

Editorial

On the Spirit and Purpose of Scandinavian Studies

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I was recently brought up short by this sentence: »The people of the North have a great talent for music.«¹ Well now, who would wish to dispute that – or the staggering banality of the statement, for that matter.

I shall make no secret of its source, for it carries considerable and substantial explanatory weight: it is a sentence from a pamphlet issued by the High Command of the *Wehrmacht* and distributed to German soldiers from 1941: »The North. Special Course. Soldiers' Training Sheets.«² It reminded me of the time when, as a student of Nordic Studies in Munich in the late 1960s, I interviewed a professor of Catholic (!) theology who, to my naive astonishment, had penned the only recent German work on Protestantism (!) in the North. To me, the curiosity I expressed was self-evident, but his explanation still took me by surprise: he had been posted on the Lofoten Islands during the war, and that was where he had discovered his interest in and love of the North...

Could it be, I ask myself today, that the German conception of Scandinavia of the post-war period was influenced by the indoctrination of these occupying soldiers, who were inculcated with racist, biologicistic and ideological components (– the music chapter of the booklet is the most harmless by far –) and who experienced war in the North (according to the many narratives) as something of an adventure playground, unlike their comrades who had survived Stalingrad? Could it be that German patterns of thought and judgement about the North derive their *longue durée* (and obstinacy) partly from the reading and life experiences of those »thousand« years? After all, there were not inconsiderable numbers of troops stationed in Denmark and Norway.

In the academic world we talk a lot about the past – what the protagonists of the »blood and soil« era used to think and write – but have we thought enough about what traces and what structures this thinking has left behind in subsequent generations? Applied to the innocuous elements of today's image of Scandinavia, which we (or at least I) find perturbing, that sentence from the *Wehrmacht* High Command should be rewritten provocatively for today: »The people of the North have a great talent for *hygge*.«

¹ »Der Mensch des Nordens ist sehr musikbegabt.«

² »Der Norden. Sonderlehrgang. Soldatenbriefe zur Berufsförderung«

The modern, harmless and downright disarming image of the North has been a constant since long before the »Growth of the Soil« and persists long after »Bullerby«. The dystopias, the social and the cultural fault-lines that exist even in Scandinavian societies occasionally awaken journalistic interest (banking scandals and corruption in Iceland, the erosion of the welfare state, and vocabulary such as »nation« and »progress« signalling a return to the past), or feed the equally booming international market for Scandinavian crime literature and TV series. But can we in the scientific community really be satisfied with the contemporary academic coverage of present-day culture, politics and society in the North? Have we truly equipped the students well enough to answer the publicly-debated questions about the North, and even assess them critically, including from a historical perspective? One example: in Germany, the *hygge* campaign is geared particularly towards women, propounding an image of the modern woman reminiscent of those of the 1950s: hearth and home, floral decor, being kind, serving, cooking, baking, crafting, reading, eating and drinking, raking leaves, tending the garden – it is a kind of yesterday's world of nostalgia, as today's world has supposedly become so unmanageable and so complicated.

The escape to the past or to the seclusion of wellness oases is being examined by the social sciences, psychology and public discourse internationally; the outdated thought patterns and structures are being questioned. But *hygge*, Bullerby, the Nordic feel-good societies and the various, perhaps innocuous-seeming »idiosyncrasies« on the other side of the Baltic Sea seem not yet to have attracted the critical attention of German-speaking Scandinavian Studies... Am I alone in seeing this as an opportunity for a critical feminist reappraisal of a broad field in which, after all, vast sums of money are being made? Especially considering that a sizeable share, if not the majority, of Scandinavian Studies is female (the students as well as the professionals).

The message being articulated is this: we still have much to do. The thematic diversity that we are able and expected to address, in *NORDEUROPAforum* and elsewhere, is immense. To streamline this, the Editorial Board has occasionally decided to set special focuses. This might be such a focus, or an impulse for one. In 2015 a focus was set for the first time on biopolitics; this year we expect others on contemporary literature and articles dealing with themes from both mediaeval studies and popular culture.

NORDEUROPAforum can look back on a changeable history, and although change is the norm in scientific institutions, we have not always found it easy to deal with. And so, to report the next change: Ina Juckel has served as a managing editor of eminent merit for many years, and has given a great deal of commitment and time to our journal, for which we are very grateful to her. We bid her farewell in the hope that the many skills she honed here will stand her in good stead in the future. – Her successor, Swantje Opitz, is already in post and we look forward to working with her. We also anticipate the input of Muriel Norde, as a further editor, and Clemens Räthel, as an addition to our editorial team, with great pleasure.

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