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## Introduction

### On the Resilience of the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand

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Over time, the Scandinavian countries have earned a certain reputation for being “global good Samaritans” (Brysk 2009; Vik et al. 2018). According to a widespread narrative, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden have an exceptional approach to world affairs, which revolves around the pursuit of peace, human rights, sustainable development, and a humanitarian commitment to “saving lives.” Scandinavian countries are indeed the world’s most generous nations in terms of official development aid allocation – the only ones consistently at or above the target set by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Their largesse is cast as uniquely motivated and driven by altruistic and idealist motives, contrasting with the self-interested foreign policies of the great powers (Ingebritsen 2002; Lancaster 2007). This reputation is not exclusive, however, to outsiders who read Scandinavia as a utopian promise of a less cynical world order. It is also a key component of the Scandinavians’ own national identity and collective self-image. Scandinavian citizens are inclined to identify their countries’ foreign policies with values of solidarity and generosity (see Leira 2007). For instance, while the Swedes see themselves as the standard-bearers of neutrality and international solidarity (Dahl 2006), Norwegians see themselves as the “peace nation” and as a “humanitarian superpower” (Tvedt 2002; Nissen 2015).

If these self-images are perhaps widespread, this does not necessarily mean that they go unchallenged. In the case of Norway, the historian Terje Tvedt has analyzed what he dubs the “national regime of goodness,” an ideological system of assumptions and intentions which is made and maintained by an elite Tvedt calls the “humanitarian-political complex,” and which creates a political culture so tightly centered on a deontological ethic of good intentions that it fails to engage

honestly and realistically with international affairs (Tvedt 2002, 2003; see also Witozsek 2011). Understood in this way, Scandinavia appears a prime example of what Didier Fassin calls “humanitarian government,” which refers to the domination of political life by “moral sentiments” (2012: 1–10). According to Fassin, a “vocabulary of suffering, compassion, assistance and responsibility to protect” increasingly frames contemporary political issues, and this “humanitarian language” is used to justify a wide range of policies.

Scandinavians excel at framing their foreign policy in such terms. Especially when they operate on a public – i.e. nontechnical – scene, they typically cast their engagement in world affairs as a moral obligation to do good in the world and alleviate the world’s suffering by giving back some of the wealth, expertise, and knowledge that led to Scandinavian societies’ success and affluence in the first place. At the same time, another notable strand in the humanitarian tradition in Scandinavia is to collapse this moral motivation with a broader, political – often more self-interested – one. As a representative anecdote, the 1962 white paper which is said to have launched Sweden’s aid ambitions, for instance, stated proudly that, “In rich countries, the political necessity of taking into consideration the demands of these new countries now unites with an awareness of our moral obligation to help” (Utrikesdepartementet 1962: 3).

Adopting Fassin’s broad understanding of humanitarianism, we do not, in this book, limit this concept to describe the field dealing with emergency relief (Barnett and Weiss 2008). Rather, we understand “humanitarianism” as a political culture or a practical ethic, framing political issues such as development aid, peace negotiations, and emergency relief through moral sentiments such as solidarity, generosity, benevolence, altruism – quite simply, “doing good” in the world.

### The Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand

Our point of departure is that this aspect of Scandinavian political culture is not just a coincidence of history, a hereditary biological given, or a collection of values set in stone. Rather, it is an evolving construct, both shaping and being shaped by political agency, social structures, and collective identity (Langford and Schaffer 2015). More crucially perhaps, Scandinavian humanitarianism is also an *asset*, or indeed, a *brand*, i.e. a resource that can be – and routinely is – put to strategic use to achieve specific purposes. Following recent scholarship that shows how countries

and regions can and do brand themselves (Aronczyk 2013), we understand nation branding as the result of a deliberate strategy to create *an image to capitalize on*, which includes a set of narratives drawing from selected elements of a country's political culture and collective identity deemed "exceptional" or distinctive. Various actors – not least policy entrepreneurs – can use this brand strategically through *branding practices* to legitimize policy interventions and governance arrangements. The brand may also serve other goals, such as status-seeking, reputation, and identity building, promoting ideas, concepts and norms, or advancing commercial, economic, diplomatic, or security interests.

We thus assume an inclusive notion of nation brands, where the uses of such brands run far beyond the marketing of commodities or "destinations." Alongside several other scholars of nation branding, we want to submit that these two aspects of Scandinavian political culture – ongoing negotiations about national identity and strategic efforts to brand the nation – are not entirely distinct. They are clearly not the same, and to some extent represent different idioms (see Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016; Mordhorst 2019). Still, in many cases there is no sure way of telling where one ends and the other begins. Norwegian romantic nationalism, for instance, was a key in the formation of the modern identity of that nation, but it was nevertheless *strategic* – and is still, today, a notable resource in nation branding efforts. Indeed, according to Mads Mordhorst, who in turn rests on Hobsbawm, the role of historians in consolidating a nation's story about itself was always infused by particular interests. Thus, "historians were the original nation-brand consultants," who "not only contributed to nation branding, but to ideology and politics" (2019: 203). As Mordhorst has also argued, there is reason to think of nations as *the original brands*, predating Coca-Cola, Nike, Apple, IKEA, and the rest, by several centuries.

In this volume, we entertain no ambitions of disentangling national identity from nation brands. To the contrary, we believe that nation building, narrating the nation, negotiating national identities, and so on are processes that have much in common with nation branding. And we start from the supposition that there is added value in incorporating both of these aspects in a single analytical movement. This ambition encourages a refocusing, as we see it, on the gaps and glitches, the discrepancies and disparities, the rhetorics and realities, of what we, with a phrase we intend to be all-encompassing, call the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand.

The Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand is an entity, then, composed of these two sets of processes: domestic self-presentation and identity-building,

on the one hand, and external presentation and reputation-building, on the other. The two sides of this branding process are not totally detached from each other, but nor is it the case that the one simply mirrors the other. Rather, our starting point will be that the relationship between external and domestic branding is a dynamic and contingent relationship, which is constantly being negotiated by politicians and bureaucrats at home and abroad, as well as between these expert communities and the general public of each country. The relation between these two sets of processes is often fraught (see, for instance, Jansen 2008; Jordan 2014), but by including both in the same panorama, we get a richer picture of what these nations do on the international stage, how they do it, and why. We follow in that way an established tradition in international relations of studying both the role of domestic and international factors in the formulation of foreign policies (Lumsdaine 1993; Reus-Smit 1999; Wendt 1999).

The first aim of this book is to describe and unpack how an idealized political culture of “Scandinavian humanitarianism” is branded across various areas of “humanitarian interventions,” such as peace efforts, development assistance, humanitarian crises, democracy and human rights promotion. The aim is, in other words, to explain some of the ways in which the idea of an exceptional model of Scandinavian humanitarianism came to be, and to identify some of the mechanisms that keep this idea in place. It is our hope that the chapters assembled here will give some idea of the motivations behind the creation of this brand and also of its uses. We believe this book shows that, while the notion of a Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand does have explanatory value, we must look to the particular trajectories and context of each country to understand how this loose, overarching idea finds concrete expression. While each of the Scandinavian countries have a particular set of attachments to this unifying brand, there are notable differences between how each of them tap into this set of narratives. Norway, Sweden, and Denmark each stand in different relation to the overarching brand; in some cases, it is in the interest of each to stand together as one – i.e. as “Scandinavia” – whereas in other cases, they are driven to compete and to distinguish themselves from each other, as in Norway’s drive to wear the moniker of “the peace nation.” In still other cases, one of these countries can appeal to the overarching brand, but for its own, exclusive benefit, as happens when Sweden takes on a role as a leading representative, even spearhead, of Scandinavia. The first aim of the book, then, is to explain some of the dynamics of the making and

maintenance of the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand, within, between, among, and beyond these three countries.

### The Resilience of the Brand

The second aim of this book is to shed light on how this brand creation and maintenance happens, or is changed, by a number of factors that would appear to challenge the very viability of the brand. Put differently, our aim is to ask how it can be that the idea of the Scandinavians as somehow exceptional in this area appears so resilient, or “sticky,” despite all the factors that now seem to challenge it.

Among the factors that today seem to pose challenges to the viability of the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand, the first is undoubtedly what we might call *transnational policy convergence*. Not least in the area of foreign aid, ideals and practices assumed to be particularly Scandinavian or Nordic have increasingly been incorporated into, fused with, or taken over by transnational networks, notably the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action.<sup>1</sup> There are other pressures in the same direction, including the OECD DAC’s peer reviews, as well as the Europeanization of aid which results from the EU’s foreign aid policy. All of these factors, and several more in adjacent areas, would seem to entail that the Scandinavians’ “comparative reputation advantage” has been withering (Selbervik and Nygaard 2006; Hansen, Gjefsen, and Lie 2015; Elgström and Delputte 2016). This can be seen as a more specific version of a broader tendency, perhaps, wherein the notion of “Nordicity” as such has disappearing, much due to the same factors (Browning 2007).

More crucially perhaps, the viability of the brand may be seriously challenged by the pressures on the institution of aid itself, coming from both the international and domestic levels.

Firstly, on the international level, *the ascendancy of BRICS and other “emerging economies”* has been interpreted as a sign that the era of traditional foreign aid and humanitarian work is now coming to an end (Gill 2018). Admittedly, various actors have been calling for the “end of aid” ever since the 1970s, with the emergence of dependency theory and the agenda for a New International Economic Order. But not until recently did this actually seem a likely scenario. Because the

<sup>1</sup> [www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/parisdeclarationandaccraagendaforaction.htm](http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/parisdeclarationandaccraagendaforaction.htm).

emerging economies tend to frame their involvement in poor countries in contrast to the rationale associated with “traditional” North–South relations, their ascent has contributed to remaking what is meant by “aid,” and they have in the process done much to undo the North–South divide altogether (Hansen and Wethal 2014). These factors too would seem to challenge the Scandinavian brand, which has rested heavily on the North–South axis – specifically on the notion of a peculiar set of rich, industrialized, modern countries (i.e. Scandinavia) who excel at helping poor, underdeveloped, and “backwards” ones.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the causes, there appears to be a shift in terms of how one justifies aid and humanitarianism, which has taken the whole field toward a more interest-driven frame. This tendency has in turn been exacerbated by *the widespread securitization of aid* over the recent couple of decades, which has considerably reshaped the fields of foreign aid and humanitarian assistance at the global level (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Brown and Grävingsholt 2015) – and which has not left Scandinavian aid practices untouched (see, for instance, de Bengy Puyvallée 2018). In discourse as well as in deed, the provision of aid is increasingly made in the name of donor countries’ security interests, whether the goal is to fight terrorism, to counter the threat of a pandemic, to reverse global warming, or to limit immigration. How to reconcile the Scandinavian premise of aid as a solidarity project with an increasingly securitized approach to aid, which is justified not so much by global justice and human rights as by the donor countries’ national security interests?

Furthermore, the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand has, over the last couple of decades, had to confront numerous head-on *challenges emanating from each of the Scandinavian countries themselves*, as certain portions of the population have grown increasingly wary of the idea that the Scandinavians are – or even should be – global frontrunners of solidarity. The question of immigration has been a key issue in this context. In Sweden, the political mainstream has more or less isolated itself from the emerging far-right Sweden Democrats, who call for a more hard-nosed approach to immigration. Denmark, for its part, made a dent in its own international reputation with its notorious “jewelry law,”

<sup>2</sup> Of course, we cannot assume that actual practice has always lived up to this brand, and there are in fact many indications that it does not. In fiction, one of the most memorable studies of the discrepancy between Scandinavian brands and reality is arguably Jakob Ejersbo’s so-called “Africa trilogy” – *Exit, Liberty, Revolution* – which leaves the reader with an impression of a notable gap between ideology and practice.

which allowed the state to seize the assets of refugees coming to the country. And in Norway, the controversial Sylvi Listhaug, from the far-right Progress Party, appropriated the term “goodness tyranny” to criticize the do-gooder tendency that she saw at the heart of Norwegian political culture. While immigration has been a contested issue in Scandinavia for a long time, in recent years it has been used as a lever to open up a debate about national self-images – a debate that in turn overflows into the question of Scandinavian foreign engagement. In 2017, historian Terje Tvedt’s latest book (Tvedt 2017), *Det internasjonale gjennombruddet* [The International Breakthrough], made a ruckus when its author suggested that Norway’s solidaristic foreign policy and its multiculturalist immigration policy were two sides of the same coin – a currency, to boot, which was designed not for actual success, but to make certain members of a humanitarian elite feel good about themselves. Connections like these would seem to spell trouble for the idea of Scandinavian exceptionalism abroad, since to the extent critics succeed in attaching foreign aid and humanitarianism to the highly contested and controversial issue of immigration, Scandinavian foreign engagement is dragged down in the mud of real politics, as it were; it is “tainted” by association with a policy area where the Scandinavians cannot boast of much more than modest success – if even that.

These are just some of the factors that would appear to create a more difficult market for the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand. To the extent international politics today is dominated by discourses of security and direct investment, instead of solidarity and aid, the Scandinavians seem to have been robbed of their most prized assets. And to the extent they encounter growing convergence transnationally, and greater criticism from home, the brand of Scandinavian goodness appears to be under threat – in several ways, and from several angles, at once.

But despite all of these factors, it would be both unwise and premature to write off the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand. In fact, in the face of all these challenges, this brand seems remarkably resilient and ready to adapt to any new circumstances, even though all nation branding logic makes it sound plainly impossible. How can this be? How do the Scandinavian countries today make use of the established Scandinavian brand in new circumstances that appear, at least on the surface, to make that brand less appealing? The second aim of the book, then, is to bring to the table concrete examples of how the Scandinavian countries update their own brand in what appears to be a more challenging situation. How

are these countries now *reassembling* items from their pool of nation branding resources, i.e. how have they managed to strike a balance between the past and the present, continuity and discontinuity, recognition of the brand and the brand's innovation?

### Structure of the Book

This volume opens by exploring the paradoxical resilience of the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand, despite growing contradictions with the actual policies implemented. In Chapter 1, Christopher Browning provides a compelling argument for why the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand seems to “stick,” despite various pressures challenging it. Drawing on recent scholarship on ontological security in international relations, he argues that “being and doing good” has become an integral part of Scandinavian national identity and provides a sense of self-esteem, status, and not least, a feeling of agency in the world. Paradoxically, perhaps, failing to live up to these altruistic expectations does not lead to a serious questioning of this identity. Rather, the unease and shame felt toward this tainted fantasy is cathartic and helps rejuvenate it by recommitting to the purity and ideals of humanitarianism. The Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand thereby “sticks” and remains a central element of collective identities, despite gaps with the reality of the foreign policies actually implemented.

This discrepancy between identity and reality is nowhere as striking as in Danish and Norwegian (and increasingly, Swedish) immigration policies, where a reputation for being the frontrunners of human rights has to be reconciled with very restrictive asylum and immigration policies. In Chapter 2, Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen explores the mechanisms and effects of “negative nation branding,” whereby measures such as the infamous jewelry law in Denmark – by which asylum seekers’ belongings are confiscated to contribute to the cost of hosting them – are actively branded in communication campaigns targeting potential immigrants – in an effort to discourage them from coming to Denmark. This deterrence strategy, which seems to have partially succeeded in making Scandinavia less attractive to migrants, has dangerous side-effects, however, warns Gammeltoft-Hansen – not least putting considerable pressures on Scandinavia’s Humanitarian Brand with consequences both at home and abroad.

In Chapter 3, Kristian Bjørkdahl further analyzes the stickiness of the Humanitarian Brand, focusing particularly on Norway. To him, the



production of strategic ignorance is a key mechanism at play in maintaining the self-image and reputation of a nation, despite incoherence or gaps with the policies implemented. Bjørkdahl illustrates this argument by providing a rhetorical analysis of the Norwegian TV series *Nobel*, which exposes how strategic ignorance about Norway's contradictions in its engagement in Afghanistan is produced in the everyday life of the series' protagonists, but how this strategy eventually (spoiler alert!) backfires. Paradoxically, Bjørkdahl argues, the tragic form of the series provides its audience with *catharsis*: Instead of leading viewers to question Norway's hypocrisy abroad and its image of altruistic engagement, the show renews viewers' faith in the Norwegian humanitarian identity, now purified of the many contradictions exposed in the series.

Peace negotiation and conflict mediation is a critical element of Norwegian and Swedish foreign policy and both countries like to refer themselves as "peace nations." The following two chapters unpack this aspect of the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand and the contradictions it entails. In Chapter 4, Ada Nissen traces the origins of the Scandinavian "peace brand." Insights from recent history provide at least two important lessons, she argues: First, the "peace nation brand" may well be a powerful narrative – but is based mostly on unsuccessful mediation efforts. Trying to broker peace (*being good*) is seen as a virtue in itself, independently of the actual results achieved, and this peacemaking commitment feeds into a collective humanitarian identity that Scandinavians are so attached to and proud of. Secondly, Scandinavian countries only rarely cooperate together in peace processes, and rather, tend to compete against each other to reap the benefits in status and prestige of mediation efforts. The "peace nation brand" may therefore be mobilized for self-interested purposes, and not only for "doing good" and "being good." In Chapter 5, Wayne Stephen Coetzee explores the paradox of Sweden, the peace nation, being a large weapons exporter. He shows how Swedish political, military, and economic elites mingled ideal objectives of "doing good" and self-interests when selling the Swedish-produced jet fighter Gripen to South Africa in 1999. Sweden's humanitarian identity was echoed by a genuine intention to support South Africa's development, democracy-building, and the black community, Coetzee argues. But the reputation for "being good" was also usefully branded to sell the jet and advance national interests, such as gaining influence in South Africa and the African continent, profiling the aircraft or securing workplaces in Sweden.

Although unequivocally a part of Scandinavia, Denmark can often seem as somewhat of an outlier in relation to the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand. In Chapter 6, Lars Engberg-Pedersen and Adam Moe Fejerskov examine this Danish singularity by surveying the evolution of Danish development cooperation policy over the last 30 years. They highlight a shift from a focus on altruistic and humanitarian values, toward a stronger focus on short-term, domestic self-interests, such as advancing Danish commercial and security interests, limiting migration, or financing the costs of asylum seekers in Denmark. They argue that foreign aid is increasingly being subordinated and instrumentalized to domestic political interests, and partly decoupled from foreign policy and humanitarian objectives. Despite these pressures on foreign aid, the policy field shows a formidable elasticity and a resilience which enable development cooperation to manage, absorb, and survive policy shifts, these authors conclude.

The following two chapters take a closer look to the historical political processes behind the make-up of Sweden's often perceived exceptional approach to development and humanitarian affairs. In Chapter 7, Johan Karlsson Schaffer unpacks what is currently Sweden's main objective in development aid: democracy promotion. Arguing against culturalists' accounts of Sweden's democracy promotion (explaining the emergence of this policy as a mere translation of Sweden's political culture in its foreign policy), Schaffer traces the rise of democracy promotion to domestic political party struggles over the redefinition of development cooperation's priorities in the 1990s and 2000s. This political contestation, far from drawing solely on Swedish culture, was motivated by party politics and influenced by the international context (post-Cold War wave of democratization), as well as the circulation of global ideas (such as the rise of human rights). Sweden's approach to democracy promotion has become a brand, Schaffer concludes, which conveniently ties culturalist identity narratives to this policy, thereby boosting the country's moral standing and authority in world affairs. In Chapter 8, Carl Marklund also explores political contestation of aid in Sweden, focusing more particularly on the competing (and changing) meaning of conditionality and evaluation. The iconic picture of an exceptional Scandinavian aid model promoting a new international economic order (NIEO), driven by solidarity and based on the recipient countries' own premises, has been put under tremendous pressures by the growing demand to provide aid "efficiently," imposing conditions of accountability,

transparency, and often, increasingly channeling aid via the market or public–private partnerships. A consequence of this trend, Marklund argues, is a change in the nature of aid evaluation. Originally focused on highlighting unspoken competing motives and interests in aid projects, aid evaluation now focuses mainly on assessing “aid effectiveness.” By so doing, it largely becomes a technical endeavor which obscures the motives and drivers of aid and brings Sweden and Scandinavia increasingly toward mainstream global aid practices.

Simon Reid-Henry usefully displaces the conversation from tension between ideology and *realpolitik* interests, and draws our attention instead toward what may be a distinctive Scandinavian political style in world affairs – what he calls the “pragmatarian style.” In Chapter 9, Reid-Henry argues that former Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, initiated a distinctive style of pragmatic humanitarianism under her leadership of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) and of the World Health Organization (WHO), a style that still constitutes the basis of Norwegian (and Scandinavian) foreign policy. This style consists in a realist commitment to a progressive development agenda by building coalitions and achieving political compromise (in a similar fashion to social democracy) – a third way between the structural radicalism of the NIEO and the neoliberal individualism of right-based approaches. If this pragmatarian style offers a tempting way to refashion the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand, it also risks altering its exceptional character by compromising with dominant forces in global politics.

Finally, in Chapter 10, Desmond McNeill builds on Reid Henry’s concept of Scandinavian “pragmatarian style” by arguing that global public good approaches to development, increasingly promoted by Scandinavian countries, may be one of the political translations of such a pragmatarian style, and a possible way forward for the Scandinavian Humanitarian Brand. McNeill recalls that global public good approaches stem from an economic logic, both pragmatic, technocratic, and dispassionate – in other words, the opposite of an idealist or revolutionary approach to world affairs. The concept of global public goods might be seducing to social-democratic Scandinavian countries, who could frame and pursue development assistance as a way to support the vulnerable and at the same time pursue its self-interests, thereby absorbing the growing pressures on humanitarianism and sustaining the resilience of the brand. However, warns McNeill, this might also constitute a serious

threat to Scandinavians' collective identity as humanitarians, to the extent that global public good does not stem from any altruistic logic. Paying one's dues as good international citizens, McNeill concludes, may be less attractive than the recognition and status conferred by humanitarianism.

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