Lawler 2005). Central to this image – indeed brand – is the idea that these are fundamentally ethical and altruistic actors, good international citizens accepting (and promoting) a broader sense of responsibility for the world's problems. This has been particularly evident in their apparent embrace of environmentalism, solidarity with the developing world through active humanitarian and development aid policies, and not least their activism in respect of practices of conflict mediation/resolution and peacekeeping contributions.

Confirmation of their "goodness" can easily be found through a perusal of the numerous benchmarking indexes that have sprung up over the last few decades as a way of ranking states' competitiveness,[1] and where the Nordic countries typically frequent the upper echelons of all those benchmarks you would want to be topping. Indeed, the 2020 rankings for the *Good Country Index* (originally launched in 2014) have Sweden 1st, Denmark 2nd, Finland 6th, and Norway 10th.[2] The *Good Country Index* ranks countries in terms of their contribution "to the greater good of humanity,"[3] and does so through trying to establish relatively objective (though contestable) assessments of data in the areas of Science and Technology; Culture; International Peace and Security;

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[1] For a critique see Broome, Homolar, and Kranke (2018).
[2] As with many debates about the Nordic countries Iceland is an outlier, ranked 34th.
[3] www.goodcountryindex.org/about-the-index.

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World Order; Planet and Climate; Prosperity and Equality; and Health and Wellbeing.[4] Irrespective of the robustness of the data, what is clear is that the Nordic countries continue to do exceedingly well in indexes analyzing national reputations (i.e. indexes that emphasize perceptions of performance – i.e. "brand" – rather than performance itself (Marklund 2017: 625)). For instance, the 2018 *Country RepTrak* study of the world's most reputable countries – which generates its data through surveying 58,000 individuals in G8 countries – had Sweden 1st, Finland 2nd, Norway 4th, and Denmark 9th.[5]

And yet as is well documented, the Nordic "good state" is open to challenge. For instance, in terms of practice it is often unclear that the Nordics any longer stand out as "exceptional" in respect of practices of environmentalism, humanitarianism, and peace support, since increasingly these are areas where other countries have caught up and where often Nordic positions seem little different to broader European positions (Browning 2007). Meanwhile, it is not only that claims of Nordic "exceptionalism" can be challenged, but that in view of recent Nordic practices it is reasonable to ask whether the Nordics are actually (or ever were – think Norwegian oil and Swedish arms exports) as good as they claim to be. For instance, Nordic "hospitality" and internationalism is under threat from a growing populist and isolationist tide in the region, while Denmark and Norway have increasingly embraced military activism, both being part of the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq in 2003 and responsible for firing approximately 20 percent of NATO's bombs in its intervention in Libya in 2011 (Wivel 2017: 489).

Despite such instances, however, the Nordic "good state" or "peace brand" appears relatively untarnished. This chapter therefore considers *how and why the Nordic "peace brand" and associated idea of the Nordics as quintessential "good states" appears to stick, both domestically and internationally, despite the fact that in many respects Nordic exceptionalism in this regard is no longer so obvious and increasingly tainted.* Building on existing explanations, this chapter argues that more attention needs to be paid to understanding the affective hold of ideas of "Nordic peace" and the "Nordic good state" on both insiders and outsiders. For insiders it is argued that these have become part of a fantasized ideal with which people enjoy identifying and that appeals because it offers a sense

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[4] The Good Country Index, www.goodcountryindex.org/results.

[5] V. Valet (2018). "The World's Most Reputable Countries 2018," *Forbes*, June 21, 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/vickyvalet/2018/03/15/the-worlds-most-reputable-companies-2018/.

of self-esteem and status, but also of ontological security and agency through articulating a role in the world. However, this chapter argues that outsiders also sometimes seem to invest emotionally in this Nordic reputation and brand as part of the politics of (de)legitimation, projecting the Nordic as an ideal-type and aspiration of (dis)identification.

## 1.2  International Stickiness of the Good State Brand: From Status Seeking to Identity and Meaning Creation

It is worth starting with a brief discussion of the "stickiness" of this image of the Nordics amongst outsiders, which will be returned to toward the end of this chapter. An important intervention here has been made by Wohlforth et al. (2018), who are concerned with challenging the established status literature in IR, which they note has been overly focused on *realpolitik* competitions between great powers (also see de Carvalho and Neumann 2015). They argue that since small/middle powers cannot compete on this terrain they will instead emphasize alternative dimensions "on which status can be measured," and may in particular seek to gain status by carving out a niche and excelling in being "good states" (Neumann and de Carvalho 2015: 10–11, 16; Wohlforth et al. 2018: 527, 532–533).

Their argument – and utilizing Norway as an example – is that there are several ways in which this can be done, but where an image/brand of "goodness" can be strategically cultivated by proving to be "useful allies, impartial arbiters, or contributors to [the] system's maintenance" (de Carvalho and Lie 2015; Neumann and de Carvalho 2015: 2, 9–10; Wohlforth et al. 2018: 530). They proceed to make a number of important observations in respect of Norway in particular, but which can be extrapolated to the Nordics in general. The basic argument amounts to the claim that the Nordic "good state" brand – and the status this confers on them – appears to stick within the international community because over a long period of time they have gained an enhanced status as a result of an assiduously cultivated reputation for actually providing beneficent services, be that to particular great powers, or to upholding the system and a norms-based international order as such (see Schia and Sending 2015).

In this respect, they argue that Norway's engagement in good deeds and development of a distinctive "peace nation" brand in international politics increasingly appears – at least at governmental level – to be driven by the desire for status and standing as opposed to an intrinsic

concern with the issues at play (Wohlforth et al. 2018: 544). In other words, the good state status is seen to confer both political and social capital, generating a sense of goodwill toward the Nordics, which in turn enhances the sense of self-esteem of Nordic leaders and populations (see Chapter 4). To quote foreign minister Jan Petersen in 2002: "Peace processes make us interesting ... We need a few products like that" (quoted in Wohlforth et al. 2018: 540). In turn this reputation has been fostered through using established branding and marketing techniques, in a form of what they term "conspicuous do-goodism" (Wohlforth et al. 2018: 543), including an embracing of benchmarking indexes for branding purposes (Browning 2018: 8). The argument therefore suggests that – at least to some not insignificant degree – the stickiness of the "good state" brand is a result of established and continuing Nordic practices of actually "doing good" (however defined), but also of "being seen to be doing good" through active branding strategies.[6]

What they also indicate, however, is that despite the fact that the Nordics no longer appear so distinctive in these terms they benefit from the fact that they have a long track record in this regard (Wohlforth et al. 2018: 536).[7] Their reputation is well established (they have "form" and therefore appear "genuine"), but with this presumably meaning that they are also able to ride out potential controversies (to some extent). For example, despite significant initial negative reaction, Denmark's "Mohammed cartoon crisis" of 2004–2005 did not appear to sully the country's reputation over the longer term.[8]

The argument of Wohlforth et al. is powerful and convincing; however, at the end of this chapter it is suggested that external actors might not simply recognize and confer status on the Nordics for this developed reputation in some neutral transactional sort of way – reflecting the idea that "they have earned it." Instead, it is suggested that at least some external actors some of the time also (and perhaps surprisingly) seem to themselves "invest" emotionally in this Nordic reputation and brand

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[6] The most obvious example in the Norwegian case being through its custodianship and cultivation of the Nobel Peace Prize (see Johnsen 2015).

[7] While an established reputation may override the loss of distinction in preserving a state's status, Neumann and de Carvalho (2015: 6) also note that status can even survive the loss of power, as for example in the case of France during and after the Second World War. Examples like this therefore challenge the tendency within power political approaches to International Relations to treat status as little more than a reflection of power.

[8] Personal communication with a Danish diplomat who was based in the Middle East at the time (March 2019).

(potentially for a variety of reasons). At stake in the emergence of a Nordic "good state/peace" brand is therefore the extent to which the emphasis shifts from a focus solely on the utility benefits of Nordic contributions (its political and social capital), to the way in which the Nordics have emerged as a symbol through which meaning and identity are generated (symbolic capital), also amongst outsiders.

### 1.3   Domestic Stickiness: The "Good State" as Imagined Community

At this point, however, we can turn to the other side of the issue, the need to account for why the "good state" brand and image remains sticky for Nordic citizens/societies.[9] In this respect, it is important to emphasize how in each of the Nordic countries ideas of "goodness," "morality," and "peace" have not simply been understood in instrumental terms as avenues for gaining status and social and political capital, but have also been central to the imagined community in construction. While this was especially so throughout the Cold War period, such claims also often preceded this.

For instance, the idea of Norway as a "peace nation" was central to narratives of national identity and of Norway's role in the world from its very early years of independence after 1905. Indeed, emphasizing and pursuing peace was a way of drawing a distance from great power politics, but also part of a broader attempt at trying to change the rules of the international game (Leira 2013). To this extent, while pursuing peace and working for a better world has become a part of the country's efforts at status seeking (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015), it can also be argued that initially this first became an embedded trait in Norwegian national identity narratives and central to the national self-image

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[9] The analysis focuses on Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, but omits specific consideration of Iceland. The concept of Scandinavia is generally considered to be more restrictive than that of Norden/Nordic, typically excluding Finland and Iceland. However, as social constructions there is nothing given about these markers, while outside the region they are often used interchangeably. Although within the region the distinction is often maintained, it is also important to recognize that the Finns in particular have sometimes made explicit claims to a Scandinavian identity (e.g. Wuorinen 1965: 304). Similarly, in recent years, claims to a Nordic identity have also been made by the Estonian government and some Scottish nationalists. The chapter limits its discussion to Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden because it is these countries that have become most closely associated with the idea of Nordic peace and the Nordic good state.

(Wohlforth et al. 2018: 537–539). For instance, within Norwegian society a prevalent and long running discourse exists that Norwegians are morally obliged to help those with less than themselves, with this making doing good an idealized aspect of national self-identity narratives. Tvedt (2007: 621) terms this the Norwegian "do-gooder regime," while in this volume Nissen highlights how such a discourse continues to be reinscribed through emphasizing legacies of Norway's lack of a colonial past, its nonviolent extraction from the union with Sweden, its enthusiastic membership of the UN, and not least its association with the Nobel Peace Prize.

Similarly, after the Napoleonic Wars and later following its war against Schleswig-Holstein in 1864, Denmark went through a considerable period of self-reflection as it began to come to terms with its declined status in European affairs, no longer a great power with *realpolitik* ambitions, but increasingly embracing the designation that it was actually a small state, a people's nation, and to some degree turning inward (Browning and Joenniemi 2013). Throughout the Cold War this manifested itself in a broadly anti-militarist stance to international affairs.

Most notably, of course, Sweden became the flag-bearer of Scandinavian exceptionalism during the Cold War, pursuing a foreign aid policy emphasizing "peace, freedom, and welfare" and seeking to cultivate the role of an arbiter, mediator, and bridgebuilder in global affairs (Bjereld 1995; Brommesson 2018: 4). In the Swedish case this often manifested in overtly moralistic terms, with Sweden positioning itself in solidarity with the Third World and where from the 1960s onward an idealistic element emerged of Sweden as having become the "world's conscience" (Trägårdh 2002: 152). In this respect, Swedish neutrality was not seen as constraining but as conferring a right and duty to speak out on international and moral issues. Central to this, and shared by the other Nordic states, was a belief in the need to help developing countries with generous foreign aid policies, and which Bergman argues in the Swedish case was understood largely in terms of the internationalization of the country's domestic welfare policy, the aim being to reduce inequalities between rich and poor on a global scale (Bergman 2007).

Lastly, there is Finland, an interesting case since its initial embracing of "peace" (and nonalignment/neutrality) after the Second World War was initially framed as a pragmatic response to geopolitical realities, but one where necessity was ultimately turned into a virtue (Browning 2008: 198–200). Thus, despite its rational and pragmatic underpinnings,

a "do-gooder" orientation in world politics quickly became integrated into Finnish identity narratives that people became emotionally invested in and which as such came to matter. In terms of foreign policy this was best captured in President Kekkonen's depiction of the country as a physician seeking to diagnose and cure, rather than a judge seeking to condemn and pass judgement (Kekkonen 1970: 94).

The Finnish case is also interesting, however, since its embrace of an international "bridgebuilder" role during the Cold War was also explicitly linked to efforts to (re)affirm to Finns and outsiders its Nordic credentials and identity. This was reflective of the fact that historically the country's Nordicness had often been questioned on geopolitical, racial, cultural, and linguistic grounds (Kemiläinen 1998). For the Finns a Nordic identification was essentially associated with escaping the precariousness of geopolitical imaginations that threatened to cast it as part of an emerging Soviet sphere of influence or within an East European/Baltic "buffer zone" (Browning 2008: 194–198). The desire to "prove" its Nordicness – be it through historical revisionism or embracing ideas of Nordic benevolence – again indicates the extent to which within the region (but also beyond) a Nordic identification carried a sense of status, but also security and safety to which Finland aspired.

Come the end of the Cold War, of course, this idea of the Nordics being different and ahead on the road to progress had become well established and was, of course, also associated with the development of a Nordic economic model depicted as a morally superior Third Way between American-style liberal capitalism and Soviet-style state socialism (Hanhimäki 1997: xii). Domestically, therefore, it can be argued that one reason why notions of Nordic do-gooding stick is because the conception of the Nordics as "good states" has become embedded in narratives of national self-identity.

## 1.4   Ontological Security and Good State "Fantasies"

What can be added to this identity-focused analysis are the insights of the developing literature on ontological security in International Relations. Briefly, this literature argues that subjects are generally driven by a desire to uphold and preserve established narratives of self-identity. They do so to avoid the onset of potentially debilitating existential anxieties that are liable to emerge whenever one feels their sense of self-(identity) is being questioned or in trouble (Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006; Rumelili 2015). For example, this was the case in the early 2000s when discussions

around the future of Swedish neutrality often provoked confused, angry, and emotional responses amongst ordinary Swedes that shifting away from neutrality would infringe fundamental norms of what it means to be Swedish. The same is also evident today amongst liberal elements of Nordic opinion with respect to debates around migration, where the increased emphasis on restrictive bordering practices is similarly challenging idealized notions of Nordic hospitality, sanctuary, and of the Nordics as champions of human rights, with this a cause of considerable angst for some.

Once embedded as an identity, therefore, and then branded to the self and the world there are significant incentives to uphold the branded identity to avoid activating ontological anxieties. In this, we also see how citizens often generate a sense of ontological security through vicariously identifying with the nation – i.e. living through the nation and its achievements, not least through internalizing claims about national identity into self-identity narratives enacted at the everyday level (Browning et al. 2021).

However, the ontological security literature's account of the affective hold that particular narratives of self-identity have on subjects is insufficient in itself. It is, in a sense, a rather restrictive reading that captures only half of the story. Particular identities, it is argued, are to be upheld because failure to do so will generate anxiety. One reason this is problematic is because it can have the effect of reducing questions of ontological security down to questions of identity (Rossdale 2015). Theoretically speaking, this carries the danger of encouraging the "securitization of subjectivity," that is, the closing down of subjectivity around a particular identity, as evident for example in the discourses of populist politicians, though such practices are not limited to them and to some extent are also evident in the cases noted above (Kinnvall 2004; Mälksoo 2015; Browning and Joenniemi 2017). However, while securitizing subjectivity certainly happens, it also underplays the extent to which ontological security is always a work in progress, the result being that while the onset of anxieties may tempt subjects into securitizing established notions of subjectivity and fighting for them, this is not inevitable. Instead, subjects often adapt their identity narratives, shift between them, and are not just concerned with "going on" (Giddens 1991), but also with living a fulfilling, meaningful, and authentic life in an inherently dynamic social environment. This often entails taking risks and breaking established ontological security enhancing routines in favor of new practices, new routines, and new identifications (Browning and Joenniemi 2017).

In this respect, while the ontological security literature directs attention to the specter of anxiety that identity transformations can generate, it has so far not grappled sufficiently with the issue of why subjects become attached to particular identities in the first place. That is, why do some identities – like being "good states" in the case of the Nordics – become attractive, exert an affective hold, and become "sticky," while others may be more easily dispensed with?

This issue is relevant in the Nordic case because since the end of the Cold War, and in particular over the last couple of decades, Nordic foreign policy approaches have changed, in some cases quite dramatically. Most notably Denmark and Norway have embraced military activism in ways that during the Cold War would have been almost unthinkable (Knudsen 2004; Rasmussen 2005). From being bridge builders and mediators there is a growing willingness to take sides. Indeed, in the Danish case this has been accompanied by an internal process of self-critical historical revisionism that depicts its Cold War policy in almost immoral terms and where current military activism appears as a mechanism for redemption (Browning et al. 2021: Ch.5). Similarly, Wohlforth et al. (2018) highlight how for Norway this has been part of a process in which being a good state increasingly takes the form of being a "good ally," and engaging in system supporting actions upholding a rules-based international order.

Interestingly, therefore, despite the change in foreign policy orientation and practice both Denmark and Norway continue to see themselves as "good states" and continue to cultivate this self-image and identity domestically and internationally. Put differently, while conceptions of "how to be good" may be transforming in some respects, the idea of "being good" as a central element of self-identity narratives retains affective hold.

To address the limitations of ontological security accounts in explaining why some identity narratives appear to be stickier and more enduring than others, a turn to Lacanian accounts of subjectivity can be useful. These argue that a fundamental "lack" lies at the heart of subjectivity, a lack that emerges in the very moment in which the subject finds itself "thrown into the world" (Glynos and Howarth 2008: 164; Epstein 2011: 334). Subjects, Lacan argues, are then driven by a perpetual desire to fill that lack, often investing their hopes and dreams in fantasies of fulfilment that come to exert affective hold over the subject. The fantasy, for example, may be the acquisition of an object or the cultivation of a relationship or idea (like freedom, liberty, or greatness if thinking about

the United States) which is to be quested after and which offers the promise of wholeness if fully attained. A fantasy may therefore be a signifier – like goodness – with which particular communities have come to enjoy identifying, but which may also be somewhat elastic insofar as it can be pursued, sought, or enacted in a variety of ways.

At the same time, the nature of fantasies is that either they always fall short (the acquisition of the object/relationship ultimately only provides a temporary sense of relief or completion),[10] or they remain just out of reach (often because attainment is seen to be thwarted by obstacles yet to be overcome).[11] However, rather than delegitimizing them it is this falling short which precisely enhances their affective hold and calls for renewed efforts seeking fulfilment (Arfi 2010; Eberle 2019). The suggestion of this chapter is that notions of the Nordics as "good states" and "peaceful nations" could be understood and theorized in these terms, where being good has become an idealized (fantasized) – and therefore "sticky" – identity that appeals because it offers a sense of self-esteem, status, ontological security, and not least a sense of agency in the world. However, it is also an identity, the content of which can take different forms, meaning that the substance of what "being good" entails may at times be openly contested.

## 1.5  The Good State, Virtuous Difference, and the Nordic "Knowledge Brand"

In the case of the Nordics this argument might be pushed a bit further, since insofar as idealizations of the Nordic "good state" have become internalized it also responds to Bourdieuian notions of "distinction" (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu uses the concept of distinction to refer to the temptations people feel to establish a sense of virtuous difference toward others, and where doing so can help them generate positive self-concepts, pride, status, and self-esteem. Thus it is, Bourdieu argues, that the upper classes prefer exclusive sports to those typically enjoyed by the *hoi polloi*, and why people enjoy belonging to exclusive clubs, or place

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[10] Consider, for instance, how contemporary marketing is often premised on convincing consumers how particular brands can provide a sense of meaning, identity, and fulfilment through their acquisition, but also how such feelings are only ever fleeting with this tempting consumers toward further purchases.

[11] In populist fantasies, for instance, it is typically "the elite," "migrants," "foreigners," and "the EU" (in the case of much contemporary European populism), which are positioned as the obstacles to fulfilment that need to be overcome (again and again).

high monetary value on rare gemstones with limited utility (Bourdieu 1984: 212). For Bourdieu difference is therefore something to be cultivated, while its erasure can be unsettling.

As Bourdieu argues, however, the enjoyment of distinction and the sense of status and self-esteem it can provide, is dependent upon others recognizing, admiring, and valuing one's difference. Virtuous difference therefore needs to be performed in front of others, and this can often stimulate those others to attempt to imitate one's distinction. Indeed, the enjoyment of distinction may even require encouraging others to engage in such actions, since doing so reaffirms those hierarchies upon which virtuous difference depends (Bourdieu 1984: 50).

To some extent, this offers a way of thinking about expressions of angst which gripped the Nordic region following the end of the Cold War, characterized as it was by proclamations of the decline of the Nordic model and the end of Nordic exceptionalism. In brief, instead of representing a progressive future a mood took hold that Norden now appeared decidedly statist and outdated, with the future moving toward the postmodern politics of European integration and Baltic Sea regionalization.[12] In Bourdieuian terms, the threat facing conceptions of Nordic identity and the Nordic brand at this time was the perceived loss of distinction – the fact that with the end of the Cold War aspects of Nordic do-gooding no longer appeared to be particularly exceptional or appeared increasingly irrelevant (e.g. East–West bridgebuilding). Instead of being exceptional, Norden was in danger of becoming merely normal.

Over the last decade, however, notions of Nordic distinction and a sense of Nordic self-confidence have returned. Discussions of Nordic models, a Nordic perspective and rejuvenated Nordic brand, have become widespread. In 2015 this resulted in the Nordic Council of Ministers publishing a *Strategy for International Branding of the Nordic Region 2015–2018*, subsequently extended for 2019–2021 (Nordic Council of Ministers 2019).[13]

In this respect, fantasies of the Nordic good state seem to fit well with developing nation branding discourses, which arguably play on subjects' desires for distinction and virtuous difference and which the Nordic states are well placed to capitalize on. As noted at the start of the chapter,

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[12] For such debates see Wæver (1992), Mouritzen (1995), and Browning (2007).

[13] See also Nordic Council of Ministers, "International branding of the Nordic Region," www.norden.org/en/international-branding-nordic-region.

new global benchmarking indexes are increasingly being designed that rank countries in terms of their contribution to global welfare – the *Good Country Index* being the most notable example. Nation branding consultants therefore increasingly advise their clients to think less about what the world can do for them, and more about cultivating a brand by focusing on what their country can do for the world (Browning 2018). As such, this is also fostering a shift in nation branding practices away from typical "place branding" narratives, more toward "policy branding" and cultivating the idea that in particular areas of activity (e.g. education, environment, health, criminal justice, etc.) the country in question possesses cutting edge knowledge – what Sum and Jessop (2013: 268, 299–305) call "knowledge brands." The idea of knowledge brands, they argue, resonates with new hegemonic discourses and economic imaginaries connected to ideas of "globalization," "competitiveness," and the rise of the "knowledge-based economy."

This is precisely what the Nordic Council of Minister's new *Strategy for International Branding of the Nordic Region* plays upon, explicitly identifying the Nordic region as a "knowledge society" that possesses solutions for pressing global problems, in particular of environmental, economic, and social sustainability. For instance, under the rubric "What the Nordic region can offer the outside world," an emphasis is placed on the Nordic governance and welfare model which is seen to have distinguished itself following the 2008 economic crisis (Nordic Council of Ministers 2015: 16–17). This shift toward policy branding therefore functions to reinscribe notions of Nordic distinction, virtuous difference, and exceptionalism as a core part of the Nordic brand and regional identity narratives. Such claims, of course, are then "evidenced" through reference to benchmarking indexes, which themselves serve to cultivate the idea that the Nordics possess expertise in specific policy areas. This, in turn, feeds into a fantasized identity of environmentalism, humanitarianism, and egalitarianism onto which the Nordic brand is built.

One example of this is the Nordic Council of Ministers' increasingly active role in support of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5, which focuses on improving the status and rights of women and girls worldwide and advancing gender equality. In March 2019, for instance, the Nordic Council of Ministers issued a "Declaration of Support towards the role of the UN Women in the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," which explicitly traded on the idea that when it comes to achieving gender equality the Nordic countries possess a "knowledge product." The declaration brands this as

*The Nordic Gender Effect* and which is to be offered to the world as part of the Nordic Prime Ministers' initiative, *Nordic Solutions to Global Challenges* (original emphasis) (Nordic Council of Ministers for Gender Equality 2019). Academics have also advocated embracing gender as a policy brand for rebranding the Nordic model – like the Nordic Council of Ministers emphasizing a presumed link between gender equality, peace, and prosperity (Wivel 2017: 494).

Sweden has gone further than the other Nordic countries in this regard, not simply by promoting gender quality, but rebranding its foreign policy as "Feminist Foreign Policy."[14] This has raised some interesting questions, in particular with regard to the distinction between "doing good" and the imperative to "be seen to be doing good." Notably, on this issue the other Nordic countries appear to be more cautious about overtly adopting the feminist label, believing doing so can sometimes be counterproductive. Of course, it might also be argued that one of the other benefits of a focus on gender is that in many respects – not least due to cultural, structural, and developmental reasons – Nordic distinction in this regard is largely ensured. This therefore conforms to Bourdieu's idea that while performing distinction is central to establishing a sense of virtuous difference, and while such performances may encourage imitations, it is always important to remain *avant-garde*.

At the same time, while establishing a sense of distinction and virtuous difference through emphasizing knowledge brands – with all the benefits that can bring in terms of status and self-esteem enhancement – may help account for the affective hold of ideas of the Nordic good state on Nordic populations, such an emphasis can also have its drawbacks. This is not least the case when such knowledge brands come to appear smug or arrogant. For example, Moss (2018) argues that the Nordic countries' proselytizing about all things gender has sometimes left the impression that they are actually rather sanctimonious "know it alls."[15] For example, an investigation into Finland's failed campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council in 2012 precisely placed some of the blame on associations of Nordics with a sense of moral superiority and a condescending "*besserwisser*" attitude (cited in Ojanen and Raunio 2018).

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[14] Government Offices of Sweden, "Feminist Foreign Policy," www.government.se/government-policy/feminist-foreign-policy/.

[15] Or to quote Mordhorst, it is not unusual for Denmark to be portrayed "as an arrogant country living in its own fairy tale" (2015: 245).

## 1.6    The Re-Generative Politics of Shame

The Nordic "good state" brand and self-image therefore has vulnerabilities. Indeed, it is not only that Nordic claims to goodness can appear self-satisfied and superior, but that they can also be challenged on empirical grounds. Thus, as noted at the start of the chapter, in some aspects the Nordics appear less distinctive and exceptional than they were previously, while in other respects Nordic practices appear increasingly sullied. While Danish/Norwegian militarism has already been noted, notions of the countries' humane internationalism have also been challenged by increasingly restrictive policies toward refugees and migrants, with this generating a certain amount of negative international publicity. Stand out cases have been the controversial Danish "jewelry law" that came into force in 2016 and mandated seizing cash and valuables from asylum seekers to help pay for their stay,[16] and the Danish People's Party proposal to house unwanted migrants on a small island two miles offshore, which presently contains a center for researching contagious animal diseases, and where one of its two serving ferries is called the Virus.[17] Concerted efforts like these to foster a hostile environment for migrants clearly challenge established images of Nordic humanitarian hospitality.

Policies like these clearly reflect the rise of populist sentiment within the region, and populist elements are unapologetically embraced. For other parts of Nordic opinion, however, such developments – the fact that the Nordics are not living up to claims of self-identity – have been a source of angst, ontological destabilization, and even shame. For example, the rise of populist sentiment in Finland has resulted in concerns that Finland is drifting away from its Nordic reference group to the level of "old Eastern European countries," a "very shameful league" (quoted in Ojanen and Raunio 2018: 10). Indeed, this idea that Finland is on its way to forsaking its Nordic identity again highlights the extent to which for many people the "Nordic" remains an idealized/fantasized identity impregnated with notions of moral do-gooding, not necessarily a birth right.

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[16] "Danish Law Requires Asylum Seekers to Hand Over Valuables," *New York Times*, January 26, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/01/27/world/europe/denmark-asks-refugees-for-valuables.html.

[17] M. S. Sorensen (2018). "Denmark Plans to Isolate Unwanted Migrants on a Small Island," *New York Times*, December 3, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/12/03/world/europe/denmark-migrants-island.html.

In this respect, it is also worth noting that Nordic academics may themselves play a role in (perhaps unwittingly) activating ontological anxieties precisely by highlighting instances of Nordic hypocrisy and of the Nordics falling short of their self-proclaimed moral self-image. Examples of this are numerous, but to note two recent instances, Vik et al.'s (2018) introduction to a recent special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* explicitly asks the question of whether the Nordics actually warrant the label of "global good Samaritans" and points to considerable inconsistencies, both domestically and internationally (also see Langford and Schaffer 2015). Similarly, Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond, and Kronsell (2018) point to inconsistencies and trade-offs in Sweden's feminist foreign policy (e.g. continuing to promote militarization through arms sales) and its (patriarchal) assumption that those women in need of (our) assistance lie solely beyond the country's borders, while remaining blind to the situation of indigenous or marginalized refugee populations at home.

The anxieties and sense of shame that such criticisms may potentially activate might, of course, give pause for thought and could potentially provoke a fundamental renegotiation of narratives of self-identity. There is, however, little sign of this. In this respect, Sara Ahmed's discussion of "shame dynamics" is interesting. Ahmed (2004: 108–112) argues that despite failures – of our self as individuals or as a community to live up to fantasized and idealized narratives of self-identity – so long as we recognize these failures and own the shame they bring we can actually also end up reproducing "the ideal" to which we aspire.

Her point is that recognizing failures and embracing shame – and even engaging in self-shaming – can be a resource for renewal and regeneration. This is a constitutive political act in the sense that willingness to witness past (and ongoing) injustice through feeling "national shame" entails aligning with other "well-meaning individuals" willing to do likewise, while excluding others unwilling to do so (e.g. populists). "[I]f you feel shame, you are 'in' the nation, a nation that means well" (Ahmed 2004: 109). Understood this way even academic critiques can be understood as part of this (self)-shaming process. In other words, criticisms that we are not living up to the ideal may actually have the effect of preserving an idealized and aspired for notion of Nordic subjectivity, which can become the basis for a narrative of national recovery: "*By witnessing what is shameful about the past, the nation can 'live up to' the ideals that secure its identity or being in the present.* In other words, our shame *means that we mean well*, and can work to reproduce the nation as an ideal" (Ahmed 2004: 109, original emphasis).

Indeed, Ahmed argues that in the face of failures it would actually be the lack of shame that would be truly shaming, whereas embracing shame can actually be affirming since it manifests "the desire to be able to identify with a national ideal" (2004: 110–111). Put differently, coming up short is not necessarily as problematic as might first be imagined, and where a willingness to acknowledge shortcomings and experience shame can actually be one further mechanism explaining the stickiness of the Nordic good state brand (at least internally).

One example of this can be seen in the response to the rise of populism in Finland noted above. Another perhaps concerns Nordic responses to the #MeToo movement, which became a particularly prominent phenomenon in Sweden.[18] Sweden, of course, is a nation with a long track record of claiming to be at the forefront of progressive gender politics and equality, such that it has now made gender a fundamental strand of its branded approach to foreign policy. What the #MeToo movement highlighted is that – at least in some respects – Sweden might not be quite so different as many other places. It is probably going too far to suggest that what resulted throughout the course of 2017–2018 was a "moral panic," but over this period there was a proliferation of stories and harassment claims across all sectors of Swedish society. Likewise, there were numerous petitions that further marked out the intensity of the Swedish experience from how #MeToo became manifest in most other places, including its Nordic neighbors.[19] Many in Sweden were themselves aware of this, with the country's Gender Equality Minister Åsa Regnér emphasizing how the country has a long history of movements for gender equality, with #MeToo another manifestation of this, and where "Swedish society expects gender equality."[20]

The explanation is interesting precisely because it identifies gender equality as an ontological issue – this is what Sweden is – and as such recasts all the unsavory experiences of Swedish women exposed by #MeToo, not as a debilitating source of shame and embarrassment – one effect of which could have been to delegitimize Sweden's proselytizing feminist foreign policy from the outset – but rather as an opportunity of

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[18] E.g. for a selection of stories see The Local.se, "Metoo," www.thelocal.se/tag/metoo.

[19] A. Booth & K. Munro (2017) "Why Is the #MeToo Movement Sending Shockwaves through Sweden?," *SBS News*, November 27, 2017, www.sbs.com.au/news/why-is-the-metoo-movement-sending-shockwaves-through-sweden.

[20] Cited in A. Booth & K. Munro (2017). "Why Is the #MeToo Movement Sending Shockwaves through Sweden?," *SBS News*, November 27, 2017, www.sbs.com.au/news/why-is-the-metoo-movement-sending-shockwaves-through-sweden.

restating, reclaiming, and reaffirming the desire for Sweden to represent this gender ideal, to be what it "really is." In other words, the prominence of the #MeToo phenomenon in Sweden ended up being used to add weight to its foreign policy brand – because Sweden is a country where society knows right from wrong, and where women feel empowered to speak up. Indeed, while with respect to #MeToo Sweden to some extent stood out from its Nordic sisters, it is also worth noting that the declaration of the Nordic Council of Ministers for Gender Equality of March 2019 noted earlier – that extolls the virtues of the *Nordic Gender Effect* – also felt compelled to recognize how #MeToo had exposed some need for improvement in the Nordic countries, as well as beyond (Nordic Council of Ministers for Gender Equality 2019). Again though, rather than this disqualifying notions of the Nordics possessing a "knowledge product" on gender issues, it rather appears as reinforcement of it.

Finally, it is important to note that "owning shame" in the way Ahmed describes is not the only way of responding to situations when the ideal is exposed as coming up short. Indeed, impressionistically it also seems that while Sweden may be more prone to shame dynamics – with this perhaps reflective of its longer history and more overt embracing of moral(izing) conceptions of self-identity – Danish society has so far been less susceptible to shame dynamics, with Finland and Norway arguably lying somewhere in between. This is most evident with respect to debates over migration, where Denmark has generally rejected any notion that it should feel ashamed, the essential position being that the country is already so good and generous that it can afford to be a bit less exceptional.[21] Similarly, *#MeToo* never really broke in Denmark.[22] In both cases, of course, such intra-Nordic differences – in particular between

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[21] Indeed, the use of self-deprecating humour to deflect away from accusations of falling short (e.g. with respect to racism, sexism etc.) in the Danish case is also notable. For example, see "Denmark Propaganda – Don't Hate Us," *DR3*, January 29, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhuJyCw06lw.

[22] Indeed, an opinion poll conducted by the YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project, which surveyed more than 25,000 people in 23 major countries, found that only 4 percent of the men and 8 percent of the women they questioned in Denmark had a "very favorable" view of the #MeToo movement. This compared to 16 percent of men and 34 percent of women in Sweden, with the average across all the countries surveyed being 19 percent and 24 percent respectively. The poll also highlighted Danish society (including Danish women) to be largely skeptical about feminism in general. See R. Orange & P. Duncan (2019). "And the Least Feminist Nation in the World Is . . . Denmark?" *The Guardian*, May 10, 2019, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/may/10/and-the-least-feminist-nation-in-the-world-is-denmark.

Denmark and Sweden – have become the basis for the reinscription of national stereotypes reaffirming particular claims about national identity (e.g. pragmatic Danes vs moralizing Swedes).

## 1.7  Nordic Fantasies and the Politics of (De)legitimation

By way of conclusion it is worth returning to the chapter's opening consideration of why it is that the Nordic peace brand and associated idea of the Nordics as quintessential "good states" also appears to stick internationally. Here it was noted how revisionist literature on status seeking in international relations can point to the importance of the Nordics having developed an established reputation for "do-gooding," be that in terms of actually *doing good* as well as making sure they are *seen to be doing good*. Insofar as such a reputation has developed it insulates them from criticisms; they are, in a sense, given the benefit of the doubt.

This account certainly goes a considerable way to explaining the continuing stickiness of the Nordic good state brand amongst outsiders. Such an account, however, can also appear a little mechanistic. What can be suggested now, and building on the foregoing analysis of factors contributing to the domestic stickiness of the Nordic peace brand, is that at least some external actors some of the time also seem to themselves invest emotionally in this Nordic reputation and brand and are affectively attached to it in certain ways. In other words, it might not be only the Nordics who are invested in fantasies of the Nordics as do-gooders.

The key dynamic here is that for some outsiders the Nordics exist as a fantasy projection of an ideal-type. This ideal-type comes in two opposed forms, either a utopian vision to be identified with and aspired for, or a dystopian vision to be roundly rejected. In both cases, however, the Nordics function as a marker of (de)legitimation in internal policy debates that often seem to have little to do with the Nordics themselves (or even with actual Nordic practices/realities).

On the utopian side, for instance, Crouch notes that there is an "enduring image of the Nordics as a soft-focus paradise of welfare and well-being" (2018: 30). In this vision the Nordics encapsulate the yearning for a better world and where they are seen to have found the key to individual and collective flourishing. In the contemporary period, this is no more evident than in airport and high street bookshops outside the Nordic region, where shelves are filled with titles dedicated to unpicking the Danish concepts of *hygge* and *lykke* and the Swedish

concepts of *lagom* and *fika*. Particularly interesting about this phenomenon, however, is that it was actually cooked up and driven by London publishing houses looking to capitalize on the flourishing market for books about lifestyle choices, this itself highlighting the extent to which preconceptions about the Nordic good life pervade such that they can even be branded and capitalized on by non-Nordics.[23] One aspect of such publishing is the cherry-picking of information and facts about Nordic lifestyles and Nordic economics to create checklists for success (Crouch 2018: 33).

However, it is also important to emphasize that such fantasies of the Nordic good state/life are also often appropriated and utilized in (geo) political debates outside the region. For instance, Norden is frequently appropriated in British politics to bolster a range of positions, with those appropriating Nordic images, myths, models, and solidarity spanning the political spectrum. This has included the selective embracing of (different) Nordic public, social, and educational policies by both Conservative and Labour politicians – therefore suggesting the apparent success of aspects of Nordic policy branding. It has also included the active courting of Nordic politicians and venues to bolster a sense of solidarity and support, both domestically and internationally. And not least, it is also evident in attempts of vicariously identifying with Nordic histories and achievements – this latter most notably evident in the Scottish National Party's invocation of Nordic themes and a Nordic cultural and geopolitical imaginary in their campaign for Scottish independence.

In such instances fantasized ideas of Norden exist as a resource of political legitimation, as also evident in former Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders' embrace of "Nordic socialism," where the Nordic part of the couplet is clearly utilized as a means of detoxifying the socialist part for American audiences. Invoking Norden is therefore understood by progressivist politicians as a way of advancing a more progressive politics (be that with regard to taxation, state interference, gender representation etc.). Again, the fact that such invocations themselves often generate rebuttals from political opponents – such as in claims that the Nordics are not socialist but

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[23] C. Higgins (2016). "The Long Read: The Hygge Conspiracy," *The Guardian*, November 22, 2016, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/nov/22/hygge-conspiracy-denmark-cosiness-trend.

compassionate capitalists[24] – only further highlights the extent to which Nordic associations are deemed powerful and politically legitimizing. In such debates over "Nordic realities" the relevant point for the argument of this chapter is not who is right or wrong, but the fact that it does not really matter whether the Nordics actually match-up; the Norden of such debates is rather a fantasized Norden of possibility and becoming.

It is important to emphasize, however, that fantasies of progressive Norden are also sometimes co-opted to legitimize nonprogressive political agendas, the argument being that "if the Nordics do it how bad can it be?" In recent years, this has been most notable with respect to justifying restrictions on immigration, particularly in reference to Danish policies. Indeed, such an argument has also been played within the Nordic countries themselves, where the populist Finns Party has argued for readmission agreements on the basis that the other Nordics already have them. Meanwhile, the Finnish government has also justified cuts in development aid, and more particularly bringing enterprises into development policy, in similar terms (Ojanen and Raunio 2018: 10–11).

Finally, of course, Norden also appears in dystopian fantasies of outsiders, where Norden's "goodness" is represented more as an illusion, a warning or trap threatening immorality, decadence, and social collapse. It was to such visions that Donald Trump appealed when he suggested in February 2017 – in reference to a terrorist attack that never happened – that Sweden's lax immigration policy toward people fleeing war and persecution was itself a cause of terrorism.[25] Similarly, in response to those utopian fantasies currently populating bookshelves, counter-narratives are also increasingly being propagated aiming to debunk Norden for what it "really is" by exposing the "darkness lurking at the edges" (Crouch 2018: 31–32). Again, such efforts are not merely a "corrective" seeking balance but play on a much longer heritage where Norden figures as a warning against political and social experiments best avoided.

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[24] J. Dorfman (2018). "Sorry Bernie Bros but Nordic Countries Are Not Socialist," *Forbes Magazine*, July 8, 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/jeffreydorfman/2018/07/08/sorry-bernie-bros-but-nordic-countries-are-not-socialist/#1cb5d8f074ad.

[25] A. Topping (2017). "'Sweden, Who Would Believe This?': Trump Cites Non-existent Terror Attack," *The Guardian*, February 19, 2017, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/19/sweden-trump-cites-non-existent-terror-attack.

## 1.8   Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, the argument of this chapter is that one significant reason for the continued stickiness and attraction amongst both insiders and outsiders of what can be generically referred to as the Nordic "good state" brand, is the extent to which such ideas have become embedded within fantasized notions of Nordic identity. For many insiders such fantasies have arguably become central to conceptions of self-understanding which if challenged may be ontologically unsettling and a source of anxiety. At the same time, however, the affective pull of these fantasies is such that even dissonant experiences and practices tend to be managed in ways that reinforce fantasized conceptions of a Nordic ideal. Thus it is that even shame can become regenerative of the affective hold of idealizations of the Nordic good state. However, the chapter has also argued that such fantasized notions of Nordic goodness also operate and exert affective influence on outsiders. Amongst outsiders, however, the fantasy is less an issue of self-identity but instead manifests in Nordic goodness appearing as an instrumentalized ideal to be utilized as a tool of both legitimation and delegitimation in political debates often only tangentially connected to the Nordics themselves.

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