From kinship to global brand. By Anna Kharkina

FROM KINSHIP TO GLOBAL BRAND

The Discourse on Culture in Nordic Cooperation after World War II

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This thesis deals with a topic that is long overdue for critical scrutiny: the uses of culture and cultural identity in the official promotion of Norden as a political actor. It consists of a comprehensive introductory chapter, three empirical chapters and a very brief conclusion. It is a study of official discourse about Nordic cultural cooperation at the level of the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers. The three empirical chapters cover three historical moments during the 20th century: the late 1960s and early 1970s; the 1990s; and the first decade of the 2000s. The choice of these periods is motivated by the fact that they illustrate the effect of international structures on the interpretation and deployment of a common Nordic cultural policy.

The introductory chapter begins by setting out the research question that the thesis seeks to answer. It states that although existing scholarship has identified the instrumental character of cultural policy, “there is little analysis made of how culture and the arts are instrumentalized in those Western democracies where the arm’s length principle is officially recognized.” Kharkina continues: “My aim is to complement the general study of the instrumentalization of art and culture with the case study of the Nordic countries”. She goes on to explain that her attention is directed to the the “discursive construction of the Nordic region” in official Nordic cooperation. She is careful here to note that this focus means that she is not concerned with the actual practice of grass-root cooperation, i.e. “the enthusiasts” (as she calls them) working in inter-Nordic projects and organisations. Rather it is how such cultural ties have been used politically for the discursive construction the Nordic region that the thesis deals with.

The discussion of previous research deals in a rather unsatisfactory fashion with primarily Anglo-Saxon studies of primarily cultural policy and public and cultural diplomacy, but it does nevertheless identify the surprisingly limited extent of research hitherto dealing with co-European and co-Nordic cultural policy and identity construction. The introduction then goes on to present the method applied in the study; discourse analysis based on the concepts and theory of Laclau and Mouffe. “Nordic culture”, it is argued here, is a nodal point – a key concept – the meaning of which is the outcome of political struggles. By studying the role attributed to “Nordic culture” in official texts, and how that in turn attributes meaning to the notion of the Nordic region, this method is designed to serve the stated purpose of analysing how culture was instrumentalized in Nordic cooperation and for what political purposes.
The chapter concludes by presenting the sources on which the analysis rests. The main sources are fundamentally of three kinds: firstly official policy documents published by the Nordic Council, the Council of Ministers and the Culture Commission—such as minutes from sessions and disseminated publications. Secondly (and this should be noted particularly) Kharkina has retrieved documents from the Nordic Council of Ministers’ offices in the Baltic States and Russia. These include PR-materials as well as unpublished correspondence, applications for grants and various reports. Thirdly, the sources include promotional materials, applications and reports surrounding specific projects. Unfortunately there is no discussion of the different character of these sources, the apparently arbitrary exclusion of certain texts and inclusion of others, and how this all might affect the results of the thesis.

Chapter 1 focuses on the 1960s and early 1970s, arguing that culture at this point became a “lifeboat” when plans for deepened Nordic economic integration failed to materialize. It begins, however, with a historic background, tracing policies of Nordic cooperation back to the intellectual Scandinavianism of the 19th century and the exchanges and summits of civil society organisations in the first decades of the 20th century. These institutions were gradually formalised after the First World War, through shared policies of neutrality and the fact that Norden as a coherent region was a notion in part imposed by other countries in the international system. After the Second World War, expanded cultural cooperation was quickly selected as a prioritised policy field for joint efforts, as it offered the political opportunity of signalling good intentions without being too controversial at home or being perceived as too threatening to other countries. “The discourse and practice of Nordic cultural cooperation functioned as proof to the international community that the Nordic countries did cooperate with each other and perceived each other as a part of a bigger whole. At the same time it taught Nordic citizens to think ‘Nordic’.”

Having established the prehistory to the plans for deepened economic integration, the bulk of the chapter consists of an analysis of how culture was used in the “rhetorical construction of the Nordic region” at three inter-Nordic summits: in Hässelby 1965; in Hindsgavl (Denmark) 1969; and at a press meeting with Nordic representatives of the media in Århus in 1971. These occasions span the period in which an ambitious plan (NORDEK) to formalise economic cooperation between the Nordic countries was launched, a treaty of intent was signed, and then the plan was abandoned when Finland and Denmark pulled out. Analysing how Nordic culture was constructed at three international summits during these years, Kharkina argues that culture went from being constructed as a natural ground for political cooperation (leading up to the NORDEK plan), to being a get-out clause, a fall-back policy area which served as a reserve reason for continued Nordic cooperation after the plan had failed. In short at the turn of the decade, it went from being constructed as the existing solid ground for increased economic cooperation to a necessary future goal which motivated the need for political cooperation.

Chapter 2 deals with the period of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the geopolitical upheaval in the Baltic region that followed it. The response of the Nordic governments in the 1990s was to strategically use cultural efforts directed at the new independent Baltic States and Russia as a tool for building regional security. The objective of the chapter is to study the institutions which were set up by the Nordic Council of Ministers, and analyse “what kind of relations are constructed through the practice of cultural exchange between the Nordic and the Baltic States”.

In 1990 the Nordic Council of Ministers set up Information Offices in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius, and a program of seminars and exchanges was launched. It was stated in 1991 that “the Nordic
cultural community should be extended to include the Baltic States”, and culture was subsequently used to spearhead the new regional relationships, and pave the way for further cooperation. The themes that ran through the cultural efforts during the early 1990s aimed at the so-called normalization of Baltic Society, and stayed clear of high politics. The centres that were set up in the Baltic capitals, although nominally centred on culture, also worked to establish diplomatic and commercial relations between the Nordics and the Baltics. Therefore, argues Kharkina, “In the case of Nordic and Nordic-Baltic cooperation, cultural cooperation can be considered as a temporary substitute for relations in other spheres which had not yet become routine and institutionalized”.

Once cooperation had become institutionalised, this substitute for “proper” relations shifted towards promoting the Nordic model in the Baltic countries. Although concepts of exchange and cooperation were used, documents show that by 1997 the events organised were intended to project the Nordic countries in the Baltic States, or aimed at educating, training or supporting the Baltic population. Only one project in 1997, notes Anna Kharkina, represented Baltic culture in the Nordic region. As one policy document stated in 2000, the main goal of cultural exchanges had so far been “to increase knowledge of Nordic culture and Nordic shared values”. By 2002 the place for cooperation in what Anna Kharkina calls (but does not define) “actual” cultural projects were clearly diminishing.

In this shift from cultural cooperation to cultural promotion, the concepts of “Nordic benefit” and “Nordic values” became central when deciding what events and programmes were to be launched. Projects that were seen to help the cause of profiling and affirming a common Nordic identity and that built on so called Nordic values were supported. Once the Baltic States had joined the EU in 2004, this form of cooperation was taken one step further. No longer understood in terms of support or aid, from now it was agreed that cooperation between the Nordics and the Baltics would be “on an equal basis”.

In effect however, argues Kharkina, the relationship remained asymmetrical, the Nordic countries preserving a decision-making role in the form and content of cooperation. She identifies this in the contradictory manner in which the Nordic Council of Ministers formulated its objectives. On the one hand it claimed that it sought to create an inclusive, strong Baltic Sea region that included the Baltic States. On the other hand it stressed that the role of its offices in the Baltic States was to promote Nordic values. In this way, it is stated in the conclusion of the chapter, cultural cooperation was at this stage being planned “to achieve political aims”. Kharkina continues: “Although the idea of Nordic identity was still connected with the idea of Nordic culture, the indeterminate concept of ‘Nordic values’ became more commonly used to prove the success of the Nordic political model”.

Chapter 3 deviates somewhat from the previous two, as the shift in Nordic cultural discourse is not seen in the light of a specific geopolitical moment, but rather in relation to a more general politico-economic process: the influence of globalization and neoliberalism. From these two phenomena Anna Kharkina particularly singles out the rhetoric of competition and success, stating that it is how this rhetoric was adopted for Nordic cooperation which constitutes the focus of the chapter.

Neoliberal policy and discourse were actively adapted for Nordic cooperation around 2005. This claim is made on the basis of the publication of a joint discussion paper called The Nordic Region as a Global Winner Region: Tracing the Nordic Competitiveness Model. Produced by the Nordic Council of Ministers in cooperation with a Danish think tank, it argued for the formulation of “an aggressive social vision with new goals and a new level of ambition in view of the global challenge facing the
“Nordic countries.” Happily making the ideologically contentious claim that “the old vision of the welfare society has now been realized”, the paper argued that a new vision was needed if the Nordic region was to be a global winner region. This vision was to see the Nordic region as “the world’s leading value region and most advanced innovation society”, and as a consequence, the paper dictated, “The Nordic Region must be branded”. This brand was to comprise eight at once aspirational and arbitrarily essentializing “values”: equality, trust, proximity to power, inclusion, flexibility, respect for nature, work ethic, aesthetics – and, finishing off with a sprinkling of Weber, “the Protestant work ethic”.

In this effort to win competitive advantages, “Nordic culture” was seen to be an indispensable asset. For this reason cultural cooperation was said to need “a new dynamic”, which led to a reformation of the Nordic cultural cooperation institutions – beginning in 2005. Kharkina sees the results of these reforms as a significant break with the past, above all as a consequence of the introduction at the discursive level of a new conception of culture, namely “creative industries”, and at a practical level in the closure of existing institutions for cultural cooperation. The replacement institution, Nordic Culture Point, which was intended to coordinate all the various fields that previously had been covered by different institutions, was clearly geared towards including also creative industries in its remit. It supported projects in accordance with themes that were decided by the Nordic Council of Ministers, and considered culture “a constellation” or “network” of different types of expression, whose “dynamic” could be harnessed for economic purposes. This was reflected in the wealth of reports that sought to map and provide a future course of action for the creative industries.

The chapter also analyses how the Nordic region was branded in two particular cultural programs: that of the ‘Nordic Look’ fashion exchange project involving Russia and the Baltic States on the one hand, and the promotional campaign of “Nordic Food” on the other. Both were launched in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century, and both explicitly sought to combine Nordic cultural expressions – design and cuisine, respectively – with business promotion. They both illustrate how, in practice, Nordic regional identity has been deployed as a resource in the promotion of Nordic creative industries. As Kharkina points out, this meant having to invent a tradition of an identifiable and common “Nordic cuisine” along the way. In the case of Nordic Look, it meant having to adapt the methods of a specific branding exercise – officially dubbed an exchange project – to local markets. This is illustrated by comparing the implementation of the fashion displays in Russia with those in the Baltic States.

*From Kinship to Global Brand* is a pioneering study for the reason that it provides a collection of important sources from the Baltic States and Russia that add to our understanding of the scope and content of Nordic history. Kharkina’s multilingual competences should be lauded especially – dealing, as she does, with Baltic, Russian, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian texts. However, there are significant problems with the validity and reliability of study. It is unclear how the apparently changing arm’s length of cultural policy is “measured” in the thesis, and Kharkina’s arguments about what is and what is not political instrumentalization of what she calls “actual” culture seem more based on intuition than rigorous method or theory. The selection of sources remains opaque (there are plenty of relevant texts that are not even mentioned), and the discussion lacks vital historical contextualization. Nevertheless, the thesis indicates a fresh inroad to historical studies of Nordic cultural cooperation. For even if the “how-question” regarding discursive change still needs to be studied further, the “that-argument” – that Nordic culture and Nordic cultural cooperation are not
the same today as they have been, and *that* this is an outcome of political ideology often masked as neutral “marketing” – is convincingly borne out in this study.