Book review: *The Nordic Secret: A European Story of Beauty and Freedom, 2nd Edition*

Ruairidh Tarvet

University of Edinburgh

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LENE RACHEL ANDERSEN, WITH TOMAS BJÖRKMAN: ***The Nordic Secret: A European Story of Beauty and Freedom, 2nd Edition.*** Nordic Bildung. 2023. Pp. 528; ISBN 9788793791190.

At 528 pages in length, the 2nd edition of Lene Rachel Andersen's synthesis of Nordic Bildung certainly leaves few stones unturned. The subtitle of the book, *A European Story of Beauty and Freedom*, alludes to an important aspect of the supposed uniqueness of the Nordic countries' success – namely that it is deeply rooted in a wider, transnational discussion on the originally German concept of Bildung. Untranslated into English, this concept represents a combination of education, moral and cultural cultivation, personal development and maturation. In Andersen's eyes, Bildung is the key to understanding how the Nordic countries generally evolved from agrarian, illiberal and illiterate societies with absolute monarchies to the socially-orientated, highly educated and happy democracies we encounter today. Whilst the 1st edition of this book was published in 2017, a series of international crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and developments such as the dramatic rise of artificial intelligence have prompted the author to readdress the topic of Nordic Bildung with a set of new considerations, concerns, and warnings for the 2020s.

The book is not intended for a purely academic audience, and is structured in part as an exploration of Scandinavian civilisation, and in part as a guide to self-development. Later sections of the book delve more deeply into political thought and opinion, and this should be taken into account when reading.

The argument is divided into five parts: (I) *Setting the Scene*; (II) *Personal Freedom and Responsibility – Bildung Philosophy*; (III) *The Scandinavian Spring – Implementing Bildung*; (IV) *Exploring What We Have Found*; and (V) *Looking Forward*.

The first part of the book introduces the Nordic countries, highlighting statistics on phenomena that make them stand out from other nations, such as world-leading levels of happiness, interpersonal trust and international competitiveness. It also introduces the reader to the two core concepts: Bildung (not in italics), and ego-development. The term Bildung is often translated into Danish as *Dannelse*, a word every Folk High School student (and teacher) in Denmark will grapple with on a daily basis during their stay. It seemed at first surprising, therefore, that such a fundamental concept to understanding Scandinavian society was referred to throughout by its German name. The author explains that this is due to the international recognition of the term Bildung and its origin in German philosophy, which leads us to a common thread throughout the book – the Nordic secret is not

uniquely Nordic! In parallel to this concept, Robert Kegan's model of Ego Development, first published in his 1982 book, *The Evolving Self*, is also introduced here. However, not only does Andersen rename the five stages of Kegan's model, she also adds an additional stage between stages 4 and 5, to which she refers as stage 4½. These are: (1) *Self-discovering*; (2) *Self-consolidating*; (3) *Self-governing*; (4) *Self-authoring*; (4½) *Self-distancing*; and (5) *Self-transforming*. By working with these two theoretical underpinnings, Andersen creates an elegant and logical framework for structuring the arguments to come in the following sections. This section also includes some etymological 'fun facts' along the way, such as the origin of the words 'encyclopaedia' (meaning 'cycles of paideia' – the ancient Greeks' take on Bildung; p.83) and 'hocus pocus' (from the Eucharist blessing *Hoc est* [*enim*] *corpus* [*meum*]; p.84). These mini tales, which are woven in throughout the book, are an effective way of keeping the reader from getting too bogged down in detail.

Part II takes us on a rather long journey through European (albeit mostly German) history of thought, detailing the ways in which philosophers, writers and even composers contributed to defining the notion of Bildung. Andersen begins by examining the religious origins of Bildung in the late-17th century, and details how the concept was shaped and refined in a more secular manner during the Enlightenment of the 18th century. Plenty of attention is devoted to the big names: Goethe, Schiller, Kant etc.; but, importantly, also thinkers on education and development who are lesser known on the international stage. The Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and the German idealist Johann Gottlieb Fichte are given a prominent podium for their contributions to discussions on Bildung.

Part III brings the discussion back to the Nordic countries, highlighting key figures such as Danish pastor and writer (amongst many other job titles) Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, who sparked nothing short of a full-scale revolution in Scandinavian pedagogy. This chapter was particularly rewarding, as it is here that Andersen begins to explore the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish dimensions of the Nordic secret, providing useful nuance on how the three countries developed their own interpretations of Bildung, dispelling any myth of a 'one-size-fits-all' Nordic model for the idea.

Parts IV and V have some overlaps, serving in essence as reflections on the Bildung journey, and applying these reflections to the present day. In these sections, the author presents a series of thoughts, suggestions, concerns, and outright warnings, along with concrete proposals for modern Nordic societies, who, in the author's view, are '[…] ruining their own success' (p.428). These sections present as far more political than the

more academically-neutral histories and summaries detailed in the previous sections, with charged discussions on issues such as terrorism, the EU, freedom of speech, gender and even safe spaces constituting prominent parts of the argument. Whilst not written as an academic book per se, some readers may find the combination of the two approaches jarring. As a matter of fact, I found this to be perfectly in line with the pedagogy (or perhaps more appropriately phrased, andragogy – the equivalent term for adult education) of Nordic Bildung, which encourages education and teaching that is deeply personal and 'from the heart.'

In many ways, reading *The Nordic Secret* chimed well with my own experiences and understanding of Scandinavian thought, culture and philosophy. The simple fact that this book is written in English presents a valuable point of entry to some key aspects of modern Scandinavian Studies. Despite this, there are also several points of criticism which I think could be addressed to improve the overarching balance of the book. Firstly, more space could have been devoted to discussing the internal and external challenges that have helped to define the Nordic nations. For example, whilst the Schleswig question, Norwegian independence and the two World Wars are mentioned, they are generally brushed over or dealt with briefly for the purpose of succinctness. This is a shame, as just a page or two more on these issues would have provided some further explanation for the uniqueness of the individual Nordic countries. Wars with neighbouring states and movements to define a nation vis-à-vis the 'other' are arguably equally important to its Bildung, especially when the choice to undertake such Bildung may not lie with the individual: In the case of wartime conscription, for example, and exposure to the ideologies and experiences that follow. Secondly, for a book entitled *The Nordic Secret*, the author seems to spend more time discussing German rather than Norwegian or Swedish philosophy and literature. Indeed, the chapter on the so-called Danish Spring of the early to mid-19th century is around twice as long as the chapters on either the Norwegian or the Swedish Springs. This is not entirely damning, given the philosophical origins of Nordic Bildung, but it does create an imbalance. Similarly, the 'case studies' on Finland and Switzerland are so short and lacking comparative structure or argument that it feels like they are only there to acknowledge the countries' existence. The relevance of Switzerland to the discussion is somewhat unclear beyond its comparable levels of wealth and success, by which metrics, other choices might have been preferred. It would, moreover, have been interesting to try to review national developments in the non-Scandinavian countries included in the light of wider European trends, and dissect in more detail how they developed differently from the Scandinavian countries. On page 358, the author

mentions the UK as an area for future research, and I would second this suggestion. Grundtvig in particular was deeply inspired by the educational institutions of the UK. The differences between political traditions in the Nordic countries and the UK are such that a case study would lend a fascinating new perspective to a future edition.

There are a few issues with grammar and typos in the book, particularly towards the end. Examples include '…for me, who am Danish' (p.404), the word 'years' missing after '300,000' (p.445) and a rather cute Danicism '…the money trickle up…' (p.454; money is plural in Danish). These should be ironed out in any further editions.

In our algorithmically fine-tuned and consequently highly-individualised and personalised world, there is, more than ever, a need for Bildung. The consequences of having everything tailored to suit our own predisposed worldviews and reinforce them monumentally are not yet fully known. However, Andersen is right to point out the dangers of tribalism and radicalisation that can ensue. I would personally add a call here to social media companies to broaden the scope and types of content to which individuals are exposed. Whenever I make the decision to watch a certain documentary on a video streaming platform, or listen to a certain artist on a music streaming service, I am then bombarded with more of the same content or the same artists again and again for weeks to come. Whilst this is likely done in an attempt to home in on my interests and extract the maximum revenue from my continued use of those platforms, it runs counter to the benefits of Bildung. It narrows our horizons, and, to use Andersen's term, it prevents us from moving beyond a state of 'self-authoring'. True 'self-transformation' requires exposure to and engagement with worlds of art, literature, comedy, politics, music etc. beyond our own comfort zone. Only by doing so can we develop from what Friedrich Schiller described in 1795 as people governed by their emotions, or those who follow fashions and trends, to truly 'free persons'. This is what the tech and social media companies fail to see, and what society could benefit from learning about. *The Nordic Secret* is therefore not just an excellent read for those seeking to learn more about the Nordic countries, it is also an invaluable springboard to becoming aware of one's own limitations and the need to pursue learning for the love of learning.

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