Nordic Peace

A characteristic feature of Nordic societies is their peaceful way of resolving conflicts. The image of the Viking warrior and the tales of family feuds and war told by Snorre Sturlason and other medieval saga writers show that this is not an immanent trait in the Nordic psyche or polities. The fact that intra-Nordic wars (between Sweden and Denmark–Norway) marred much of the 17th and 18th centuries underlines the historical contingency of the state of peace that has permeated Norden since 1814. Norway’s dissolution of the union with Sweden in 1905—a unilateral move that caused Swedish anger and dismay as well as saber-rattling but in the end was accepted without gunshots—is a case in point, and sets the Nordic example off from cessations in the Balkans, Caucasia, the Iberian peninsula, and the United States.

The Nordic way of peaceful conflict solution has both an internal and an external dimension. Internally, there has evolved within the Nordic societies a way of dealing with political as well as economic, ethnic or religious conflicts that tends to acknowledge the rights of all conflicting parties and to find solutions that are acceptable to all, if perfect to none. (The civil war in Finland 1918 is an exception, illustrating that Nordic peace is not to be taken for granted.) This consensus model of conflict solution permeates all areas and levels of the Nordic societies, including the parliamentary systems as well as working-place relations and—if only recently—treatment of indigenous peoples (the Sami). A question is to what extent the internal Nordic peace is preconditioned on a low initial level of economic, ethnic and religious differences, facilitating the establishment of a durable consensus, or whether societies with greater cleavages can emulate the Nordic example.

Externally, the main trait of Nordic peace is of course non-aggressive foreign policy: the historical contingency of which is seen by looking at Swedish foreign policy in the centuries before the Congress of Vienna. This has manifested in policies of neutrality and in active support of world organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations. Especially in recent years Nordic peace has shown a new and more active face as attempts to broker peace in areas where the Nordic countries have little material interests, such as the Balkans or Guatemala. The Nobel Peace Prize to Martti Ahtisaari in 2008 serves as a dual illustration: pointing to the Nobel Peace Prize institution—one of the ways in which Norway seeks to contribute to a more peaceful world—as well as to the laureate. Under which conditions Nordic peace brokering can be successful is a question that remains under-researched, despite much focus recently. Another question is why peace-brokering seems to be a preoccupation of Finland, Sweden, and Norway but not Denmark.

Nordic peace has a specific academic incarnation in the peace research institutes that until recently were located in every major Nordic country. (Again Denmark is the exception, having incorporated Copenhagen Peace Research Institute into the Danish Institute of International Studies.) Born of the combination of cold-war fear of nuclear war and the same period’s belief in the power of social science to remedy social deficiencies (the lack of peaceful conflict resolution being regarded as one such deficiency), these institutes—several of whom house eminent researchers—can be seen as attempts to combine the missionary impulse of Nordic protestantism with a scientific attitude to peace building and conflict resolution. The first research into peace research has been published but much remains, not least on the lines between peace activism, peace research, and peace brokering.
Since 2005 IAKH has been home to “The Norwegian Peace Tradition,” an NFR Storforsk project with affiliations to the Department of Political Science at UiO, and with formal cooperation agreements (through IAKH’s Forum for Contemporary History) with Ohio University, the University of Oxford, and Aarhus University. Five PhD dissertations have been submitted (others are on their way) and several seminars and conferences held, and a far-reaching international network has been established. Unpacking the Nordic Model provides an opportunity and an incentment to broaden this research both thematically and institutionally, allowing for systematic comparisons with other Nordic countries and including scholars in fields such as political science, international relations, human rights, and ethics. Perhaps most importantly, it would give room for research into the connections between the internal and external dimensions of Nordic peace.

Within IAKH, professor Helge Pharo has been managing the Peace Tradition project; he is retiring by the end of 2013 but will be associated with the department as professor emeritus. Professors Hilde Henriksen Waage and Olav Njølstad have been affiliated with the project, having portfolios comprising, respectively, Norway’s attempted peace brokering in the Middle East and Nobel Peace Prize laureates. Postdoctoral Peace Tradition scholars have been studying Norway and the UN (Sunniva Engh); Nordic strategies in the World Bank (Hanne Hagtvedt Vik); Norway, the ILO, and the Sami (Hanne Hagtvedt Vik); and the relationship between security and justice in the Oslo Middle East Accords and the Dayton Peace Agreement on Bosnia-Hercegovina (Mona Fixdal). Head of Department, professor Tor Egil Førland has conducted comparative research on the foreign policy profiles of the Scandinavian countries and on the Nordic model for peaceful conflict resolution in the radical “1968” revolts, and is ready to take part in developing Nordic Peace as a thematic research area within the Nordic Model.

Select list of Nordic Peace publications 2005–2013


