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Los Angeles

Bridging the Narrative Abyss:  
Evolution Toward Social Democracy  
in a Millennium of Nordic Fiction

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Germanic Languages

by

Mads Larsen

2022

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2022

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Bridging the Narrative Abyss:  
Evolution Toward Social Democracy  
in a Millennium of Nordic Fiction

by

Mads Larsen

Doctor of Philosophy in Germanic Languages

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Arne O. Lunde, Chair

As the past decade built toward today's crisis, Scandinavian social democracy was frequently suggested as a model that could reform capitalism. The Nordic region's income equality, gender equality, low-conflict politics, and prosperous economies with generous benefits contribute to high levels of happiness and social cohesion. Leading politicians on the American Left, as well as a majority of young Americans, express that they would prefer such outcomes. But is the Nordic Model suitable for cross-cultural export?

This study examines the cultural origins of Scandinavian egalitarianism by applying an evolutionary perspective to ten influential works of fiction. These criticisms—ranging from an Icelandic saga to Swedish posthumanist TV—align to trace the emergence of modernity in the Nordic region. These works illustrate how fiction can be an evolutionary tool when

environmental change requires that communities update the story they live by, their *master-narrative*. This study analyzes the ideological evolution from the polytheistic beliefs of Viking kinship societies, to Christian monotheism, to religious and later secular humanism, the master-narrative of the modern world.

With each of these transitions, communities face a narrative abyss. The unquestionable story that had provided meaning, informed their cooperation, and dictated which future to strive for becomes transparent to them. *Homo sapiens* need such stories, or their larger communities come unglued. Reading these Nordic case studies through an evolutionary lens illuminates the brain mechanisms that make us factionalize, fall prey to anxiety, double down on orthodoxy, or even kill our neighbors during these master-narrative transitions. This study proposes that the West entered into such a transition in the 2010s. No longer convinced by liberal humanism, some populations have reverted to older stories of nationalism or tribal belonging. Until people are able to unite around a new master-narrative, things could get worse. The tenth work of fiction points to the leading candidate for becoming tomorrow's uniting story: *dataism*.

This study concludes that social democracy arose from uniquely Nordic experiences, which makes the political model unlikely to work well elsewhere. But insights from this journey through a millennium of cultural change illuminate the challenges humanity faces in the twenty-first century.

The dissertation of Mads Larsen is approved.

Todd S. Presner

Timothy Tangherlini

Kalani Bianca Michell

Arne O. Lunde, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

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In preparation for each of my 10 chapters, I wrote 1–3 articles, all of which are referenced in notes. Chapters build on the following earlier versions of my analysis: (ch. 1) “Evolutionary Insights Into a Maladapted Viking in *Gísla saga*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 120.3; (2) “Belief System Disintegration: Evolutionary Insights from Bergman’s *Det sjunde inseglet*,” *World Futures* 75.8; (3) “Adapting a Witch to Modern Beliefs and Values: Persecuting the Outsider through Trial, Stage, and Film,” *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 3.2; (4) “Historicist Cosmopolitanism from Scandinavia’s First Novel,” *Comparative Literature* 74.3; (5) “Adapting to Urban Pro-Sociality in Hamsun’s *Hunger*,” *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 4.2; (6) “Investigating the Lutheran Roots of Social Democracy in *Ingeborg Holm*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 93.4; (7) “Battleground of Humanisms: How Väinö Linna’s *Under the North Star* United What Liberalism, Socialism, and Fascism Tore Apart,” *The European Legacy* 26.6; (8) “Nordic Noir’s Exemplary Microcosm: Promoting Core Design Principles for Group Efficacy,” *World Futures* Online First; (9) “Sealing New Truths: Film Adaptation as Cultural



Capstone for *101 Reykjavik*,” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 10.1; (10) “Memory as Tyranny: A Dataist Argument for Posthuman Interconnectivity in *Humans* and *Real Humans*,” *Memory Studies* 16.4. See bibliography for details.

## Vita

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2020	UCLA ELTS	CPhil in Germanic Languages
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2018	UCLA Theater, Film and Television	MFA in Screenwriting
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2019–22	7 reviews

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2021	SASS Aurora Borealis Prize
2020–21	UCLA CERS Dissertation Writing Fellowship
2019–20	Komar Shideler Graduate Fellowship
2018–19	Pro Suecia Graduate Student Support
2017	Jack Nicholson Prize in Screenwriting

### SERVICE

2020–	Review editor for literary studies, <i>Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture</i>
2017–	Reviewer for <i>Journal of Screenwriting</i> , <i>New Media and Society</i> , <i>Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture</i> , <i>Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences</i> , <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> , and Peter Lang International Academic Publishers
2020–22	Organizing committee for UCLA ELTS Graduate Conference
2018–21	SCMS Nordic SIG Graduate Student Representative
2020	UCLA ELTS website committee

Figure 1: Case Studies

# Bridging the Narrative Abyss

## Evolution Toward Social Democracy in a Millennium of Nordic Fiction

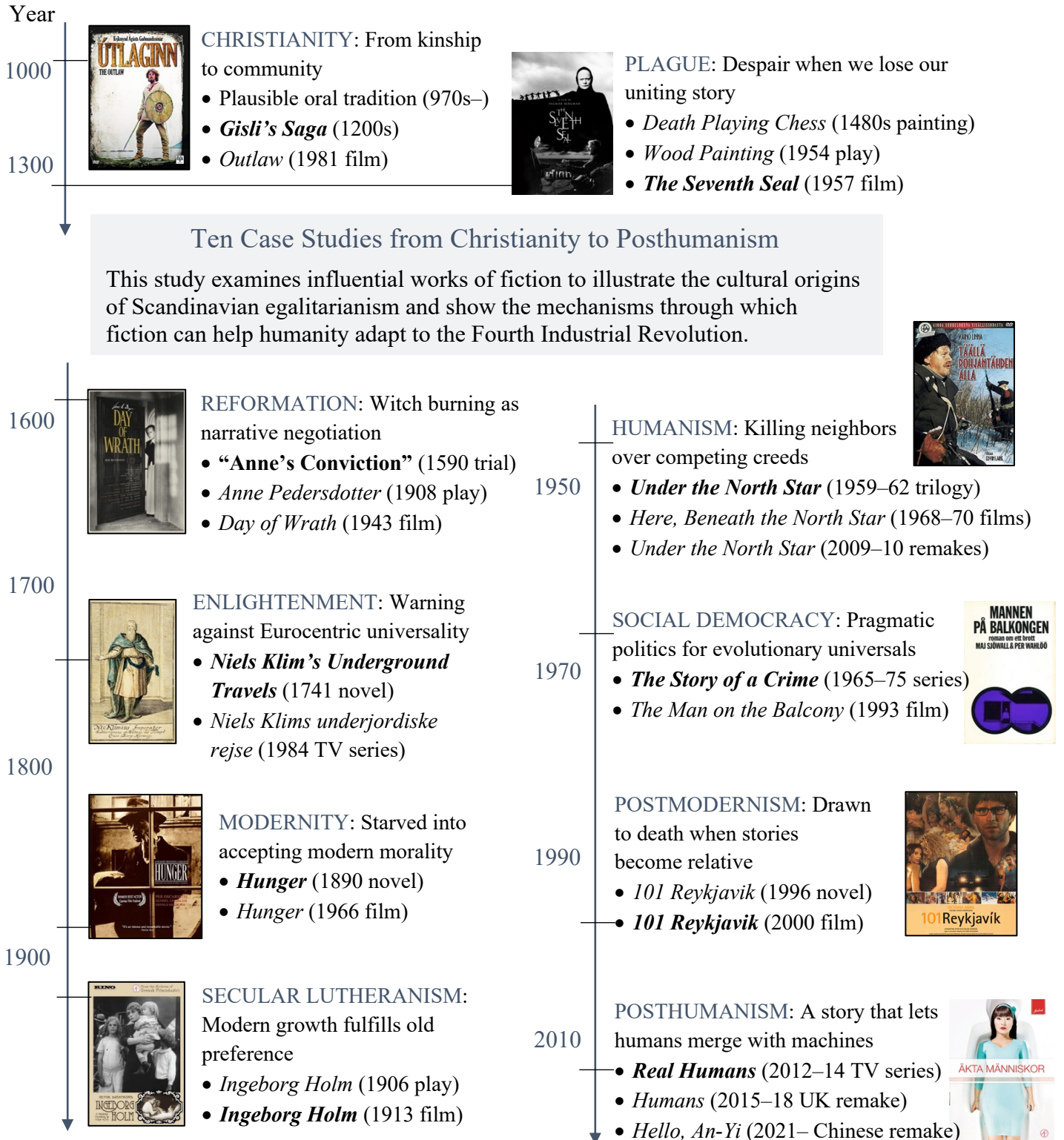
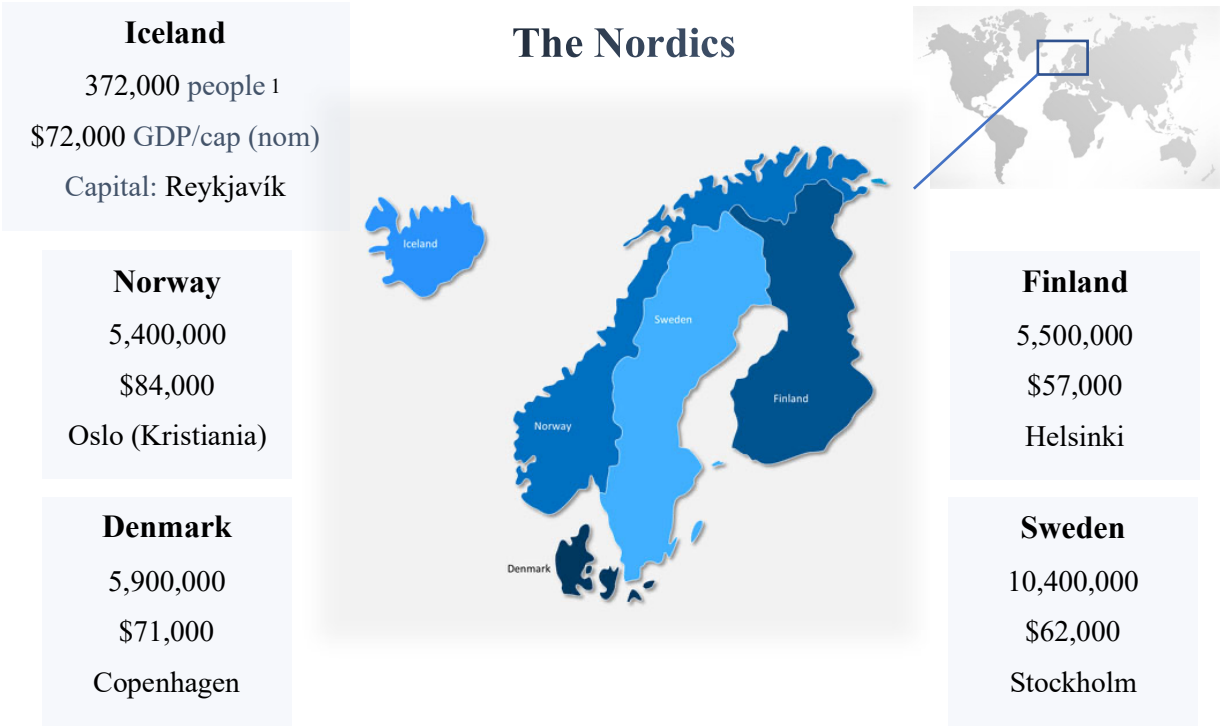


Figure 2: The Nordics



<sup>1</sup> GDP/cap numbers from International Monetary Fund, “World Economic Outlook Database,” October 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2021/October/weo-report>. Population numbers from the countries’ Wikipedia pages, accessed 3 May 2022.

## Introduction

Humanity stands in front of a narrative abyss. The story the West has lived by, the ideological foundation for the modern world, no longer convinces people of a better future. Liberal humanism offered a tale of global convergence that the twenty-first century has revealed to be another utopia. After the Cold War, liberal democracies were supposed to become ubiquitous. Instead, democracy has been in retreat since 2005.<sup>2</sup> We no longer think we know what connects our nations or how we should cooperate to solve those of our present era's challenges that only have global solutions. Disillusioned populations have reverted to an older story of nationalism or tribal belonging. The American "city upon a hill," and many other Western nations, appear not like models for emulation, but like leaky ships in a storm. A seemingly unstoppable rise in economic inequality, debt, social disintegration, and political impotence threatens individual nation-states and the post-war global order. However, while liberal humanism played itself out, a new city upon a hill established itself, particularly in the West's leftist imagination: Scandinavia.

As the past decade built toward today's crisis, Scandinavian social democracy was frequently suggested as an alternative that could reform capitalism. Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez emphasize that by "socialism" they do not mean Soviet or Cuban style politics, but something akin to what the Nordic countries have.<sup>3</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary adjusted its definition of "socialism" accordingly.<sup>4</sup> A majority of young Americans are already on board; they too would prefer to live in a society that provides for its citizens as the Nordics

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<sup>2</sup> Nate Schenkkan, and Sarah Repucci, "The Freedom House Survey for 2018: Democracy in Retreat," *Journal of Democracy* 30.2 (2019): 100–14. According to *The Economist*, 6.4 percent of the world population live in "full democracies." 5 of the 6 most democratic countries are Nordic; see Economist Intelligence, *Democracy Index 2021*, <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> CBS News, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: The '60 Minutes' interview," *60 Minutes*, 23 June 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-congresswoman-challenging-democratic-establishment-60-minutes-interview-2019-06-23/>; "The CNN Democratic debate transcript, annotated," *Washington Post*, 13 October 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/10/13/the-oct-13-democratic-debate-who-said-what-and-what-it-means/>.

<sup>4</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, "Socialism," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183741>.

do.<sup>5</sup> Upon shallow inspection, the choice seems obvious, at least for Western progressives. In the five Nordic countries—Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland—income equality, gender equality, low-conflict politics, and prosperous economies with generous benefits contribute to high levels of happiness and social cohesion. A variety of United Nations rankings uphold that in the twenty-first century these nations facilitate the pinnacle of human well-being.<sup>6</sup> Historian Yuval Harari calls this “the Scandinavian miracle.”<sup>7</sup> Political scientist Francis Fukuyama accounts for how in less well-run nations, the Nordic region has become “a mythical place” with “political institutions in perfect balance.”<sup>8</sup>

These institutions did not arise in a cultural vacuum. In his 2020 magnum opus, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*, Harvard anthropologist Joseph Henrich documents how Nordic populations are psychological and cultural outliers in many respects.<sup>9</sup> By focusing on the cultural origins of political distinctiveness, Henrich breaks with an older form of ideological thinking. For those convinced by the social democratic story, its tenets were typically assumed to be universal. Scholars and politicians have put forth the Nordic Model as cross-culturally implementable, as something all nations could—and perhaps should—convert to as soon as they

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<sup>5</sup> Harris Poll, “Percent of Millennials and Gen Z Agreeing with Statement,” 2019, <https://www.axios.com/exclusive-poll-young-americans-embracing-socialism-b051907a-87a8-4f61-9e6e-0db75f7edc4a.html>.

<sup>6</sup> UNDP, “Human Development Reports,” United Nations Development Programme, 1990–2019; John F. Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2020*, <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2020/>.

<sup>7</sup> “Yuval Noah Harari Interview on 'Pozner',” YouTube, posted by Yuval Noah Harari, 12 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ov78eDUoF0M>.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 14; *Political Order and Political Decay* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), eBook.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), eBook. Henrich coined the acronym WEIRD to bring attention to how claims of psychological universals often build on research conducted exclusively on American undergraduates or other populations who are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; see Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, “The Weirdest People in the World?” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33.2–3 (2010): 61–83.

reach economic and political maturity.<sup>10</sup> Social democratic humanists typically sided with liberal humanists in terms of democracy being history's end station.<sup>11</sup> But these democracies, including the United States, would evolve toward the ideal offered by Scandinavia.<sup>12</sup>

Research on the cultural origins of the modern world suggests that such universalizing is as misguided for social democracy as it was for liberal democracy. After World War II, the West offered its ideology and institutions as off-the-shelf solutions that would bring peace and prosperity to developing nations. How effective these institutions have been, writes Henrich, depends partially “on the cultural psychology of the populace.” He places the origins of the modern world in the fourth century, when the Christian Church began to impose new Marriage and Family Practices (MFPs).<sup>13</sup> By prohibiting cousin marriage, and changing rules for ownership and inheritance, the Church wrested power away from Europe's tribes. As a result of these MFPs, writes Fukuyama, “extended kinship among the Germanic barbarian tribes dissolved within a generation or two of their conversion to Christianity.”<sup>14</sup>

This medieval transition from kinship societies to feudal rule set in motion a psychological-institutional coevolution, argues Henrich, that made possible the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and modernity itself. Philosopher Daniel Dennett writes that Henrich “develops a fascinating case brimming with evidence.”<sup>15</sup> The dramatic consequence of new MFPs has been

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<sup>10</sup> As late as in 2013, Brandal et al. write that social democratic “ideas and demands are of a universal nature, and that these values therefore ought to be equally appreciated across the globe.” See Nik Brandal, Øivind Bratberg, and Dag Einar Thorsen, *The Nordic Model of Social Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 109. Less scholarly explorations, too, tend to universalize; “Can be copied anywhere,” write Lene Rachel Andersen and Tomas Björkman, *The Nordic Secret: A European Story of Beauty and Freedom* (Stockholm: Fri Tanke, 2017), 2. Non-Nordic advocates for social democracy often align with this universalist approach; see Thomas Meyer, *The Theory of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 3; Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2020*.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Terje Tvedt, *Det internasjonale gjennombruddet: Fra “ettpartistat” til flerkulturell stat* (Oslo: Dreyers forlag, 2017), 107.

<sup>13</sup> The philosophical origins of this path toward individualization go further back; see Jon Stewart, *The Emergence of Subjectivity in the Ancient and Medieval World: An Interpretation of Western Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay*.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, “Why Are We in the West So Weird? A Theory,” *New York Times*, 12 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/12/books/review/the-weirdest-people-in-the-world-joseph-henrich.html>.

scrutinized by scholars from a variety of fields since 1965 when demographer John Hajnal pointed out “the striking contrast between marriage patterns in Western Europe and virtually every other part of the world.”<sup>16</sup> Kinship societies with communal ownership and shared liability had driven conformity, submission to authority, and sharp group distinction.<sup>17</sup> Europe’s new reality of individualism, nuclear families, and voluntary organization drove nonconformity, abstract thought, and impersonal trust among strangers.

The European progression toward modern states was thus unique in that it built on a religious dissolution of tribes instead of politically imposing state institutions on top of kinship structures. The resulting cultural psychology was less bound by kin loyalty, a change that facilitated liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. Medieval Europeans became more dependent on state institutions and primed for cross-cultural prosociality<sup>18</sup> through a pan-European belief in the same master-narrative, a term for the story that structures a community’s beliefs and provides meaning to experience. Master-narratives of tribal religion were replaced by Christian theism, which was superseded by religious and later secular humanism, the master-narrative of the modern world.<sup>19</sup>

Literature offers insight into this interior transformation. As the continent’s people lost the predictability of predetermined kinship roles, they had to create their own identity and foster

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<sup>16</sup> Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, 230; John Hajnal, “European Marriage Patterns in Perspective,” in David V. Glass, and D. E. C. Eversley, eds., *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965), 101–43.

<sup>17</sup> Germanic kinship societies likely began transitioning around two thousand years ago from communal to private ownership of land and livestock, a process that accentuated inequalities; see Bjørn Myhre, “The Iron Age,” in Knut Helle, ed., *Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, v. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 60–93, 71.

<sup>18</sup> The term “prosocial” describes behavior that is cooperative (win-win), in opposition to competitive (win-lose). Both are forms of social behavior, in opposition to antisocial behavior. Cooperative behavior can be altruistic, meaning that a person sacrifices for another (win-intentional lose), but it needs not be. However, influential evolutionary scholars have begun to use “prosocial” to describe “an orientation toward the welfare of others and society as a whole. This might be an attitude, a behavior, or an institution. It might be directed toward family and friends or the social acceptance of all people. Ultimately, Prosocial is an entire worldview”; see <https://www.prosocial.world>. I use the term in its original meaning.

<sup>19</sup> A meta-narrative is “an overall account of things that enables people to find belief, pattern, and meaning in their experiences”; see Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/metanarrative>. A master-narrative is a moral community’s shared meta-narrative.



voluntary relations with a variety of others. You could to a lesser extent assume how someone would act based on who they were born to be; you had to put yourself in their shoes. As the modern world progresses, we see in fiction an increasing emphasis on interiority. Such works could offer adaptive advantages to readers, as learning to recognize thought patterns to predict behavior, and trends too, was valuable in a changing world.

In Iceland's medieval world literature, the sagas, interior states are mostly inferred from dialogue and action.<sup>20</sup> *Gisli's Saga* (*Gísla saga Súrssonar*, c. 1200s) includes poetic verses to offer insight into the psyche of a protagonist who straddles the old and new world.<sup>21</sup> But in terms of storytelling, the saga oeuvre is firmly planted in the Germanic kinship tradition.<sup>22</sup> Six centuries later, Knut Hamsun inaugurates the modernist novel with *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890).<sup>23</sup> The later Nobel winner's focus on interiority could hardly be stronger; dialogue and action are secondary. His starving protagonist stumbles through the Norwegian capital's urban squalor, confused by how his own psyche responds to the alien environment. This era's Second Industrial Revolution had accelerated what began with Church MFPs.<sup>24</sup> Like millions of others, Hamsun—and his partly autobiographical protagonist—had to let go of the morality into which they had been socialized in order to embrace more functional beliefs. Similar to the way in which *Gisli's Saga* engages the transition from kinship societies to feudalism, *Hunger* dramatizes the perils of

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<sup>20</sup> Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> *Gisli Sursson's Saga* [*Gísla saga Súrssonar*], in Martin S. Regal, trans., *The Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York: Penguin, 2000), eBook.

<sup>22</sup> One element of this kinship society tradition is how saga characters are introduced through elaborate genealogy, which reads as irrelevant to modern individualists.

<sup>23</sup> Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* [*Sult*], Sverre Lyngstad, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1996 [1890]).

<sup>24</sup> The First Industrial Revolution began around 1760, primarily with steam power and new manufacturing processes. The Second took off around 1870, driven by steel, oil, and electricity. The Third brought computers in the 1980s. The Fourth Industrial Revolution brings artificial intelligence, automation, biological enhancement, killer robots, et cetera. There exist varying definitions of content and timing for these periods of technological innovation.

transitioning from rural family life to urban individualism. In Hamsun’s narrative, this entails replacing religious humanism with secular humanism.

In later fiction, we see Nordic authors and filmmakers respond to the twentieth century. Fueled by technological innovation, the region undergoes its most transformative period since the introduction of agriculture more than five millennia prior. Then, some stone age storytellers likely helped their communities adapt by telling new stories that aided their transition from an animist master-narrative to a theist one, imparting norms and values more functional for sedentary living, animal husbandry, and cultivation of crops. The content of those tales is lost; we mostly have rock art to help us reconstruct the fictions that governed life among Nordic foragers and early agriculturalists. Over the past centuries, there has been no lack of recorded fiction that lets us study how Scandinavians came to unite around social democracy. How peoples who a thousand years ago were infamous for rape and plunder became today’s peaceful, prosocial Scandinavians has been referred to as the “Viking mystery.”<sup>25</sup> In this study, I illuminate this mystery by applying recent scholarship on cultural evolution, and related theoretical frameworks, to Nordic fiction that spans a millennium.

### **Bridging the Abyss**

From *Gisli’s Saga*—with plausible oral roots in the 970s—to the posthumanist TV series *Real Humans* (*Äkta människor*, 2012–14), we see how Nordics build on former master-narratives as they negotiate transitions to find new stories to live by.<sup>26</sup> There is consolation in how our present era’s Fourth Industrial Revolution does not entail humanity standing in front of a narrative abyss

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Nelson, *Lutheranism and the Nordic Spirit of Social Democracy: A Different Protestant Ethic* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2017), 54.

<sup>26</sup> *Real Humans* [*Äkta människor*], Lars Lundström, creator (Sveriges Television, 2012–14).

for the first time. In fact, we always do, with each dramatic transition. Our capacity for fiction is a prerequisite for effective cooperation in groups larger than around 150 individuals.<sup>27</sup> Human genetics facilitate interpersonal relations up to this *Dunbar number*. Beyond that, we need cultural adaptations that bind larger groups together through impersonal bonds; that is, we make up stories that explain why we should align our cause with that of certain others.

For instance, when agricultural land became contested, we needed alliances to protect our fields. Tapping into our innate loyalty to kin, tribal religion extended such ties through glorious tales of shared ancestors. Bronze Age warfare turned relatively peaceful sun gods into martial gods.<sup>28</sup> As the Nordic Iron Age evolved into the Viking Age, beliefs had to accommodate ever-larger cooperation. Deified ancestors became generic gods to promote wider appeal.<sup>29</sup> The “broad supernatural punishment” of moody, immoral gods—the Norse pantheon—gave way for “moralizing high gods”—the Christian one—“to facilitate cooperation among strangers in large-scale societies.”<sup>30</sup> Parallel with this master-narrative evolution, Nordic chiefdoms entered into tribal alliances, which solidified as petty kingdoms, and later kingdoms that with Christianization consolidated as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.<sup>31</sup> The late medieval Kalmar Union could have led to a Scandinavian nation, but coincidence prevented this outcome.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Russell A. Hill, and Robin I. M. Dunbar, "Social Network Size in Humans," *Human Nature* 14.1 (2003): 53–72.

<sup>28</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), eBook.

<sup>29</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

<sup>30</sup> Harvey Whitehouse et al., “Complex Societies Precede Moralizing Gods throughout World History,” *Nature* 568 (2019): 226–29, 226.

<sup>31</sup> Reviewing Nordic history with modern hindsight can give the impression that these stages of social organization would necessarily follow each other. A global and longer perspective gives a more meandering and diverse impression; see David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Byron J. Nordstrom, *Scandinavia Since 1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Jens E. Olsen, “Inter-Scandinavian Relations,” in Knut Helle, ed., *Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, v. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 710–70.

From a distance, these may look like smooth transitions. For those who experienced them, they could be dramatic, existentially threatening even. *Gisli's Saga* centers on a former Viking so convinced by the past era's heroics that he chooses to die rather than to accept the moral demands of a new master-narrative. A millennium later, another Icelander, Hlynur in *101 Reykjavik* (1996), also plans to end his life due to story conflict.<sup>33</sup> His parents and grandparents could take the social democratic narrative for granted. Hlynur cannot; because neoliberal globalization had relativized the Icelandic story, he no longer finds meaning. Gradually, his moral community becomes transparent to him. This is the narrative abyss: the horror of discovering that our truth was relative; and not only that, but that it could be outdated, while we are yet to agree on a replacement. Face to face with similarly disillusioned members of our former moral community, we could get a taste of the primordial state of things: how primates owe nothing to fellow primates until both parties believe that they do.

When transition requires that we embrace new beliefs, change can feel impossible or so painful or disgraceful that death is preferable. The fictions that undergird our eras hold together our societies and individual identities. We are not culturally permitted to doubt these stories. Modern Westerners could be as ostracized for questioning the sanctity of human life as their medieval ancestors would have been for questioning the existence of God. A direct confrontation over cultural premises could turn violent, lethal even, or genocidal in exceptional circumstance. In terms of challenging such premises, made-up tales can offer a less costly approach. Fiction is cultural technology that allows societies to impart to its members what is good and bad. Stories offer continuity through recognizable characters who are models for emulation, but storytellers can also challenge values and norms in ways that audiences can accept or reject. The risk of

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<sup>33</sup> Hallgrímur Helgason, *101 Reykjavik*, Brian FitzGibbon, trans. (New York: Scribner, 2002 [1996]).

sanction tends to be lower if your protagonist transgresses than if you transgress yourself. Fiction thus functions as a low-cost testing ground for novelty. *101 Reykjavik*, the 1996 novel and its 2000 film adaptation, exemplifies how fiction can help communities come to terms with change through inspiring debate and a reassessment of identity and morality.<sup>34</sup> The provocative novel was rejected commercially and culturally. Yet discussion and a more conciliatory film made Icelanders embrace *101 Reykjavik* as the authoritative portrayal of their postmodern 1990s.<sup>35</sup>

Other transitions cut deeper. Fourteenth century Black Death and sixteenth century Reformation offer dramatic examples of how communities can turn homicidal when their uniting narrative disintegrates. Still, my case studies can give the impression that all transitions are manageable. Not only does civilization survive, but after a painful interlude, progress continues with vigor. Feud-ridden kinship societies give way for relative peace under feudalism. Plague opens up for the Renaissance.<sup>36</sup> Reformation contributes to witch-burning but accelerates the journey toward humanism. A failed socialist revolution tore asunder Finland's social fabric, as did fascist rebellion, yet Väinö Linna's *Under the North Star*-trilogy (*Täällä Pohjantähden alla*, 1959–62) helped unite what humanism's competing creeds had torn apart.<sup>37</sup>

Past successes must not mean that our current transition will turn out well, too. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is expected to bring the fastest, deepest, and most transformative change in human history. Over the next decades, automation could outcompete millions, then billions, of workers. Killer robots, biological hacking, and artificial intelligence are among the disruptions that could threaten civilization, or worse. Google's inhouse futurist, Ray Kurzweil,

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<sup>34</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, Baltasar Kormákur, dir. (Iceland, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> "NEÐANMÁLS –," *Morgunblaðið*, 25 August 2001, <https://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/622532/>.

<sup>36</sup> Norman Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death & The World it Made* (New York: The Free Press, 2015), eBook.

<sup>37</sup> Väinö Linna, *Under the North Star* [1959]; *The Uprising: Under the North Star 2* [1960]; *Reconciliation: Under the North Star 3* [1962] [*Täällä Pohjantähden alla 1-2-3*]; Richard Impola, trans. (Beaverton: Aspasia Books, 2001; 2002; 2003).

estimates that computers could reach human-level intelligence by 2030.<sup>38</sup> Elon Musk, too, is among those open to such a rapid onset of artificial super-intelligence.<sup>39</sup> The median estimate of experts is more conservative, placing this breakthrough in the 2040s.<sup>40</sup> Others question whether such machines are possible or think their development will take longer.<sup>41</sup> Harari emphasizes that if digital life comes to be, this could entail the most transformative change not only in human history, but since biological life appeared around 4 billion years ago.<sup>42</sup> Even an ardent realist like Henry Kissinger writes, “How the Enlightenment ends. Philosophically, intellectually—in every way—human society is unprepared for the rise of artificial intelligence.”<sup>43</sup>

This is the narrative abyss humanity faces in the twenty-first century. Our liberal-humanist narrative had convinced many that all the world’s peoples were headed for a peaceful federation of collaborating democracies. The Enlightenment’s culminating philosopher, Immanuel Kant, suggested that even a global state could be within reach.<sup>44</sup> On a foundation of universal reason, free trade, and human rights, diverse cultures would converge so that we could cooperate to stop climate change, nuclear proliferation, et cetera. Developing nations would

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<sup>38</sup> Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005); Carole Cadwalladr, “Are the Robots about to Rise?” *The Observer*, 22 February 2014. To describe this event, the term *singularity* was popularized by Vernor Vinge in his 1993 essay “The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era,” VISION-21 Symposium, <https://edoras.sdsu.edu/~vinge/misc/singularity.html>. Vinge predicted that superhuman intelligence would be achieved by 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Maureen Dowd, “Elon Musk, Blasting Off in Domestic Bliss,” *New York Times*, 25 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/25/style/elon-musk-maureen-dowd.html>. Artificial super-intelligence (ASI) refers to digital greater-than-human intelligence.

<sup>40</sup> Vincent C. Müller, and Nick Bostrom, “Future Progress in Artificial Intelligence: A Survey of Expert Opinion,” in Vincent C. Müller, ed., *Fundamental Issues of Artificial Intelligence* (Berlin: Springer, 2016), 555–72.

<sup>41</sup> George Gilder, *Life After Google: The Fall of Big Data and the Rise of the Blockchain Economy* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), eBook.

<sup>43</sup> Henry Kissinger, “How the Enlightenment Ends,” *The Atlantic*, June 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/06/henry-kissinger-ai-could-mean-the-end-of-human-history/559124/>; see Henry A. Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher, *The Age of AI: And Our Human Future* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021). Nobel winner Daniel Kahneman is similarly convinced that AI will outcompete humans; see Foster Kamer, “Nobel Winner: Artificial Intelligence Will Crush Humans, ‘It’s Not Even Close,’” *The Byte*, 17 May 2021, <https://futurism.com/the-byte/nobel-winner-artificial-intelligence-crush-humans>.

<sup>44</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” in Hans Siegbert Reiss, ed., Hugh Barr Nisbet, trans., *Kant’s Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970 [1795]), 93–130.

catch up economically and—thought many Scandinavians—even become social democracies. Instead, our global community faces nationalism, populism, and widening inequalities within and between nation-states. Technology is not bridging divides, but creating chasms between social media echo chambers. No wonder young Americans are eager for alternatives; and, social democracy is not the only draw. Across the world, young people are spiraling downward from democratic apathy to an antipathy that makes them embrace illiberalism.<sup>45</sup>

### **A Case for Irrational Optimism**

Such despondency, I will show, is typical for transitions between master-narratives. By investigating how Scandinavians solved some of the most pivotal eras of the past millennium, I hope to generate insights that can be of use in the decades ahead. In particular, as a counter to despondency, I will make a case for using fiction to explore and unite around new beliefs. Compared to many other nations, the Nordics made it through the ideological gales of the twentieth century relatively unscathed. The low body count was contributed to by a tradition for seeking peaceful, pragmatic compromise. I will illustrate how innovative fiction can help communities negotiate consensus with less risk of violence.

An exception to Nordic pragmatism and peacefulness is dramatized in Linna's *Under the North Star*. Yet even Finland's Civil War counted its victims with only five digits. Nine digits were needed to count the dead when liberal, socialist, and fascist humanisms fought over which narrative could undergird the most potent industrialized society. Earlier contests between religious creeds, too, resulted in mass casualty, but industrial revolutions had produced technology that drove industrial-level carnage. Harari emphasizes how with the god-like powers

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<sup>45</sup> Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "Youth and the Populist Wave," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 45.9–10 (2019): 1013–24.

that the Fourth Industrial Revolution is about to grant humanity, we can ill afford another all-out war between competing creeds. Human history suggests I am naïve to point this out, but a less militaristic, more cultural exploration of alternatives seems highly preferable. As we search for a new story, a posthumanist master-narrative, I make a case for irrational optimism.

Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957) argues that naïve hope is the most adaptive response when the Black Death tears apart a small community in the summer of 1350.<sup>46</sup> This cinematic masterpiece uses not the Plague's 80 percent case mortality rate to construct its horrors, but the disintegration of a rural community's belief system. As people turn on each other, a young couple focuses on the joy of wild strawberries, a Bergmanian symbol of humanism. Nearly everyone else succumbs to despair, accentuated by how Christian theism makes the Plague be about God's wrath. The couple ignores old beliefs, instead allowing themselves faith in a better tomorrow. This may seem naïve, as in all likelihood, they too would die. As representatives of humanity, the couple does what is adaptive: they move toward the future, beyond the setting sun; and, as the film ends, into a new day with renewed hope. The night before, all had seemed lost. Yet the Plague eventually came to an end, as did ensuing revolts, although social disruption would continue to wreak havoc for generations.

Few who experienced the Black Death could have imagined the modern world's ethos, which the pandemic accelerated the onset of.<sup>47</sup> Some could, like Boccaccio who wrote *The Decameron* (1353) after the Plague devastated Florence.<sup>48</sup> His made-up tales of young men and women sheltering from the Black Death was one of the literary launch pads of the Renaissance. This instance illustrates how human imagination made possible all the epochs we have lived in.

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<sup>46</sup> *The Seventh Seal* [*Det sjunde inseglet*], Ingmar Bergman, dir. (Sweden, 1957).

<sup>47</sup> Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague*.

<sup>48</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2020 [1353]).



Since we developed our capacity for fiction around 70,000 years ago,<sup>49</sup> ever more ambitious narratives have let *Homo sapiens* conquer the planet. From animism to humanism, someone constructed these imaginaries; and, with every transition, most people likely rejected the possibility of a new master-narrative when it was suggested to them. We cannot trust our own assessment of how reasonable, naïve, or deplorable new beliefs are. We do not know beforehand if such meta-narratives will be adaptive if promoted to master-narrative status. If we rely on the internal logic of the narrative we transition out of, we become backward-looking. At the same time, building on former beliefs enhances the chance for effective cultural uptake; abrupt breaks add all sorts of peril to already difficult circumstance.

New beliefs—if they are to be effective—must align with features of our evolved minds. Kinship societies built on our innate drive toward altruism between closer relatives than those with whom tribal religion made us join forces. The Church made Europeans turn against cousin marriage by exploiting our instinctual incest taboo.<sup>50</sup> Socialist humanism failed to understand that kin altruism cannot be scaled to the national level.<sup>51</sup> Liberal humanism won the twentieth century because empowering individuals through free markets was the most profitable approach to the technologies of the first industrial revolutions.<sup>52</sup> Worth remembering is that none who rallied behind these meta-narratives knew how they would play out as master-narratives, as *Under the North Star* illustrates. That something feels right must not mean that it will work—and certainly not in the specific context it may be suggested for.

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<sup>49</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Random House, 2014), eBook; Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, suggests 60–80,000 years. Richard Dawkins points to 50,000 years; see Dawkins and Yan Wong, *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2016), eBook. *Homo sapiens'* creative revolution could also have been a more drawn-out affair with older origins.

<sup>50</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRD People in the World*.

<sup>51</sup> Simon Kemp, *Was Communism Doomed? Human Nature, Psychology and the Communist Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Harvill Secker, 2016), eBook.

Human feelings evolved to promote survival and reproduction in the context of the African savanna.<sup>53</sup> As we could expect, socialism appeals to the psychology of a primate whose ancestors spent 2 million years in egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers. The modern-day ideology taps into this, but industrialized societies constitute a dramatically different context. Perhaps with future technology, socialist principles will outcompete liberal ones, yet we cannot know beforehand if this will be the case. When agriculture set humanity on a path of, at times, bizarre levels of inequality, such outcomes offended the impulses toward equity that our evolutionary past coded into our brain systems. Further back, our Great Ape ancestors likely lived in societies with strong dominance hierarchies.<sup>54</sup> In that more primordial context, the domineering and submissive aspects of our psychology evolved. With increasingly needy offspring, a more mobile lifestyle, and power-equalizing weapons, the genus *Homo* had to adapt genetically and culturally to an egalitarianism that since has been dear to us.<sup>55</sup> Still, when context permits, exceptional individuals or powerful groups are driven to accumulate resources and enforce dominance hierarchies, which in the extreme—in terms of resource and woman- hoarding—make our Great Ape ancestors seem like hippies.<sup>56</sup>

This is the tension between egalitarianism and dominance that my study engages. Those who have the ability to dominate will often do so, and the majority who get dominated must

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<sup>53</sup> Patrick K. Durkee, Aaron W. Lukaszewski, and David M. Buss, “Pride and Shame: Key Components of a Culturally Universal Status Management System,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 40.5 (2019): 470–78.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Turchin, *Ultrasociety: How 10,000 Years of War Made Humans the Greatest Cooperators on Earth* (Chaplin: Beresta Books, 2015), eBook; Cathryn Townsend, “Egalitarianism, Evolution of,” in Hilary Callan, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018).

<sup>55</sup> Bernard Chapais, *Primeval Kinship: How Pair-Bonding Gave Birth to Human Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> For instance, genetic research suggests that there have been environments in which up to seventeen women reproduced for every man who earned the privilege to beget offspring; see Monika Karmin et al., “A Recent Bottleneck of Y Chromosome Diversity Coincides with a Global Change in Culture,” *Genome Res.* 25 (2015): 459–66. An alternative hypothesis for this 95% drop in Y chromosome diversity after the introduction of agriculture is intergroup warfare with systematic annihilation of defeated males; see Tian Chen Zeng, Alan J. Aw, and Marcus W. Feldman, “Cultural Hitchhiking and Competition between Patrilineal Kin Groups Explain the Post-Neolithic Y-chromosome Bottleneck,” *Nature Communications* 9 (2018): 2077.

develop cultural adaptations if they are to restrain inequalities. Which equilibria can be found between dominance and egalitarianism varies with context. In forager bands, good leaders are appreciated, but if one becomes too domineering, his band may agree behind his back to snuff him out.<sup>57</sup> In pre-colonization Mexico, there was little commoners could do to prevent elites from hoarding hundreds of women each, leaving few for those who worked the fields.<sup>58</sup> In the Middle Ages, how Christianity promoted lifelong monogamy, and thus sexual egalitarianism, drove a social harmony that enhanced European competitiveness vis-à-vis regions with greater inequities.<sup>59</sup> With industrialization, populations mattered even more, since dominant elites needed to maximize their access to bodies for protection, as soldiers, and production, as workers. This gave people leverage to negotiate the social breakthroughs of the 1930s, which comprised the Western adaptation to the urban squalor and inequities that Hamsun dramatizes in *Hunger*.

For the world that arose from this transition, our current world, I will argue that social democracy turned out to offer the most functional narrative. This is not an irresistible argument, but given the performance of Nordic countries in terms of productivity and populace satisfaction, it is a reasonable one. The region's norms and values at the beginning of the twentieth century motivated these countries to organize their economic and social spheres in a manner that was rewarded by historical coincidence. Fukuyama writes, "The story of the rise of Danish democracy is full of historical accidents and contingent circumstances that cannot be duplicated."<sup>60</sup> Similarly fortuitous, the Church's new MFPs happened to set in motion the psychological-institutional coevolution that made possible the modern world. Ending cousin marriage had little support in scripture, notes social anthropologist Jack Goody, as Jesus himself

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<sup>57</sup> Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*.

<sup>58</sup> Toribio Motolinía, *Motolinía's History of the Indians of New Spain* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973).

<sup>59</sup> Nicholas A. Christakis, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2019), eBook.

<sup>60</sup> Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, 434.

was, “according to one legend, the offspring of just such a marriage.”<sup>61</sup> Clergy seemed more motivated by how loosening kin bonds and changing inheritance practices drove a third of Western Europe’s agricultural land into Church ownership by 900. What benefits one entity in one context can work in the opposite direction in another. A millennium later, the same coevolution undermined religion, too, opening up for secular humanism.<sup>62</sup>

As humanity stands in front of another narrative abyss of at the beginning of the third millennium, our future is uncertain in a way we have no choice but to embrace. We cannot know how we should respond. Cultivating the right imaginative approach could spare us unimaginable suffering. If our liberal-humanist narrative unravels before our global community has a new story to structure cooperation around, we do not need war to trigger destruction that could make prior catastrophes seem quaint. If something as mundane-sounding as global logistics break down—a plausible outcome of, for instance, a financial crisis—we will not be able to feed our population, which soon surpasses eight billion. Digging up sidewalks to plant potatoes will not suffice. Within weeks, we could face starvation and cannibalism. It may sound naïve to think that a new story can save us from the multitude of risks that humanity faces. Yet new creative imaginaries are the only cultural technology that has ever let us adapt to transitions like the one we currently face. Without such a story, violent suppression or small-group organization are our alternatives. It would be inexcusably naïve *not* to seek new beliefs as the Fourth Industrial Revolution transforms our environment, instead insisting that humanism is our best and final truth.<sup>63</sup>

To make this case, I will examine ten works of Nordic fiction, and related adaptations, from the past millennium. These criticisms align to illustrate the perils of change and the

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<sup>61</sup> Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 53.

<sup>62</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

<sup>63</sup> A failure to rethink cultural narratives has doomed many communities and civilizations; see Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

adaptive strategies that such threats have been met with. This journey through fiction builds toward consensus around social democracy, but my study is no Whig history, presenting the past as an inevitable progression toward today's reality. No Vikings planned a cultural evolution that would grant their descendants paid paternity leave; fortunate happenstance offers the most convincing through-line. Although I make use of evolutionary theory, my approach stands in opposition to the misguided interpretations of social Darwinists who wreaked cultural havoc in the late 1800s and early 1900s.<sup>64</sup> Genetics do not explain Nordic success. *Homo nordicus*, the Frankenstein of American scientific racism, shall remain buried.<sup>65</sup> Henrich documents how the emergence of the modern world likely reduced genetic fitness vis-à-vis modern demands, at least for a period, while cultural adaptations made the West more productive. Differences in cultural psychology explain why modern institutions are utilized with different levels of effectiveness and are probably unaffected by genetic variation. To the extent that genetics could play a part, writes Henrich, "they may be pushing in the opposite direction to that typically presumed."

Throughout my exploration, I focus on egalitarianism in addition to fiction's role in negotiating change. Ideally, I could offer ancient tales that let us investigate the beliefs that medieval Scandinavians carried with them after millennia in their cold, sparsely populated European outskirts. I have little choice but to begin with a saga; no stories were written down before the Nordic region was Christianized around the end of the first millennium. Runic writing existed from the beginning of that millennium, but carving words into stone and wood lent itself

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<sup>64</sup> For an insightful account of how human imagination led early evolutionary thinkers astray, see Emelie Jonsson, *The Early Evolutionary Imagination: Literature and Human Nature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). For more on using evolutionary theory in criticism, see Joseph Carroll, Mathias Clasen, and Emelie Jonsson, eds., *Evolutionary Perspectives on Imaginative Culture* (New York: Springer, 2020).

<sup>65</sup> Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, The Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916). Hitler was so inspired by *Homo nordicus* that he purportedly wrote Grant, telling him the book was his bible; quoted in Stefan Kuhl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 85.

poorly to longer narratives. Still, we can make qualified guesses in respect to the inner lives of prehistoric Scandinavians, as well, relying on archaeology, their own artwork, and evolutionary theory in combination with the ethnographic record as it relates to comparable populations.

### **A Tale of Nordic Pre-History**

Scandinavia opened up around 16,000 years ago when the ice sheet began to retract after intermittently covering the region for more than 2 million years. Within a few millennia, the initial colonists arrived to hunt reindeer and seal and additional large fauna that followed later. These Paleolithic hunter-gatherers lived in small, dispersed groups who revered the animals they depended on for survival. Their animist beliefs express themselves in rock art across the region.<sup>66</sup> Where bulk hunting and perhaps storage are required to survive winter, cooperation and planning are crucial. Early Nordics were also incentivized to form larger groups in order to smooth out variation in hunting luck. Inferring from what we see among Arctic hunters of large prey, these Paleolithic bands could to a greater extent have included hunters who reduced the group's efficacy per participant. The rationale behind such altruism is that when working alone or in small numbers is ineffective, groups who already are at optimal size avoid costly conflicts by being more inclusive toward outsiders whose uncoordinated hunting could sabotage everyone's chance of survival.<sup>67</sup>

Paleolithic egalitarianism carried on into the more sedentary Mesolithic when larger groups lived off a greater variety of land and sea resources. This transition would have allowed

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<sup>66</sup> The oldest preserved Nordic rock art is from the beginning of the Mesolithic.

<sup>67</sup> T. Douglas Price, *Ancient Scandinavia: An Archaeological History from the First Humans to the Vikings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Robert L. Bettinger, Raven Garvey, and Shannon Tushingham, *Hunter-Gatherers: Archaeological and Evolutionary Theory* (New York: Springer, 2015); Eric Alden Smith, "The Application of Optimal Foraging Theory to the Analysis of Hunter-Gatherer Group Size," in Bruce Winterhalder, and Eric Alden Smith, eds., *Hunter-Gatherer Foraging Strategies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 35–65.

greater resource-hoarding, but social relationships seem to have remained “primarily egalitarian,” writes archaeologist Douglas Price, “There is no evidence for status differentiation or pronounced inequality.”<sup>68</sup> This Scandinavian Eden faced an existential threat when farmers broke land in Northern Germany around 5000 BC. Their new lifestyle and early agriculturalist sun gods did not appeal to the Nordics. Scandinavian hunter-gatherers obtained some objects from these field-toiling migrants, such as new types of axes, but clung to their old ways.<sup>69</sup> Why they held out for more than a millennium has puzzled archaeologists. We know too little of these Scandinavians foragers to conclude, but considering how reluctant humans can be in terms of changing master-narrative, the answer is probably that they “consciously decided to continue as hunter-gatherers” because they could—for a while.<sup>70</sup>

To explain the spread of cultural practices, like agriculture, scholars have often offered a narrative of technology diffusion through contact with neighboring peoples.<sup>71</sup> Ancient DNA reveals a darker side to humanity; progress has frequently been a product not of cultural exchange but population replacement.<sup>72</sup> DNA from Mesolithic and Neolithic populations suggests that such replacement was the primary driver behind the spread of agriculture through

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<sup>68</sup> Price, *Ancient Scandinavia*, 101.

<sup>69</sup> Lasse Sørensen, “Biased Data or Hard Facts? Interpretations of the Earliest Evidence of Agrarian Activity in Southern Scandinavia from 6000 to 4000 cal BC in a Theoretical Discourse on Random Down-the-Line Exchanges and Structured Migrations,” Kurt J. Gron, Lasse Sørensen, Peter Rowley-Conwy, eds., *Farmers at the Frontier: A Pan European Perspective on Neolithisation* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2020), 289–316.

<sup>70</sup> Christopher Prescott, “Interpreting Complex Diachronic ‘Neolithic’-Period Data in Norway,” in Kurt J. Gron, Lasse Sørensen, Peter Rowley-Conwy, eds., *Farmers at the Frontier: A Pan European Perspective on Neolithisation*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2020, 381–400, 392.

<sup>71</sup> Joaquim Fort et al., “Estimating the Relative Importance of Demic and Cultural Diffusion in the Spread of the Neolithic in Scandinavia,” *Journal of the Royal Society Interface* 15 (2018): 20180597.

<sup>72</sup> Joseph K. Pickrell and David Reich, “Toward a New History and Geography of Human Genes Informed by Ancient DNA,” *Trends in Genetics* 30.9 (2014): 377–89; Mark Lipson et al., “Population Turnover in Remote Oceania Shortly after Initial Settlement,” *Current Biology* 28.7 (2018): 1157–65.e7; Selina Brace et al., “Ancient Genomes Indicate Population Replacement in Early Neolithic Britain,” *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 3 (2019): 765–71.

Southern Scandinavia and along the coasts.<sup>73</sup> From around 4000 BC, foreign peoples began to displace locals, clear forest, and introduce agriculture where soil and climate permitted. If future research further substantiates this replacement hypothesis, most Scandinavian foragers simply refused to change.<sup>74</sup> This strategy made them suffer the fate of the Neanderthals whom their ancestors had replaced more than 30,000 years prior.<sup>75</sup>

With farming, the Scandinavian population began to grow. Inequalities did, too. The Neolithic transition, believes Price, was driven by high-status individuals seeking to accumulate surplus to increase their own power and prestige. Tens of thousands of monumental tombs were built in this period, as were many wood and earth constructions of considerable size. Long-distance trade networks were established, which in particular benefitted elite individuals. New beliefs drove ritualistic sacrifice of animals and humans. No longer did animism promote relative harmony between humans and their environment; nature was to be tamed and harvested. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle continued, particularly in the north, but where agriculture took hold populations had to adapt to new demands. Hunters became warriors, camps were replaced by farms or small villages, and egalitarianism gave way for hierarchical power. The domineering impulses from our evolutionary past, which had been kept in check by the reverse dominance hierarchies of nomadic hunter-gatherers, were let loose by Neolithic technology. Many low-

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<sup>73</sup> Helena Malmström et al., “Ancient DNA Reveals Lack of Continuity between Neolithic Hunter-Gatherers and Contemporary Scandinavians,” *Current Biology* 19.20 (2009): 1758-62; Alissa Mittnik et al., “The Genetic Prehistory of the Baltic Sea Region,” *Nature Communications* 9 (2018).

<sup>74</sup> Fort et al., “Estimating the Relative Importance”; Kurt J. Gron and Lasse Sørensen, “Cultural and Economic Negotiation: A New Perspective on the Neolithic Transition of Southern Scandinavia,” *Antiquity* 92.364 (2018): 958–74.

<sup>75</sup> Replacement does not entail eradication of all individuals but that one genetically distinct group takes over the territory of another. Humans are driven to conquest but also reproduction; both DNA from Neanderthals and Scandinavian hunter-gatherers carry on in modern humans. In fact, ancient DNA from Sweden indicates that modern Europeans share more DNA with the region’s foragers than what early agriculturalists did; see David Reich, *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018), eBook; Torsten Günther et al., “Population Genomics of Mesolithic Scandinavia: Investigating Early Postglacial Migration Routes and High-Latitude Adaptation,” *PLOS Biology* 16.1 (2018): e2003703. After suffering environmental marginalization in Scandinavia, some forager populations seem to have migrated across the Baltic Sea where there has been found greater genetic continuity; see Malmström et al., “Ancient DNA.”



status individuals likely resented the growing difference in wealth and status, despite new beliefs probably offering at least some justification for such. Yet these differences would only grow with the technology of a new age: bronze.

The Nordic Bronze Age (1700–500 BC) was a pivotal time in terms of prosperity, inequality, and cultural transformation.<sup>76</sup> Amber, which was in high demand during this era, was abundant in Scandinavia. This luck contributed to large-scale import of bronze from regions with ores of copper and tin. Nowhere in Europe has there been found more bronze artifacts from this period than in Scandinavia, notes Price. Competition over these resources drove conflict and war, and also accelerated and formalized inequalities. By comparison, the Neolithic had been an era of “equality, communal behavior, and social identity.” The new age was “dominated by hierarchy, competitive—even predatory—social behavior, and individual identity.”<sup>77</sup> Powerful groups hoarded land and herds and likely traded slaves and captives. Elites probably ruled through chiefdoms, under a powerful leader and with inequities furthered by hereditary status. These kinship societies comprised hierarchies of ranked families united by theist beliefs in martial gods. What stories they told of these gods we know not, but ships were important in the mythologies of this coastal region.<sup>78</sup> Nowhere in Europe has there been found more Bronze Age rock art, including 10,000 depictions of ships.<sup>79</sup> These, along with human figures, weapons, and animals are staged in ways that suggest religious purposes. Archaeologist Johan Ling interprets these works to express “conflict, power, and mobility.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Henrik Thrane, “Scandinavia,” in Harry Fokkens, and Anthony Harding, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the European Bronze Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 746–66.

<sup>77</sup> Price, *Ancient Scandinavia*, 249.

<sup>78</sup> Åsa Fredell, “Bildbroar: Figurativ bildkommunikation av ideologi och kosmologi under sydsandinavisk bronsålder och förromersk järnålder,” dissertation, University of Gothenburg, 2003.

<sup>79</sup> Johan Ling, *Elevated Rock Art: Towards a Maritime Understanding of Bronze Age Rock Art in Northern Bohuslän, Sweden* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014).

<sup>80</sup> Johan Ling, “War Canoes or Social Units? Human Representation in Rock-Art Ships,” *European Journal of Archaeology* 15.3 (2012): 465–85, 480.

The Nordic Iron Age (500 BC–750 AD) furthers this trend of social stratification, although with several disruptions. By the time of the Viking Age (750–1050), centuries of increasing inequities seem to have led to an equilibrium that let powerful men hoard wives, concubines, and sexual slaves to such an extent that regular men had poor access to the marriage market—unless they somehow could accumulate wealth and reputation. Archaeologists Ben Raffield and Neil Price along with evolutionary anthropologist Mark Collard are among those who believe that the Viking practice of raiding foreign lands for wealth and women was driven by this inequity.<sup>81</sup> Such raids provided tremendous opportunity for social mobility—for men with the right talents. Their wreaking havoc along Europe’s coasts and rivers thus disrupted the social stasis that a bizarre level of inequality had imposed on the Nordic region.

That violently capable commoners could kill enough people to earn even a princess in marriage, if we are to believe the sagas, did not herald a return to Neolithic equality and social sameness. A Nordic class system had formalized social relations. That elites should rule society and control commerce had been institutionalized.<sup>82</sup> Although violent upstarts could go far, which kin group you were born into could still be of enormous consequence. However, as chiefdoms evolved toward kingdoms, the Nordics’ ancient organization around blood relations faced a threat evocative of what the region’s foragers had faced six millennia earlier. When Harald Fairhair unified Norway toward the end of the ninth century, people either had to shift their loyalties from kin-based institutions and submit to proto-feudal rule—or risk annihilation.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard, “Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios and The Viking Phenomenon: An Evolutionary Anthropological Perspective on Late Iron Age Scandinavian Raiding,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 38 (2017): 315–24; James Barrett, “What Caused the Viking Age?” *Antiquity* 82 (2008): 671–85.

<sup>82</sup> Price, *Ancient Scandinavia*, 318.

<sup>83</sup> Harald Fairhair may have been a literary construction; see Shami Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History: Problems and Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Peter H. Sawyer, “Harald Fairhair and the British Isles,” in Régis Boyer, ed., *Les Vikings et leur civilisation: problèmes actuelles* (Paris: De Gruyter, 1976), 105–9.

Informed by the morality into which they had been socialized, such submission felt shameful to many, worse even than death.

By fortunate happenstance—from a tribal perspective—Iceland was discovered by the Norse around the same time. This triggered an exodus of more than 10,000 people before 930, the year colonists established their national assembly, the Althing. By this time, most of the island’s arable land had been settled.<sup>84</sup> Many had left valuable land behind to continue to live in a kinship society without an executive branch. Icelanders still had laws and courts, but verdicts had to be carried out with the help of kin or ad-hoc alliances. Iceland’s large size and remote location allowed this by then anomalous governance to continue for centuries. Most of Europe had come under feudal rule and begun to implement Church MFPs. In the Nordic region, the last Germanic tribes held out. When they, too, converted to Christianity and feudalism around the turn of the millennium, only Iceland remained. The Norwegian king demanded that they adopt the new faith around 1000, but Icelanders were granted a transition period to rid themselves of old beliefs and MFPs. Those who had grown up with Odin and Thor could still sacrifice to Norse gods, as long as they did so out of public view.

By the Sturlung Age (1220–60s), regional strife threatened to throw Icelanders into all-out civil war. Predictably, powerful kin groups had spent the previous centuries consolidating power, yet no faction was dominant enough to seize national control. Voluntary submission under the Norwegian king seemed inevitable—no matter how painful the thought of feudalism was. The saga production, which occurred around this time, is now interpreted to have arisen as a response to this transition.<sup>85</sup> That such literary fecundity—in vernacular prose—could arise from

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<sup>84</sup> Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Bredsdorff, *Chaos & Love: The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, John Tucker, trans. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001), 124–25; Viðar Pálsson, “Heroism,” in Ármann Jakobsson, and Sverrir Jakobsson, eds., *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (London: Routledge, 2017), eBook.

a tiny island community, at this time, has always been a mystery to philologists. Sagas appeared, thrived, and declined; it would take centuries before additional Nordic literature of significance came to life, which necessitates my more creative selection of case studies in chapters 2 and 3. What could have motivated these outpost farmers and fishers, without a single town even, to commit such considerable resources to creating fiction?<sup>86</sup>

One authorial intent behind these feud-ridden narratives seems to be to discredit kinship practices, whose emphasis on honor and revenge threatened to make thirteenth-century Icelandic life impossible. Long after European powers had reorganized to counter the Viking threat, impoverished Nordics, like the Icelanders, had few options for betterment. The island had become barren from settlers cutting down forest, and the Little Ice Age would bring colder climate. Life was already on the margins, so civil war could be catastrophic, worse even than adapting to a new master-narrative. *Gisli's Saga*, perhaps written midway through the Sturlung Age, reads as one of the many literary attempts at convincing Icelanders that olden-days morality must be discarded.<sup>87</sup> Exceptional individuals like Gisli could still be viewed as heroic for accomplishing glorious feats in a foregone era. But as the protagonist accepts that a new environment requires that he no longer uses his extraordinariness to dominate others, instead adapting to the more prosocial tenets of a new story, readers too should realize that it is time to submit to the moral demands of a new Europe. The story breaks with an ethos that had been hegemonic since the Bronze Age.<sup>88</sup> We can therefore interpret *Gisli's Saga*, and the saga oeuvre

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<sup>86</sup> In addition to the creative labor, pre-printing-press saga production required wholesale animal slaughter. A modern editor of *Flateyjarbók*, the largest extant manuscript, notes that 113 calfskins were needed to produce the work's 225 vellum leaves; see *Viking Voyages to North America*, Birthe L. Clausen, ed. (Roskilde: Viking Ship Museum, 1993), 26.

<sup>87</sup> No thirteenth-century manuscripts have survived, so dating a hypothesized original is guesswork based on little hard evidence. For *Gisli's Saga*, the tendency is to point toward mid-century; see Emily Lethbridge, "Dating the Sagas and *Gisla saga Súrssonar*," in Else Mundal, ed., *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013), 77–113, 83.

<sup>88</sup> W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (New York: Macmillan, 1897).

in general, to be the literary launch pad for modern Scandinavia. These works did not have the direct long-term influence on the region that works like *The Decameron* had on the Italian Renaissance. But by deconstructing elitist heroism, *Gisli's Saga* points readers to the egalitarian course that would let the Nordic countries become today's social democracies.

### **Toward a Dataist Future**

In the next chapter, I use the concept of *devoted actor*, from evolutionary psychology, to illuminate Gisli's psyche, which has remained a mystery to saga scholars. His commitment to the sacred values of the previous era makes Gisli sacrifice his own life, a choice that appears driven by the same evolved mechanisms of the human mind that in our present era informs the actions of suicide bombers and revolutionaries.<sup>89</sup> In chapter 2, I argue that Bergman's portrayal of how cognitive systems play out during crisis—individually and socially—aligns with what evolutionary theory predicts. *The Seventh Seal* was inspired by *Death Playing Chess* (1480s), a church mural by Albertus Pictor. After the Plague, medieval Europeans reconsidered their relationship to God, which Pictor visualizes by man no longer feeling powerless against supernatural forces, but locked in a battle of wits against Death himself.

In chapter 3, I analyze court documents (1590) from Norway's most famous witch trial, which plays out like a narrative contest with extraordinary stakes.<sup>90</sup> We normally do not view court proceedings as fiction, but these tales are among the most fantastical of this study. The least convincing storyteller, the rationally-minded widow of Norway's first significant humanist, was burned alive. The Reformation had thrown Europe into a battle between Christian creeds—

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<sup>89</sup> Scott Atran, Hammad Sheikh, and Angel Gomez, "Devoted Actors Sacrifice for Close Comrades and Sacred Cause," *PNAS* 111 (2014): 17702–3.

<sup>90</sup> Olaf Sollied, "Anna Pedersdatters Dom 1590," in *Skrifter* (Bergens historiske forening, 1930), 5–28.

and older folk beliefs too—which drove a witch-hunt with five-digit mortality. I identify the cognitive dispositions that in periods of crisis motivate us to annihilate minorities and outsiders, also today. In chapter 4, Scandinavia’s one-man Enlightenment show, the polymath Ludvig Holberg, warns against Eurocentric universality through the region’s first novel, *Niels Klim’s Underground Travels* (*Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum*, 1741).<sup>91</sup> The psychological-institutional coevolution set in motion by Church MFPs manifested itself in a regime of abstract thought, and a search for universal categories, that blinded European thinkers to the relativity of their unique position. Holberg exemplifies how Nordic Enlightenment is driven by a less elitist, more common-sense ethos that promotes cooperation, altruism, and pragmatism.<sup>92</sup> My reading of his only novel aligns Holberg with historicist Enlightenment critics like Giambattista Vico and Johann Herder, although with an important distinction. I argue that Holberg is a biocultural thinker, too, grounding his case for gender and racial equality in our shared human nature.

In chapter 5, I read *Hunger* through the framework of Morality-as-Cooperation to argue against the novel ending in tragedy.<sup>93</sup> When Paul Auster concludes that Hamsun’s protagonist “arrives at nothing,” this only makes sense from the perspective of the God story he leaves behind.<sup>94</sup> An evolutionary perspective shows how the protagonist triumphs in the climax sequence by adapting to the urban morality of secular humanism and free-market capitalism. In chapter 6, I argue that *Ingeborg Holm* (1913) was able to become the first work in cinematic history to cause verifiable social change because the silent film aligns its thematic argument with

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<sup>91</sup> Ludvig Holberg, *The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground* [*Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum*] (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2004 [1741/5]).

<sup>92</sup> Nina Witoszek and Øystein Sørensen, “Nordic Humanism as a Driver of the Welfare Society,” in Witoszek and Atle Midttun, eds., *Sustainable Modernity: The Nordic Model and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 36–58, 39.

<sup>93</sup> Oliver Scott Curry, “Morality as Cooperation: A Problem-Centred Approach,” in Todd K. Shackelford, and Ranald D. Hansen, eds., *The Evolution of Morality* (New York: Springer, 2016), 27–51; Oliver Scott Curry, Daniel Austin Mullins, and Harvey Whitehouse, “Is It Good to Cooperate? Testing the Theory of Morality-as-Cooperation in 60 Societies,” *Current Anthropology* 6.1 (2019): 47–69.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Auster, *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 20.

Lutheran morals.<sup>95</sup> Victor Sjöström’s early narrative masterpiece motivated Swedes to use new economic prosperity to fulfill centuries-old preference for poverty relief.<sup>96</sup> A scholarly argument has evolved since the 1990s that posits that social democracy is best understood as a secularized form of Lutheranism, the Nordic region’s Protestant creed.<sup>97</sup> There was a coevolution between Lutheranism and its environment that complicates causal claims,<sup>98</sup> but my reading of *Ingeborg Holm* supports that four centuries of Lutheran thinking influenced the social democratic story.

In chapter 7, *Under the North Star* illustrates how the twentieth century turned into a battleground between humanist creeds: liberalism, socialism, and fascism. The trilogy chronicles a family of dirt-poor tenant farmers who are pulled into the currents of history from 1884 to the 1950s. This hugely popular work, heralded as modern Finland’s origin story, was commonly read to have a socialist moral center. I argue that the trilogy’s ending, after more than a thousand pages of intermittent catastrophe, makes a clear case for the virtues of social democracy. This is the ethos that after World War II finally unites class-divided Finns. After four decades of suppressed debate concerning their Civil War, *Under the North Star* tore open old wounds in a way that let Finns discuss their way to cultural reconciliation. The trilogy became one of literary history’s most directly influential works. Two pairs of film adaptations (1968–70; 2009–10) exemplify how fiction helps communities negotiate consensus around new truths.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *Ingeborg Holm*, Victor Sjöström, dir. (Sweden, 1913).

<sup>96</sup> Erik Hedling, “Förord: Nils Krok, Victor Sjöström och *Ingeborg Holm*,” in Nils Krok, *Ingeborg Holm* (Umeå: Atrium, 2008), 5–11.

<sup>97</sup> Nelson, *Lutheranism*.

<sup>98</sup> Rasmus Broms and Bo Rothstein, “Religion and Institutional Quality: Long-Term Effects of the Financial Systems in Protestantism and Islam,” *Comparative Politics* 52.3 (2020): 433–54.

<sup>99</sup> *Here, Beneath the North Star* [*Täällä Pohjantähden alla*], Edvin Laine, dir. (Finland, 1968); *Akseli and Elina* [*Akseli ja Elina*], Edvin Laine, dir. (Finland, 1970); *Under the North Star* [*Täällä Pohjantähden alla*], Timo Koivusalo, dir. (Finland, 2009); *Under the North Star II* [*Täällä Pohjantähden alla II*], Timo Koivusalo, dir. (Finland, 2010).

In chapter 8, I offer a new perspective on *The Story of a Crime* (*Roman om ett brott*, 1965–75). This crime fiction decalogy birthed the Nordic noir genre.<sup>100</sup> I use the Core Design Principles (CDPs) of Elinor Ostrom, the 2009 Nobel winner in economics, to argue that social democracy is successful because such governance adheres to evolutionary universals for group efficacy at all levels of social organization.<sup>101</sup> In the 2010s, this hypothesis was explored by the Evolution Institute in collaboration with top Nordic scholars, and my literary criticism aligns with their conclusions.<sup>102</sup> The ten-novel story arc offers an analysis of what threatens the Swedish *People's Home* that maps quite impressively on top of Ostrom's CDPs. A 1993 film adaptation of the third novel, *The Man on the Balcony* (*Mannen på balkongen*), illustrates how Nordic noir drew wide population segments into a continuous debate on how social democracy should evolve in order to counter internal and external threat.<sup>103</sup>

In chapter 9, *101 Reykjavik* offers a postmodern example of how the social democratic ethos encourages pragmatic reassessment of its own tenets. With neoliberal globalization, many a eulogy was offered for social democracy.<sup>104</sup> A renegotiated narrative let the region enter the new millennium with vigor. In chapter 10, I engage our present era's challenges, those of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. *Real Humans* (2012–14) dramatizes the threat of artificial intelligence through android servants, human-like robots with beyond-human capabilities. The Swedish protagonist family responds to the android challenge by crafting their own posthumanist meta-narrative. They build on social democratic values like inclusivity, individual dignity, and

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<sup>100</sup> Maj Sjöwall, and Per Wahlöö, *The Story of a Crime* [*Roman om ett brott*] (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1965–75).

<sup>101</sup> Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," *American Economic Review* 100.3 (2010): 641–72.

<sup>102</sup> Nina Witoszek and Atle Midttun, eds., *Sustainable Modernity: The Nordic Model and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>103</sup> *The Man on the Balcony* [*Mannen på balkongen*], Daniel Alfredson, dir. (Sweden, 1993).

<sup>104</sup> Robert Geyer, Christine Ingebritsen, and Jonathon W. Moses, eds., *Globalization, Europeanization and the End of Scandinavian Social Democracy?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).



generous time for leisure. The British remake, *Humans* (2015–18), and the Chinese remake, *Hello, An-Yi* (你好, 安怡, 2021–), exemplify how nations carry distinct cultural baggage that motivates different narrative adaptations to novelty and threat.<sup>105</sup> The Swedish and British series align their thematic argument with what Harari posits as humanity’s next master-narrative: *dataism*. I make a case for how new technology—for both storytelling and governance—could facilitate a dataist creed of *algorithmic universality*. This Nordic-inspired ontology could usher in a golden age for humanity; at least, this is how such a brave, new world could be assessed from a dataist perspective. From a humanist perspective, a world of algorithmic universality could appear more like a hellscape of totalitarian surveillance and morbid infantilization.

These ten criticisms illustrate the Nordic path to modernity and beyond. They align to explain the cultural origins of social democracy, which, I argue, is the narrative that has brought its adherents furthest along the path that Church MFPs opened up seventeen centuries ago. Freed from kin networks, Europeans had to fend for themselves in a transforming world. That this process underpinned modernity is a hypothesis strengthened by more than half a century of scholarly investigation.<sup>106</sup> Modernization has been an evolution toward ever more individual independence, the unintended teleology of the new MFPs. A common view has been that liberal humanism is the most effective narrative for optimizing individual freedom. I argue against this;

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<sup>105</sup> *Humans*, Sam Vincent and Jonathan Brackley, creators (Channel 4/AMC, 2015–18); *Hello, An-Yi* [你好, 安怡], Roland Moore, head writer (Tencent, 2021–).

<sup>106</sup> Henrich’s 2020 magnum opus has persuaded most critics, but more research needs to be conducted on the specifics of his claims; see Alberto Acerbi, “Henrich, Joseph. 2020,” *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 5.1 (2021): 91–95; G. David Johnson, “Joseph Henrich,” *International Sociology* 36.5 (2021): 780–82; Tanya Marie Luhrmann, “Varieties of Experience,” *The American Scholar* Autumn (2020): 124–25; Benedikt Koehler, “*The WEIRDest People in the World*,” *Economic Affairs* 41.1 (2021): 188–90; Jane Shaw Stroup, “Another Reason Why the West Is Rich,” *Regulation* 44 (2021): 48–50. Others deny the possibility of such generalization; see William James Earle, “Critical Review: Some Remarks on Joseph Henrich’s *The WEIRDest People in the World*,” *The Philosophical Forum* 52 (2021): 263–72; Daniel A. Segal, “Fortune Favors the Fortunate: How the West Got So WEIRD,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 November 2020, 34. So far, none have been able to effectively challenge Henrich’s conclusions, although his thesis “is still being vetted by the scientific community”; Christopher Levenick, “*The WEIRDest People in the World*,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 October 2020, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/weirdest-people-world-review-marriage-story/docview/2448010002/se-2?accountid=14512>.

social democracy manifests modernity in its most idealized form. The Nordics' large-government, high-taxation model does not ultimately hinder individual freedom; it makes meaningful freedom possible for more individuals in a given population.<sup>107</sup> Historian Lars Trägårdh's concept of *statist individualism* accounts for how the Nordic Model allows Scandinavians not only greater freedom from kin, but from parents, employers, and spouses.<sup>108</sup> Algorithmic universality would go further, allowing individuals influence over their own environment in a manner that humanism and nation-states never could.

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<sup>107</sup> Sakari Hänninen, Kirsi-Marja Lehtelä, and Paula Saikkonen, "Introduction: The Nordic Welfare State as a State of Civilization," in Hänninen, Lehtelä, and Saikkonen, eds., *The Relational Nordic Welfare State: Between Utopia and Ideology* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 1–14, 4–5.

<sup>108</sup> Lars Trägårdh, "Statist Individualism: On the Culturality of the Nordic Welfare State," in Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, eds., *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 253–85; Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, "Social Trust and Radical Individualism: The Paradox at the Heart of Nordic Capitalism," in *Nordic Way: Equality, Individuality and Social Trust* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute, 2012), 13–29.

## 1. Christianity: From Kinship to Community

The protagonist in *Gisli's Saga* is a man born too late. Had he been born earlier in the Viking Age, or in the Iron or Bronze Ages, the exceptionally tall, strong, strategic, and capable Gisli would have represented what the ethos of those eras upheld as ideal. He appears born for elitist heroics with literary roots back to Achilles.<sup>1</sup> Such a genetically superior specimen would have been a boon to any kin group. Fewer would dare insult your honor, woo your sister, or steal your property if you could call on Gisli to settle scores. Admittedly, in the mid-tenth century, too, the rural Norway Gisli grows up in is a place of honor and duels to the death. His saga begins, as many sagas do, by dramatizing how much worse things used to be. "At the end of the days of Harald Fairhair," the story commences, then heads straight for the social dysfunction that still mires the land despite its recent conversion to proto-feudal rule.

A berserk roams the countryside with twelve accomplices, "listed into the houses of men, and took away their wives and daughters, and kept them with him as long as he liked."<sup>2</sup> He murders Gisli's uncle in order to take his wife, but Gisli's other uncle revenge-kills the berserk.<sup>3</sup> One generation later, the threat to kinship honor appears less violent: Gisli's sister Thordis associates with suitors in an unbecoming manner. Her father demands that Gisli solves the problem in accordance to their age-old, murderous honor code. Gisli at first resists, preferring a cooperative approach to the suitor. Readers are led to think that the feudal era already has begun

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<sup>1</sup> Ker, *Epic and Romance*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Story of Gisli the Outlaw*, George Webbe Dasent, trans. (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1866), eBook, chapter 1. For the Norwegian prelude, I cite Dasent's translation of the S-version of the saga but with modernized spelling.

<sup>3</sup> Historical berserks were likely elite warriors and bodyguards. In the sagas, they often embody the most socially disruptive aspects of warriors during peace; see Roderick T. D. Dale, "*Berserker: A Re-Examination of the Phenomenon in Literature and Life*," dissertation, University of Nottingham, 2014.

to effect young people's psyche. The father finds this cultural evolution ignoble, accusing Gisli and his brother Thorkel of having "little or no feeling of honor."<sup>4</sup>

Still convinced that *quid pro quo* is the way to go, Gisli offers the suitor an arrangement to everyone's benefit. What transpires shows that Gisli is born too early, as well; he is a man perennially stuck between epochs. The young Gisli has adapted to the ethos of a new era, but not everyone has. When the suitor quips, "the words of the weak are little worth," Gisli steps toward the domineering he appears born for. His response is evocative of Bruce Banner, the Hulk's alter ego, "I am afraid that we shall not like it, if you are bent on being cross-grained." I read the "we" as Gisli sensing that human nature—in this case his—can play out in a win-win manner in the right environment, while quite differently when others are not committed to cooperate—to everyone's detriment. Such avantgarde musings do not impress Gisli's father who adheres to the kinship mentality of us versus them. He belittles his too-modern son, "It is hard to learn, when one is old, that one has sons who have no more manly thoughts than women had in olden times."

Gisli pleads with the suitor again, gets rejected by him twice, then finally draws sword; "One stroke was more than enough." He may have thought he was out, like Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* trilogy, but kin bonds pull him back in. Gisli seems transformed by the kill; he coldly mocks his own distressed brother who witnessed the slaying. The murder triggers a feud of morbid mortality. Gisli axe-chops the leg off of another one of Thordis's suitors, which motivates fifty of the victim's kin and allies to torch Gisli's family farm. Thirty people burn. Predictably, Gisli torches an enemy's homestead with everyone inside. The thirteenth-century saga author gives the impression that under a regime of kinship honor, mere flirting can lead to

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<sup>4</sup> *The Story of Gisli*, chapter 2.

burned-down homes and dozens of gruesome murders.<sup>5</sup> Even someone as prosocially inclined as Gisli cannot help but give in to the violent urges of our human nature once feud is unleashed and there is no strong administrative authority to restrain emotions.

Clearly, Gisli is no longer a man of the new era. Neither can he return to who he was, not in the context of the kinship society that only slowly will dissolve in Norway. The superior young man instead embarks on a Viking expedition. The author solidifies Gisli's new psyche through an intense acculturation process that taps into innate kin loyalty, in addition to the narrative of tribal religion, in order to forge a loyalty between *lið* members similar to that between close kin. Ancient DNA shows that such war bands could be recruited from a wide geographical era. The story that united a Viking *lið* thus had to overcome ethnic, cultural, and linguistic barriers.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this part of *Gisli's Saga* is lost in a lacuna.<sup>7</sup> To explain Gisli's even extremer psyche when he returns, we can extrapolate from what we know about Viking warrior bands.

The *lið* was a ship-borne troop sworn to a leader responsible for feeding, equipping, and rewarding his warriors. A ninth-century source refers to such bands as “brotherhoods.”<sup>8</sup> Oath-taking, shared material culture, and group-specific ideology facilitated strong ingroup cohesion, which under mortal threat and trauma could evolve into *identity fusion*—a visceral sense of being united with one's group.<sup>9</sup> Not only would the *lið*'s defining traits then be experienced as part of

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<sup>5</sup> For ease of communication, I assign authorial intent to the thirteenth-century saga author(s). We do not know which parts of the story carry on from an oral tradition or were altered through a later process of rewriting/transcribing.

<sup>6</sup> Ashot Margaryan et al., “Population Genomics of the Viking World,” *Nature* 585 (2020): 390–96.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the missing manuscript pages, see Emily Lethbridge, “*Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Textual Variation, Editorial Constructions and Critical Interpretations,” in Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge, eds. *Creating the Medieval Saga* (Odense: Univ. Press of Southern Denmark, 2010), 123–52, 130.

<sup>8</sup> The *Annals of St-Bertin*, J. L. Nelson, trans. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 95–96.

<sup>9</sup> See Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard, “Ingroup Identification, Identity Fusion and the Formation of Viking War Wands,” *World Archaeology* 48 (2015): 35–50. Raffield et al. rely on archeological data and saga sources to reconstruct Viking practices in terms of material culture, social composition, and rituals for fostering in-group cohesion, such as the oath-taking in *Gisli's Saga*.

the group member's concept of self, but warrior brothers could feel as close as kin, or closer.<sup>10</sup>

The resulting psychological makeup, writes Raffield et al., would motivate members “to incur a personal cost to benefit their group and to stay faithful to their group when it is imperiled.”<sup>11</sup>

This phenomenon is common within fighting groups under prolonged mortal threat. Such loyalty can be further strengthened by seducing *lið* members with a story that, even until death, can remain more compelling than society's master-narrative. Transcultural studies show that when identify-fused groups unite around a story with *sacred values*, members can become *devoted actors*. These actors show an exceptional willingness to sacrifice themselves for their group, or its sacred values, even long after the group has disbanded. Such *parochial altruism* is hypothesized to be informed by “an evolutionary rationale to make costly sacrifices for the group to which one belongs in an effort to beat rival out-groups in the competition for survival and dominance.”<sup>12</sup> Vikings thus gained a battle advantage against groups with members more concerned with individual preservation. Likely, such story-motivated altruism evolved over tens of thousands of years after our forager ancestors developed their capacity for fiction. War-like activities throughout the genus *Homo*'s history, and prior to that too, are hypothesized to have shaped human psychology through evolutionary pressures on individual and group levels.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For devoted actor theory, see Scott Atran and Jeremy Ginges, “Religious and Sacred Imperatives in Human Conflict,” *Science* 336 (2012): 855–87; Jeremy Ginges et al., “Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution of Violent Political Conflict,” *PNAS* 104 (2007): 7357–60; William W. Swann et al., “What Makes a Group Worth Dying for? Identity Fusion Fosters Perception of Familial Ties, Promoting Self-Sacrifice,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106 (2014): 912–26; Harvey Whitehouse et al., “Brothers in Arms: Libyan Revolutionaries Bond Like Family,” *PNAS* 111 (2014): 17783–85.

<sup>11</sup> Raffield et al., “Ingroup identification,” 37.

<sup>12</sup> Hammad Sheikh et al., “The Devoted Actor as Parochial Altruist: Sectarian Morality, Identity Fusion, and Support for Costly Sacrifices,” *Clodynamics* 5 (2014): 24.

<sup>13</sup> Lei Chang et al., “The Face That Launched a Thousand Ships: The Mating-Warring Association in Men,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37 (2011): 976–84; Luke Glowacki, Michael L. Wilson, and Richard W. Wrangham, “The Evolutionary Anthropology of War,” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2017); Mark van Vugt, “The Male Warrior Hypothesis: The Evolutionary Psychology of Intergroup Conflict, Tribal Aggression, and Warfare,” in Todd K. Shackelford and Viviana A. Weekes-Shackelford, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Perspectives on Violence, Homicide, and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 291–300.

Viking bands appear to have tapped into these evolved features of the human mind quite effectively. If Gisli, despondent after being drawn into feud, experienced identify fusion with his Viking *lið*—and internalized heroism of the elitist, domineering kind as a sacred value—this increases the likelihood of his psychology having become similar to what we see with today’s devoted actors among terrorists, revolutionaries, and certain criminal groups. His emotional responses would then promote (1) increased mistrust and conflict with outgroups, (2) unconditional commitment toward values and comrades, even beyond that toward kin, (3) a feeling of *special destiny*, and (4) a willingness to sacrifice his own life for a real or abstract group and for the values that define this group.

### **Accessing Medieval Mental Worlds**

When Gisli returns, his family stands ready to leave Norway to avoid further feud by settling on Iceland. Gisli insists on first hunting down more of those who torched their farm. They slay fifteen people, five of whom fall by Gisli’s hand. Yet this Norse Achilles is not done; he leads his men to their enemies’ farm where Gisli chops the head off a man, and then his raiding band “behaved as much like enemies as they could.”<sup>14</sup> The collaborative negotiator who suffered his father’s accusations of feminine behavior has had his psychological makeup transformed. In the brutal environment of what de facto is still a kinship society, even the best of men can become monstrous; in this case, a devoted actor who feels entitled to revenge-slay beyond what a third party would assess to be reasonable—because Gisli’s martial superiority allows him to do so.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Story of Gisli*, chapter 3.

We can, of course, question whether it makes sense to apply evolutionary frameworks to sagas or other fictional accounts of questionable veracity.<sup>15</sup> Evolutionary literary critics do not concern themselves primarily with fiction as a representation of historical fact, but as a cultural tool for adaptation and a window into the minds of those among whom a literary work arose. Naturally, he/she or those who wrote, rewrote, or transcribed *Gisli's Saga* had never heard of devoted actors; capable storytellers intuit human nature without creating the frameworks that scholars do. In a 1995 evolutionary saga study, Dunbar et al. write that while

the accuracy of the sagas will always remain in doubt, our real interest lies in the way people think about the social worlds they inhabit. We may assume that their literature, however fictional it may be, reflects their parochial interests, desires, and hopes. At worst, then, we can use the sagas to ask whether or not the [saga authors] constructed their mental worlds in accordance with the principles of evolutionary biology. It seems that they did.<sup>16</sup>

In Iceland, Gisli gets a chance to reembrace the collaborative ethos of his younger self. His parents die and with them so does symbolically the old country's honor code. Iceland is still a kinship society with Norse beliefs, but Christian faith and institutions are seeping into the region. Gisli, Thorkel, and Thordis marry locals and build valuable alliances. All seems set for prosperous idyll, until Gisli attempts to ensure continued idyll through a swearing of allegiance that, where he came from, had been a common practice that extended kinship-like bonds to a Viking *lið* or other allies. At the time, Iceland was split among a few dozen chieftains (*goðar*)

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<sup>15</sup> Saga scholarship has failed to provide hard evidence or consensus in respect to the oral origins of Gisli's story or the historical veracity of Gisli himself. Archaeological and other findings have proven aspects of related sagas to be remarkably precise; see Jesse Byock, "Egil's Bones," *Scientific American* January (1995): 82–87. It may be that Gisli Surrson was a historical figure, a violently capable Norwegian who joined the Norse diaspora to Iceland in the mid-tenth century. Another hypothesis is that Gisli was modelled after Áróf Hjórléifsson (c. 1200–55), one of the thirteenth century's most famous warriors, according to *Arons saga Hjórléifssonar*; see Sverrir Tómasson, "Old Icelandic Prose," in Daisy Neijmann, ed., *A History of Icelandic Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 2006), 64–173, 127–28.

<sup>16</sup> Robin I. M. Dunbar, Amanda Clark, and Nicola L. Hurst, "Conflict and Cooperation Among the Vikings: Contingent Behavioral Decisions," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 16.3 (1995): 233–46, 245. For another evolutionary approach to sagas, see Markel Palmstierna et al., "Family Counts: Deciding When to Murder Among the Icelandic Vikings," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 38 (2017): 175–80.



whom people submitted to voluntarily.<sup>17</sup> Gisli's chieftain, Thorgrim, stops Gisli's elaborate ritual, which includes a spear and a mixing of blood and soil. The local knows that such practices are a poorer fit for Iceland's "great village" experiment. If they were to continue free of feudalism, they had to minimize the number of people with whom they forged uncompromising obligation.<sup>18</sup> For kin groups and marauding Vikings, all-for-one could be adaptive. Among socially and economically scheming farmers, a more discriminate approach was preferable, especially on a barren island in the North Atlantic with complex demands for agricultural coexistence.

Those whose swearing of allegiance was interrupted are later pulled into a feud triggered by romantic jealousy. When Gisli's brother-in-law gets murdered by Thorgrim, Gisli is torn between the old code of Germanic honor and the new code of proto-democratic Iceland's legal system. Both motivate revenge but through different means. Gisli attempts to play by the new rules, subduing his own impulses toward elitist heroism. He also lacks certainty in respect to the murderer's identity—until Thorgrim gives himself away after Gisli tackles him hard in a ball game. As Gisli's social superior, the chieftain expects few consequences from his continued gleeful behavior while hinting at his own guilt. Gisli's Bronze Age mindset gets the better of him; he reverts to his former ethos and kills Thorgrim without due process—he too with nocturnal stealth, leaving little evidence.

So far, the saga adheres to the logic of feud and psychological expectation.<sup>19</sup> If Gisli could only keep quiet, Icelandic law would protect him. At the story's midpoint, Gisli gives

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<sup>17</sup> According to one attempted chronology of saga events, Gisli's failed swearing of allegiance would have occurred in 960; see *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas*, Anthony Faulkes, ed. (London: Everyman, 2001), x. In the mid-960s, the Althing fixed the number of *goðar* at 48; see Jesse Byock, "The Icelandic Althing: Dawn of Parliamentary Democracy," in J. M. Fladmark, ed., *Heritage & Identity: Shaping the Nations of the North* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1–18, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Byock, *Medieval Iceland*.

<sup>19</sup> Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

himself away in a manner that has never made sense to saga scholars. He admits the murder to his sister Thordis who had been Thorgrim's wife. She betrays her own blood by sharing the confession with her new husband, Thorgrim's brother. Gisli thus causes his own outlawry, which—since he is unwilling to flee Iceland—will eventually ensure his death. Theodore Andersson finds Gisli to be “strangely uncomprehending” toward his brother Thorkel and with “no appreciation of the wrongs [Gisli] has done” to their sister Thordis.<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Turco calls the confession “one of the saga's most perplexing episodes.”<sup>21</sup> He suggests that “gender-bending” could be a key concept for illuminating both the “psychological mystery” of Gisli's confession and “the structure of enigma” inherent in the saga. After applying his theoretical framework, Turco concludes that the protagonist's confession remains enigmatic.

Other scholars read incestuous and homosexual motivations into the text in order to explain Gisli's irrational behavior.<sup>22</sup> David Clark finds that Gisli's spearing of Thorgrim “clearly carries a sexual resonance” and that the intimate bond between Gisli and his brother-in-law fits into “the homosexual dynamics of the saga.”<sup>23</sup> Like Turco, Clark finds that his approach does not provide satisfying answers. In an attempt to understand Gisli's behavior, Christopher Crocker investigates the conflict between Germanic and Christian beliefs, which structures the remaining half of the saga. In this part of the narrative, the saga author makes a case for the necessity of not being stuck in a bygone era. Ultimately, Crocker is unable to draw “a readable map of [Gisli's] psyche.” He points to how if this was possible to do, it would more directly address

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<sup>20</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas, 1180-1280* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 81.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Turco, “Gender, Violence, and the ‘Enigma’ of *Gisla saga*,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 115.3 (2016): 277–98, 278.

<sup>22</sup> David Clark, “Revisiting *Gisla saga*: Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106 (2007): 492–515; Hermann Pálsson, “Death in Autumn: Tragic Elements in Early Icelandic Fiction,” *BONIS* 1973 (1974): 7–39.

<sup>23</sup> Clark, “Revisiting,” 513–14.

the tensions that pervade the saga and bring to light the internal conflict that informs the overall narrative than the traditional religious reading; that is, Gisli's struggle to correlate his own motives and actions with those of his family and with the consequences that he suffers on account of them.<sup>24</sup>

The devoted actor framework, I argue, provides such a “readable map.” When Gisli admits his guilt to his sister, he seems driven by a sense of moral superiority. He had suppressed his Viking code to fit in, but feud triggers a stepwise return to those values that earned him glorious revenge in Norway. When his sister and brother prove unwilling to unconditionally support Gisli, he feels that he is the only Surr left to embody those values he holds sacred. Increasingly seduced by his own sense of superiority and special destiny, Gisli views Thordis as being too beguiled by her husband’s wealth—to the detriment of her honor: “My sister, too taken with her fine clothes, lacks the firm-rooted spirit of Gudrun . . . who killed her husband with undaunted courage to avenge her brave brothers.”<sup>25</sup>

This opposition between kin and one’s nuclear family is key to the Church MFPs, which saga authors to an exceptional degree seem motivated to promote.<sup>26</sup> In *Gisli’s Saga* in particular, marriage entails loyalty while kinship spells trouble. Throughout the narrative that remains, only Aud, Gisli’s wife, unwaveringly stands by his side. When Gisli expects that his sister should act with similar kin loyalty as that of the legendary Gudrun of the Völsungs, he has reverted to the heroic code of an environment far removed from Icelandic reality. The Norse Achilles places himself above his community to such an extent that they can ill afford to let him continue as part of it. There was a time, not long ago, when superior individuals could be protectors of their

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Crocker, “All I Do the Whole Night Through: On the Dreams of Gísli Súrsson,” *Scandinavian Studies* 84.2 (2012): 143–62, 160.

<sup>25</sup> *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, chapter 19. After the Norwegian prelude, I cite Regal’s translation of the M-version of the saga. For why I cite both S and M-versions, see Mads Larsen, “Evolutionary Insights into a Maladapted Viking in *Gísla saga*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 120.3 (2021): 302–25, 304, note 11.

<sup>26</sup> Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard, “Polygyny, Concubinage, and the Social Lives of Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 13 (2017): 165–209.

community and bringers of wealth from successful raiding or war. Iceland has no external enemies, and raiding opportunities are not what they used to be. The expanding Church not only makes former raid victims fellow Christians, but offers a Jesus morality in direct competition, an antithesis almost, to upholding the violently superior individual as heroic.

Patricia Morgan points to the conflict between egalitarianism and the elitist domineering that had been promoted by the millennia-long heroic literary tradition. The hero's single-minded approach to life, she writes, expresses itself in how as the typical hero "lived out his often brief but always glorious life, his society functioned rather like a Greek chorus as it approved, admired or questioned his actions."<sup>27</sup> This heroic ideal could only be fulfilled by the most talented or the most dedicated to a cause. For warriors in mortal combat, such beliefs could sooth anxiety and motivate efforts that increased one's chance at survival—or at least the survival of one's group. Because an individual's heroic sacrifice could provide fitness benefits for the individual's peers, these beneficiaries often rewarded such heroism with status, coalitional loyalty, and increased reproductive opportunities.<sup>28</sup> In particular during times of war, the heroic creed finds cultural resonance. Farmers who struggle more with poor soil and deforestation are, understandably, less likely to be appreciative of heroic single-mindedness.

### **The Long Road to Feudalism**

Gisli spends thirteen years on the run as an outlaw, increasingly drawn to a glorious finale. The author makes the devoted actor's journey toward death be about a transition from Germanic to Christian values. In the sagas, Thomas Bredsdorff reads such a focus on faith to be a literary

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<sup>27</sup> Patricia G. Morgan, "Norse Heroic Tradition and the *Íslendingasögur*: A Contextual Analysis of the Ethos of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*," dissertation, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1983, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Glowacki, Wilson, and Wrangham, "The Evolutionary Anthropology of War."

device for promoting the final step from kinship society to feudalism, which Icelanders submitted to in 1262. He reads Gisli's period, that of Christianization around 1000, to symbolize 1262 "if these two dates can be permitted to stand as convenient abbreviations for the entire complex of transition [to] the new, hoped-for, Christian society . . . in which conflicts are no longer resolved by the individuals involved, but from above."<sup>29</sup>

That a transition between master-narratives should take centuries may sound excessive. Christianity took hold among Norse merchants and elites around Gisli's time. Yet among some commoners, Norse religion held out until the twelfth century and certain kinship practices even longer.<sup>30</sup> The Neolithic transition lasted for more than a millennium. Many Scandinavian foragers seem not to have adapted until they were chased east and had no other choice.<sup>31</sup> It took centuries before the humanism of fourteenth-century Italy led to religious humanism becoming hegemonic in the West. The turn to secular humanism required additional centuries. These transitions take time, which is why the rapid onset of our present era's Fourth Industrial Revolution seems so perilous to many. For dramatic purposes, *Gisli's Saga* stages the Christian/feudal transition as similarly rapid, through a conflict between two characters in Gisli's dreams: one good woman and one bad. Andersson calls the saga the first "to explore a psychological fissure and thus to make the vagaries of human nature the real center of the tale."<sup>32</sup>

Some scholars read both voices "as amalgamations of Christian and Scandinavian traditions [while some propose] that the good dream woman is more closely affiliated with the Christian tradition whereas her evil counterpart has more of a Germanic religious background."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bredsdorff, *Chaos & Love*, 124–25.

<sup>30</sup> Eljas Orrman, "Church and Society," in Knut Helle, ed., *Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, v. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 421–62, 455.

<sup>31</sup> Malmström et al., "Ancient DNA."

<sup>32</sup> Andersson, *The Growth*, 84

<sup>33</sup> P. S. Langeslag, "The Dream Women of *Gisla saga*," *Scandinavian Studies* 81 (2009): 47–72.

Crocker views the women not as religious representations, but psychological manifestations. The good one represents “Gisli's self-assurance that his actions, as determined by his code of honor, are justified [while] his bad dream-woman is the unconscious manifestation of his own self-doubt.”<sup>34</sup> Henrich’s concept of psychological-institutional coevolution offers a perspective for which religion and psychology interact: Gisli must transform psychologically to fulfill the requirements of a new master-narrative. During his final years on the margins of Iceland’s expansive, inhospitable geography, he must meet the challenge from his good dream woman. She wants him (a) to stop following his old faith, (b) not to kill first or provoke others to fight, and (c) “be kind to the deaf and the lame and the poor and the helpless.”<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, Gisli had long since converted to Christianity for commercial purposes. Already the ancient Greeks and Romans tapped into evolved features of the human mind to keep merchants honest. Commercial contracts often had to be signed “under sacred oath in the name of particular gods” with assumed risk of supernatural punishment.<sup>36</sup> Christian trading fraternities were a medieval adaptation of such practices, one Gisli encountered on a trip to Denmark. The narration conveys that conversion “was common in those days for all who went on trading voyages; for so they entered into full fellowship with Christian men.”<sup>37</sup> At that time, Gisli merely stopped sacrificing to Norse gods. Now, he must embody the Christian ethos while chased by inferior men out to kill him for bounty.

As Gisli ingeniously escapes these men, time and time again, he meets the Christian challenge. Instead of glorious slaughter, he chooses guile and avoidance. Instead of honorably engaging in battle, he once pretends to suffer from intellectual disability to escape capture. When

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<sup>34</sup> Crocker, “All I Do,” 160.

<sup>35</sup> *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, chapter 22.

<sup>36</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

<sup>37</sup> *The Story of Gisli*, chapter 5.

he eventually kills, it is because he must in order to escape more than a dozen men. Earlier, Gisli sacrificed a slave to save himself. Now, he gives two gold rings to free two slaves who assist him. He hands the last possessions he carries, a knife and belt, to a farmer who helps him. While these actions attest to Gisli's commitment to change the moral content of his heroics, he understands that his emotions threaten this transformation. The moral programming that he underwent in Norway and the *lið* is embodied by his bad dream woman. He tells his wife, "That woman in my dreams takes all my joy, it seems. As I fall asleep, she appears, and comes to me besmeared hideously in human blood, and washes me in gory flood."<sup>38</sup>

The bad woman represents his past. The good who "swore she would heal me" promises a "a soft resting place [with] wealth . . . dominion over [her and] riches beyond gold's measure."<sup>39</sup> How this fiction of a reward in the afterlife convinces Gisli to help the meek attests to how the Christian ethos broke with a more elitist past. "Sincere belief in supernatural moralistic punishers," writes Peter Turchin, "is particularly important because of the way it can restrain the powerful."<sup>40</sup> Gisli's restraint toward bounty hunters and his altruism toward the "poor and the helpless" attest to his successful transformation. Intriguingly, he becomes no less of a devoted actor. Similar to the way in which his sister's lack of support dumbfounded Gisli, he is too blinded by his own sense of destiny to understand why his brother will not tie his destiny to Gisli's. Bredsdorff concludes, "To Gisli's either-or mentality this is incomprehensible."<sup>41</sup> For a devoted actor who holds group unity and self-sacrifice to be sacred values, Thorkel's well-adapted sense of self-preservation is like blasphemy. Gisli's last words to his brother are: "We

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<sup>38</sup> *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, chapter 24.

<sup>39</sup> *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, chapter 30.

<sup>40</sup> Turchin, *Ultrasociety*.

<sup>41</sup> Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love*, 70.

take our leave of each other now on worse terms than we ought and will never see each other again. But know this. I would never have treated you as you have treated me.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Same Violence, New Justification**

Gisli’s nuclear family—he and his wife—approaches his last stand together. Aud has been as courageous and single-minded as he has, rejecting bribes and ignoring threats, resorting to violence and doing all she can to help her outlaw husband. Clearly, in this smaller unit Icelanders should invest their trust. Fifteen men follow the couple to a ridge. Aud awaits with a large club—Gisli with axe, sword, and shield. The battle is not about adhering to the new ethos; Gisli has already (a) stopped following his old faith, (b) ceased to initiate battle, and (c) shown kindness to the weak. Perhaps surprisingly, what ensues is all about glory, how heroically superior Gisli can prove himself to be against a much larger force. But what will another mass slaughter mean to Gisli—what does he hope to achieve?

Clark sees a hero guilt-ridden over past slayings, tired of being a heroic outlaw, longing to be part of a community, yet who at this point knows he “has gone too far to go back.”<sup>43</sup> Viðar Pálsson views Gisli as being so superior that he belongs not among farmers, but in Eddic poetry, a paradox of which “Gisli seems curiously conscious.”<sup>44</sup> This self-importance lets Gisli enter his final battle with calm and purpose. My reading suggests that Gisli intends to show that fighting for Christian values makes a warrior like him no weaker, that the same glorious, violent devotion can be directed to all sacred values. His actions may not be what Jesus would do, but for a former Viking they are as close as his emotions allow. Gisli’s decision attests to how when

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<sup>42</sup> *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, chapter 24.

<sup>43</sup> Clark, “Revisiting,” 514.

<sup>44</sup> Pálsson, “Heroism.”



*Homo sapiens* transitions between master-narratives, if circumstance permits, our first adaptations tend to build strongly on previous practices that are still dear to us; in Gisli's case, to use his superior physicality to slaughter a whole bunch of people for what he believes in.

The rational yet homicidal ambiguity Clark reads into the protagonist could illuminate Gisli's psyche at a deeper level. But that Gisli knows he has been mistaken all along, yet "has gone too far" to act in accordance with such an insight finds thin support in the saga itself. Pálsson's take on Gisli's Eddic-heroic self-assessment appears more aligned with the narrative. On the ridge, Gisli knows his special destiny has arrived, quipping, "Attack like a man, and you may be sure I will retreat no farther."<sup>45</sup> In terms of the list I established to identify devoted actors, we can conclude that Gisli's emotional responses have (1) increased mistrust and conflict with outgroups. In Iceland, swearing allegiance to a chieftain is meant to define your ingroup. Gisli instead acts in accordance with values he internalized before he arrived, those of a group that no longer exists. The former Viking expects (2) unconditional commitment from allies, in particular from his brother and sister, even when this would cost them dearly. Their embrace of Icelandic sociality is clearly more adaptive, yet their approach appears incomprehensible to Gisli. Even when his old morality severs family ties for good, he does not doubt the righteousness of his decision. As a devoted actor, his commitment to sacred values remains absolute.

From a rational actor, we could expect a reassessment similar to the one Clark reads into the protagonist before the climax. Gisli is not such an actor; he is possessed by (3) a feeling of special destiny, given voice by his good dream woman. His last stand fulfills an ultimate function: it will give meaning to, or discredit, all that preceded it. Surrounded by more than a dozen enemies, Gisli is (4) willing to sacrifice his life for a real or abstract group and for the

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<sup>45</sup> *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, chapter 34.

combat values that define this group. This fourth element seems to be an amalgamation of Gisli's heroic ancestors, the *lið* members he fought alongside, and the values that warriors like him have lived by since the Bronze Age. A few Christian tenets are thrown into the mix, but they amount to little more than a bit of ideological influence from the environment he never learned to master.

Gisli slaughters his way to a fame of millennial persistence.<sup>46</sup> The narrator comments that Gisli's attackers "began to wonder where this man's capacity for slaughter was going to end." He defends himself with "great courage and strength, and they faced such an onslaught of rocks and powerful blows that none escaped being wounded. When Gisli struck out he never missed." Only when his gut is cut open, is the Christianized Achilles ready to finalize his mission. His last words tie the saga ending to its Norwegian prelude, "I greet the sword's honed edge that bites into my flesh, knowing that this courage was given me by my father." Even facing death, the devoted actor remains true to the heroic imperative of a bygone era. With the suicide bomber's strength of conviction, Gisli chops another man in two, then exhales his own last breath. The narrator concludes, "Gisli had died with so many and such great wounds that it was an amazement to all. They say that he never once retreated, and as far as anyone could see his last blow was no weaker than his first."<sup>47</sup>

## Two Lessons from a Devoted Actor

As many sagas do, *Gisli's Saga* ends with a pilgrimage to Rome. After watching her husband die, Aud converts to Christianity and ventures south. The saga's final sentences suggest an

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<sup>46</sup> According to the saga, Icelanders began to tell tales of Gisli's daring escapes toward the end of his outlawry, which would have been in the 970s; see Faulkes, *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas*, xi. *Gisli's Saga* is the only saga whose narrative has been closely adapted into a feature film; see *Outlaw [Útlaginn]*, Ágúst Guðmundsson, dir. (Iceland, 1981). For an adaptation study based on my evolutionary reading of the saga, see Mads Larsen, "From Oral Story to Film: A Millennium of Reassessing Icelandic Identity in *Gisla saga*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 48.4 (2020).

<sup>47</sup> *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, chapter 36.

evolutionary view on what ultimately matters. Gisli may have had the superior genetics, but his brother Ari, who has stayed out of kinship-fueled trouble, gets the last kill of the feud. Ari then settles on Iceland where he “had many descendants. And here ends the saga of Gisli Surrsson.”<sup>48</sup> Clark, too, notices how “Gisli dies childless . . . whereas the dull Ari lives a normative existence for a long time and achieves . . . a good lineage.”<sup>49</sup>

Gisli’s demise is best understood as a consequence of his maladapted emotions, the single-mindedness that his Viking ethos dictates. Andersson notes that Gisli pursued “his course of action with no understanding of or regard for the nuances,” and he “is therefore responsible for his own demise because of his own emotional shortcomings.”<sup>50</sup> Norwegian feud necessitated a distinct type of psychology, which under additional *lið* pressures changed into that of a devoted actor, a term for the most extreme commitment possible to the narrative of one’s moral community. Modern demands of rational assessment appear inglorious to such types. Instead of accepting give-and-take negotiation, the devoted actor can be motivated to make “extreme sacrifices that are independent of, or all out of proportion to, likely prospects of success.”<sup>51</sup> Infusing Gisli with such psychology allows the saga to offer two thematic arguments to thirteenth-century Icelanders. Their dilemma was to choose between the risk of all-out civil war and submission to the Norwegian king so that he could impose peace between regional factions.

Firstly, the young Gisli can be read to personify the Icelandic Commonwealth. He wants peace and collaboration, as do they. If they are unable avoid civil war, Icelanders risk undergoing a transformation similar to that of Gisli. War and feud can motivate new psychologies that can be hard—for some people impossible—to transition out of once peace returns. Some Icelanders

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<sup>48</sup> *Gisli Surrsson’s Saga*, chapter 38.

<sup>49</sup> Clark, “Revisiting,” 515.

<sup>50</sup> Andersson, *The Growth*, 83–84.

<sup>51</sup> Scott Atran, Robert Axelrod, and Richard Davis, “Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution,” *Science* 317 (2007): 1039.

may have felt tempted to revert to their ancestors' Viking heroics. This might have enhanced their own chances of survival and victory in a civil war, but it could also undermine centuries of cultural progress for their Christian "great village" experiment. From a modern perspective, progress may seem inevitable, but the Middle Ages were given their name for a reason.

Secondly, if even the most devoted of actors can change, perhaps everyone can. When Gisli surrenders certain tenets of his Germanic ethos to live up to Christian demands, this parallels what Bredsdorff considers the sagas to be about in respect to 1262, the year of feudal submission. Gisli never overcomes his "emotional shortcomings," he just directs his single-minded heroism in a more Jesus-aligned direction. This compromise could soothe the anxieties of thirteenth-century Icelanders who experienced their own interiority to be incapable of truly embracing feudalism. Their feelings may never change, but they could make a glorious sacrifice in service of a new epoch, so that later generations could benefit. These beneficiaries need not even be the children of those who sacrifice, a parallel to how Gisli dies childless. Once kinship bonds are dissolved, greater concern can be afforded one's moral community as a whole.

### **A Saga Bridge Across the Narrative Abyss**

*Gisli's Saga* and other sagas offer valuable insight into the interiority of Germanic tribes as they were compelled to surrender ancient beliefs and institutions. From the fourth to the thirteenth century, tribe after tribe gave in—after long periods of coercion. Cultural psychology can evolve slowly, in particular in relation to what is most foundational, like our Marriage and Family Practices. In England, the Church began to impose new MFPs late in the sixth century. In the ninth century, there were still considerable cousin marriage, polygyny, out-of-marriage reproduction, and copulation with nuns. Only around 1000 had the Church succeeded in

reshaping Anglo-Saxon kinship practices. Then followed Iceland; they gradually, too.<sup>52</sup> The Commonwealth's only paid political position, that of Lawspeaker, was financed by payments the Church demanded from those who still preferred to marry relatives.<sup>53</sup>

The sagas chronicle the onset of this transition: the events that led to Christianization and the period shortly thereafter. From the sagas' themes, omissions, and what we can infer of authorial intent, we gain insight into the later cultural evolution that led to a seemingly inevitable 1262. Similar to what happened across Europe with the transition toward nuclear families, Icelandic feuds grew unmanageable. *Gisli's Saga* exemplifies how it was “harder to carry on blood feuds, because the circle of vengeance kept getting smaller, and there were many individuals who felt themselves related to both sides of the quarrel.” Feudalism was a desperate adaptation for populations who were left unprotected after losing kinship institutions, writes Fukuyama, it “was the voluntary submission of one individual to another, unrelated, individual, based on the exchange of protection for service.”<sup>54</sup> Raffield et al. account for how the evolution of—and interaction between—religious beliefs, new culture, and socio-political complexity eventually made Iceland ripe for state-building.<sup>55</sup> Bredsdorff views this process as the principle subject of the sagas, as their stories are not about “the age of heroes, but the age of collapse.” Kinship society is “replaced by a society in which every individual is directly subject to a higher power.” In the sagas, this power is the Christian god, but “in the everyday realities of life [it is] represented by the power of the Norwegian crown.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> For my evolutionary account of how the sagas embody Church MFPs, see Mads Larsen, “Antipolygynous Bachelorhood in Icelandic Sagas,” *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* (2022): Online First.

<sup>53</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

<sup>54</sup> Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, 235–36.

<sup>55</sup> Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard, “Religious Belief and Cooperation: A View from Viking-Age Scandinavia,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 9 (2019): 2–22.

<sup>56</sup> Bredsdorff, *Chaos & Love*, 126.

As a result of centuries of psychological-institutional coevolution, Bredsdorff asserts that a discrepancy arose between the make-up of society and the psychology of individuals, which the sagas attempt to bridge. Evolutionary literary critics emphasize how fictional narratives make “social norms explicit [thus] contributing to the solution of common knowledge problems by means of the creation of a common reference among players.”<sup>57</sup> Bredsdorff concurs, “No one can dispense with a philosophy of life, a conceptual universe. One of the functions of literature is to give it form.” To bridge such a psychological discrepancy, a new Christian morality gradually took over. In respect to social discrepancy, Icelanders arrived at “the rare insight that the social order is not necessarily part of the natural order: society can be organized in *different* ways, and when one way fails to work any longer, it is time for another.”<sup>58</sup>

We can thus reasonably conclude that the writing and retelling of sagas contributed to a peaceful transition to feudalism, once Iceland’s cultural psychology was ready. These stories helped Icelanders submit to God’s man on earth, the Norwegian king, yet their submission was not divinely rewarded. The Little Ice Age further marginalized their barren outpost, as did epidemics and colonial oppression; Iceland’s population shrunk from 70,000 in 1100 to half of that six centuries later.<sup>59</sup> Their outpost position did, however, spare them from the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century. This pandemic eradicated around half of the Scandinavian population, a disaster that ushered in a golden age of equality across the region.

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<sup>57</sup> Lorenza Lucchi Basili, and Pier Luigi Sacco, “Tie-Up Cycles in Long-Term Mating. Part II: Fictional Narratives and the Social Cognition of Mating,” *Challenges* 8 (2017), 6. More on the adaptive functions of fiction in chapter 5.

<sup>58</sup> Bredsdorff, *Chaos & Love*, 126–27; emphasis in original.

<sup>59</sup> Magnús S. Magnússon, *Iceland Saga* (London: Bodley Head, 1987), 26.

## 2. Plague: Despair When We Lose Our Uniting Story

The knight Antonius Block (Max von Sydow) returns to Sweden after a ten-year crusade. When he had left his moral community, he was convinced that their Christian story was true, that violently spreading its gospel was an act of altruism toward non-believers. In the Holy Land, Block fought warriors like himself who were equally convinced by a competing story. God was on the side of neither; nothing came of their war but death and disillusionment. Upon his return, Block has lost faith in the Christian God, leaving his existence without meaning. His inability to recommit to the creative imaginary of his community also deprives him of fellowship. “Through my indifference to my fellow men,” he mourns, “I have isolated myself from their company. Now I live in a world of phantoms.”<sup>1</sup>

Ingmar Bergman crafts a protagonist whose crisis of story parallels Bergman’s own. The Swedish auteur struggled to reconcile his childhood Lutheranism with modern demands for rational thought.<sup>2</sup> In *The Seventh Seal* (1957), Bergman’s “first unquestionable masterpiece,”<sup>3</sup> he dramatizes the ideological evolution that occurred after the Black Death ravaged Europe in 1347–52. Block’s character arc over the twenty-four hours the film depicts parallels that of the European individual from the Plague to sixteenth-century Reformation. That is, if we allow the two events “to stand as convenient abbreviations for the entire complex of transition,” as Bredsdorff in the previous chapter referred to the years 1000 and 1262.<sup>4</sup> For increasingly

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<sup>1</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 19–20. Translations from Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman*, Lars Malmstrom and David Kushner, trans. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960). Number range refers to minutes in film, not screenplay page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Ingmar Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011), 235–36.

<sup>3</sup> William Mishler, “*The Virgin Spring* and *The Seventh Seal*: A Girardian Reading,” *Comparative Drama* 30.1 (1996): 106–34, 106.

<sup>4</sup> Bredsdorff, *Chaos & Love*, 125.

individualized Europeans, simply submitting to whatever the Church presented as true grew untenable. Christian monotheism had replaced tribal polytheism, which had promoted conformity and submission to authority because kin groups were the primary social unit. By the fourteenth century, individuals and their nuclear families had become primary, which set Europe's master-narrative on a path of privatization.

Bergman's disillusioned knight will no longer submit to doctrine. Like modern man, Block wants to rely on his own reason and senses. "I want knowledge," he pleads, "Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses?"<sup>5</sup> This is the core tenet of religious humanism: not to depend on divine revelation for truth—as conveyed by clergy elites—but to seek that truth yourself. Church MFPs had freed Europeans from tribes, but once nonconformity was unleashed, European individuals craved further freedoms, from feudal exploitation and the narrative that justified such organization. These processes can be slow. Similar to the cultural lag in respect to the uptake of MFPs, Europeans were slow to challenge feudal structures that failed to keep up with the new era's psychology. It would take the continent's perhaps greatest disaster to accelerate the onset of what manifested itself as the early modern world two centuries later.

The Black Death not only killed around half of the population.<sup>6</sup> In the short run, its horrors undermined the God story that had united European communities. For those who survived this disaster, decades of social dysfunction followed, then renegotiation of feudal relations. In the long run, Europeans reconceptualized their place in the cosmos. An early artistic

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<sup>5</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Regions with good data, such as Norway, show a mortality of around 60 percent; see Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death and Later Plague Epidemics in the Scandinavian Countries: Perspectives and Controversies* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 152. One estimate reduces the European population by 30–50 percent, with 40–60 percent in Northern Europe, as a consequence of plague contagion and secondary catastrophe effects; see Per Lagerås, "Introduction," in Per Lagerås, ed., *Environment, Society and the Black Death: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Late-Medieval Crisis in Sweden* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), 1–28, 11. Massimo Livi Bacci estimates that from 1340 to 1400, Europe's population dropped from 88 to 63 million; see *A Concise History of World Population* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 25.



expression of this is Albertus Pictor's *Death Playing Chess* (1480s). The painting depicts man relying on "deliberation and strategy" against the Grim Reaper. Stephanos Efthymiadis accounts for the long artistic tradition of man playing dice, a game of luck, against supernatural entities. He places "the pictorial *leitmotif* of 'Death playing chess with man'" as originating from the Plague. There are surviving depictions in Germany and England, in addition to the Stockholm church mural that inspired Bergman to write the play *Wood Painting* (*Trämålning*, 1954),<sup>7</sup> which *The Seventh Seal* is an adaptation of.<sup>8</sup>

When Block and his squire Jöns (Gunnar Björnstrand) come ashore, plague with a case mortality rate of 80 percent is about to turn the rural community into a hellscape.<sup>9</sup> What appears to be God's wrath has crept from the west at a pace of around 1 kilometer a day, so everyone knows what awaits.<sup>10</sup> On the beach, Death personified (Bengt Ekerot) demands that Block comes with him. The knight challenges him, desperate to buy time so he can face his final moment with the comfort that only a convincing meta-narrative can provide. Block has to find a new story, and—like Gisli had to—he must act in a way that lends credence to his new beliefs. Bergman crafts a protagonistic goal that aligns with what evolutionary theory predicts in terms of using cultural beliefs to assuage death anxiety. Such stories connect believers to something that persists after death, be that spiritual immortality or the earthly group one feels part of. Acting in a way defined as meaningful by this story is the foundation for self-esteem—a critical component for

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<sup>7</sup> Ingmar Bergman, "Wood Painting: A Morality Play," in Birgitta Steene, ed., Randolph Goodman and Leif Sjöberg, trans. [1960], *Focus on the Seventh Seal* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 159–73; "Trämålning: En moralitet," in *Svenska radjopjäser* (Stockholm: Sveriges radio, 1954), 9–28.

<sup>8</sup> Stephanos Efthymiadis, "A Game of Dice and a Game of Chess: A Byzantine vs. a Scandinavian Allegory," in Denis Michael Searby, Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, and Johan Heldt, eds., *Dōron Rodopoikilon: Studies in Honor of Jan Olof Rosenqvist* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2011), 166–74, 169; John Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 222.

<sup>9</sup> Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 167.

<sup>10</sup> In Northern Europe, the spread rate over land is estimated to have been around 0.66–1.5 km/day; see Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 128–29.

psychological equanimity.<sup>11</sup> As Block sits down with Death to play “the most famous and emblematic chess game in film history,”<sup>12</sup> the knight’s journey toward humanism commences.

### Shortcomings of Cynicism

Although Bergman’s 1957 film naturally does not originate from a medieval mental world, medievalist John Abert makes a strong case for its relevance. “*The Seventh Seal*,” he writes, “is not only considered the best film about the Black Death, it is also one of the most admired films about the Middle Ages and, quite possibly, the greatest movie of all time.”<sup>13</sup> The painting that inspired Bergman does originate from the era in question. The painter’s life story illuminates how new MFPs transformed European thought by promoting mobility and voluntary association through guilds, charter towns, monasteries, and universities. Bergman lets Block and Jöns meet a fictionalized Albertus Pictor (Gunnar Olsson), a German painter who exemplifies how a new “residentially mobile Latin-speaking class” spread artistic and intellectual trends.<sup>14</sup>

At the time, German influence was so strong that Sweden in terms of arts could be regarded as “a German province.”<sup>15</sup> Pictor shows up in historical records when Arboga grants him burgher status in 1465.<sup>16</sup> The town was the Nordic center for the Franciscan order that

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<sup>11</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*; Lee A. Kirkpatrick and Carlos David Navarrete, “Reports of My Death Anxiety Have Been Greatly Exaggerated: A Critique of Terror Management Theory from an Evolutionary Perspective,” *Psychological Inquiry* 17.4 (2010): 288–98; Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, “Pride and Prejudice: Fear of Death and Social Behavior,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 9.6 (2000): 200–04.

<sup>12</sup> Efthymiadis, “A Game of Dice,” 170.

<sup>13</sup> Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies*, 214.

<sup>14</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*. In terms of Pictor’s nation of origin, scholarly consensus is that he was born in Germany; see Thomas Hall, “Albertus Ymmenhusen alias Albertus Pictor,” *Formvännan* 98.2 (2003): 131–32; Rune Pettersson, “Homage to Albertus Pictor – An Early Information Designer,” paper, Visual Literacy Association Conference, 2009. Plausibly, Pictor could be Swedish; see David B. Roberts, “Albertus Pictor: A Native-born Swede?” *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 83.1 (2014): 40–47.

<sup>15</sup> Henrik Cornell and Sigurd Wallin, *Albertus Pictor, Sten Stures och Jacob Ulvssons målare* (Stockholm: Alb. Bonniers boktryckeri, 1972), 13; my translation.

<sup>16</sup> Achim Timmermann, “Good and Bad Prayers, Before Albertus Pictor: Prolegomena to the History of a Late Medieval Image,” *Baltic Journal of Art History* 5 (2013): 131–78, 134; Roberts, “Albertus Pictor,” 43.

established a monastery there in 1285, one of seventy such centers of idea distribution founded in Sweden during the Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup> For this new European class—minus the monks—one advantage to mobility was a marriage market free of cousins. In the eleventh century, “the Church’s incest taboos had swollen to include even sixth cousins,” covering not only blood relatives but in-laws and godparents. This entailed that Europeans often had to look far outside of their community for a fellow Christian to wed. Pictor married a local in 1473,<sup>18</sup> although by then the Church had pulled back their prohibition only to include third cousins.<sup>19</sup>

Having been set adrift in a non-tribal Europe, the German artist grew new roots and became the greatest painter of late-medieval Sweden, decorating more than thirty churches. His anatomically realistic portrayals of people with unusually lively expressions offered a “Poor Man’s Bible,” visual stories with religious and moral instruction for illiterate parishioners.<sup>20</sup> Pictor’s innovative art attests to how already at this time in Scandinavia, “the dim light of the pursuit of rational knowledge and development of man’s logical skills is perceptible.”<sup>21</sup> Bergman practices considerable artistic freedom by placing Pictor in 1350, the year that the Black Death engulfs Sweden. Holy Land crusades were also over by then, while the film’s witch-burning would be a better fit two-three centuries later. Bergman makes these choices to let his film be about the failure of and the competition between master-narratives.<sup>22</sup> As Block and Jöns ride through the rural community, its social fabric comes apart as the Plague fastens its grip.

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<sup>17</sup> Pettersson, “Homage,” 2.

<sup>18</sup> Cornell and Wallin, *Albertus Pictor*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

<sup>20</sup> Pettersson, “Homage,” 6.

<sup>21</sup> Efthymiadis, “A Game of Dice,” 171.

<sup>22</sup> For my evolutionary reading of the worldview contest between Block and the witch suspect, see Mads Larsen, “Belief System Disintegration: Evolutionary Insights from Bergman’s *Det sjunde inseglet*,” *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research* 75.8 (2019): 632–52, 640–41.

At an abandoned farm, the squire encounters the priest Raval (Bertil Anderberg) who had convinced Block to fight in the Holy Land. From his place of hiding, Jöns sees the formerly respected theologian steal a bracelet from a corpse. When a young woman (Gunnel Lindblom) walks in, Raval feels no shame for his moral failure; he decides to add to it by raping her:

Why do you look so surprised? I steal from the dead. These days it's quite a lucrative enterprise. You're thinking of running to the village and telling. That wouldn't serve any purpose. Each of us has to save his own skin. It's as simple as that. Don't try to scream. There's no one around to hear you, neither God nor man. Isn't that surprising?<sup>23</sup>

Bergman uses the fallen priest to illustrate the universality of risk. When our uniting narrative no longer convinces us, even those presumed strongest in their faith can revert to the foulest instincts of our shared human nature. The woman is confronted by what I referred to as the primordial state of things, how primates owe each other nothing unless all parties believe that they do. Without threat of supernatural punishment from religious fiction, Raval sees no reason not to act out what his feelings would reward. Those feelings evolved in an environment where taking resources we did not generate or spreading genes without consent could lend evolutionary advantage. Clearly, it has been enormously advantageous when our species has been able to cultivate the more collaborative parts of our nature, creating societies that convince us that hurting others is wrong.<sup>24</sup> Ravel's monologue makes this case by exemplifying how quickly internalized norms are overridden when individuals stop believing and communities stop caring.

Interestingly, Bergman chooses Jöns, the cynic, to be who stops Ravel from raping. The squire represents the modern secularist who sees through all uniting fictions, yet still acts in a

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<sup>23</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 29–30. Final sentence not included in screenplay; my translation.

<sup>24</sup> Christakis, *Blueprint*.

humane way. Crusade horrors took God away from him, although without this triggering a religious crisis. Block wants to recreate meaning through what he himself can sense. Jöns embraces the metaphysical void, in spite of it stripping his cosmos of meaning. He protects himself with cynicism, coldly assessing reality in its stark nakedness. This provides poor consolation as death nears. Still, while Block remains inactive until the end, Jöns acts like the conventional hero who protects the weak. Juxtaposing the disillusioned knight and the cynical squire, Bergman's thematic question becomes: why should "people treat each other like 'brothers,' i.e., equitably" in an era when "Christianity has lost its metaphysical validity?"<sup>25</sup> In 1950s Sweden, under rapid secularization during social democracy's golden age,<sup>26</sup> this was a timely question; in the summer of 1350, it was existentially important. Bergman uses the historical crisis to explore a theme that dominates his oeuvre's, that of "the inherent destructiveness of human relationships."<sup>27</sup>

This destructiveness, similar to what Kant termed our "unsocial sociability,"<sup>28</sup> is not bearable to Jöns without a meta-narrative that justifies human suffering. The cruelty of ignorant humans—driven to dominate, convinced that what feels right is right—becomes too much for the squire. When a young witch suspect is about to be tipped onto a pyre, Jöns pleads with Block:

Who watches over that child? Is it the angels, or God, or the Devil, or only the emptiness? . . . We stand powerless, our arms hanging at our sides, because we see what she sees, and our terror and hers are the same. . . . I can't stand it, I can't stand it.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mishler, "The Virgin Spring," 108.

<sup>26</sup> Richard F. Tomasson, "How Sweden Became So Secular," *Scandinavian Studies* 74.1 (2002): 61–88.

<sup>27</sup> Mishler, "The Virgin Spring," 109.

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in Hans Siegbert Reiss, ed., Hugh Barr Nisbet, trans., *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970 [1784]), 41–53, 44.

<sup>29</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 77–78.

## Why We Kill Those Who Disagree

As an alternative to despair, Bergman offers a young family. Jof (Nils Poppe) and Mia (Bibi Andersson) are *leikarar* (entertainers) who travel with a horse-drawn wagon and 1-year-old Mikael. They clown, juggle, and act, even as the Black Death ravishes the countryside. It was common to assume that medieval Scandinavia was mostly void of dramatic activity outside of the Church's liturgical ceremonies.<sup>30</sup> Research suggests that *leikarar*—whom are depicted in several Pictor paintings—were a regular feature. At least since the days of Harald Fairhair,<sup>31</sup> itinerant entertainers seem to have delivered storytelling and other performances to a paying aristocracy, and likely to a wider populace, too, thus providing “literary culture in the vernacular languages of Scandinavia.”<sup>32</sup> Folklorist Terry Gunnell believes that, until the thirteenth century, some performances were based on ritual dramas with Bronze Age roots.<sup>33</sup>

For Jof and Mia—Bergman's happy, uncomplicated family—a sunny morning, chirping birds, and enough to eat are all there is to a good life. Add a bowl of wild strawberries, a common Bergman symbol, and a human cannot ask for more; it is heaven. Mia sums up her aspirations, “I want Mikael to have a better life than ours.”<sup>34</sup> Their philosophy sounds banal, but can the family have found some kind of truth? Certainly not, according to the theists who interrupt their performance outside a tavern. Merchants, soldiers, and kids enjoy the *leikarar* until flagellants show up to impose their particular brand of doom. In dark, sinister robes, swinging incense—brandishing crosses, a skull, and thorn-crowns—the flagellants wail, whip,

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<sup>30</sup> Kimberly La Palm, “Uncovering Performance in Medieval Scandinavia: A Survey and Analysis of Medieval Performance in Scandinavia,” dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> *Fagrskinna*, Bjami Einarsson, ed., *Íslensk Fornrit 29* (Reykjavik: HiS íslenska fornritafélag, 1984), 64. The presumed tenth-century poem from an early-thirteenth-century manuscript places *leikarar* alongside other freelance retainers like skalds and berserks at Fairhair's court.

<sup>32</sup> Göran Stockenström, “Scandinavian Drama: Medieval and Modern: Introduction,” *Comparative Drama* 30.1 (1996): iii-x, iii.

<sup>33</sup> Terry Gunnell, “‘The Rights of the Player’: Evidence of *Mimi* and *Histriones* in Early Medieval Scandinavia,” *Comparative Drama* 30.1 (1996): 1–31, 2.

<sup>34</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 13.

and bleed. The procession demonstrates in-group unity through song, “Dies irae,” the Latin poem that describes the Last Judgment when the unsaved are condemned to eternal flames.

Previously cheerful audiences react like many Europeans did when flagellants entered their town. They sink to their knees, pray with tear-filled eyes, wanting to believe that uncompromising faith can appease God. The flagellant movement, which comprised tens of thousands, never reached as far north as Scandinavia.<sup>35</sup> Bergman brings them to his fictional Sweden to make a point in line with what evolutionary theory predicts during times of mortal threat. Instead of losing faith, many increase their investment in in-group beliefs to assuage anxiety. Related feelings incite them to sanction out-groups whose divergent beliefs threaten the validity of the beliefs of one’s in-group.<sup>36</sup> In response to the Black Death, flagellants singled out Jews whom they murdered by the thousands.<sup>37</sup> Solomon et al. explain:

More than 80 studies have supported . . . that making death momentarily salient increases liking for people who supports one’s worldview and hostility toward those with alternative worldviews. This work helps explain human beings’ dreadful history of intergroup prejudice and violence: The mere existence of people with different beliefs threatens our primary basis of psychological security; we therefore respond by derogation, assimilation efforts, or annihilation.<sup>38</sup>

While Block and Jöns watch, the flagellants’ master monk (Anders Ek) makes it clear that only groups like his can hope to be among the saved. He has nothing but derision for the lustful, indulgent, and sinful around him, “Do you know, you insensible fools, that you shall die today or

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<sup>35</sup> Keith Charles Patterson, “The Flagellants of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Their Rise and Decline,” master’s thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1977.

<sup>36</sup> Kirkpatrick and Navarrete, “Reports of My Death,” 293. We evolved genetically to respond to war and similar shocks in a way that sparks our interdependence psychology, writes Henrich in *The WEIRDest People in the World*. Because norms evolved culturally to promote group survival, we are driven to strengthen our norm commitment when threatened. These genetic and cultural factors combine to “increase people’s religious commitments and ritual participation.”

<sup>37</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), eBook.

<sup>38</sup> Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, “Pride and Prejudice,” 200.

tomorrow, or the next day, because all of you have been sentenced? Do you hear what I say? Do you hear the world? You have been sentenced, sentenced!”<sup>39</sup> To such fanatics, the problem with the God story was not that it was wrong, but that people’s beliefs were too weak. Outside the tavern, almost all bend their knee to the flagellants’ strength of conviction, given credible display through their public suffering and irreconcilable speech. Jöns, however, seems to have experience with what fanatic adherence to made-up tales can lead to:

This damned ranting about doom. Is that food for the minds of modern people? Do they really expect us to take them seriously? . . . Allow me to point out that I’ve either read, heard or experienced most of the tales which we people tell each other.<sup>40</sup>

The flagellants and Jöns’s reaction appear to birth the beginning of an epiphany for Block. At the film’s midpoint, he formulates his new belief, accepting that his own senses can be a source of metaphysical truth. Eating wild strawberries with Mia, Block reminisces about how he and his wife enjoyed life together—playing, laughing, singing, hunting, and dancing in a house full of people. His anxiety dissolves, “Everything I’ve said seems meaningless and unreal while I sit here with you and your husband. How unimportant it all becomes suddenly.” Under afternoon sun by the ocean, surrounded by his new friends, Block commits to a new meta-narrative:

I shall remember this moment. The silence, the twilight, the bowls of strawberries and milk, your faces in the evening light. Mikael sleeping, Jof with his lyre. I’ll try to remember what we have talked about. I’ll carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk. And it will be an adequate sign—it will be enough for me.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 56.



## Reproduction as Humanist Essence

This communion of milk and strawberries, and its relationship to the twenty-four hours it bifurcates, has been critically dissected since the film's premiere. What is Block's new worldview; and, is it supported or negated by the knight's eventual death? Vernon Young sees "no character development," as Block is "mainly ignorant of cause or consequence." In reality, the knight "has performed a more-than-Christian deed" by helping the Holy Family escape, since Mikael is but an allegory for Jesus; Block remains a Christian until death.<sup>42</sup> Birgitta Steene finds that because Block has forgotten the lesson of love, he dies in tragedy.<sup>43</sup> Robin Wood, perhaps inspired by Jöns's cynicism, concludes that the family's escape means "no more than itself . . . it is just a bit of one-dimensional, though picturesque, fantasy."<sup>44</sup> Norman Holland deems Block's quest to end in failure because the knight lacks Jof's artistic sensibility, which is required if Block is to "conceive God with his senses."<sup>45</sup> The film is commonly read as an existentialist discourse on God under threat of Plague as an allegory for nuclear war in the 1950s.<sup>46</sup>

This plurality of interpretation, and seeming confusion, is typical in respect to many of Bergman's films. The enigmatic director's ambitious and complex themes can be approached from a variety of directions. My evolutionary criticism contributes to this body of interpretation by focusing on master-narrative transitioning as a cultural tool. Such a process typically involves letting go of a story that is still emotionally compelling, while searching for one that is more adaptive for a new context. In the previous chapter, Gisli's "emotional shortcomings" remained

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<sup>42</sup> Vernon Young, *Cinema Borealis; Ingmar Bergman and the Swedish Ethos* (New York: Avon, 1971), 154.

<sup>43</sup> Birgitta Steene, *Ingmar Bergman* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), 65.

<sup>44</sup> Robin Wood, *Ingmar Bergman* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 107–08.

<sup>45</sup> Norman N. Holland, "The Seventh Seal: The Film as Iconography," *The Hudson Review* 12.2 (1959): 266–70, 270.

<sup>46</sup> Mitchell B. Reiss, "The Nuclear Tipping Point: Prospects for a World of Many Nuclear Weapons States," in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 6.

until his death, yet he still died in triumph. Similarly, Bergman's religious dilemma regards "a God from whom he can free himself intellectually but not emotionally."<sup>47</sup> The director's own experience, he explains, made him reject "religious emotions [and] sentimentality [which] is something I got rid of long ago—I hope. The religious problem is an intellectual one to me."<sup>48</sup> From my perspective, the writer-director only lets Block use God as a starting point. At the film's midpoint, the knight becomes indifferent to the existence of God. He commits to humanism, no longer seeking meaning through revelation from a supernatural entity, but from his own reason and senses. Frank Gado supports my reading, "What will eventually bring [Block] the release he seeks is not faith in God but faith in man."<sup>49</sup>

The communion places primacy with Block's new community, the small group he assembles as the Plague makes the wider community come unglued. Block can taste the delicious strawberries, feel the sun on his face, and let anxiety go as he enjoys the company of his new, self-chosen in-group. In this fellowship he finds his truth. Bergman makes an interesting decision by hinging his thematic argument on a particular group member, 1-year-old Mikael. When Block continues his chess game with Death, he smirks throughout, unnerving his pale opponent. But—alas—Death understands human nature. When he refers to Jof and Mia, then adds, "who have a small son," Block's face stiffens, "Why do you ask?" "Oh, no reason at all," replies Death. The scene fades to dramatic music.<sup>50</sup>

With this choice, Bergman supports a humanist concept of *inclusive fitness* that encompasses more than one's kin.<sup>51</sup> Block wants to sacrifice himself in a way that ensures the

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<sup>47</sup> Stockenström, "Scandinavian Drama," vii.

<sup>48</sup> Bergman, *Four Screenplays*, xxi.

<sup>49</sup> Frank Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 209.

<sup>50</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 58.

<sup>51</sup> *Inclusive fitness* refers to passing on genes through offspring or aiding kin; see Joseph Carroll, "Evolutionary Literary Theory," in David H. Richter, ed., *A Companion to Literary Theory* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 425–38, 427.

survival of Mikael, since he represents the future of the social group the knight now defines himself to be part of. If Mikael survives, this would connect Block to what I referred to as something larger “that persists after death.” Christianity inspired similar altruism, but Block’s breakthrough is that he can motivate his selfless act by something else: humanism. Moreover, Bergman makes an evolutionary argument similar to the one suggested by the final sentences of *Gisli’s Saga*. In his 1940s and ‘50s films, Bergman had made his customary case for a dysfunctional twosome being preferable to loneliness.<sup>52</sup> In Mia’s words, “It’s always better when one is two.”<sup>53</sup> In *The Seventh Seal*, Bergman places further importance on this dyad. Block’s climax choice elevates reproduction to be the essence of human purpose. Not only for the dyadic participants themselves, but for anyone who can contribute to the survival of such a formation and their offspring. If Block can do this, he can face death with a raised chin.

In the final chess scene, Block succeeds by distracting Death while Jof and Mia flee with Mikael. At dawn in Block’s seaside castle, Death claims what is his: those who remain in the group. At this point, Bergman seems to make a case for the ultimate futility of all meta-narratives that seek to alleviate our anxiety for what comes after. Despite his humanist victory, Block cannot help but plead for God’s mercy. Jöns accepts his fate “but under protest.”<sup>54</sup> Cynicism may claim that “no one matters” and humanism that “everyone matters.” Yet in the end, biology wins.

In the resolution scene, Jof, Mia, and Mikael awaken to sun and sea outside their wagon. Birds chirp, and the road waits before them. One of cinema’s most iconic imagery offers Jof a vision: his former companions dance with Death, in Jof’s words, toward “the dark lands, while

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<sup>52</sup> Bergman sums up, “Living in hell together is at least better than living there alone,” in Maaret Koskinen, *Ingmar Bergman* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute, 2007), 14.

<sup>53</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 93.

the rain washes their faces and cleans the salt of the tears from their cheeks.”<sup>55</sup> Importantly, only Jof sees this. Mia, as always, is blind to his visions. Bergman does not conclude that a supernatural journey awaits after death. His *mise en scène* suggests subjectivity, as the top of the image is covered by what appears to represent Jof’s eyelid. That this dance with Death follows our last breath is Jof’s story, one that allows him to continue living with a smile on his face and care for his family. The landscape he and Mia must traverse is still ravaged by the Plague. But filled with meaning from Block’s humanistic sacrifice, they embark, in embrace, optimistically on a new day.

### **Equality Like Never Before or After**

*The Seventh Seal* gives an insightful portrayal of human nature and the variety of ways in which it can play out during crisis. Bergman’s intuitions contributed to why, during his prime, he was considered among cinema’s greatest directors.<sup>56</sup> Despite its budget of only \$150,000,<sup>57</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, in Bergman’s words, “swept like a forest fire across the world.”<sup>58</sup> The film’s continued appeal supports evolutionary critics who argue that for fiction to be popular across culture and time—decades, centuries, or millennia even—characters must act in ways that are universally relatable, which means in line with the evolved nature we all share.

Albertus Pictor did something similarly insightful, capturing a psychological development accelerated by the Black Death, which had infested a world ripe for transformation. A Europe united by the Christian narrative had experienced political and economic progress

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<sup>55</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 95–96.

<sup>56</sup> Eugene Archer, “The Rack of Life,” *Film Quarterly* 12.4 (1959): 3–16, 3.

<sup>57</sup> 700,000+ SEK; see Melvyn Bragg, *The Seventh Seal* (London: BFI Publishing, 2020), eBook.

<sup>58</sup> Bergman, *My Life in Film*, 242.

since the turn of the millennium.<sup>59</sup> The continent's population more than doubled from 1000 to 1340.<sup>60</sup> Norway's late Viking Age population of an estimated 185,000 reached 345,000 by 1330.<sup>61</sup> Because Christianization had ended Scandinavian slavery, and the region's tribes had been dissolved, many of the growing population became rent-paying tenant farmers on great estates—manors—whose nobility no longer had kin who could supply sufficient labor. In Sweden, the transition toward feudal manorialism was complete by the thirteenth century. The newly established nobility—in addition to the king and the Church—were large landholders, but in particular Sweden and Norway had a high number of landowning peasants. They did not pay rent but taxes to the Crown and tithes to the Church. There still existed arable land that could be broken to accommodate new people, which along with more productive agricultural practices drove growth, and a relative peace and prosperity, that contributed to a naively optimistic age. Things were going so well, writes historian Norman Cantor, that Europeans convinced themselves that all that remained was to wait for the Second Coming.<sup>62</sup>

The continent's medieval expansion halted around what historian Barbara Tuchman refers to as “The Calamitous 14th Century.” In *A Distant Mirror*, she compares this painful transition to what our present era could be headed for.<sup>63</sup> No longer was there enough land to break, and technological innovations had been exhausted. Living standards declined, which led to poverty and malnutrition. This Malthusian trap was made worse by the onset of the Little Ice Age, and also the Hundred Years' War, which in addition to war pressures generated looting

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<sup>59</sup> Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague*.

<sup>60</sup> Livi Bacci, *A Concise History*, 25.

<sup>61</sup> Ole J. Benedictow, “Demographic Conditions,” in Knut Helle, ed., *Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, v. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 237–49, 248.

<sup>62</sup> Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague*.

<sup>63</sup> Tuchman writes, “A violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age, a time, as many thought, of Satan triumphant—was compelling and, as it seemed to me, consoling in a period of similar disarray. If our last decade or two of collapsing assumptions has been a period of unusual discomfort, it is reassuring to know that the human species has lived through worse before.”

bands of decommissioned soldiers. Politics were no longer about distributing a growing pie. In response to poorer agricultural yields, the upper classes raised rents and taxes. Their “number-one priority . . . was to keep up their luxury consumption and life style,” writes historian Per Lagerås, “while little resources were invested back into the agricultural system.” This feudal dysfunction brought the population to “the edge of starvation.”<sup>64</sup> They fell over this edge when bad weather led to crop failure in 1315–17, followed by livestock epidemics. The food shortage was perhaps the worst in Europe’s recorded history.

Instead of Jesus’s return, Plague returned after being gone for six centuries. Around 60 percent of Norwegians died—slightly fewer Swedes.<sup>65</sup> The horrors tore apart the European master-narrative in the immediate aftermath, like we see in *The Seventh Seal*. Tuchman writes,

God’s purposes were usually mysterious, but this scourge had been too terrible to be accepted without questioning. If a disaster of such magnitude, the most lethal ever known, was a mere wanton act of God or perhaps not God’s work at all, then the absolutes of a fixed order were loosed from their moorings.<sup>66</sup>

In Norway, people stopped paying tithe. “Furthermore,” wrote the leader of the government, “They are drinking far more than people ever did. . . . They forget, therefore, God’s rights. . . . The land lays desolated, uncultivated and unsown.”<sup>67</sup> “Survivors in growing helplessness fell into apathy,” writes Tuchman, “The sense of a vanishing future created a kind of dementia of despair. . . . Nature’s awful energy crept back over cleared land, dikes crumbled, salt water re-invaded and soured the lowlands.”<sup>68</sup> With people no longer united under Christ, and desperate for food, morals unraveled at both ends of society. Parts of the Swedish nobility “turned to a

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<sup>64</sup> Lagerås, “Introduction,” 9.

<sup>65</sup> Lagerås, “Introduction,” 13.

<sup>66</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted from Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 164.

<sup>68</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*.

robber economy, plundering the countryside, which [led] to counter reactions and resistance.” Lagerås estimates that the catastrophe lasted two decades. The dysfunctional reaction lasted until social and economic recovery took hold around 1440, continuing to 1520, which marks the early modern transition in Scandinavia. Europe followed a similar pattern. Riots were so threatening that, despite a desperate shortage of manpower, Swedish nobles and royals poured great resources into castles and fortifications in the aftermath of the Black Death.<sup>69</sup>

After decades of revolt, tenant farmers secured lower rents in the early 1400s. In Norway, rents stabilized at 20–25 percent of pre-Plague levels.<sup>70</sup> After major uprisings in the 1430s, taxes for landholding peasants were significantly reduced, too.<sup>71</sup> Fewer workers meant higher wages. In Western Europe, “real wages doubled and tripled and laborers dined on meat and beer while landlords struggled to keep up appearances.”<sup>72</sup> Even the university educated, who had been plagued by precarity, found themselves employed and with higher salaries. Abandoned farms were taken over by the poor and landless. “A new world of opportunities opened up,” writes historian Ole Benedictow, “Social and economic equality in Norway was greater than before (as far as we can see into the past) or later.”<sup>73</sup>

### **Weaker Nobility, Stronger State**

Throughout history, nothing has driven equality like war, famine, and pestilence.<sup>74</sup> But the effect of such disasters depends on institutional and other contexts. In Egypt, depopulation after the

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<sup>69</sup> Lagerås, “Introduction,” 17.

<sup>70</sup> Helge Salvesen, “Landskyldutviklingen,” in Jørn Sandnes and Helge Salvesen, *Ødegårdstid i Norge* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1978), 109–41.

<sup>71</sup> Lagerås, “Introduction,” 17.

<sup>72</sup> Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), eBook.

<sup>73</sup> Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 165.

<sup>74</sup> Scheidel, *The Great Leveler*.

Black Death had “profoundly different” long-term consequences, writes Turchin, as “wages dropped, land rents and grain prices rose, and unemployment levels increased.”<sup>75</sup> A powerful, unified elite was impervious to the types of peasant uprising that motivated European elites to enact reform. These egalitarian reforms resulted in increased popular consumption, which stimulated growth in non-agricultural production, craftsmanship, and trade. Transitioning to more land-intensive, less labor-intensive animal husbandry increased productivity, as did wider use of female labor. Other changes, too, unleashed growth.<sup>76</sup> By the time Europe neared recovery, Egyptian agricultural output had declined 68 percent.<sup>77</sup>

Scandinavia benefited from less severe revolts, as well. Sparsely populated Sweden had not suffered stagnation before the Plague, and neither had probably Norway.<sup>78</sup> Losing half the population devastated people’s worldview, but many areas across Europe fared much worse for much longer. On the continent, flagellants destroyed property, seized or looted churches, stoned priests, and denounced those who disagreed as Anti-Christ. Master monks began to hear confession and grant absolution; a battle of worldview primacy ensued as flagellants turned on the Church and the system itself. Having lost an enormous number of clergies—who had been obliged to minister to the dying—the Church reeled, but they eventually prevailed.<sup>79</sup> In Scandinavia, the Church was never existentially threatened.<sup>80</sup> In 1351, the Norwegian Church had no choice but “to take into its service simple-minded and ignorant men to guide souls,” but

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<sup>75</sup> Peter Turchin, *Historical Dynamics: Why States Rise and Fall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 146.

<sup>76</sup> Lagerås, “Introduction,” 17–19.

<sup>77</sup> Turchin, *Historical Dynamics*, 146.

<sup>78</sup> Jouko Vahtola, “Population and Settlement,” in Knut Helle, ed., *Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, v. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 559–80, 560.

<sup>79</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*.

<sup>80</sup> Lars Hamre, “Church and Clergy,” in Knut Helle, ed., *Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, v. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 653–75, 653.



within decades the dearth of talent had been remedied.<sup>81</sup> The most consequential change to Scandinavian institutions resulted from how popular revolt drove a redistribution of power.

Feudalism had strengthened nobility across Europe. Stagnation and the Plague exposed the weaknesses of feudal economics, which had disincentivized agricultural investment and innovation. That the nobility responded to the Black Death by raising rents and resorting to plunder further undermined their position. Still, “social structures remained surprisingly intact.”<sup>82</sup> The institutions that had arisen as a consequence of new MFPs proved flexible, as they facilitated “positive feedback mechanisms” that allowed resistance to oppression to eventually win through. Thus, “the crisis changed the power relationship between the classes and paved the way for a stronger state.”<sup>83</sup> These structural changes, argues historian Janken Myrdal, contributed to the expansion that took off in the sixteenth century.<sup>84</sup>

With weaker nobility and a stronger state, late medieval Scandinavia was better positioned to restrain inequities.<sup>85</sup> In the long run, strengthening central authority laid the foundation for how Lutheranism would evolve, which again informed how social democracy would manifest itself. In the short run, the population drop facilitated economics that drove a culture of equality and sameness. Abandoned farms were cultivated by families who previously would have had no access to land. Fields could also be taken over by neighbors who wanted to expand, but there were new impediments to affluence. Before, ambitious farmers hired laborers to increase production. Now, everyone mostly had to rely on whatever labor their own nuclear

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<sup>81</sup> Hamre, “Church and Clergy,” 657.

<sup>82</sup> Lagerås, “Introduction,” 26.

<sup>83</sup> Lagerås, “Introduction,” 24.

<sup>84</sup> Janken Myrdal, “Scandinavia,” in Harilaos Kitsikopoulos, ed., *Agrarian Change and Crisis in Europe, 1200–1500* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 204–49, 235–37.

<sup>85</sup> Low nobility seems to have been weakened in most parts of Scandinavia. The high nobility was weakened in Norway, while this elite flourished in Denmark and Sweden; see Erik Ulsig, “The Nobility of the Late Middle Ages,” in Knut Helle, ed., *Cambridge History of Scandinavia, v. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 635–52, 641–42. A similar divide between the moderately rich and the very rich is a feature of modern social democracy, as well.

family could provide. For generations, this egalitarian environment influenced Scandinavian culture. A bit more freed from feudal oppression, a bit more skeptical of the Church's story, Nordic people came to see themselves as more central in the grander cosmic drama—like Pictor's painting attests to. This provided fertile ground for thoughts such as those Bergman, in his own words, “infused the characters of Jof and Mia with . . . the holiness of the human being.”<sup>86</sup> As the Henrichian coevolution continued, the Church could no longer resist drastic reform; the new psychology of the European individual was about to be sacralized.

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<sup>86</sup> Bergman, *Images*, 236.

### 3. Reformation: Witch Burning as Narrative Negotiation

By the time Anne Pedersdotter's final day arrived, 7 April 1590, almost everyone in Bergen had turned against the old widow. Her son had led her opening defense when witch accusations were formalized just weeks earlier. As Anne is marched through town, to be tipped onto a pyre surrounded by gleeful townsfolk, her son is not there. Being a local chaplain, he had to choose sides. Only two clergymen stand up against the collective madness. As they accompany Anne, singing psalms, they shout unpleasantries to authorities along the route.<sup>1</sup> A few decades earlier, burning Anne, or someone like her, would have been a highly unlikely outcome of the malicious gossip that now seals her fate. The witch-craze, which engulfed Europe, was not a product of medieval ignorance; it arose from Renaissance empiricism and Reformation thought.<sup>2</sup> The ancient witch concept, used by our forager ancestors to ostracize outsiders, transformed into a medium for homicidal negotiation over the modern world's master-narrative. Anne likely had no idea, and neither had her accusers, but her burning alive was partially a consequence of Norway's painful, protracted transition from Catholicism to Protestantism.

Two decades prior, Anne had fought similar gossip successfully. She had been married to "Norway's first significant humanist,"<sup>3</sup> the clergyman Absalon Beyer, who secured a letter from the Danish-Norwegian king attesting to Anne's innocence. Around the same time, Danish authorities decided finally to crack down on the backwardness of their Norwegian province. This contributed to more than a thousand witch suspects being executed across Scandinavia.<sup>4</sup> After a

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<sup>1</sup> Nils Gilje, *Heksen og humanisten: Anne Pedersdatter og Absalon Pederssøn Beyer – en historie om magi og trolldom i Bergen på 1500-tallet* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca L. Stein and Philip L. Stein, *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft* (London: Routledge, 2017), eBook.

<sup>3</sup> Jan-Erik Ebbestad Hansen, ed., *Norsk tro og tanke, I* (Oslo: Tano Aschehoug, 1998), 259; my translation.

<sup>4</sup> For conviction estimates, see Rune B. Hagen, "Witchcraft Criminality and Witchcraft Research in the Nordic Countries," in Brian P. Levack, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford

brief civil war, the kingdom had committed to Protestantism in 1536, but Norway's peasants resisted, particularly in the southwest. The king instructed his people in Bergen to continue Catholic services in order not to "worry and disturb the poor, simple and uneducated people."<sup>5</sup> Evocative of their forager and Viking Age ancestors, Norwegian farmers did not yet feel sufficiently compelled to change. This time, too, a period of resistance ensued, but around 1570 "it was finally decided to take action against the surviving Catholic traditions."<sup>6</sup>

This decision came after the bishop in Bergen discovered women who still worshipped statues of Catholic saints. Absalon, Anne's husband, got involved in the drama, which made the Lutheran reformer even more unpopular with the town's Hanseatic elite. The Hanseatic League was a product of post-kinship-society Europe, a confederation of merchant guilds and market towns that in medieval and early modern Scandinavia was an economic and political alternative to the state. Of Bergen's 6,000+ inhabitants, these foreign elites comprised around 1,500 people.<sup>7</sup> To argue against their right to be in Bergen, Absalon had written a history of Norway that made this point.<sup>8</sup> The division between him and the town's Norwegian elite on one side, against the more powerful Hanseatic elite may have influenced these foreigners' animosity toward Anne, which increased after Absalon died, 47 years old, in 1575. In addition to cultural and religious division, Bergen's witch-craze was contributed to by several environmental pressures, which also affected the hysteria across Europe.

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University Press, 2013), 375–92; Jens Chr. Johansen, *Da Djævelen var ude... Trolddom i det 17. århundredes Danmark* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Martin Schwarz Lausten, "The Early Reformation in Denmark and Norway 1520–1559," in Ole Peter Grell, ed., *The Scandinavian Reformation: From Evangelical Movement to Institutionalisation of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12–41, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Jens Chr. V. Johansen, "Faith, Superstition and Witchcraft in Reformation Scandinavia," in Ole Peter Grell, ed., *The Scandinavian Reformation: From Evangelical Movement to Institutionalisation of Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 179–211, 184.

<sup>7</sup> Gilje, *Heksen og humanisten*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Absalon Pedersøn Beyer, *Om Norgis Rige* (Bergen: Harald Beyer, 1928 [1567]).

From this early modern dysfunction, we can draw lessons with contemporary relevance. In order to investigate cultural evolution and perils of transition, Norway's most famous witch trial makes for an illuminating case study.<sup>9</sup> Applying theoretical frameworks from evolutionary psychology and cognitive science of religion, I will identify cognitive dispositions that during crisis can trigger persecution of outsiders. These universal mechanisms manifest themselves differently depending on context. In embryonic state systems like those of early modern Europe, when people experienced powerlessness in the face of threat or uncertainty, in-group individuals were targeted as representatives of external conspiracies.<sup>10</sup> In modern societies, similar thought patterns direct our vengefulness toward more collectivist targets: "to predatory landlords, to entrepreneurial ethnic minorities who 'suck the life force out of people,' to financial or communist conspiracies, or even to an abstract entity such as 'the system.'"<sup>11</sup>

When we convince ourselves that an entire group threatens our well-being or survival, our environment becomes that much more target-rich. The witch-craze was restrained by how credible accusations were mostly dependent on individuals accumulating years of reputational damage. When people feel politically excluded in our present era, the potential for mass-scale persecution is thus much higher. Examining why Anne's contemporaries found it so compelling to burn her alive can help us understand how we, too, can delude ourselves into believing our era's threat conspiracies, many of which are about as rational than the fantastic tales that convinced Anne's judges. The manner in which Scandinavia's craze ended in the seventeenth

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<sup>9</sup> Anne's fame has been contributed to by several dramatizations of her story after the court documents were uncovered in 1890. Hans Wiers-Jenssen's play, *Anne Pedersdotter* (1908), was successful in the Nordic countries and also staged abroad. Carl Th. Dreyer adapted the play into *Day of Wrath* (1943), arguably Danish cinema's greatest masterpiece. For my evolutionary adaptation study, see Mads Larsen, "Adapting a Witch to Modern Beliefs and Values: Persecuting the Outsider through Trial, Stage, and Film," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 3.2 (2019): 39–52.

<sup>10</sup> Niek Koning, "Witchcraft Beliefs and Witch Hunts: An Interdisciplinary Explanation," *Human Nature* 24.2 (2013): 158–81, 162–66.

<sup>11</sup> Koning, "Witchcraft Beliefs," 159.

century can also offer some hope for the longer-term viability of reason. Once Lutheran beliefs were firmly entrenched and environmental pressures had subsided, the craze turned into a trickle. Eventually, the witch concept returned to the more modest position it had previously held, no longer motivating cruel murder but social ostracism.

The Lutheran faith, whose introduction had contributed to this malaise, reorganized the Nordic nations in a manner that changed social dynamics. According to their new story, classes were united in a Lutheran “priesthood of believers.” The king was responsible for his subjects’ salvation, education, and well-being; it was the state’s responsibility “to guarantee the existence of a just society.” All should strive to forge a state within which everyone, from king to pauper, was united by the “common good.” No longer were the poor provided for by the Catholic Church or well-off Christians whose generosity was meant to ease their own way into Heaven. The safety net became a secular, local, and communal responsibility grounded in “neighborly love.”<sup>12</sup> To provide for the needy, the Church and laypeople pooled their resources in a “common fund,” which promoted poverty relief as a shared responsibility.<sup>13</sup>

This may sound heartwarming, but in the early-seventeenth century these countries were among Europe’s poorest.<sup>14</sup> Generosity as a value will only get you so far; alas, the Nordic poor of this era were about as well off as they would have been under Catholicism.<sup>15</sup> Still, the region’s new master-narrative of big government, religious egalitarianism, and civil loyalty found fertile

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<sup>12</sup> Lausten, “The Early Reformation,” 35–38.

<sup>13</sup> German: *gemeine Kasten*, Norwegian: *felleskasse*; see Aud V. Tønnessen, “Reformasjonen og utviklingen av en ny fattighjelp,” in Tarald Rasmussen and Ola Tjørhom, eds., *Reformasjonen i nytt lys* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2017), 193–212.

<sup>14</sup> Jutta Bolt and Jan Luiten van Zanden, “Maddison Style Estimates of the Evolution of the World Economy. A new 2020 update,” Maddison Project Database, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Lausten, “The Early Reformation,” 38. For fifty years following the Reformation, Danes tried to make charity a public responsibility. Lack of funds made this unworkable, so that private charity again took over for the next few generations; see Thomas Riis, “Poor Relief and Health Care Provision in Sixteenth-Century Denmark,” in Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham, eds., *Health Care and Poor Relief in Protestant Europe 1500–1700* (London: Routledge, 1997), 126–43.

ground. When modern economic growth kicked in, centuries later, such beliefs empowered Scandinavians to transform their Lutheran values into socially transformative policies with remarkable longevity.

### **Driven by a Medial Revolution**

To understand how nearly all of her townspeople came to view Anne as a witch, we must examine the particulars of uniting imaginaries at several geographical levels: the local, national, and European. Her story is distinctly one of Bergen and Norway, but the craze spread across Europe, also to non-Protestant regions. As populations needed to negotiate their distinct master-narrative transition from the medieval to early modern, the witch concept was appropriated for a variety of purposes. But why use something as odd-seeming as a witch to adapt to Protestantism or Counter-Reformation Catholicism?

Both the witch-craze and Reformation owe their ascendance to a medial innovation, that of the printing press. The Henrichian coevolution manifested itself in how the Reformation sacralized the new European psychology, placing the individual alone in front of God. Yet earlier religious movements had had similar tenets and promoted comparable ethics without triggering a revolution. For half a millennium, Cistercian monks had emphasized the typically Protestant values of hard work and self-discipline. In fourteenth-century Holland and Germany, Brethren of the Common Life promoted manual labor, reading scripture, and a personal relationship to God.<sup>16</sup> As Europeans embraced such values and what Bergman referred to as “the holiness of the human being,” Catholic humanism did not evolve quickly enough. In an era ripe for change, Martin Luther broke the dam by making centuries-old ideas go viral. Before the printing press,

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<sup>16</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

Europe's books were counted in the thousands. By 1500, perhaps 20 million books had been printed; by 1600, 200 million.<sup>17</sup> Francis Bacon declared that the new medium helped change "the appearance and state of the whole world."<sup>18</sup> Half a millennium later, a medium with an even lower marginal cost of transmission—practically zero—seems to initiate a similarly drastic change, one that could bookend the modern era that the printing press made possible.

When Luther began his campaign in 1517, within two weeks his theses had been seen "in every part of the country."<sup>19</sup> Over the next eight years, a third of all books in German were by him. His vernacular bible was printed in hundreds of editions. For the first time, we see "a truly mass readership and a popular literature within everybody's reach."<sup>20</sup> Europe's religious war was first waged on the page with propaganda spread to every village. Protestant stories had a significant transmission advantage by being told in people's own language. The Counter-Reformation retained their preference for Latin, which many interpreted to express "Catholic clerical arrogance and contempt for the laity."<sup>21</sup> Similarly short-sighted, the French king—desperate to avoid the viral infection of Protestant thought—made it a capital offense to bring printed books into his realm.<sup>22</sup> No longer having a de-facto monopoly on the published word made those in power stumble, responding in a backward-looking manner. Half a millennium later, we see similar dysfunction from many of those whose broadcasting or publication advantages are undermined by social media egalitarianism.

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<sup>17</sup> Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800*, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton, eds., David Gerard, trans. (London: NLB, 1976), 248.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, "Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought: A Preliminary Report," *The Journal of Modern History* 40.1 (1968): 1–56, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Febvre and Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, 290.

<sup>20</sup> Febvre and Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, 295.

<sup>21</sup> Lausten, "The Early Reformation," 27.

<sup>22</sup> Febvre and Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, 310.



The decades when Luther went viral overlap with a quiet period for a bestseller from the previous era: *Hammer of Witches (Malleus Maleficarum, 1487)*.<sup>23</sup> The do-it-yourself witch-hunter's guide was printed in 13 editions before 1520, then received little interest. After 1570, another 16 editions were sold to Europeans eager to apply the new era's scientific means toward exterminating internal threat.<sup>24</sup> The author, a Catholic clergyman, had combined Renaissance empiricism, extreme misogyny, and demonologic conspiracy to compose a "Witch-Hunting for Dummies" that the Church and authorities at first rejected, but which general readers found captivating and highly shareable. Similar to the way in which Protestant-like thought percolated for centuries, popular and clerical culture needed time to internalize that the witch figure of ancient folk belief was, in fact, a Satanic collaborator of significant importance. When the battle over worldview primacy tightened toward the end of the century, the witch concept became an ad-hoc medium that let rulers, clergy, townsfolk, and rural populations engage in narrative contests that generated content and demarcation for each moral community's master-narrative.

In the community around Bergen, the Lutheran Church was losing the battle for hearts and minds. People did not bring children to get baptized, asked not ministers to visit the ill, refused to pay tithe, and stayed away when the bishop visited. Churches decayed and several ministers were murdered.<sup>25</sup> Once it was decided to force through the conversion, heterodox thought and political deviance became less acceptable. Rulers and clergy demanded a uniformity of thought that many in Bergen—and across Europe—were wont to accept. Not only were Catholic traditions struck down upon, but formerly ignored folk beliefs were connected to Catholicism and Satanic worship. Since the Bronze Age, such beliefs likely evolved alongside

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<sup>23</sup> Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, Montague Summers, trans. (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007 [1487]).

<sup>24</sup> Gilje, *Heksen og humanisten*, 190.

<sup>25</sup> Johansen, "Faith," 184.

whichever master-narrative was imposed upon the peasantry. Gods like Odin and Thor may have inspired rulers and warriors, but farmers had their own creative imaginaries, too, populated with creatures more involved in day-to-day concerns like harvest, livestock, health, and fortune. For millennia, the ornery outsider had been available for scapegoating when famine or pestilence struck, or a cow miscarried. Witch accusations could also be offered similar to a one-star review if the cunning folk—the healer—you enlisted to cure your ailments failed to provide a cure. Or, accusations against popular healers, writes folklorist Timothy Tangherlini, “could be deployed by rivals to drive away potential customers.”<sup>26</sup>

*Malleus Maleficarum* convinced people that the witch was more than a local nuisance; she (or sometimes he) did Satan’s work to undermine God. Appropriated by Protestants, the story became that witches did the Catholics’ Satanic work, a claim corroborated by how cunning folk had long incorporated Catholic rites in their healing rituals. Similarly weak logic dominates the witch discourse; this was before early modern scientists influenced the wider community’s epistemic norms in terms of evidence and reasoning. It also did not help that Protestant leaders like Luther and Philip Melanchthon declared that the apocalypse was near, so that murdering witches became imperative in order to weaken Satan.<sup>27</sup>

In Bergen, the witch concept thus became preconsciously enlisted to enforce a Lutheran purity of belief upon a population resistant to give up Catholicism and folk beliefs. From this perspective, it is illogical that conservative Norwegian commoners would be so eager to execute witch suspects. But they were no more aware of the specifics of the witch-craze’s ideological function than what most enforcers of Lutheranism were. Once the Church pinned Satan on witch

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<sup>26</sup> Timothy R. Tangherlini, “How Do You Know She’s a Witch?”: Witches, Cunning Folk, and Competition in Denmark,” *Western Folklore* 59.3–4 (2000): 279–303, 292.

<sup>27</sup> Gilje, *Heksen og humanisten*, 149; Hagen, “Witchcraft Criminality.”

suspects, and execution verdicts were easier to win, it was regular folks who got caught up in the fervor. Secular and clerical authorities were at first appalled and tried to restrain popular bloodthirst, but to little avail. Soon, these mostly foreign elites too had internalized the logic of burning townspeople alive, likely preconsciously driven by how such a regime of terror aided their ideological colonization of Norway. The witch-craze exemplifies how with cultural evolution, processes can work with remarkable efficacy without a single individual being aware of their actual workings.<sup>28</sup> This is partly why—throughout history—witches' sabbaths, Jewish puppet masters, and other conspiracies have been so attractive for those convinced that someone must be in charge.

### **Religious Cognition**

Cognitive scientist Nora Parren compiles a more scientifically grounded framework to explain witch-hunts. The witch concept was enlisted for a dramatically different use post-Reformation, but persecution was effective because its specifics aligned with the evolved features of the human mind that have let witches remain part of human culture from our forager days until today. This phenomenon can be explained through the shared cognitive systems described in literatures of (1) religious cognition, (2) threat perception, and (3) coalitional psychology.<sup>29</sup> How these mechanisms played out before and during Anne's trial can be read in summarized testimonies from the original court documents.<sup>30</sup> The claims that most effectively elicited these mechanisms were assigned the greatest credibility. In the contest between Anne and her 48

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<sup>28</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

<sup>29</sup> Nora Parren, "The (Possible) Cognitive Naturalness of Witchcraft Beliefs: An Exploration of the Existing Literature," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 17.5 (2017): 396–418.

<sup>30</sup> Sollied, "Anna."

accuser-and-witness opponents, victory would be awarded to the side with the most alluring story.

Three concepts from cognitive science of religion (CSR) have particular relevance to a belief in witches: (a) minimally counter intuitive concepts (MCI), (b) agency, and (c) intuitions of ritual and magic efficacy. The MCI concept suggests why the witch character arose and has remained such a persistent symbol of threat. Minimally counter intuitive refers to how a concept achieves a memory and attention advantage by only violating one or very few of our expectations of reality. Purely natural concepts, like illness or coincidence, have similar disadvantage as maximally counter intuitive concepts, like omnipotent monsters. Both lack the cognitive allure of something familiar yet unusual.<sup>31</sup> A witch looks like everyone else and is driven by the same relatable motivations. But—in Anne’s context—the witch’s connection to Satan empowers her to will misfortune upon others. Thus, when people seek explanation for an unexpected death or crop failure, witchcraft is brought up more frequently since it benefits from a memory advantage over more mundane, or more extreme, causality.

The accusations against Anne offer several examples. Due to previous rumors, people were open to Anne being a normal-looking but powerful witch. She thus provided a memorable opportunity for assigning blame when Jesper Troff died after years of illness. The German was part of Bergen’s foreign elite who had been in conflict with Anne’s now dead husband. Two of Troff’s friends testified that the victim’s pain began days after he had been in a vociferous quarrel with Anne for shooting a crow on her property. Perhaps at some level the men were driven by vengefulness, but abstract partisanship was no way to rally the masses. By evoking a widely alluring threat figure, Troff’s side achieved several advantages. In this era, illness was first attempted explained as a consequence of the victim’s

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<sup>31</sup> Pascal Boyer and Charles Ramble, “Cognitive Templates for Religious Concepts: Cross-cultural Evidence for Recall of Counter-intuitive Representations,” *Cognitive Science* 25 (2001): 535–64.

immorality. A Satanic witch was thus preferable for the deceased's family. This explanation also allowed grief to be channeled into revenge. The fact that witch accusations furthered her accusers' social and political interests may not even have been a conscious consideration, at least not for all of Anne's dozens of accusers. Likely, nearly everyone in town were so drawn to the minimally counter intuitive witch concept that social politics were subordinate to such a convincing threat. Even a rational Lutheran like Absalon, Anne's husband, had believed in astrology, cloud interpretation, and sorcery. When Anne countered her accusers' salient narrative by simply stating that it was a lie, and that she could not remember any crow shooting, her natural-explanation defense was burdened by a considerable transmission disadvantage.<sup>32</sup>

The allure of witch belief depends also on our proneness to interpret ambiguous information as evidence of intentional agents.<sup>33</sup> In an evolutionary context, the cost of failing to detect those who conspire against us is higher than the cost of incorrectly detecting conspiracy. Perceptual and cognitive biases lead us to see intentionality where none exists. This tendency is more frequent in environments that already harbor expectations of clandestine agents out to cause harm. With Anne as a readily available agent of death and misfortune, even the most ambiguous information could be cognitively massaged to add up. Giert de Paes was already convinced that Anne had caused his first wife's death, driven by vengeance because they had stopped selling alcohol to her. The Dutchman therefore knew where to point when his second wife's four-year-old son died. The child had fallen ill after eating a piece of bread Anne had given him. He had recovered, and it took a long time before the boy died, but Anne's witchcraft had to be the cause. Her defense was simple but offered no alternative culprit: "I gave the child bread, but I meant no harm, and I did not know that any harm came from it. Many children die in

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph M. Stubbersfield, Emma G. Flynn, and Jamshid J. Tehrani, "Cognition Evolution and the Transmission of Popular Narratives: A Literature Review and Application to Urban Legends," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginary Culture* 1.1 (2017): 121–36.

<sup>33</sup> Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2004).

this town. I can't have killed them all."<sup>34</sup> The court preferred de Paes's version.

It did not help that Anne was an old woman who walked with a stick. In conflict, she tended to engage in spirited cursing that invoked Satanic imagery. Yet we have no reason to believe that Anne thought herself to be a witch, that she engaged in sinister rituals, or that she suspected that her verbal fury could have any effect beyond the social. Anne likely saw herself as a victim of conspiracy, but some accused witches did consider themselves guilty, which the final concept within religious cognition helps explain. CSR research shows that people harbor strong intuitions about actions or objects that can give them power over uncertainty.<sup>35</sup> That witch cults were prevalent has no basis in historical fact, but some women—and men—were convinced that they were ritual and magical actors. This was not necessarily seen as bad. People perceived to have such powers were often appreciated in an era of no vets and few physicians. Under pressure to conform to a new master-narrative—the only acceptable one—such cunning, whether used for good or bad, came to mean Satanic collaboration.

Even outside of established structures of belief, people can with relative ease be convinced of the specialness of objects. This could be the athlete who during playoffs discovers a pair of lucky socks. In early modern times—surrounded by magical actors, whether accused, delusional, or presumed real—the death of a loved one could convince someone of their neighbor's dark powers. Parren writes,

The ritual and magical idiosyncrasies of neighbors may be ignored or accepted by an individual, but the presence of such behaviors and beliefs makes the concept more salient and perhaps available to call on when explaining misfortune. . . . If this person down the road uses and believes in magic, might it not be that she is using that magic against me?<sup>36</sup>

This seems to have been Hans Rønnepog's conclusion after his mother's death. His neighbor Anne was

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<sup>34</sup> Sollied, "Anna," 17; my translation.

<sup>35</sup> Justin L. Barrett and E. Thomas Lawson, "Ritual Intuitions: Cognitive Contributions to Judgments of Ritual Efficacy," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 1.2 (2001): 183–201.

<sup>36</sup> Parren, "The (Possible) Cognitive Naturalness," 403.

still in Rønnepog's favor when he had traveled to France and offered to bring back "eye water" in the little bottle she gave him. When he forgot, and his mother lost Anne's bottle, this triggered a long day of Anne's wrath. Shortly thereafter, his mother fell ill and later died. Anne had been their friend, but decades of intensifying witch accusations had made Anne even more antagonistic than she had been originally. Even the most patient ally could suspect that more than a difficult personality was at play. Anne kept throwing around curses like "I wish you fall to Hell's abyss where Hell is deepest," and "Go to seven thousand devils' Hell," and "You'll get both shame and harm, and evil will overcome you."<sup>37</sup>

### **Threat Perception and Coalitional Psychology**

Others, too, had postponed concluding on Anne's witchery. When Adrian van Bucksott formally accused her in March 1590, townspeople had to choose sides. The two latter parts of Parren's framework help explain the nearly universal hostility directed toward Anne. Psychological research shows a clear bias against positive or neutral stimuli in several cognitive domains. We evolved to pay greater attention to what risks hurting us, and to communicate this more eagerly. Three main aspects of this bias apply to belief in witches: (a) bad is stronger than good, (b) advantage for negative social ideas, and (c) transmission preferences.

Bad is stronger than good: Threat and negativity disproportionately arouse many of our cognitive processes. The greater the threat, the greater the memory advantage. When trial testimony uncovered a mass witch conspiracy to sink all ships in Bergen, and to burn and flood the town, the narrative from Anne's accusers became more compelling. Negative information is viewed as particularly credible among those who view the world as a dangerous place.<sup>38</sup> This bias helps explain why witch accusations

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<sup>37</sup> Gilje, *Heksen og humanisten*; Sollied, "Anna"; my translations.

<sup>38</sup> Dan M. T. Fessler, Anne C. Pisor, and Carlos David Navarrete, "Negatively-Biased Credulity and the Cultural Evolution of Beliefs," *PLoS ONE* 9.4 (2014): e95167.

has been found to increase with real threat and resource strain.

Advantage for negative social ideas: We pay extra attention to cues that suggest someone could be a bad social exchange partner, which motivates us to ostracize them. Negative impressions form quicker than positive ones and are harder to change.<sup>39</sup> When Absalon was alive, Anne had been a respected part of Bergen's upper class. Still, the first rumor triggered a process that would keep gaining momentum unless she and her allies were able to offer an effective counter-narrative. Research shows that the best defense was not economic power, but a good reputation, a strong local network, and a husband.<sup>40</sup> Anne had all this. But when she lost her husband, her reputation, and her network, negativity prevailed and eroded her defense. Eventually, her accusers felt confident enough to bring their case to the secular authorities.

Transmission preferences: Not only do we prefer to believe what is negative and threatening, we spread such content more eagerly. Disgust, if it is involved, can boost transmission. With witches who steal and eat babies, murder in the name of Satan, and will impotence upon men, a lot of cognitive boxes are ticked for juicy gossip.<sup>41</sup> With new accusations added to old ones, momentum influences people to interpret ambiguous information as negative. Even those without prior animosity toward the suspect can be motivated to participate since people who share threat information can gain a reputational boost.<sup>42</sup>

After religious cognition made possible the prospect of Anne as a witch, and threat perception made it an appealing and viral idea, coalitional psychology pushed her opponents and former friends to close ranks against her. Parren suggests that what makes witchcraft ideas particularly destructive—

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<sup>39</sup> Felicia Pratto and Oliver P. John, "Automatic Vigilance: The Attention-Grabbing Power of Negative Social Information," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 61.3 (1991): 380–91.

<sup>40</sup> Louise N. Kallestrup, *Agents of Witchcraft in Early Modern Italy and Denmark* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 110.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen T. Asma, "Monsters on the Brain: An Evolutionary Epistemology of Horror," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81.4 (2014): 941–68; Kimmo Eriksson and Julie C. Coultas, "Corpses, Maggots, Poodles and Rats: Emotional Selection Operating in Three Phases of Cultural Transmission of Urban Legends," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 14.1–2 (2014): 1–26.

<sup>42</sup> Pascal Boyer and Nora Parren, "Threat-Related Information Suggests Competence: A Possible Factor in the Spread of Rumors," *PLoS ONE* 10.6 (2015): e0128421.



compared to other responses to misfortune—is the combination of these five mechanisms:

**Coalitional inferences and group tracking:** Ensuring one’s support in a nationally diverse and economically divided town of over 6,000 people is computationally demanding even for natives. Anne was from a different part of Norway, and she only moved to Bergen to be with her husband. She had isolated herself after his death, and as alliances shifted, she lost her ability to master social dynamics.

**Cue tracking:** People automatically scan the world for cues of coalition. When someone gets assigned out-group status, little can be required to qualify as evidence of conspiracy. Jesper Troff who purportedly shot a crow on Anne’s property, responded to her furious reaction by suggesting that the dark birds were her children with Satan. When such cues trigger coalitional reasoning systems, bias and favoritism increase while critical thinking diminishes.

**In-group support:** With these systems active, people identify more strongly with their coalition. Its gains and losses are perceived as shared. Misfortune that befalls one can be experienced as an attack on the whole group, even for those who in reality are unaffected. With Anne increasingly defined as an existential threat for the whole town, room for dissent diminished, and skeptics had to manage the risk of being ostracized themselves.

**Out-group rivalry:** Not only do members of one’s own group come to be seen as interchangeable, one’s opponents do, too.<sup>43</sup> Two years before Anne’s trial, two witch-convicted women—perhaps after torture—gave Anne up as a fellow witch. This solidified her out-group position. Irrespective of which deaths she was personally responsible for, Anne became representative of a dangerous minority that had to be exterminated.

**Defection management:** In a contentious context, stepping away from one’s collective can be seen as treacherous behavior warranting punishment. To discourage defection, groups can demand that

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<sup>43</sup> Matthew T. Crawford, Steven J. Sherman, and David L. Hamilton, “Perceived Entitativity, Stereotype Formation, and the Interchangeability of Group Members,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83.5 (2002): 1076–94.

members signal strong commitment. Perhaps such an ultimatum motivated the trial's most spectacular testimony, on its last day. No grievances were previously recorded from Elina, Anne's servant through 20 years. After being taken in for questioning just days prior, Elina could disclose that Anne had three times ridden her as a horse to the local witches' sabbath. Her narrative perfectly fit how stories of witches unfolded in folklore, as had almost all aspects of the other witnesses' testimonies. Lutherans may have claimed that folk beliefs were now heresy, but in reality their faith fused with folklore just like Catholicism had.<sup>44</sup> The judges likely experienced an overwhelming sense of confirmation; Anne had to be guilty. 38 men from Bergen's elite unanimously condemned her to be burned alive.

### **Environmental Pressures**

Anne ended her life near the gallows, in agony, likely tied to a ladder and pushed onto a pyre. Her daughter later appealed to the king, but the realm was not yet ready for reason. King Christian IV became an eager witch-hunter himself; his 1617 Witchcraft Regulation turned occasional pyres into mass-scale annihilation. Over the next eight years, hundreds were brought to trial. Eventually, appeals court judges came to suspect that court procedures were not reliable enough, that innocent people were being burned. A more mundane reason for the tempering was simply that communities had run out of convincing candidates. Building a solid witch reputation often took years, or decades even, and with Christian IV's near *carte blanche* all the obvious suspects had been done away with.<sup>45</sup> In Denmark-Norway, clergy used this lull to convince people of the immorality of burning neighbors. Only a trickle of trials continued. Authorities first quit executing, then stopped persecuting all together.<sup>46</sup> Nordic

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<sup>44</sup> As a term for such syncretism, ecclesiastical historian Hilding Pleijel uses "manifold unity" (*complexio oppositorum*), referring to how peasants fused competing narratives into one. He rejects the competing view, that farmers lived by one story—folk beliefs—on weekdays while by the Christian story on Sundays; see Hilding Pleijel, *Hustavlans värld: Kyrkligt folkliv i äldre tiders Sverige* (Stockholm: Verbum, 1970).

<sup>45</sup> Johansen, *Da Djævelen var ude*; Koning, "Witchcraft Beliefs."

<sup>46</sup> Tangherlini, "How Do You Know," 287.

populations arrived at “the realization that the phenomenon rested on delusion and fraud.”<sup>47</sup> Across the West, a similar evolution toward modern rationality transpired, but with pyre frequency peaking in different decades. Parallel with this ideological development, environmental pressures subsided.

The Little Ice Age was at its coldest during the early modern era.<sup>48</sup> The region most sensitive to cooling, the European Alps, experienced the first mass-scale witch-hunts. Where overpopulation was slower to manifest, witch-hunts did not occur until decades later.<sup>49</sup> The extreme climate was mentioned in Anne’s trial as possible evidence of her guilt. Lower temperatures caused crop failures, which drove up grain prices. The latter pleased Norwegian farmers but not townsfolk.<sup>50</sup> Bergen was under additional pressure from a new Malthusian crisis. Norway’s population size only recovered from Black Death early in the sixteenth century but then skyrocketed. By one estimate, the population tripled from 1520 to 1660, leading to increased poverty, higher unemployment, lower wages, and migration from the countryside to towns like Bergen.<sup>51</sup>

By the late 1600s, population growth had slowed, farming innovation had increased productivity, and Lutheranism was taken for granted. Forged in the crucible of witch-hunts, Scandinavia’s new master-narrative inspired a conformism that lowered the cost of norm enforcement. This cultural tightness expressed itself in witch trials through how the best defense was having locals vouch for you. Anne having none sealed her fate. Coalitional psychology drove people to agree on what was good and bad, what was good Lutheranism versus bad Calvinism or Catholicism, what was acceptable or unacceptable folk beliefs, et cetera. Narrative contests with life-and-death stakes drove a frenzy of

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<sup>47</sup> Johansen, “Faith,” 211.

<sup>48</sup> Anders Moberg et al., “Highly Variable Northern Hemisphere Temperatures Reconstructed from Low- and High-Resolution Proxy Data,” *Nature* 433 (2005): 613–17.

<sup>49</sup> Koning, “Witchcraft Beliefs.”

<sup>50</sup> Johansen, *Da Djævelen var ude*, 42.

<sup>51</sup> Hans Eyvind Næss, *Trolldomsprosessene i Norge på 1500-1600-tallet: En retts- og sosialhistorisk undersøkelse* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1982).

popular discussion around the era's important ideas, thus generating content and demarcation for a community's evolving master-narrative. Trials provided verdicts, but those were only the culmination of a period of intense gossip at all levels of learnedness and in all social arenas. Witch-hunts are so effective in tapping into our shared cognitive systems that they made for a universally appealing debate medium. That your life may suddenly depend on the cultural precision with which you are able to tell a story in your own defense is a strong motivator for learning what your community considers appropriate. Four hundred years later, gory Nordic noir would fulfill a similar—albeit less murderous—role when Scandinavians argued over content and demarcation for their new social democratic story.<sup>52</sup>

I have no evidence for witch trials driving more long-term conformism in their Nordic context. Conditions before and after are probably more important for explaining why, in our present era, Norway remains surprisingly conformist. One study places Norway among the world's most conformist nations along with Pakistan, Singapore, and South-Korea.<sup>53</sup> Norway's cold, sparsely populated geography—with less than 3 percent arable land—might have driven resource pooling and cultural tightness since the Paleolithic. Does this illuminate why Norwegians, in particular, seem so reluctant to change? Their ancestors' uniting around norms and values was perhaps so existentially important that this informs why individuals have been discouraged from stepping out of consensus to embrace new trends. In his 1960 dissertation, social psychologist Stanley Milgram used Norway to exemplify exceptional conformity.<sup>54</sup> There is no lack of more recent examples, either, of how Norwegians have to be dragged along when certain new mores or ski sport innovation require adaptation. However, once change has been agreed

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<sup>52</sup> Mads Larsen, "Adapting Social Change: Swedish Crime Fiction as a Medium for System Correction," *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 13.1 (2020): 37–50.

<sup>53</sup> Michele J. Gelfand et al., "Differences Between Tight and Loose Cultures: A 33-Nation Study," *Science* 332.6033 (2011): 1100–04.

<sup>54</sup> Stanley Milgram, "Conformity in Norway and France: An Experimental Study of National Characteristics," dissertation, Harvard University, 1960. Norwegian conformity is a complex issue that some find to be misunderstood; see Ole-Martin Ihle and Dag Wollebæk, "Myter om norsk strenghet," *Morgenbladet*, 4 June 2021, <https://www.morgenbladet.no/ideer/debatt/2021/06/04/myter-om-norsk-strenghet/>.

upon after wide discussion, hardly anyone wants a refight, which makes for steady governance. With slow-moving transitions, how Norwegians are skeptical together, then convinced together, can perhaps be an adaptive response.

In smaller, warmer, and more arable Denmark, major towns were mostly reformed by the 1530s.<sup>55</sup> This process, too, entailed a messy discussion, although without people-burning. Once commoners gained access to Bible stories in their own language, they could to a greater extent interpret scripture for individual, in-group, and local needs. Such interpretive atomization threatens social cohesion, but can also generate new story understandings that draw communities together. Scandinavian clergy noticed this effect and therefore “not only tolerated, but often actively used [the region’s] dozens of Lutheran popular prophets” despite their low-class origins and “often problematic character.”<sup>56</sup>

To disciplined thinkers and careful ideologues, letting regular folks argue their way to a shared reality may appear reckless. Even to the 1520s’ sworn humanists, it seemed counterproductive how

the word of God is now freely discussed in inns, bath-houses, barber shops, forges, mills, custom houses, burgher houses, in guilds, at banquets, among drunkards and gamblers, dancers and acrobats, courtiers, cacklers and fools, and shopkeepers [and even by] such noble and learned men where he who shouts, cackles and blasphemes the loudest is counted the wisest.<sup>57</sup>

This may appear like a cacophony of ill-informed noise, but it produces the raw material upon which cultural evolution depends.<sup>58</sup> When the time is right, such a process can also be effective. Within two decades of being challenged, the Catholic church was gone from Denmark-Norway. In the long-run, it was of little consequence that when evangelical thought reached Norway around 1526, it convinced but

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<sup>55</sup> Lausten, “The Early Reformation,” 22.

<sup>56</sup> Ole Peter Grell, “Introduction,” in Ole Peter Grell, ed., *The Scandinavian Reformation: From Evangelical Movement to Institutionalisation of Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 1–11, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Poul Helgesen, *Skrifter af Paulus Helie, II*, Marius Kristensen and Niels-Knud Andersen, eds. (Copenhagen, 1932), 65–66; translation from Lausten, “The Early Reformation,” 22.

<sup>58</sup> For a systems theory perspective on this process, see Larsen, “Adapting Social Change.”

a few noble families. A century later, Reformation had “succeeded to an extent [that the first Lutheran] bishops in these countries would only have dreamed of in their more optimistic moments.”<sup>59</sup> The Nordic region’s egalitarian features at the onset of the early modern world may suggest that Lutheranism was the obvious choice. Yet obvious historical choices tend only to appear as such in hindsight; Sweden long dithered between the competing creeds of Martin Luther and John Calvin, the fathers of the Reformation. Even Catholicism remained a hot candidate before the Swedes’ official conversion in 1593.<sup>60</sup>

### **Toward the Second Rational Wave**

United under Lutheranism, the region translated their new story into practical policies. Since people were meant to read the Bible for themselves, literacy was crucial. After Christianization, the Church had built over a thousand stone churches in medieval Sweden,<sup>61</sup> one of which was the meeting place for Antonius Block and Albertus Pictor in *The Seventh Seal*. New tenets required additional infrastructure. “The Lutheran church began to set up schools in every village,” writes Fukuyama, “where priests taught peasants the basics of reading and writing.”<sup>62</sup> Early and widespread literacy accelerated the change in Northern European psychology by altering the brain’s biology and people’s cognitive abilities. Again, a religiously motivated institutional change was to have fortuitous long-term consequence. Henrich points out how “by instilling thrift, patience, and an internalized work ethic while at the same time requiring literacy and encouraging schooling, Protestantism had psychologically prepared the rural populace to participate in and fuel the Industrial Revolution.”<sup>63</sup>

Before this revolution transformed Europe, another tenet of the Reformation, Melancthon’s

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<sup>59</sup> Grell, “Introduction,” 11.

<sup>60</sup> Grell, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>61</sup> Lagerås, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>62</sup> Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, 432.

<sup>63</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

“*Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your *own* understanding!” became the motto of a new intellectual movement, one that sought to make superstition, like witch belief, a thing of the past.<sup>64</sup> The Reformation was only “the first wave of rationalism in Europe.”<sup>65</sup> Modern man, writes literary scholar Wolfgang Iser, “may have been born in the sixteenth century, but was only truly raised in the eighteenth.”<sup>66</sup> Parallel with this intellectual maturation, European discovery and technological innovation put the continent on path to overtake other continents in terms of military and economic power. How this power came to be used was influenced by how the Henrichian coevolution promoted increasingly abstract thinking, which drove a categorization of the world into universal categories. The resulting perspective made it seem as if the West was leading everyone to a more enlightened future with a preset goal. Christian humanism may encourage *Sapere aude!* but only to search for God’s truths yourself instead of relying on medieval scripture commentators. The assumption still was, according to Kant, that learned men should discover God’s “purposive plan of producing concord among men, even against their will.”<sup>67</sup>

This plan was humanity’s “fate,” suggested Kant as he wrote the concluding chapter to the Enlightenment in 1795. Half a century earlier, Scandinavia’s preeminent Enlightenment figure, Ludvig Holberg, had written the region’s first novel to warn against such Eurocentric universality. His story dramatizes how even pre-Kantian thought was not steering toward an enlightened federation of likeminded nations, but rather imperialist tyranny destined for collapse. In the twenty-first-century, scholars have suggested a new understanding of Holberg’s heterodox cosmopolitanism. His early-

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<sup>64</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’,” in Hans Siegbert Reiss, ed., Hugh Barr Nisbet, trans., *Kant’s Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970 [1784]), 54–60, 54; Gilje, *Heksen og humanisten*, 135. The Latin phrase *Sapere aude* means “Dare to know,” originally used in the Roman poet Horace’s *First Book of Letters* (20 BC).

<sup>65</sup> Karl Vocelka, “Enlightenment in the Habsburg Monarchy: History of a Belated and Short-Lived Phenomenon,” in Ole Peter Grell and Roy Porter, eds., *Tolerance in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 196–211, 196.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Ben De Bruyn, *Wolfgang Iser: A Companion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 32.

<sup>67</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace,” 108. The full quote: “Perpetual peace is *guaranteed* by no less an authority than the great artist *Nature* herself (*natura daedala rerum*). The mechanical process of nature visibly exhibits the purposive plan of producing concord among men, even against their will and indeed by means of their very discord. This design, if we regard it as a compelling clause whose laws of operation are unknown to us, is called *fate*.”

eighteenth-century insights into how “active cosmopolitanism is only real when situated in local environments” matches the transnational perspectives that have gained in influence as the West’s Kantian master-narrative unraveled over the past decades.<sup>68</sup> My reading of his only novel places the polymath from Bergen in his rightful European Counter-Enlightenment context, one that previous criticism has overlooked or misunderstood. This context makes clearer how Holberg’s fantastic voyage to the inside of a hollow earth exemplifies how Nordic Enlightenment promoted a more common-sense ethos. Less seduced by the hegemonic abstraction and elitism, Scandinavians were motivated to make more pragmatic choices as the modern world unfolded.

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<sup>68</sup> Svend Erik Larsen, “Ludvig Holberg: A Man of Transition in the Eighteenth Century,” in Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and Dan Ringgaard, eds., *Danish Literature as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 53–90, 61.



#### 4. Enlightenment: Warning against Eurocentric Universality

I began the previous chapters by trying to make you invest emotionally in the protagonist of my case study. This narrative device can draw readers in both to fiction and essays about fiction.

This time I will not, because Niels Klim was not crafted to elicit sympathy or simulate psychologically credible experience. When Ludvig Holberg wrote Scandinavia's first novel, he did so in the *conte philosophique* format. The *conte* was popular during the Enlightenment, but then devalued for its prioritization of philosophy over drama. You are not supposed to side with the *conte* protagonist at all; the author tries to convince you of a certain philosophy by having the story be "intimate with its reader in a mocking attitude" toward its protagonist.<sup>1</sup> The main character is a naïf who embodies the shortcomings of the old world that European intellectuals strove to evolve out of. The genre's "mordant satire," writes critic Thomas Kavanagh, "relies not on careful logic or rhetorical eloquence, but on a fast-moving, witty, and always ironic tone [and its] most frequent structuring device is an extended voyage or quest for a lost beloved."<sup>2</sup>

*Niels Klim's Underground Travels* (1741) was the European breakthrough the aging Holberg had worked for his entire career. Partially due to its moral relativism, he wrote the novel in Latin and first published it abroad to circumvent Denmark-Norway's pietistic censors. *Niels Klim* was translated into nine languages and reprinted in dozens of editions.<sup>3</sup> With later tastes, Holberg's novel fell out of favor.<sup>4</sup> His stage comedies, which founded modern Scandinavian

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy M. McGhee, "The 'Conte Philosophique' Bridging a Century," *PMLA* 58.2 (1943): 438–49, 448.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas M. Kavanagh, "Boufflers's *La Reine de Golconde* and the *Conte philosophique* as an Enlightenment Form," *French Forum* 23.1 (1998): 5–21, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Lars Roar Langslet, *Den store ensomme* (Oslo: Cappelen, 2001), 405.

<sup>4</sup> For my study on how *Niels Klim* was marketed after its content was perceived as less relevant, see Mads Larsen, "Paratextual Adaptation of Social Importance for Three Groundbreaking Scandinavian Novels," *LOGOS: Journal of the World Publishing Community* 30.3 (2019): 40–56.

drama, travelled poorly but remain among the region's most beloved plays. The *conte* format is much to blame for how *Niels Klim* has been undervalued. The author of Holberg's modern standard biography dismisses the novel as poor literature, listing justifications for such a verdict that correspond with genre requirements for the *conte*.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I will show how a proper understanding of this Enlightenment format reveals how Holberg subverts the *conte* to criticize contemporary intellectuals, doing so in a manner that appears prescient. Not only does he predict a global cultural collapse evocative of what we currently experience, but the Lutheran-inspired worldview that lets him do this informs the distinctness of Nordic Enlightenment.

With *Niels Klim*, Holberg wages war against the European Republic of Letters, a term for the continent's intellectual community. They were convincing themselves that their new perspective was universal, that all humans would embrace modern Europe's abstract truths if properly exposed to them. They moved toward a cosmopolitanism that "meant transcending local conditions and traditions leading to a global community based on universal legal and ethical principles."<sup>6</sup> This ethos would later receive its enduring manifestos from Kant. To the ornery loner from Bergen, such universalizing appeared narcissistic. In *Niels Klim*, he portrays modern European thought and its concept of rationality to be products of a unique history.

Holberg was not entirely alone. Another ornery outpost philosopher, Giambattista Vico, had formulated historicist cosmopolitanism, arguing that all cultural and political creations are forms of self-expression that can only be understood within their own context.<sup>7</sup> Vico feared that his era's universalizing impulse could justify tyrannical imperialism. Europeans could come to feel that it was altruistic, their "fate" even, to export their ideology and institutions to the parts of

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<sup>5</sup> Langslet, *Den store ensomme*, 401.

<sup>6</sup> Larsen, "Ludvig Holberg," 61.

<sup>7</sup> Giambattista Vico, *New Science* (London: Penguin Books, 1999 [1725]). Vico practiced a form of proto-historicism that became more fully developed with later thinkers.

the world that they were exploring and colonizing. The Enlightenment would then entail little more than using secular concepts to express something eerily similar to Christianity's Great Commission, which had justified imposing Jesus upon the world.<sup>8</sup> The ongoing transition from religious to secular humanism would then result in a master-narrative that no longer claimed divine truth, but its Western prejudice would remain. Like Vico, Holberg suspected that their era could culminate in a plan evocative of Kant's, "of producing concord among men, even against their will."<sup>9</sup>

The two Enlightenment skeptics had little influence beyond their outposts of Naples and Scandinavia. Historicism did not gain scholarly traction until Johann Gottfried Herder, one of Kant's students, became "the father of the related notions of nationalism, historicism, and the *Volksgeist*, [and] one of the leaders of the romantic revolt against classicism, rationalism, and faith in the omnipotence of scientific method."<sup>10</sup> Vico was rediscovered in 1824 and inspired thinkers and artists like Marx, Nietzsche, Yeats, Beckett, Joyce, Auerbach, and Said.<sup>11</sup> When historicism gained traction, this aspect of Scandinavia's beloved Enlightenment dramatist had mostly been forgotten. Only in the twenty-first century has Holberg become recognized for having anticipated "the new cosmopolitanism and transnationalism as they have re-emerged over the last twenty years."<sup>12</sup> Holberg's historical scholarship is embraced by today's constructivist "historians who raise him up to the skies as a prophet for their own modern views on history."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume Two: Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 148.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, "Perpetual Peace," 108.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), 145.

<sup>11</sup> Edward W. Said, "Vico: Autodidact and Humanist," *The Centennial Review* 11.3 (1967): 336–52.

<sup>12</sup> Larsen, "Ludvig Holberg," 60.

<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, *Ludvig Holberg som pragmatisk historiker: en historiografisk-kritisk undersøgelse* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2015), 10; my translation.

This conflict between historicism and universalism is similar to those between emotion and reason, and faith and knowledge, which the Enlightenment reconciled in a manner that made for an unstable foundation.<sup>14</sup> The modern world order was undergirded by a master-narrative that made assumptions with a limited shelf life. For my study, the question is not whether Kant or Herder was *right*; master-narratives are not about truth. They are about power, the advantage groups gain from working together more effectively and at greater scale. It is not surprising that the world was conquered by peoples whose uniting story told them to convert all humans to the one true faith. Similarly, liberal humanism did not win the twentieth century because its tenets are true, or morally superior, but because empowering individual choice in a rapidly changing world made for the most effective data processing, and thus for the most productive societies.<sup>15</sup> The West's utopia of eternal peace among liberal nation-states may have been misguided narcissism, but this story motivated collaboration at an unprecedented scale, whether "against their will" or not. This is how you evaluate the efficacy of a master-narrative, by its ability to facilitate cooperation among strangers. Morality, which I focus on in the next chapter, has the same function, at least from an evolutionary perspective.

This perspective, I will argue, is similar to Holberg's approach to nature and culture. The evolutionary perspective is a biocultural one, meaning that humanity's shared biology provides an underlying unity in human motivational and cognitive dispositions.<sup>16</sup> This universality is different from what was assumed by the typical Enlightenment *philosophe* (public intellectual). Cultural history creates an internal momentum and continuity that cannot be brushed aside, like

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<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>16</sup> Holberg writes that our shared human nature, "our natural alikeness," is the ultimate foundation for why we should treat each other with dignity, and also reject slavery; quoted in F. J. Billeskov Jansen, *Ludvig Holberg og menneskerettighederne ... og andre Holbergstudier* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1999), 24.

the *conte* posited, to reveal “an enlightened ideal . . . applicable to all times and all places.”<sup>17</sup> Vico was right, that a “reconstructive imagination” of the mental life of others is necessary for understanding a culture on its own terms. Yet it is not a complete fallacy that there is “an unchanging reality [behind] changing appearances.”<sup>18</sup> Philosophes just pushed this case too far. Arguably, Vico went too far in the other direction, leaving an impression of discrete cultural regimes being incommensurable with one another. Holberg places himself between these positions, making a biocultural argument that undergirds both his remarkably modern case for race and gender equality, and his historicist cosmopolitanism.

To Holberg, human nature is a universal foundation that cooperation between culturally distinct nations can build on. But in *Niels Klim*, he warns against universalizing the tenets of any one culture, thinking they can provide a sustainable foundation for global harmony.<sup>19</sup> Despite his prescience in many regards, Holberg was naturally no evolutionary thinker more than a century before Darwin. Yet his emphasis on a bottom-up process of cultural evolution, as opposed to striving toward predetermined goals, evokes evolutionary processes, but also social democratic ideology. While liberalism, socialism, and fascism won adherents by offering compelling utopias, social democrats are concerned with “making the world a little better,”<sup>20</sup> for as many as

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<sup>17</sup> Kavanagh, “Boufflers's,” 10.

<sup>18</sup> Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, xix.

<sup>19</sup> To explore alternative foundations for global cooperation, I used Holberg’s historicist position to evaluate four present-day cosmopolitanisms: Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “universality plus difference” (2006), James Tully’s “agonistic dialogue” (2008), and Jürgen Habermas’s “legal order” (1997) and “postmetaphysical reason” (2019); see Mads Larsen, “Historicist Cosmopolitanism from Scandinavia’s First Novel,” *Comparative Literature* 74.3 (forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup> Jenny Andersson, “Not Without a Future,” in Henning Meyer and Jonathan Rutherford, eds., *The Future of European Social Democracy: Building the Good Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 166–76, 172. See also Ernst Wigforss, “Om provisoriska utopier,” *Minnen*, Vol. 2 (Lund: Hans Larsson Samfundet, 1958), 86–119.

possible.<sup>21</sup> This common-sense pragmatism permeates *Niels Klim*, which helps illuminate how Nordic Enlightenment translated Lutheran values into secular philosophy.

### **Inverting *Conte* Ideology**

Holberg begins his novel—he explains in a letter—like “a fisherman must bait his hook to the tastes of the little fishes, if he expects to catch them.” *Niels Klim*’s fantastic elements draw readers in, but the story “is a mere trifle,” primarily “a vehicle for moral precepts and reflections” meant for “readers who would shrink from a regular didactic treatise.”<sup>22</sup> We meet a protagonist who personifies the European intellectual in the eighteenth century. Klim is similar to the protagonist in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), a young man who has passed his university exams and must make something of himself in a world obsessed with discovery and new knowledge.<sup>23</sup> Holberg copies structure and motifs from *Gulliver* but not its misanthropy.<sup>24</sup>

Klim shares biography with Holberg and also Absalon from the previous chapter. The two historical figures were orphans whose intellectual prowess motivated men of means to include them in a new form of kinship, the Republic of Letters, bound not by blood, but education, scientific societies, and journals. Absalon returned to Bergen after humanist schooling in Wittenberg and Copenhagen. He staged the first public theater in Norway, copying what Melanchthon did in Wittenberg and building on how Norway’s Catholic humanists had let

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<sup>21</sup> One ideological root of this pragmatic rejection of utopias is Luther’s distrust of people’s ability to improve, in opposition to how medieval Catholicism expressed “faith in the perfectibility of human nature”; see Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love 1: Plato to Luther* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 324.

<sup>22</sup> Ludvig Holberg, *Ludvig Holberg’s Memoirs: An Eighteenth-Century Danish Contribution to International Understanding* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 168–69.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* (London: CRW Publishing, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Jørgen Sejersted, “Å reise med Gulliver, Niels og Peer – Holbergs *Niels Klims* *underjordiske reise* lest mellom Swifts *Gulliver’s Travels* og Ibsens *Peer Gynt*,” in Eivind Tjønneland, ed., *Den mangfoldige Holberg* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2005), 277–302; K. M. Jan and Shabam Firdaus, *Perspectives on Gulliver’s Travels* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2004).

students do classical comedies in Greek or Latin.<sup>25</sup> Holberg went beyond didactic school plays, inventing a genre for which he combined Roman comedy, Molière, and *commedia dell'arte*.<sup>26</sup> Similar to Absalon's focus on creating a nationally distinct creed of humanism, Holberg dedicated his life "to cultivate an emerging polite reading public in his own country."<sup>27</sup>

Klim is of a different ilk, too seduced by how the new European ethos compels individuals to "come up with new ideas and improved techniques—to uniquely distinguish themselves."<sup>28</sup> Despite being a penniless, unemployed academic, Klim is only interested in pursuing that which would be "worth the inquiry of the philosopher."<sup>29</sup> His smugness represents what Vico refers to as "the conceit of nations and of scholars."<sup>30</sup> When Klim goes stumbling down into an unexplored cave and emerges on the inside of a hollow earth, readers familiar with the *conte* would expect a lesson that subverts Europe's old beliefs and institutions. After a chaotic accumulation of episodes marked by stupidity and brutality, "reason's single voice" should promote "a single universal paradigm." This structure led literary theorist Roland Barthes to characterize the *conte* "as little more than a vehicle for imposing the world view of a soon-to-be triumphant bourgeoisie at its most reductive and its most imperial."<sup>31</sup>

In the subterranean planet Nazar's empire of Potu (*utopia*), Klim believes that he finds such exemplified universality. Slow-moving, hyper-rational tree-creatures enjoy a society engineered to trigger mind orgasms for philosophes. The trees' enlightened rule results in an

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<sup>25</sup> Gilje, *Heksen og humanisten*.

<sup>26</sup> Bent Holm, "Holberg's Comedies: Intensions and Inspirations," in Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds., *Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017), 135–56, 141.

<sup>27</sup> Knud Haakonssen, "Introduction, Part Two: The Author and the Work," in Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds., *Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017), 13–26, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

<sup>29</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 53.

<sup>31</sup> Kavanagh, "Boufflers's," 10.

empire in which everything makes sense and works according to intention, to all's benefit and contentment. As Klim explores Potu, readers get the impression that if only Europeans could continue down a path of rational Enlightenment, a nearly optimal society would manifest itself, one that other nations, too, would aspire for and move toward. Holberg encourages readers to align themselves with this position by letting his naïf take a contrary position: that Europe is already comparable to the Potuan Empire. Klim notes that “as in our world the Europeans excel the rest of mankind, so the Potuans are distinguished by their superior virtue and wisdom from the rest of [their] globe.”<sup>32</sup>

So far, Holberg's satire is of the typical Enlightenment kind. Europe has far to go, but the Potuans represent a worthy, universal ideal. What remains is to convince Klim of Europe's (that is, his own) shortcomings. His arboreal hosts find him useful for nothing but delivering messages on foot. Klim pleads for a more dignified position, referring to the strengths of his scholarly work on slipper use in antiquity. Unfortunately, the trees' only appreciation for academic argument is as cockfight-like entertainment. Holberg makes clear how lacking he considers European intellectuals, culture, and politics to be; a greater reliance on rationality would be much preferable. Yet in the narrative that follows, Holberg subverts the idea of reason as a universal cure-all. What Klim's shallow inspection made seem like a product of theory and rational governance is a product of the trees' uniqueness and a millennium of cultural evolution.

For instance, the Potuan Empire practiced hereditary rule throughout this period, except once, when—inspired by the reasonability of it—they appointed a philosopher to govern. He was a wiser sovereign. But since Potuan culture had evolved to depend on the veneration only a monarch could inspire, effective obedience required that they reinstate a king. Even a milder

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<sup>32</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 48.



reform, of choosing the most capable from the royal pool of talent, was discarded. Rather than being intelligently designed in the strain of Plato's *Republic*, which lays forth what is required of rulers and citizens in an ideal state, Potu owes its well-being to evolutionary processes. The empire is a constantly renegotiated compromise informed by its habitat and the nature and culture of its inhabitants. Social organization works well in Potu, but only because the Potuans are who they are.

By letting Klim arrive at this conclusion only after an extended stay—during which he learns their language and culture—Holberg makes a case for the necessity of the interpretive “key which Vico's *New Science* was intended to provide.”<sup>33</sup> You could suspect Holberg of having read the Neapolitan, but this is unlikely. One inspiration could be the fourth century-BC philosopher who coined the term cosmopolitan, Diogenes the Cynic, with whom Holberg was acquainted. Diogenes's concept of world citizen was of the non-universalist, anti-imperial kind—in opposition to the imperial aspirations of later Stoics, Romans, and other universalists.<sup>34</sup> He, too, could safely be referred to as ornery. These men's outsider status may inform their heterodoxy. Perhaps Vico and Herder's origins from what philosopher Isaiah Berlin referred to as “cultural backwaters” (which applies to Holberg too) could help explain their originality and resistance to hegemonic thought.<sup>35</sup> Tenets offered as universal can feel less self-evident as you get farther away from the cultural center from which they arose. To make this case, Holberg sends his protagonist on a journey through Nazar's expansive periphery.

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<sup>33</sup> Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, xix.

<sup>34</sup> Tamara T. Chin, “What Is Imperial Cosmopolitanism? Revisiting Kosmopolitēs and Mundanus,” in Myles Lavan, Richard E. Payne, and John Weisweiler, eds., *Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Universal Rulers, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 129–52.

<sup>35</sup> Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, xv.

## A Biocultural Argument for Equality

At the beginning of Klim's circumnavigation, Holberg loosens his fisherman's line to lure readers back in. After a historicist explanation of Potuan particulars, Holberg returns to more familiar Enlightenment waters. In the first provinces, precepts offered are little more than truisms. In Quamso, inhabitants enjoy perfect lifelong health. Yet Klim sees "nobody pleased and joyful."<sup>36</sup> The take-away is not to curse the frailty of human health, as contentment is partly derived from the contrast of hardship. In neighboring Lalac, the land's abundance frees people from work, but neither they are happy. Sloth and luxury lead to a loathing of life, which lets Holberg offer a lesson of moderation and acceptance. In Mardak, Holberg offers an analogy to cultural particulars. That distinct groups have differently shaped eyes leads to tribalism because to "those who have oval eyes . . . every object appears oval."<sup>37</sup> Holberg argues for the immorality of a hegemonic group to impose their perspective on others. For anyone of a different tribe to gain a post in the government, this individual must swear to see the world as being just as oval as the ruling group does. Klim, unwilling to submit, flees what to him appears "horrid, barbarous, and unjust." Holberg lets a juniper tree turn the experience into a Counter-Enlightenment lesson:

You have formerly assured me that in most of the European dominions there are governing tribes which fall upon the rest with fire and sword upon account of some defect, not of their eyes indeed, but of their reason; and you yourself extolled such a proceeding as a pious act.<sup>38</sup>

Klim "blushed for shame." Yet the narrator's assurance of Klim thereafter having become "a staunch advocate for toleration" extends no further than to entertain "milder sentiments of people

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<sup>36</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 87.

under error.”<sup>39</sup> The keen reader, of course, should conclude that seeing a square world with one’s square eyes is not an error. That there were different forms of “reason” was a lesson harder to accept. Holberg’s subversion of the *conte* is fully underway. Philosophe-aligned readers can no longer assume that the author shares their values. As expected from a *conte*, *Niels Klim* exposes what is behind society’s subterfuge, yet this is not the customary “values assumed to be universal in scope and application.” Beneath this *conte*’s “absurdity of prejudices by which the true philosopher must never be duped”<sup>40</sup> is no Kantian foundation; it is cultural relativism. If readers want to avoid this position, they must align themselves with the naïf. Holberg subverts the *conte* by turning the reader, “the interpreting subject into the central satirical target of the novel.”<sup>41</sup>

As *Klim* journeys through more than two dozen wildly different nations, a cosmopolitan argument arises. Paramount to this Holbergian cosmopolitanism is how the diversity *Klim* experiences is not meant to be overcome. Distinct cultural customs and legal systems are “described in accordance with the fundamentals of natural law, such as changing laws according to the differences and changes in climate and race and nature.”<sup>42</sup> Holberg eschews racism like the one Montesquieu would espouse through his climate theory.<sup>43</sup> To Holberg, diversity between nations is a result of how distinct environments produce cultural differences—not biological ones. Rather impressively from a modern perspective, Holberg avoids delineating cognitive faculties along quantitative lines. The inhabitants of the nations *Klim* visits, many of which read as allegories to actual nations, “differ very little in sense and judgment from the Potuans,” writes

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<sup>39</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 87.

<sup>40</sup> Kavanagh, “Boufflers’s,” 10.

<sup>41</sup> Samuel Galson, “A Missive from the Mole: Holberg on How to Read the *Iter Subterraneum*,” in Stefan Tilg and Isabella Walser, eds., *Der neulateinische Roman als Medium seiner Zeit* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2013), 193–207, 195.

<sup>42</sup> Arild Linneberg, “From Natural Law to The Nature of Laws: Ludvig Holberg,” in Karen-Margrethe Simonsen, ed., *Law and Justice in Literature, Film and Theater: Nordic Perspectives* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 77–84, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Baron De Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws [De l’esprit des loix]*, Thomas Nugent, trans. (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2011 [1748]).

Holberg, “but in their rites and customs.”<sup>44</sup> Such openminded cosmopolitanism underpins his portrayal of the Nazarian periphery. Amusing observations are offered, and some narrative tension is imbued, but the author’s priority is to provide Vichian keys to each nation. These keys make obvious why Potuan ways of doing things—although they lead to utopian outcomes in Potu—could have disastrous consequence if exported to neighboring lands.

Holberg’s arguments against racism and imperialism are biocultural. Human biology is too universal to justify hierarchies based on race or nationality. Yet cultures can be so distinct that shallow assessment can give the impression of inferiority from one’s own position. Holberg avoids the extreme relativism of Vico. Cultures can become dysfunctional, so Holberg “does not consider all systems as equally good or valid.”<sup>45</sup> He offers a biocultural argument in support of gender equality, too. Over decades, he launched “a virtual campaign” for women’s access to education and work based on merit.<sup>46</sup> To his readers this was unbelievable; they seem to have assumed that *Niels Klim*’s wild sex distortions were part of the story’s fantastic exaggerations, merely included for comedic effect.<sup>47</sup> At this time, Nordic women, instead of gaining equality, kept having opportunities to contribute to the public sphere restricted.<sup>48</sup> This is inverted in the Nazarian province of Cocklecu. The Eurocentric narrator recounts with horror how “males alone perform the drudgery of the kitchen, and every such ignoble labor. . . . The females, on the other hand, are in possession of all honors and employments sacred, civil, or military.” Cocklecu’s inhabitants believe that nature has given males greater strength not to rule women, but that

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<sup>44</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Jørgen Sejersted, “Morals and Religion in Holberg’s Essays,” in Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds., *Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017), 80–97, 94.

<sup>46</sup> Haakonssen, “Introduction,” 14; Billeskov Jansen, *Ludvig Holberg*, 28.

<sup>47</sup> Langslet, *Den store ensomme*, 309.

<sup>48</sup> Birthe Cecilie Flugt, “Niels Klim’s europæiske rejse: en oversættelseshistorisk undersøgelse af *Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum*,” dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2015, 28.

nature's "intention in that could only be to destine [males] to the more laborious and servile duties of life."<sup>49</sup>

The author makes his feminist case also in the Potuan Empire. They grant women equal access to education and work, which produces such favorable outcomes that even the misogynist protagonist admits the merit of such. Holberg's campaign has led some to suggest that he was Scandinavia's first feminist.<sup>50</sup> Others reject this label, since he did not promote equal *rights*.<sup>51</sup> Holberg's position was that society would benefit from a greater utilization of female talent, irrespective of whether women are less, equally, or more talented than men. This was a question of efficacy, informed not by a framework of abstract rights, but by his biocultural perspective. Across Nazar, creatures do differ in nature (biology), yet Holberg offers this as an analogy to cultural difference between human nations. Throughout his scholarly and literary oeuvre, he emphasizes the similarity between all human collectives, and importantly, insisting on their right to self-govern.

This viewpoint is informed by Holberg's embrace of Pufendorfian natural law. He brought to Scandinavia the works of Samuel von Pufendorf, the son of a Lutheran pastor.<sup>52</sup> In this Westphalian era, natural law was "*the smart modern subject*" because it provided a secular approach to formulating national law.<sup>53</sup> Unlike Calvinist-aligned natural law, which posited rights as something inherent in individuals, the Pufendorfian perspective had "much in common

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<sup>49</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 90–91.

<sup>50</sup> Ingeborg W. Ovesen, "Ludvig Holberg – en tidligmoderne feminist," *Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift* 45 (2010): 45–54; Sven Hakon Rossel, ed., *Ludvig Holberg: A European Writer: A Study in Influence and Reception* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Kristoffer Schmidt, "Heroes and Heroines: The Lives of Men and Women," in Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds., *Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017), 98–115, 109.

<sup>52</sup> Ludvig Holberg, *Moralske Kierne Eller Introduction Til Naturens og Folke-rettens Kundskab, Uddragen af de fornemste Juristers, Besynderlig Grotii, Puffendorfs og Thomasii Skrifter, Illustreret med Exempler af de Nordiske Historier og confereret med vore Danske og Norske Love, Recesse og Forordninger* (Copenhagen: Johan Kruse, 1715).

<sup>53</sup> Knud Haakonssen, "Holberg's Law of Nature and Nations," in Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds., *Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017), 59–79, 60.

with traditional Lutheran conceptions.” Holberg envisioned few cross-cultural rights. Instead, he viewed society as “a complicated web of duties to others” and oneself.<sup>54</sup> Within each nation—our moral community—we could agree on which rights to grant one another, but these rights would not apply beyond our borders.

Unable to argue for individual rights, Holberg had to consider whether human nature was universal enough to provide an alternative platform for equality. He intuited that it was. When he saw peoples of different ethnicities create societies that to other Europeans appeared grounded in cognitive inferiority, Holberg saw little difference “in sense and judgment,” merely other “rites and customs.”<sup>55</sup> When his contemporaries saw women as mostly suitable for the domestic sphere, Holberg imagined how women could thrive under a different cultural regime. Human culture, he thought, expressed itself so divergently that it could seem as if national characteristics were informed by a difference in nature, like on *Nazar*. But from this ornery polymath’s elevated position, the follies of human nature appeared so thickly and widely distributed that there was no reason to draw distinction based on sex or skin color.<sup>56</sup>

### **Using Fiction to Undermine Censorship**

Holberg’s biocultural approach to equality informs why his feminism is as lacking of utopianism as his cosmopolitanism is. In his historical writings, he praises female rulers, yet criticizes them as mercilessly as he does male rulers.<sup>57</sup> He finds eighteenth-century gender division to be foolish—like so much else in his era—but his *conte* offers no utopian prospects for the rule of

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<sup>54</sup> Haakonssen, “Holberg’s *Law of Nature*,” 66.

<sup>55</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 83.

<sup>56</sup> We are all subject to the same human conditions and frailties, writes Holberg, quoted in Billeskov Jansen, *Ludvig Holberg*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Schmidt, “Heroes and Heroines.”

women. In Cocklecu, women rape and buy prostitutes. The queen's harem holds three hundred men. Spinning and weaving husbands must on "occasion take a beating from their wives."<sup>58</sup> Females are not morally, behaviorally, or biologically better, merely circumstantially different. This parallels how his cosmopolitanism lacks determinism. *Niels Klim* argues for cultural and religious tolerance, yet no promises are made for the outcome of such an approach. Throughout Klim's journey, the reader sees no Kantian hand of nature, nothing that guides toward preordained harmony or perpetual peace. Agonistic nations are unique products of habitat and history. Nothing suggests that they must evolve through the same stages and converge. When Klim attempts to force such an outcome through imperial conquest, the narrative punishes him.

These historicist themes are poorly grasped in scholarship on *Niels Klim*. The seminal criticism is literary historian Julius Paludan's 1878 dissertation. He reads the novel as a satire on human folly, emphasizing its intertextuality with imaginary journeys from *The Odyssey*, via Lucian, to *Don Quixote*.<sup>59</sup> Within the *conte* genre, such journeys became a trope due to their suitability for social experimentation. Over two hundred imaginary voyages were published.<sup>60</sup> Many offer utopias, like the Potuan Empire gives the impression of being, and these utopias serve a variety of purposes.<sup>61</sup> In such a context, Paludan did not see how *Niels Klim* distinguishes itself. This left an impression of the novel being little more than a local *Gulliver*. Newer scholarship suggests that the novel satirizes more than copies Swift, but without recognizing the extent to which *Niels Klim* undermines the universality that would come to dominate European thought. Other critics seek an interpretative key in protagonist interiority, in the gap between

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<sup>58</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 90.

<sup>59</sup> Julius Paludan, "Om Holbergs *Niels Klim*, med særlig Hensyn til tidligere Satirer i Form af opdigtede og vidunderlige Reiser," dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 1878.

<sup>60</sup> Philip Babcock Gove, *The Imaginary Voyage in Prose Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941).

<sup>61</sup> Michael Nerlich, *Ideology of Adventure: Studies in Modern Consciousness, 1100–1750. Volume 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Enlightenment aspirations and Klim's psychological shortcomings.<sup>62</sup> A common view is that the authorial intent is to promote tolerance and freedom of religion.<sup>63</sup> Even those who approach Holberg as a constructivist limit their focus mostly to how the author's biography informs geography and social relations in his stories.<sup>64</sup> Lars Roar Langslet, the biographer, is unable to appreciate the *conte* on its own terms.<sup>65</sup>

Clearly, this Enlightenment format confuses modern readers. If we approach this eighteenth-century self-expression with Vichian "reconstructive imagination," the *conte* provides a key to Holberg's historicism. Recent scholarship supports my approach. Thomas Velle reads *Niels Klim* as unique in its cosmopolitanism but focuses on its Latin language.<sup>66</sup> Brian Kjær Olesen places Holberg in his appropriate Counter-Enlightenment context, finding the author's position to be "an eclectic blend of Lutheranism, Arminianism, and modern natural law."<sup>67</sup> When we examine how Holberg conforms to, and subverts, the *conte*—and juxtapose his Enlightenment critique against that of Vico—we see how radically *Niels Klim* breaks with the cosmopolitanism that would inform modern Europe. It is not surprising that the novel's historicism has been overlooked or misunderstood; it is a subtle foundation. Berlin writes of "the vehement zeal with which both Vico and Herder thought and spoke."<sup>68</sup> Holberg is more

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<sup>62</sup> Guttorm Fløistad, "Opplysningstidens underverden: Noen betraktninger over Holbergs roman om Niels Klim," *Edda* 81.1 (1987): 57–61; Søren P. Hansen, "Mellem rejseroman og udviklingsroman: En læsning af Ludvig Holbergs *Niels Klim*," *Danske Studier* 77 (1982): 5–20; Lasse H. Kjældgaard, "Tolerance og autoritet hos Locke, Voltaire og Holberg," in Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter C. Teilmann, and Frode Thorsen, eds., *Holberg i Norden: Om Ludvig Holbergs författarskap och dess kulturhistoriska betydelse* (Gothenburg: Makadam förlag, 2004).

<sup>63</sup> Sejersted, "Å reise," 280.

<sup>64</sup> Gunnstein Akselberg, "Sosial- og kulturkonstruktivistiske trekk hjå Ludvig Holberg," in Eivind Tjønneland, ed., *Den mangfoldige Holberg* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2005), 45–72.

<sup>65</sup> Langslet, *Den store ensomme*, 401.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Velle, "Ludvig Holberg's Mobile Novel *Niels Klim's Travels Underground* (1741–45): A Functionalistic Approach to its Place in European Literary History," dissertation, Gent University, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Brian Kjær Olesen, *Monarchism, Religion, and Moral Philosophy: Ludvig Holberg and the Early Northern Enlightenment*, dissertation, European University Institute, 2016, 306.

<sup>68</sup> Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, xxv.



circumspect in *Niels Klim*. His scholarly historicism had also faded from view. Unlike his writings on law, which were read by Danish law students for two centuries, his historical scholarship became seen as outdated, until recently.<sup>69</sup>

Holberg is not as neat a fit as Vico and Herder for the term Counter-Enlightenment thinker. In spite of his unwillingness to universalize rationality, Holberg allows himself to be a careful champion of reason, expressing moderate optimism in regard to this faculty and its potential for making a better future.<sup>70</sup> To promote rationality as an alternative to superstition and other follies, Holberg made his case through accessible scholarship and more accessible fiction. His plays were so successful that they earned him the nickname “the Molière of the North.”<sup>71</sup> He was an early adopter when European theater moved on from frivolous entertainment by travelling comedians to plays with literary quality and social relevance.<sup>72</sup> Despite his success, this venue for influence was deprived him by pietistic prohibition of theater in 1728–47.<sup>73</sup>

After writing more than two dozen plays of remarkable quality and variety in 1722–27, Holberg had to direct his considerable energy toward his professorship. A decade later, he transitioned from being a pragmatic historian to a moral philosopher. Around the same time, novels “took off as a genre,”<sup>74</sup> and in the *conte* Holberg saw a venue for popular influence that lent itself to his new specialty. As a moral philosopher, he had little concern for metaphysics or

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<sup>69</sup> Jørgen Sejersted and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds., *Historikeren Ludvig Holberg* (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2014); Olden-Jørgensen, *Ludvig Holberg som pragmatisk historiker*.

<sup>70</sup> A 1984 TV adaptation of *Niels Klim* rejects Holberg’s project, insisting that humans are not creatures of reason, and that we will have no choice but to self-destruct. For my adaptation study, see Mads Larsen, “Bookending the Enlightenment: Scandinavia’s First Novel and the Anthropocene Condemnation of its TV Adaptation,” *Journal of European Studies* 50.4 (2020): 325–42.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Fitting, “Reconsidering Holberg’s *Niels Klim* in the World Underground,” *Utopian Studies* 7.2 (1996): 93–112, 94.

<sup>72</sup> Holm, “Holberg’s Comedies,” 136.

<sup>73</sup> Holm, “Holberg’s Comedies,” 144. The Copenhagen Fire of 1728 was the largest in the capital’s history. It resulted not only in economic depression, but cultural piety since many interpreted the fire to be God’s punishment for the Enlightenment. Denmark’s new theater, which had been inaugurated in 1722 with plays by Molière and Holberg, was shut down, and Holberg withdrew socially; see Sven Hakon Rossel, “Ludvig Holberg: The Cosmopolitan: A Monographic Sketch,” in Rossel, ed., *Ludvig Holberg: A European Writer: A Study in Influence and Reception* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 1–41, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), eBook.

overarching philosophy.<sup>75</sup> Such are part of the cultural process, yet philosophical precision does not change the world on its own. Complex thought creates raw material, but what matters is what the masses absorb; this feeds into a community's master-narrative. If I write that Kantian thought informs the failure of the Bush doctrine, I suggest not that the American president decided to spread democracy through bombs and nation-building because he had read Kant. Neither did early social democrats confer with Luther's writings. We are enmeshed in a culture whose master-narrative is informed by numerous influences. To navigate this chaos, we craft narratives that attempt to make sense of it all, like I do with this study. If my story is compelling, more will see the world like I do. If it is not, other stories will outcompete mine as we try to understand how we arrived at where we are today.

This is the cultural contest the aging Holberg wants to reenter, baiting "his hook to the tastes of the little fishes."<sup>76</sup> He understood that we are *Homo narrans*, the storytelling ape. Reason will only get you so far, as our moral sensibilities are not philosophical but narrative. We act not to adhere to the cleverest philosophy, but informed by what is rewarded in the stories we prefer. Importantly, which is the case *Niels Klim* makes, no consensus can be found beyond the border of our story collective. Before distinct tribes can agree on what is just, they must come to prefer the same tales; they must long for similar climax resolutions. Justice is local, which is why we crave stories that have arisen from our own community, building on our former prejudices to inform new ones. Enlightenment philosophes assumed that these prejudices were evils that harmed humanity.<sup>77</sup> Holberg, like Vico, was among those who understood that no moral community was possible without them. If you want to influence your community's future

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<sup>75</sup> Haakonssen, "Introduction," 17.

<sup>76</sup> Holberg, *Ludvig Holberg's Memoirs*, 169.

<sup>77</sup> Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment: And Why it Still Matters* (New York: Random House, 2013), 396–401.

prejudices, you have to impact its inhabitants through compelling stories. Holberg therefore referred to Molière as one of the great philosophers of recent times.<sup>78</sup>

### **A Return to Homeric Heroism**

In *Niels Klim*, Holberg warns readers against what emerges as Europe's new prejudices. These were secularly justified ones, but they could motivate a cosmopolitanism that was too similar to an older creed that Holberg feared. He ends his novel by dramatizing a possible consequence of imposing European custom on cultural others. Banished from land after land—like Gulliver—Klim emerges as shipwrecked among primitive peoples whom he introduces to gunpowder. He and his soldiers embark on a campaign for planetary domination. With superior technology, they force nation after nation into subjugation. The empire's motivation is not supremacy of the ethnic or cultural kind; Holberg offers a more complex argument against imperialism.

The conquerors appreciate the uniqueness and strengths of those they conquer. The Martinians are superior mariners, so Klim incorporates their expertise. The defeated are offered to join ranks within the new regime, similar to the way in which Alexander the Great's cosmopolitanism offered the universal, non-ethnic identity of "Greek" to all willing to embody his imperial creed.<sup>79</sup> Inspired by such conquerors of the past, and considering himself to be their successor, Klim expects his empire to become the prophesied Fifth Monarchy (after the Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires). Such a conquest, Klim fantasizes, would usher in a millennium of saintly peace.

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<sup>78</sup> Ludvig Holberg, *Moralske Tanker* (Copenhagen: H. Hagerup, 1943), 18.

<sup>79</sup> Chin, "What Is Imperial Cosmopolitanism?" 145.

Despite its assimilatory inclusivity, Klim's imperial adventure ends disastrously. The narrative casts scathing judgment on those who think the purpose of philosophy is to discover God's "purposive plan of producing concord among men, even against their will."<sup>80</sup> Imperial oppression could succeed as a scheme for immediate subjugation, but this is too perilous of a strategy for lasting convergence. Holberg emphasizes the limitations of assimilation, arguing for the importance of a Vichian understanding of nations and mores. When Klim rules over so many lands that he no longer bothers "to inquire the names of these four surrendered territories,"<sup>81</sup> this becomes the final-act turning point. A cultural collapse motivates his subjects to overthrow him. The narrative makes clear how Klim's demise is of his own making. He justified imperial oppression with philosophe beliefs, which are but a thinly veiled mask for his own personal ambition.

This imperialism is not portrayed as an eighteenth-century novelty. *Niels Klim's* intertextuality with literature from antiquity suggests a reemergence. By invoking the Four World Monarchies framework, Holberg connects modern Europe's ethos to those of olden-days empires. Approaching world history through these empires had been common, but such a narrow frame ceased to make sense with global discovery. Klim viewing himself as the Fifth Monarch heralds a return to an outdated ethos of imperial expansionism, one grounded in the same "Homeric heroism"<sup>82</sup> that *Gisli's Saga* broke with half a millennium earlier. Holberg feared that an increasing sense of moral and military superiority could motivate a return to this ethos. *Niels Klim's* subterranean world thus reads as an allegory for "early modern European exploration of

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<sup>80</sup> Kant, "Perpetual Peace," 108.

<sup>81</sup> Holberg, *Niels Klim*, 213.

<sup>82</sup> Schmidt, "Heroes and Heroines," 101.

hitherto unknown continents.”<sup>83</sup> Klim’s Eurocentric megalomania, as he regresses to embrace an antiquated imperialism, does and must lead “to defeat and catastrophe.”<sup>84</sup>

Not only do his colonies suffer, Klim does too. Holberg warns against how the universality embraced by his contemporaries could motivate a lose-lose outcome, a world order so unstable that, in the long run, it cannot help but fall apart. If European nations convinced themselves that their ideology and institutions were suitable for export, a day of reckoning would inevitably come. I read *Niels Klim* to argue that no safe, prosperous future is possible through domination and standardization. Holberg offers no alluring—and certainly no preordained—alternative. He argues for a process of careful progress that evokes evolutionary processes, similar to social democratic governance. Holbergian cosmopolitanism offers no greater hope than what we can expect from accepting diversity, applying reason to difficult circumstance, and discussing our way to agreement when possible. This is not as dark as how the misanthrope Swift portrays human hopelessness, but it is still bleak, as the story ends with Klim living out his days as low-level clergy in Bergen. He suffers the exile’s estrangement from what once felt familiar. Like Gulliver, whose wife and children upon his return smelled foul to him, Klim has lost his local anchoring, forever deprived the experience of homely comfort.<sup>85</sup>

### **Nordic Pastoral Enlightenment**

With this ending, Holberg makes a case for finding one’s adaptation to modernity within a local framework. The novel was an apt medium for conveying such a message. After the eighteenth

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<sup>83</sup> Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, “Journeys of Humor and Satire: *Peder Paars* and *Niels Klim*,” in Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds., *Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017), 116–34, 132.

<sup>84</sup> Skovgaard-Petersen, “Journeys of Humor and Satire,” 131.

<sup>85</sup> Edward W. Said, “The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum’s Logic of Irreconcilables,” in *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000), 7–17.

century's *conte* and epistolary novels, the medium found its more familiar form in the nineteenth century, which it came to dominate. Novels became field manuals on how to adapt to an ever-changing world.<sup>86</sup> The Henrichian coevolution had driven a small increase in European GDP per capita since the turn of the millennium, a growth that would accelerate in the 1800s.<sup>87</sup> A drastic increase in production and population would tear the old world apart—and a new world needed new stories. Pre-modern tales had ended with a return to tradition, to the static world that was disturbed at the beginning of the story.<sup>88</sup> *Niels Klim* is an early example of how the European individual could never again return to a familiar harbor; no longer would anyone grow old in a world like the one they were born into. My previous case studies offered anomalies of disruption between hardly noticeable change. From now on, several times in a single life, social change could require that you adapt your outlook if you were to get along and get ahead. In this environment, insightful novels could provide adaptive advantages that I will account for in the next chapter.

Holberg's novel also exemplifies how Nordic particularness expressed itself in a distinct Enlightenment. Cultural critic Nina Witoszek refers to the region's movement as "pastoral," which is a pun.<sup>89</sup> This movement was driven not by philosophes in salons, but rather by Lutheran *pastors* in rural areas. They brought early literacy that accustomed regular people to orienting themselves intellectually, practicing *Sapere aude*, the courage to use their own understanding. Clergymen were responsible for their community's well-being both spiritually and secularly, a duty that motivated them to adapt continental ideas to the local environment. Instead of being an

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<sup>86</sup> Mark Seltzer, "Murder/Media/Modernity," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38.1 (2008): 11–41.

<sup>87</sup> Bolt and van Zanden, "Maddison Style Estimates of the Evolution of the World Economy."

<sup>88</sup> Quentin G. Kraft, "Robinson Crusoe and the Story of the Novel," *College English* 41.5 (1980): 535–48.

<sup>89</sup> Nina Witoszek, *The Origins of the "Regime of Goodness": Remapping the Cultural History of Norway* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011); J. Peter Burgess, ed., *Den norske pastorale opplysning: Nye perspektiver på norsk nasjonsbygging på 1800-tallet* (Oslo: Abstrakt forlag, 2003).

urban intellectual movement, Nordic Enlightenment was grounded in Lutheranism and a *rural* perspective, which is the second meaning of Witoszek’s “pastoral Enlightenment.”

This rural anchoring influenced narrative expectations. While in Western Europe the ideal was the honorable gentleman, Nordics made the modest peasant the hero of their stories.<sup>90</sup> Since the Neolithic, Scandinavian farmers had united around a cooperative ethos to optimize their chance of survival. Their modern beliefs built on those values, informing a master-narrative of altruism, distrust of extravagance, and with a focus on creating a better future instead of looking to a golden past. Nordic modernity, writes Witoszek, was set on a path of prosocial politics, toned-down nationalism, and pragmatic rationality.<sup>91</sup> *Niels Klim* is part of this movement. In the next chapter, I offer an evolutionary reading of Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*, arguably the world’s first modernist novel. Like Holberg, Hamsun builds on his culture’s Lutheranism, as he dramatizes a morality more adaptive to a new era. When the Second Industrial Revolution threw humanity into its most consequential transition since the Neolithic, Hamsun used fiction to explore what his own emotions rejected.

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<sup>90</sup> Trägårdh, “Statist Individualism,” 258. In the works of Danish polymath N. F. S. Grundtvig, this rural anchoring expressed itself through the goal of “a common national culture instead of the ruling academic liberalism.” His folk high school movement promoted freedom, anti-authoritarianism, national-historical values, and optimism—in opposition to orthodoxy; see Sven H. Rossel, “From Romanticism to Realism,” in Sven H. Rossel, ed., *A History of Danish Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 167–259, 198–99.

<sup>91</sup> Witoszek and Sørensen, “Nordic Humanism,” 39.

## 5. Modernity: Starved into Accepting Modern Morality

In *Hunger* (1890), Knut Hamsun's unnamed protagonist is an urban migrant, the ad-hoc solution to the nineteenth century's explosive expansion. From 1800 to 1914, the Nordic population tripled.<sup>1</sup> Rather precisely, the Swedish poet Esaias Tegnér attributed the growth to “peace, vaccines, and potatoes.” The consequences undermined Nordic egalitarianism. With little land left to break, the previously “homogeneous and remarkably peaceful, rural society” was split between those with land to live off and those with nothing.<sup>2</sup> Thus, “social polarization among the rural populations worsened, and tensions grew.”<sup>3</sup> Without war, famine, or pestilence to wipe out the surplus, a rural exodus was inevitable. Over 3 million Nordics emigrated, mostly to the United States. Cities would have to absorb the rest. In the nineteenth century, the Norwegian capital of Kristiania (now Oslo) grew from 10,000 to 250,000 people.<sup>4</sup> Conditions were appalling. Squalor, unemployment, exploitative labor practices, social disintegration, and cultural confusion challenged those set adrift on the rough seas of the first industrial revolutions. New technologies transformed the world, and cultural adaptations were slow to catch up.

Hamsun's protagonist responds with a social dysfunction that threatens his life. Unable to make sense of urban morality, he falls prey to his own emotions. Overwhelmed by sensations of pride and shame, he becomes an untrustworthy collaborator, which deprives him of mating opportunities and professional success. Starving and delirious, he stumbles through a Kristiania that appears alien to him. He misinterprets the intentions of others, lies to himself, and curses the

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<sup>1</sup> Nordstrom, *Scandinavia*, 228.

<sup>2</sup> Nordstrom, *Scandinavia*, 153.

<sup>3</sup> Nordstrom, *Scandinavia*, 230.

<sup>4</sup> Nordstrom, *Scandinavia*, 231.



Lutheran God that has abandoned him. His experiences build on Hamsun's own.<sup>5</sup> The later Nobel-winning novelist was uprooted from his family's rural environment as a child, which made life hard and transient. Until his success with *Hunger*, Hamsun—like many others—had to adjust to “life as a permanently itinerant laborer.”<sup>6</sup> To make the point that these city dwellers have no history, that their identity and sense of worth are transitory, Hamsun provides no name or backstory for his protagonist.<sup>7</sup> In what he referred to as a “self-revelatory” novel, the narrative is inspired by what he himself experienced as a starving artist in Kristiania.<sup>8</sup>

*Hunger* ends with its homeless protagonist boarding a merchant ship to do manual labor in international waters. Some critics read him simply to be “fleeing.”<sup>9</sup> Paul Auster concludes that he “unburdens himself of every belief in every system, and in the end, by means of the hunger he has inflicted upon himself, he arrives at nothing.”<sup>10</sup> Auster equates this “nothing” with modernism itself: “There is nothing to keep him going, and yet he keeps on going. He walks straight into the twentieth century.”<sup>11</sup> I will argue against *Hunger* ending in tragedy or nothing. While his material conditions remain grim, the protagonist triumphs in the climax sequence by finally adapting to what Hamsun's novel centers on: modern morality.

Reading *Hunger* through the framework of Morality-as-Cooperation (MAC) shows how the protagonist's journey ends with something: freeing himself emotionally from a mismatched ethos. He changes from rural to urban morality, which in *Hunger* entails a transition from religious to secular humanism. Using MAC to trace this journey lets us distinguish the

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Ferguson, *Enigma: The Life of Knut Hamsun* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 110; Tore Hamsun, *Knut Hamsun* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Nordstrom, *Scandinavia*, 230.

<sup>7</sup> Ingar Sletten Kolloen, *Knut Hamsun: Dreamer and Dissenter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 48.

<sup>8</sup> Knut Hamsun, *Knut Hamsuns brev: 1879-1895, Vol. I* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Lars Thomas Braaten, *Roman og film: En studie over forholdet mellom ord og bilde* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1972), 82.

<sup>10</sup> Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, 20.

protagonist's variety of strategies as they apply to a series of collaborative domains that are informed by corresponding types of moralities.<sup>12</sup> MAC proposes that "morality consists of a collection of biological and cultural solutions to the problems of cooperation recurrent in human social life."<sup>13</sup> Morality is neither transcendent nor coincidental; its function is to promote prosocial behavior within a given environment. MAC "predicts that specific forms of cooperative behavior . . . will be considered morally good wherever they arise, in all cultures." This hypothesis has been explored within a variety of academic fields. A team led by Oliver Scott Curry from Oxford's Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology tested MAC's universality against the ethnographic records of 60 societies from across the world and found that "in 961 out of 962 observations (99.9%), cooperative behavior had a positive moral valence."<sup>14</sup>

Hamsun intuited that morality has this function and that its most important role is to inspire emotion. Before *Hunger*'s publication, the expert marketer publicly scolded a priest and politician for not understanding that morals change with context.<sup>15</sup> To help people adapt to the modern context, literature could be of help, but this would require narrative innovation. Hamsun wanted to go beyond how other authors turned characters into types with too superficial psychology.<sup>16</sup> He sought to portray humans as they really are by dramatizing the "strange activities of the nerves, the whispering of the blood, the pleading of the bone, the entire unconscious intellectual life."<sup>17</sup> His description corresponds with what evolutionary psychologists less poetically refer to as "neurocomputational adaptations designed by natural selection to coordinate the operations of multiple systems within the organism (e.g., perceptual,

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<sup>12</sup> Curry, "Morality as Cooperation."

<sup>13</sup> Curry, Mullins, and Whitehouse, "Is It Good to Cooperate?" 47.

<sup>14</sup> Curry, Mullins, and Whitehouse, "Is It Good to Cooperate?" 54.

<sup>15</sup> Knut Hamsun, *Fra det moderne Amerikas åndsliv: Lars Oftedal*, in *Samlede verker* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2009 [1889]), 215.

<sup>16</sup> Knut Hamsun, *Paa turné; tre foredrag om litteratur* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1960 [1891]), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Knut Hamsun, "Fra det ubevidste Sjæleliv," *Samtiden* 1 (1890): 325–34, 333; my translation.

metabolic, and motivational systems) and to orchestrate system-wide functional responses to specific ancestrally-recurrent adaptive problems.”<sup>18</sup> Harari simplifies, “Emotions are biochemical algorithms that are vital for the survival and reproduction of all mammals.”<sup>19</sup> Since we no longer live like the foragers for whom these biological mechanisms evolved, we have to—with every significant transition—reprogram our “social and moral emotions.”<sup>20</sup>

Fiction can help us do this. From reading about the failures—and eventual success—of *Hunger*’s protagonist, contemporaries could draw lessons on how to get along and get ahead in the urban environment. Joseph Carroll, the founder of evolutionary literary criticism, sums up eight functions that arts have that may provide adaptive advantage: (a) reinforcing the sense of a common social identity, (b) fostering creativity and cognitive flexibility, (c) enhancing pattern recognition, (d) serving as a form of sexual display, (e) providing information about the environment, (f) offering game-plan scenarios to prepare for future problem-solving, (g) focusing the mind on adaptively relevant problems, and (h) making emotional sense of experience.<sup>21</sup> These add up to one overarching function: to create “an imaginative virtual world, an inner world, that guides our behavior in the actual, physical world.”<sup>22</sup> In this chapter, I will show that particularly with functions (a), (e), (f), (g), and (h), *Hunger* offered insights that contributed to the novel’s success. Judging by Hamsun’s romantic entanglements around the

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<sup>18</sup> Durkee, Lukaszewski, and Buss, “Pride and Shame,” 470.

<sup>19</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 382.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Carroll, Jonathan Gottschall, John A. Johnson, and Daniel J. Kruger, *Graphing Jane Austen: The Evolutionary Basis of Literary Meaning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Carroll, “Imagination, the Brain’s Default Mode Network, and Imaginative Verbal Artifacts,” in Joseph Carroll, Mathias Clasen, and Emelie Jonsson, eds., *Evolutionary Perspectives on Imaginative Culture*. New York: Springer, 2020, 31–52, 47.

time of publication,<sup>23</sup> the later-to-be father of five's debut novel also fulfilled function (d).<sup>24</sup>

### **The Morality of Unmooring**

*Hunger* consists of four parts through which the protagonist's situation worsens as autumn becomes winter. We experience his deteriorating physical and mental state through a stream-of-consciousness narrative in which all aspects of reality are filtered through the protagonist's emaciated organism. He is determined to write a masterpiece that can bring him prestige and money, but he self-sabotages with behavior that is driven by whatever emotions overwhelm him from moment to moment. This made for a novel reading experience. First-person narration was unusual at the time, and the extreme subjectivity felt unique and personal. There is little in terms of traditional plot. From paragraph to paragraph—from sentence to sentence even—the narrator's mood changes, sending the story in new directions. The emotional tone can be dizzyingly manic, only to turn gut-wrenchingly depressive for little external reason.

From his work in progress, Hamsun published a fragment in 1888—anonously—which triggered a public search for the identity of this new voice that felt so relevant. Hamsun dramatized the interiority of the Western individual who now risked complete unmooring. Without kin or family to call on, Hamsun (and his protagonist) was on his own in an overcrowded city of strangers. Lutheran beliefs still motivated altruism and expectations of supernatural reciprocity, but no institutional apparatus could translate the Nordic ethos into effective solutions for the urban environment. Ideologically, the individual was more important than ever. In reality, there were so many that a large proportion was redundant, mirroring what

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<sup>23</sup> Kolloen, *Knut Hamsun*, 50.

<sup>24</sup> For more on the sexual selection hypothesis as it regards male artists, see Helen Clegg, Daniel Nettle, and Dorothy Miell, "Status and Mating Success Amongst Visual Artists," *Frontiers in Psychology* 2 (2011): 1–4.

Harari refers to as our present era's "useless class."<sup>25</sup> After slow industrialization, Scandinavian modernization caught speed around 1860,<sup>26</sup> but labor demand could not yet keep up with supply. The global Long Depression (1873–93) made things worse.<sup>27</sup> To make emotional sense of such precarity, city dwellers had to update their "imaginative virtual world." Institutions would catch up, as we will see in the next chapter, but insightful literature could help people navigate the transition. Literary critic Toril Moi concludes that Hamsun's approach resonated with an era "in which one paradigm has broken down and another has not yet become dominant."<sup>28</sup>

*Hunger* came at the tail end of a Scandinavian literary movement, the Modern Breakthrough. Critic Georg Brandes had agitated for fiction that could help readers make sense of the new time.<sup>29</sup> Ibsen, Strindberg, and others wrote plays and novels that offered new content for the Nordic imaginary.<sup>30</sup> Responding to the Darwinian revolution, they approached humans not as Lutheran subjects but evolved animals.<sup>31</sup> Religious humanism had posited that individuals had a soul with a divine spark. Expressed through natural law, this master-narrative offered that God's plan could be deduced by reason alone.<sup>32</sup> Darwin took away both God and the soul; it was a lot to make emotional sense of. Most people still clung to religion, but as a personal meta-narrative. Gradually, the God story had been demoted from its master-narrative status, no longer being the unquestionable story that informed a community's decisions. Instead of being oriented

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<sup>25</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*.

<sup>26</sup> Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40.

<sup>27</sup> Jon-Arild Johannessen, *Innovations Lead to Economic Crises: Explaining the Bubble Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 89–109.

<sup>28</sup> Moi, *Henrik Ibsen*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Elias Bredsdorff, *Den store nordiske krig om seksualmoralen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> For my account of one of Ibsen's attempts at influencing Nordic thought, see Mads Larsen, "A Liberal Stand-Off with Deplorables: Adapting Ibsen from Nietzscheanism through Nazism to Neoliberalism," *Journal of European Studies* 52.1 (2022): 4–23.

<sup>31</sup> For my evolutionary reading of the movement's literature, see Mads Larsen, "Untangling Darwinian Confusion Around Lust, Love, and Attachment in the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 5.1 (2021): 41–55.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), eBook.

toward salvation, the modernist outlook emphasized a belief in progress from science and technology, a concern with time as a commodity, an ideal of freedom defined by abstract humanism, an orientation toward pragmatism, and a cult of reason, action, and success.<sup>33</sup>

Earlier literature, too, had engaged such themes. *Hunger* is termed modernist because it deals with modernist themes in a manner that makes content and form indistinguishable: “Worldview is not simply placed inside form; worldview is equivalent to form. Not only is the content of the work the content of the psyche, but the form of the work is also the form of the psyche.”<sup>34</sup> *Hunger* received its modernist label from critic James McFarlane in 1956.<sup>35</sup> Already upon reception, the novel was praised for its style and literary brilliance.<sup>36</sup> One critic proclaimed that Hamsun’s debut sent the author straight to the European literary Parnassus.<sup>37</sup> Many later assessments have been no less laudatory. Isaac Bashevis Singer endorses *Hunger* as the literary opening of the twentieth century: “His subjectiveness, his fragmentariness, his use of flashbacks, his lyricism. The whole modern school of fiction . . . stems from Hamsun.”<sup>38</sup>

Through more than a century of changing trends in criticism, morality has been central in scholarship on *Hunger*. Carl Nærup called Hamsun a nihilist who goes against all accepted values by writing books that seek to turn the world upside down.<sup>39</sup> The protagonist was

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<sup>33</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 41.

<sup>34</sup> Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 28.

<sup>35</sup> James W. McFarlane, “The Whisper of the Blood: A Study of Knut Hamsun's Early Novels,” *PMLA* 71.4 (1956): 563–94. Viewing *Hunger* as modernist has since been the hegemonic position; see Einar Eggen, “Mennesket og tingene,” in Øystein Rottem, ed., *Søkelys på Knut Hamsuns 90-års diktning* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1979 [1966]), 55–76; Peter Kirkegaard, *Knut Hamsun som modernist* (Copenhagen: Medusa, 1976); Martin Humpál, “The Roots of Modernist Narrative: Knut Hamsun’s Novels *Hunger*, *Mysteries*, and *Pan*,” dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1996; Ståle Dingstad, *Hamsuns strategier: Realisme, humor og kynisme* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2003); Eirik V. Vassenden, “En Ildebrand i en Bøglade. Modernisme og vitalisme i Hamsuns *Sult* og i *Sult* resepsjonen,” *Norsk Literaturvitenskapelig Tidsskrift* 13.2 (2010): 101–15.

<sup>36</sup> Edvard Brandes, “*Sult*. Af Knut Hamsun,” in Øystein Rottem, ed., *Søkelys på Knut Hamsuns 90-års diktning* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1979 [1890]), 40–43.

<sup>37</sup> Erik Skram, “Knut Hamsuns *Sult*,” in Øystein Rottem, ed., *Søkelys på Knut Hamsuns 90-års diktning* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1979 [1891]), 37–39.

<sup>38</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Knut Hamsun. Artist of Skepticism,” in Hamsun, *Hunger*, 5–10, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Carl Nærup, *Skildringer og Stemninger fra den yngre Litteratur* (Kristiania: Cammermeyer, 1897).

embraced by outsiders who rebelled against bourgeois morals.<sup>40</sup> Gradually, Hamsun became seen not as a moral outsider, but a harbinger. With fame, he was idealized.<sup>41</sup> Some Germans did so to an extent that today reads as uncomfortable.<sup>42</sup> Americans found Hamsun's modernism to be too anti-Christian.<sup>43</sup> As a consequence of the older Hamsun's embrace of Nazism, his literature was reread to express immoral ideology.<sup>44</sup> Psychological schools dissected the immorality of both Hamsun and his protagonist.<sup>45</sup> Atle Kittang's influential Lacanian approach alleviated Hamsun's moral culpability by reading irony into his texts,<sup>46</sup> but the author's morals continued to be castigated from a variety of ideological perspectives.<sup>47</sup> My focus on morality as cooperation adds to this body of interpretation by analyzing how the novel offers insight into what modernity requires of emotional adaptation.

For Hamsun, truth in fiction was a question of consequence. Holberg had expressed

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<sup>40</sup> Cathrine Theodorsen, "Knut Hamsun og Wien. Om den tidlige Hamsun-resepsjonen og Peter Altenberg," *Nordlit* 7.1 (2003): 1–29.

<sup>41</sup> Carl Morburger, *Knut Hamsun: Eine literarische und psychologische Studie* (Leipzig: Xenien-verlag, 1910); John Landquist, *Knut Hamsun. En studie över en nordisk romantisk diktare* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1917); Einar Skavlan, *Knut Hamsun* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1929).

<sup>42</sup> Walter A. Berendsohn, *Knut Hamsun: das unbändige Ich und die menschliche Gemeinschaft* (München: Albert Langen, 1929).

<sup>43</sup> Josef Wiehr, "Knut Hamsun: His Personality and His Outlook Upon Life," *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 3.1–2 (1922): 1–130.

<sup>44</sup> Alf Larsen, "Hamsuns änd," in *I kunstens tjeneste: Essays* (Oslo: Dreyers forlag, 1964 [1937]), 113–23; Leo Löwenthal, "Knut Hamsun: Zur Vorgeschichte der autoritären Ideologie," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6.2 (1938): 295–345; Rolf Nettum, "Knut Hamsun og patriarkatet," in Olav Storstein, ed., *Fra Jæger til Falk* (Oslo: Tiden Norsk Forlag, 1950), 111–17; Aasmund Brynildsen, "En svermer og hans demon," *Spektrum* (1952): 159–79; Willy Dahl, *Perspektiver* (Bergen: J. W. Eides Forlag, 1968).

<sup>45</sup> Morburger, *Knut Hamsun*; Isador H. Coriat, "Sex and Hunger," *Psychoanalytic Review* 8.4 (1921): 375–81; Gregory Stragnell, "A Psychopathological Study of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*," *Psychoanalytic Review* 9.2 (1922): 198–217; Trygve Braatøy, *Livets sirkel: Bidrag til analyse av Knut Hamsuns diktning* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1929); Kjell R. Solheim, "Kristianias merke. En studie i Hamsuns *Sult*," *Edda* 2 (1987): 141–56; Thomas Fechner-Smarsly, "Die Wiederkehr der Zeichen. Eine Psychoanalytische Studie zu Knut Hamsuns *Hunger*," in Heiko Uecker, ed., *Der nordische Hamlet*, Vol. 25 of *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Germanistik und Skandinavistik* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1991); Peter Sjølyst-Jackson, *Troubling Legacies. Migration, Modernism and Fascism in the Case of Knut Hamsun* (London: Continuum, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Atle Kittang, *Luft, vind, ingenting: Hamsuns desillusjonsromanar frå Sult til Ringen sluttet* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1984); "Knut Hamsun's *Sult*: Psychological Deep Structures and Metapoetic Plot," in Janet Garton, ed., *Facets of European Modernism* (Norwich: University of East Anglia, 1985), 295–308; "Knut Hamsun og nazismen," in Bjarte Birkeland, Kittang, Stein Uglevik Larsen, and Leif Longum, eds., *Nazismen og norsk litteratur* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1995), 254–67.

<sup>47</sup> Kirkegaard, *Knut Hamsun*; Monika Žagar, *Knut Hamsun: The Dark Side of Literary Brilliance* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009); Ståle Dingstad et al., eds., *Knut Hamsun: Transgression and Worlding* (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2011); Ståle Dingstad, *Knut Hamsun og det norske Holocaust* (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 2021). For a more comprehensive literature review, see Mads Larsen, "Adapting to Urban Pro-Sociality in Hamsun's *Hunger*," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 4.2 (2020): 33–46, 35–37.

similar pragmatism, that “the moral writings that had the best effect were the most useful.”<sup>48</sup> Hamsun evaluates literature by how it “creates or awakens notions with the reader, whether it hits his strings, whether it *works*.”<sup>49</sup> In regard to *Niels Klim*, “useful” meant conveying the perils of Enlightenment universality. For *Hunger*, “works” means helping readers master urban social codes. Moi posits that “the task of art” in the nineteenth century had been “to point the way to the ideal.”<sup>50</sup> Hamsun’s modernism overturns this sense of mission. Neither literature nor morals should be transcendently informed, as static ideals can wreck one’s identity and threaten one’s life. Altruistic egalitarianism had kept Nordic farmers alive for millennia, but this ethos was a poor match for crowded, inequality ridden, pre-welfare-state cities. A different ideology was needed to solve the problem of cooperation for a looser culture of individualistic competition.

Both sets of moralities can be examined within Curry’s MAC framework. He identifies seven moral domains that correspond to the following universal moral rules: (1) helping kin, (2) helping your group, (3) reciprocating, (4) being brave, (5) deferring to superiors, (6) dividing disputed resources, and (7) respecting prior possession. These domains are collaborative arenas for *non-zero-sum games*. Competitive actions within *zero-sum games* produce winners and losers, neither of which are more moral than the other. Expressions like “all is fair in love and war” support the moral neutrality of such competition. Morals evolved to guide humans toward prosocial behavior within non-zero-sum games in which all parties can be winners. In the following, I use Curry’s categories to analyze how *Hunger*’s protagonist transitions.

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Ewen Daltveit Slettebø, “Holberg’s Authorial Personae,” in Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds., *Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017), 29–44, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Hamsun, *Paa turné*, 69; my translation.

<sup>50</sup> Moi, *Henrik Ibsen*, 4.



### **Allocation of Resources to Kin (Family Values)**

Genes that benefit replicas of themselves are favored by natural selection if the cost of helping is lower than the benefit of receiving such help. Humans are therefore driven to care for their children, and to help family and relatives—all of which are considered morally good.<sup>51</sup> In an environment like the one we can assume that *Hunger*'s protagonist grew up in, family had been of utmost importance. If one were in need, having family or relatives with resources to spare was greatly advantageous. As an urban migrant, he has no kin to call on for resources; his inner monologue never references any such possible recourse. His love interest is in a better situation. The woman whom he calls Ylajali lives in a nice downtown apartment with her mother and a maid. The women seem to live off the means that Ylajali's deceased father procured through his career in the military. His success therefore contributes to his daughter's material security, which informs her class identity, thus limiting the pool of her most likely mates to prosperous males.

The physical decay that results from the protagonist's poverty triggers Ylajali's rejection of his romantic advances. While undressing, she is repelled: "What a lot of loose hair you've got here! . . . You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" Her reminder is redundant; throughout the novel the protagonist has been overwhelmed by shame. His first reaction is to despair: "I was good for nothing, I'd turned into a wet sock."<sup>52</sup> Ylajali covers her nakedness. The next time he sees Ylajali on the street, she seems to have paired up with a physician.

If the protagonist had had kin at least to feed him, he could have obsessed over his artistic ambitions without such detriment to his health. Family could perhaps also have helped him move past the dysfunction of his obsessiveness. With the transition to urban environments, our

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<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey Kurland and Steven Gaulin, "Cooperation and Conflict Among Kin," in David M. Buss, ed., *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2005), 447–82.

<sup>52</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 149.

propensity to allocate resources to kin did not significantly change. But in the Norwegian countryside, families could have centuries-long roots, and relatives were close by. Urban migrants often left kin behind. If their own professional efforts failed, aid could be available, but then administered based on morals of cooperation other than kinship.

### **Coordination to Mutual Advantage (Group Loyalty)**

In a range of situations—termed “mutualisms”—individuals benefit more from working together than from working alone. The challenge is to coordinate mutualisms, and humans do so by forming friendships, committing to collaborative endeavors, favoring their own group, and adopting local convention—all of which are considered morally good. *Hunger*’s protagonist mastered the skills necessary for becoming part of a group. Until a few months before the novel begins, he had people with whom he socialized and exchanged favors. These people were middle class, or at least socially ambitious, so we can assume that status, to a great extent, was assigned based on one’s professional performance. When the protagonist fails to achieve his ambitions as a writer, he gradually runs out of resources. To avoid shame, he isolates himself instead of drawing on group resources for sustenance or help to gain non-artistic employment.

In a rural environment, pervasive gossip distributes socially relevant information. In the city, *Hunger*’s protagonist has the option of avoiding his social group. When he runs into people who know him, he deceives them in respect to his social, economic, and romantic situation. For instance, when he encounters a gentleman called Maiden, the protagonist has just become homeless and has only one possession left that is not attached to his body: a blanket he borrowed from a friend.

“How are things, by the way?” [Maiden] asks hesitantly.

“Oh, beyond expectation.”

“So you’ve found something to do, have you?”

“Something to do?” I reply, looking greatly surprised. “I’m a bookkeeper at Christie’s, the merchant, don’t you know.”<sup>53</sup>

Instead of attempting to get assistance by an appeal to group loyalty, the protagonist gives preference to shame avoidance. The self-conscious emotions of pride and shame help people manage their status.<sup>54</sup> Displaying pride, which can be a highly pleasant emotion, is meant to promote an individual’s achievements so that others will think more highly of them. Displaying submissive shame is meant to appease others when an individual has done or experienced something that can cause others to devalue them.<sup>55</sup> The protagonist has wrapped his blanket so that “there would be nothing to be ashamed of anymore in carrying it.”<sup>56</sup> The package is material for clothes, he tells Maiden who therefore recommends a fashionable tailor instead of paying back the 10 kroner he owes the protagonist, a sum which could have fed him for weeks. The protagonist responds with anger, which is among the undesirable outcomes of shame, an emotion that can motivate both pro and anti-social behavior. Because he has been seduced by the city’s opportunities for false status, prosocial submission would not provide him with what his emotions tell him that he should seek. His shame system therefore switches “to less noble means . . . deceit and aggression” in an attempt to prevent devaluation.<sup>57</sup>

His pride system, as Auster observes, clouds his judgment. He becomes unable to precisely assess how his behavior is interpreted by more experienced urban collaborators, which further weakens his efforts at fitting in. The transition from rural to urban did not significantly

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<sup>53</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 34–35.

<sup>54</sup> Cameron Anderson, John Angus D. Hildreth, and Laura Howland, “Is the Desire for Status a Fundamental Human Motive? A Review of the Empirical Literature,” *Psychological Bulletin* 141.3 (2015): 574–601.

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Sznycer, “Forms and Functions of the Self-Conscious Emotions,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 23.2 (2019): 143–57.

<sup>56</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 33.

<sup>57</sup> Sznycer, “Forms and Functions,” 7.

change the morals of mutualisms. The size and looser culture of cities made possible a wider variety of social strategies, and *Hunger*'s protagonist has not yet learned to function well within those strategies. He opts to maintain his status vis-à-vis group members, a strategy that leads to isolation and further impoverishment. Ultimately, he gets assigned an outcast status that excludes him from collaboration with the segments of society with which he feels affinity. If he could accept his low status and ask for help—instead of betting everything on his ability to write a masterpiece—he could acquire his calories and perhaps secure a white-collar job.

*Hunger* does not necessarily condemn its protagonist's all-or-nothing strategy but makes its cost viscerally felt. For readers tempted by urban opportunities, Hamsun's story offers insights more relevant than those they could get from reading about the successes of the few. Most people who were caught in this transition probably adapted without entering into so severe a downward spiral. By centering his narrative on an ill-adapted outlier, Hamsun lets readers vicariously explore the boundaries and breaking points of urban collaboration. For most urban migrants, becoming and remaining part of a group that could coordinate activities for mutual advantage would be a strategy far superior to that adopted by *Hunger*'s protagonist.

### **Social Exchange (Reciprocity)**

The more populated an environment is, the greater the opportunities for free riders to reap the benefits of cooperation without contributing. This problem can be solved by strategies of direct reciprocity, which is conditional cooperation. The usefulness of tit-for-tat leads to moral recognition of cooperative behaviors such as “trusting others, reciprocating favors, seeking revenge, expressing gratitude, and making amends.”<sup>58</sup> *Hunger*'s protagonist struggles because he

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<sup>58</sup> Curry, Mullins, and Whitehouse, “Is It Good to Cooperate?” 49.

maneuvers poorly between different forms of reciprocal exchange. Urban anonymity led him not to collect the money Maiden owed him, and similar dysfunction repeats itself with several of his acquaintances.

The protagonist acts even more bizarrely with respect to the related mechanism of indirect reciprocity. When being helpful is unlikely to be reciprocated, we can still be incentivized to cooperate because others can observe and gossip about our altruistic behavior.<sup>59</sup> Such altruism seems to have been rewarded for at least 45,000 years,<sup>60</sup> and it can be particularly effective in transparent environments. Rural Nordics had internalized Lutheran morals for acting selflessly and being honest even when no one was watching. They thought God would reward them. In reality, pervasive gossip and socially involved pastors made it likely that altruistic individuals would be rewarded—even before the afterlife.<sup>61</sup>

Such piety was a poor match for the city. *Hunger*'s protagonist believes that God balances a karma-like exchange informed by one's moral contributions. When a limping old man begs for "a bit of change for milk," the starving protagonist pawns his own vest for 1.50 kroner and gives 1 kroner to the old man.<sup>62</sup> No one witnesses this magnanimity except the beggar who scrutinizes his benefactor's worn trousers and harrowed looks. When the old man tries to return the coin, the protagonist will not take it. The ill-afforded charity allows him to display pride. Giving away more than half could also feel appropriate for someone with a background from an intensely cooperating community.<sup>63</sup> For a man who starves for lack of resources, the moral good

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<sup>59</sup> Christakis, *Blueprint*.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Boehm, "Purposive Social Selection and the Evolution of Human Altruism," *Cross-Cultural Research* 42.4 (2008): 319–52, 328.

<sup>61</sup> Nelson, *Lutheranism*, 51.

<sup>62</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 6–9.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph Henrich et al., "'Economic Man' in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Behavioral Experiments in 15 Small-Scale Societies," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28.6 (2005): 795–855, 811–12.

of giving conflicts with the adaptiveness of feeding oneself. The beggar recognizes this moral conflict but is left holding the coin. Because the protagonist's good deeds go unrewarded, his strategy of indirect reciprocity leads to angry accusations:

I felt increasingly bitter toward God for his continual oppressions. If he meant to draw me closer to himself and make me better by torturing me and casting adversity my way, he was slightly mistaken, that I could vouch for. And nearly crying with defiance, I looked up toward heaven and told him so once and for all, inwardly.<sup>64</sup>

This beginning rejection of the God story triggers a sensation: "God had stuck his finger down into the network of my nerves and gently, quite casually, brought a little confusion among the threads." When he refuses to accept his own instinctual emotions—his old morality—another feeling is triggered, one of "a gaping hole after . . . God's finger, and wounds in my brain from the track of his finger."<sup>65</sup> A God-shaped hole remains, begging to be filled. As he lets go of his former morality bit by bit, he must learn how to separate modern morals from what is immoral in both rural and urban environments. Confused as he loses the reassurance of a stable tradition, city morals and antisocial crime can feel similarly wrong. He responds by clinging to simple rules for reciprocity, like returning what is borrowed. He is tempted to sell the blanket he got from a friend, since the cash could buy "three decent meals." By the pawn shop, a sudden emotion stops him. Readers may suspect that the friend does not want his crummy blanket returned, but for the protagonist this dilemma becomes a battle against urban decay:

As I walked away I felt more and more pleased that I had conquered this great temptation. The consciousness of being honest went to my head, filling me with the glorious sensation that I was a man of character, a white beacon in the midst

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<sup>64</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 18.

of a turbid human sea floating with wreckage everywhere.<sup>66</sup>

Yet his moral unmooring has begun. He rings a door bell and lies about having business with a gentleman who is supposed to live there. When he spends a night in jail to avoid sleeping outside, he pretends to be a journalist who lost his keys. He continues to lie about his identity, then goes further. A store clerk gives him almost five kroner by mistake. By not returning the money the protagonist commits his “first real dishonesty . . . my first tiny, big fall.”<sup>67</sup> He progresses to willfully deceiving a coachman to get a free ride. His transgressions trigger visions of “a heaven and earth set on fire, mountains of fire, devils of fire, an abyss, a desert, a whole world on fire, a raging Judgment Day.”<sup>68</sup> His dysfunction with reciprocity triggers no transcendent punishment. God does not care that he lies and steals, but such behaviors make him come across as an unreliable partner for social exchange. His awareness of this unreliability exacerbates his shame and eventually motivates his transformation.

In the novel’s final part, the protagonist fights to gain control over his emotions. He exhorts himself, “no misplaced pride!” and “none of your misplaced pride now!”<sup>69</sup> The impulses that have informed his assessment of moral valence lead him toward death by starvation; he has no choice but to change. His moral breakthrough comes as he watches his former landlady have extramarital sex with a sailor. Her husband watches, too, through a peephole, laughing. The narrator cuts his moral anchor and embraces relativity:

This spectacle had thrown all my thoughts into merciless confusion and upset my rich mood. Why, what was it to me? When the husband himself put up with it, was even greatly amused by it, there was no reason why I should take it to heart.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 42.

<sup>67</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 113.

<sup>68</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 133.

<sup>69</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 179, 183.

<sup>70</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 183.

Auster places his moral “nothing” at the end of the novel. I locate the moral void after this first of two final-sequence epiphanies. Although this is a false victory, the protagonist believes he now can achieve his goal of producing prestigious literature. Having seen through the veil of his old moral reality, he wants to use this epiphany to complete a judge’s speech in a medieval drama. However, his literary projects have engaged too little with the time he lives in. In starving delirium, he wanted to write “a three-part monograph about philosophical cognition . . . to deal a deathblow to Kant’s sophisms.”<sup>71</sup> Many of his newspaper articles were rejected for being unsuitably highbrow. If his intention is to write relevant literature, a medieval drama hardly seems an optimal choice. This realization dawns on him as he repeats the judge’s unfinished line three times: “And so too my own conscience bids me . . .” No additional words occur to him. A second epiphany makes him conclude that “the whole idea, in fact, was utter nonsense. One couldn’t really talk about conscience in the Middle Ages, [because] conscience was only invented by Shakespeare.”<sup>72</sup> The protagonist realizes that his old morality not only prevented him from adapting to the city, but from putting his literary talents to better use. A medieval judge could not be his voice, and neither could Shakespeare.

Hamsun saw that modernity had profoundly transformed human psychology, but that literature had not developed its portrayal of the psyche since the time of Shakespeare.<sup>73</sup> As the Henrichian coevolution further tightened its screw, Hamsun wanted to be first to dramatize this new interiority. To do that, Hamsun—like his protagonist—had to adapt emotionally himself. Only then could he—and his protagonist—hope to produce literature that awakened the right

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<sup>71</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 185.

<sup>73</sup> Hamsun, *Paa turné*, 46–48. For more on Hamsun’s lecture series, see Michal Kruszelnicki, “Irritation, Impudence, Insight: A Critical Reading of Knut Hamsun’s *På Turné*,” *Nordlit* 26 (2010): 55–69.



modern “notions,” that would hit readers’ “strings,” and that thus “works.” Simply spelling out the urban playbook for collaboration would not suffice; an emotionally captivating narrative would have to impart a more visceral understanding. Through the final sequence, readers can vicariously experience how the protagonist deals with his emotional breakthroughs. When he understands that morality originates from the stories we tell, he surrenders his old beliefs. He accepts that his writing is not of the right quality; he breaks his pencil and tears his manuscript, tramples his hat in the gutter, and proclaims: “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m lost!”

His moral “nothing” ends there. The novel’s journey has prepared the protagonist—emotionally and cognitively—to let his behavior be informed by the new era’s moral algorithm, which he decides to test. Previously, he would ask police what time it was, then adamantly disagree with their answer. Symbolically, he refused to conform to the inner workings of the city. Now, for the first time, he accepts what the policeman tells him, agreeing vehemently, “Exactly! A little past four, perfectly correct!”<sup>74</sup> He then uses capitalist rules of reciprocity to his advantage. When a store clerk had mistakenly given him almost five kroner, the protagonist’s break with Lutheran morals had triggered not only shame but fear. He therefore passed on his ill-gotten coins to a woman who sells cake on the street, whom he now confronts. Since giving a merchant money for nothing goes against the modern code, clearly he had meant the transaction as payment for cakes to be picked up later: “Yes, I’ve come to pick them up, you bet I have!”<sup>75</sup>

Unable to refute his logic, the cake seller hands over her goods. The protagonist eats five cakes and leaves one for a boy he had felt sorry for in an earlier scene. The five-to-one cake division represents the reciprocity of the new world. First satisfy your own wants, then share what you can spare. This sequence made Auster argue that the protagonist “arrives at nothing,”

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<sup>74</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 190.

<sup>75</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 193.

but what he arrives at only appears like nothing from the perspective of the God story he leaves behind. The protagonist embraces secular humanism and its liberal moralities of exchange and individualism. When, in Auster's words, "he keeps on going," it is as an individualistically empowered actor in a moral community that extends far beyond the rural environment he was socialized into, and the Norwegian capital he adapted to; he is a citizen of a globalizing world.

Having proven himself, the protagonist walks to where merchant ships hire labor. He leaves Kristiania, like Hamsun had done in 1886. For over a decade, Hamsun had tried to make it as a writer. Debt-ridden, he boarded a ship for America, perhaps with feelings similar to those of his future protagonist. Three years later, Hamsun returned in triumph after his *Hunger* fragment had convinced Kristiania's elite that his debut novel was about to become a sensation. His protagonist looks back "toward the shore and said goodbye for now to the city, to Kristiania, where the windows shone so brightly in every home."<sup>76</sup> It is the novel's last sentence. Readers can imagine how the protagonist one day will be able to convey his hard-earned insights—just like Hamsun did—to those who struggle with the same transition.

### **Bravery, Respect, Fairness, and Property Rights**

The protagonist arrives at a better understanding of urban morality also with respect to the remaining four domains of Curry's model. Even within zero-sum contests, individuals have a mutual interest in cooperation. To avoid the cost of all-out competition, contestants can display status-related behaviors or reliable indicators of fighting ability. Domain (4) promotes hawkish displays of dominance that include moral virtues like bravery, skill, and wit. Domain (5) promotes dovish displays of submission like respect, humility, and obedience. The protagonist is

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<sup>76</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 196–97.

tempted by urban anonymity to use his hawkish wit to deceive. Portraying himself as someone of high status gives short-term advantage, but turns him into an unreliable partner for social exchange. This reputational damage has consequences that motivate him to gradually adapt to dovish submission to get access to charity. From his dysfunction within these two domains, it becomes clear to the reader that displaying dovish virtues is a superior strategy for most urban migrants, even when the city tempts you with the thrill of playing hawk.

Domain (6) promotes a division of resources in proportion to the relative power of the parties in conflict. Equal individuals should get equal resources, and the principle of equal shares is found cross-culturally as a spontaneous reaction to the problem of division.<sup>77</sup> In inequality-ridden cities, a more flexible approach is necessary. In Kristiania, poverty and affluence share the same streets. This engenders the protagonist's jealousy toward those with more than he has, as well as maladaptive generosity toward those with less. With his final-sequence cake division, he adheres to urban preferences for proportional exchange and division.

Domain (7) promotes solving resource conflicts by respecting prior possession, which is supported by how accepting private property rights is a cross-cultural moral good.<sup>78</sup> The protagonist feels affinity with property rights throughout the novel, also when he on occasion behaves against the morals of this domain. For readers, *Hunger* offers clear advice: even with the city's greater inequalities, theft is morally wrong and likely to make bad situations worse.

### **Adaptive Functions of Fiction**

*Hunger*'s protagonist gets his moral algorithm reprogrammed through a months-long downward

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<sup>77</sup> Henrich et al., "'Economic Man?'"

<sup>78</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *Economic Anthropology: A Study in Comparative Economics* (New York: Knopf, 1952).

spiral of pain. Within most of Curry's domains, the protagonist struggles to understand how new moralities must be negotiated to meet the needs of urban collaboration. From his transformation, readers could draw several lessons. In respect to the eight adaptive functions that Carroll proposes that arts can have, *Hunger* (a) reinforced a sense of common social identity. Urban migrants had to adapt to new moralities but also new identities, as a fragmentation of who you are is a feature of modernity.<sup>79</sup> Hamsun's novel assured readers that they were not alone with these struggles. From their new identity as city dwellers arose political organization that led to the social breakthroughs of the 1930s.

*Hunger* also (e) provided information about the environment. The urban labyrinth with its new institutions and bureaucratized roles could bewilder new arrivals. Reading realistic portrayals of such environments offered (f) game-plan scenarios to prepare for future problem-solving. *Hunger*'s protagonist was an artistic outlier whose ambitions and mental issues made him atypical. His dysfunctional sociality generated situations from which readers could draw insights that they could use to solve problems that were similar yet hopefully less extreme.

*Hunger* let readers (g) focus their minds on adaptively relevant problems, such as professional and romantic pursuits in the city. In terms of (h), making emotional sense of experience, Hamsun did not offer any neat, conclusive answers. He was one of many writers who attempted to assign meaning—or at least offer some guidance—to the emotional mismatch that came with our urban existence.<sup>80</sup> *Hunger*'s greatest contribution was perhaps its emphasis on the relativity of morality. Meaning can be elusive for modern minds, but fiction conveys how we share this struggle for making emotional sense of who we have become.

Hamsun's novel helped people deal with the psychological and social consequences of

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<sup>79</sup> De Bruyn, *Wolfgang Iser*, 33.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Gluckman and Mark Hanson, *Mismatch: The lifestyle diseases timebomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

the Second Industrial Revolution and the myriad of changes around this time. Readers could find solace in how it was possible to adapt even for someone referred to as one of literary history's most asocial protagonists.<sup>81</sup> I suggested that an authorial intent for making Gisli Surrsson a devoted actor was to offer a similarly maladapted outlier whose partial success readers could draw inspiration from. Such social influence was the *raison d'être* for Nordic literature when Hamsun debuted. In crafting his fictional alter ego, he builds on the Darwinian insights of the Modern Breakthrough. He sees no point in faithfully describing reality and finds no purpose for objective truth in fiction. If a lie moves him, Hamsun explained, that lie means more to him as a human than a truth does if it does not move him.<sup>82</sup> Around the turn of the century, such Darwinian humanism informed how some fiction sought to move greater society toward ameliorating urban squalor and other inequalities.

During these Darwinian decades, authors found a different foundation for prosociality than those of religion or Kantianism. The Darwinian utopia was “a gradual expansion of social sympathy,”<sup>83</sup> from the local to the global—a cosmopolitanism of empathy, if you will, grounded in our shared nature. Hamsun's novel sought to engender sympathy for how hard life was on the urban margins. How this issue should be solved *Hunger* suggests not. In the next chapter, a solution emerges, set in motion by the fiction medium that would dominate the next century. *Ingeborg Holm* was one of cinema's first narrative masterpieces. It inspired Swedes to change their poverty legislation, which sped up the process of translating Lutheran values not only into

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<sup>81</sup> Kittang, *Luft, vind, ingenting*, 64.

<sup>82</sup> Hamsun, *Paa turné*, 53. From an evolutionary perspective, such a lie is referred to as an adaptive bias, something that is untruthful but which gives you an advantage if you believe in it. In *The Seventh Seal*, Jof and Mia's adaptive bias was thinking that everything would turn out fine, since that motivated them not to give up.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph Carroll, “Introduction,” in Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 2003), 33. Social Darwinism originated not from Darwin, but from the philosopher Herbert Spencer who coined the term “survival of the fittest.” His evolutionary utopia was not to expand social sympathy, but “eliminating social undesirables and perfectly synchronizing the symbiotic interactions in a population of maximally efficient egoists,” 32.

secular philosophy, but political policies funded by the era's growth. *Hunger* and *Ingeborg Holm* thus helped inspire consensus around what would develop to become the social democratic welfare state, which I argue was the most effective cultural adaptation to the environment of the past century.

## 6. Secular Lutheranism: Modern Growth Fulfills Old Preference

The eponymous protagonist in *Ingeborg Holm* (1913) is the epitome of a worthy needy. Every political system should want to offer her short-term support. When this industrious middle-class mother of three loses her husband to illness, she takes over the family shop. When a dishonest employee causes bankruptcy, she accepts the consequence and auctions away her belongings. An ulcer makes her temporarily unable to work, but having seen in the setup sequence what an upstanding character Ingeborg is, cinema audiences know she will bounce back. She just needs a little help. But, like Hamsun's protagonist, neither this urban dweller has family to call on.

In early twentieth-century Sweden, it was still not clear how a modern state should care for those in need. In chapter 3, I outlined the ethos that was embraced in early modern Scandinavia. The Lutheran-humanist story had posited that the nation was “a divine construction and kings were still seen as reigning by divine right and on behalf of God.”<sup>1</sup> The king and his pastors were obliged to create a just society since the Lutheran utopia was that everyone, from rich to poor, should unite in a priesthood of believers. Togetherness was the ideal. Giving alms was no longer a way for the well-off to buy their way into heaven. Neither was poor care primarily a Church responsibility; it was everyone's civil duty.<sup>2</sup> Yet funds had been limited. Only those thoroughly unable to work were considered worthy, and local communities pooled resources to provide solely for their own.

This system was stable until the economic ideology of the late 1700s brought an end to feudal manorialism and its paternalistic care. To unleash the productive potential of each

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<sup>1</sup> Thorkild Lyby and Ole Peter Grell, “The consolidation of Lutheranism in Denmark and Norway,” in Grell, ed., *The Scandinavian Reformation: From Evangelical Movement to Institutionalisation of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 114–43, 128.

<sup>2</sup> Tønnessen, “Reformasjonen,” 196.

individual, the landless should no longer bound be to an estate that provided material essentials. Empowered to engage in free-market capitalism and urban migration, and forced to do so by population growth, many Scandinavians found themselves destitute in cities rampant with poverty—like we saw in the previous chapter. In this mobile world, caring for the members of one’s in-group would have to move from the local to national level. While poverty care had been everyone’s duty, pastors had done much of the work. With new liberal constitutions and a secular-humanist master-narrative, it was no longer obvious that the Church should keep this role. Gradually, poor relief was administered more by public officials. Yet policy standards were unclear and help often ineffective. Church representatives suggested that they take back the reins and reintroduce moral training to straighten out the poor. Socialists suggested that revolution was a better solution. To ensure social stability, commissions were set up to explore alternatives.<sup>3</sup> Sweden introduced new poor laws in 1871, which were meant to provide for people like Ingeborg Holm.

In spite of this reform, help could still be ineffectual and unpredictable. Nils Krok wrote the play *Ingeborg Holm* (1906) after serving on a local poor board through which he had met a young widow who had been deprived of her children.<sup>4</sup> He writes, “Her circumstances were like those I account for in *Ingeborg Holm*. At that very moment I got the idea for a poor ward drama, and I immediately began work on it.”<sup>5</sup> Krok wanted to change the world through fiction. By revealing reality and inspiring empathy, he sought to rally Swedes behind a relief regime more in line with their cultural preference. His somewhat intellectual and elitist play failed at that. It received mediocre reviews; one critic seems to find Krok’s argument unconvincing.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Tønnessen, “Reformasjonen,” 203–9.

<sup>4</sup> Nils Krok, *Ingeborg Holm* (Umeå: Atrium, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Hedling, “Förord,” 5–6; my translation.

<sup>6</sup> r-n, “Ingeborg Holm – ett folkskådespel,” *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, 6 November 1906.



following year, *Ingeborg Holm* was restaged by the future father of Swedish film, Victor Sjöström. 28 years old, he was already a theater veteran, and he would become a global giant of silent film. His restaging was seen by poor-law activist Ebba Pauli who expressed in a review how compelling the play was.<sup>7</sup> If enough Swedes saw it, she hoped, they would protest the paternalistic laws that took children away from mothers in temporary need. Pauli encouraged poor boards around the country to see the play, but its limited success stood in the way of wider geographical spread. The debate Pauli attempted to spark never took off.<sup>8</sup>

Cinema was emerging as a popular mass medium, which motivated Krok to adapt his play into a screenplay. Danish and Swedish producers, busy filming erotic and sensationalized melodramas, passed on the socially conscious script.<sup>9</sup> Neither Sjöström felt any sense of urgency when Krok slipped him the screenplay. A coincidence led to the green-lighting of the film. Sjöström's producer, Charles Magnusson at Svenska Bio, had 17 days left on a contract with Hilda Borgström, one of the era's best paid actresses. Sjöström remembered that Krok's script had a female lead. After a 3–4-day rewrite, and an equally short prep time, Sjöström and Borgström were ready to make film history.<sup>10</sup> Not only did *Ingeborg Holm* arouse a debate that changed poor-relief laws, but its narrative innovations made it one of cinema's early masterpieces. Telling his story in a way similar to what would become known as classical Hollywood narrative, Sjöström lay the foundation for a golden age of Swedish film.<sup>11</sup> Borgström,

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<sup>7</sup> Ebba Pauli, "Ingeborg Holm," *Svenska Fattigvårdsförbundets tidsskrift* 1.2 (1907): 102.

<sup>8</sup> Hedling, "Förord."

<sup>9</sup> Aleksander Kwiatkowski, *Swedish Film Classics: A Pictorial Survey of 25 Films from 1913 to 1957* (New York: Dover Publication, 1983), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Brownlow, "Samhällskritik år 1913: *Ingeborg Holm* – Victor Sjöströms stumfilmklassiker," *Chaplin* 27.1 (1985): 37–41.

<sup>11</sup> Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kääpä, "Introduction: Nordic Genre Film and Institutional History," in Gustafsson and Kääpä, eds., *Nordic Genre Film: Small Nation Film Cultures in the Global Marketplace* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 1–17, 3.

too, was ahead of her time, acting more naturalistically than what was common in the new medium.<sup>12</sup>

Bergman praised *Ingeborg Holm* as one of the most remarkable films ever made.<sup>13</sup> Film historian Bengt Idestam-Almquist suggests that no film from the 1910s is as likely to emotionally captivate today's audiences.<sup>14</sup> That the writer-director-actor had a career in cinema spanning more than four decades was much due to his cultural *fingerspitzengefühl*; Sjöström knew how to play the strings of his audience. He simplified Krok's story to optimize for emotional impact across population segments. His argument against the era's poverty relief was so compelling that the film became the first in history to cause verifiable social change.<sup>15</sup> In this chapter, I argue that *Ingeborg Holm*'s success was greatly due to how the play and film craft arguments precisely attuned to the Lutheran sensibilities of their audiences. Four centuries of Lutheranism had so influenced the region's modern master-narrative that the previous century's secular turn was more about changing vernacular rather than values. My reading of *Ingeborg Holm* supports a scholarly argument that has developed since the 1990s, suggesting we should view "the social democrats as a secularized Lutheran movement" and social democratic policies not as a break with a religious past but as a "continuation/transformation of Lutheranism."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Sandberg, "Maternal Gesture and Photography in Victor Sjöström's *Ingeborg Holm*," in Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams and Terje I. Leiren, eds., *Stage and Screen: Studies in Scandinavian Drama and Film: Essays in Honor of Birgitta Steene* (Seattle: DreamPlay Press, 2000), 131–57.

<sup>13</sup> Stig Björkman, Torsten Manns, and Jonas Sima, *Bergman on Bergman* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1973), 136.

<sup>14</sup> Brownlow, "Samhällskritik," 41.

<sup>15</sup> Erik Hedling, "Swedish Cinema Alters History: *Ingeborg Holm* and the Poor Laws Debate," *Scandinavica* 39.1 (2000): 47–64, 48. Hedling makes a case for causality that can be problematized like all narrative history; see Alex Rosenberg, *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), eBook.

<sup>16</sup> Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, "Introduction," in Sørensen and Stråth, eds., *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 1–24, 13, 5.

## **Borrowing from Fascism and Socialism**

As early as in 1928, a scholar suggested that the Nordic region could be defined by its Protestantism.<sup>17</sup> This would include Scandinavian Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, plus fellow Nordics Finland and Iceland. Estonia and Latvia were Lutheran, too, but fell politically out of the region with the Cold War.<sup>18</sup> This Lutheran past was long considered irrelevant by scholars and politicians who sought to explain the Nordic Model. The region's governance was viewed as grounded in rational secularism, which should make its specifics suitable for cross-cultural export. Scandinavians still loved Holberg's plays, but his warning in *Niels Klim* against universalizing the tenets of one's own culture was no match for the post-war ideological orientation toward one global regime. During social democracy's golden age (1945–75),<sup>19</sup> peak smugness was reached by Swedish intellectuals who offered that their country should be the world's conscience.<sup>20</sup>

The Nordic Model is called the Middle Way,<sup>21</sup> meaning between liberalism and socialism.<sup>22</sup> I argue that this model is predominantly liberal, but its two distinguishing features are borrowed from socialism and fascism, respectively. Fascist corporatism (or tripartism) manifests itself as tight collaboration between the government, employers, and employees, a process that produces low-conflict politics, compressed wage structures, and competitive exports. Socialist redistribution through high taxes and high social spending provides fetus-to-

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<sup>17</sup> Sten De Geer, "Das Geologische Fennoskandia Und Das Geographische Baltoskandia," *Geografiska Annaler* 10.1–2 (1928): 119–39.

<sup>18</sup> Among former the Soviet republics, Latvia and Estonia rank at the top of many GDP-per-capita comparisons. After the Cold War, these two countries did not replace communism with the Nordic Model but similarities exist; see Mart Laar, "The Estonian Economic Miracle," *The Heritage Foundation*, 2007, <https://www.heritage.org/report/the-estonian-economic-miracle>.

<sup>19</sup> Brandal, Bratberg, and Thorsen, *The Nordic Model*, 83.

<sup>20</sup> Arne Ruth, "The Second New Nation: The Mythology of Modern Sweden," *Daedalus* 113.2 (1984): 53–96, 67–68.

<sup>21</sup> Popularized by Marquis Childs, *Sweden: The Middle Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936).

<sup>22</sup> Jenny Andersson, "Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic Light: The Swedish Model as Utopia 1930–2007," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 34.3 (2009): 229–45, 231.

funeral support that empowers individuals to maximize their productive potential and pursue their own preference for what a good life comprises. I will elaborate on specifics in chapter 8. Those hoping to export this model thought that having homogenous populations perhaps made policies easier to agree on. Strong national identities could make people more willing to share. But the model's values and policies were still "of a universal nature [which] ought to be equally appreciated across the globe."<sup>23</sup> Other nations' current or past religion, cultural values, or historical experiences were seen either as irrelevant or mere hindrances to be overcome.

*The Cultural Construction of Norden* (1997) began a movement toward a historicist explanation of Nordic particulars.<sup>24</sup> Key to social democratic productivity is high labor force participation, which is underpinned by Lutheran beliefs in the importance of work. The Calvinist "work ethic," which informs American culture, promotes hard work to succeed economically. Getting rich and retiring early is a common cultural script. A century ago, Max Weber argued that this ethos contributed to the rise of capitalism, a claim mostly ignored by economists who preferred to view humans as rational actors instead of cultural beings. Recent empirical studies have led many economic historians to support Weber's claims.<sup>25</sup> Compared to Calvin, Luther was more skeptical of business ventures and rich people. His "employment ethic" posits that labor has value in itself. Even rich people should work, so that their production can benefit others. High performance is not primary; any job can help workers feel a sense of ordinariness, fulfillment, and moral satisfaction.<sup>26</sup> Since viewing work as intrinsically rewarding has been so internalized—the argument goes—Scandinavians can offer generous benefits because they are

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<sup>23</sup> Brandal, Bratberg, and Thorsen, *The Nordic Model*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, eds., *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Nelson, *Lutheranism*, 13–17, 111.

<sup>26</sup> Kelly McKowen, "Substantive Commitments: Reconciling Work Ethics and the Welfare State in Norway," *Economic Anthropology* 7 (2020): 120–33, 124.

less inclined to abuse welfare. With everyone enmeshed in a secularized version of Luther's priesthood of believers, shared obligation and conformity make the Nordic Model go around.

Furthering this hypothesis, a 2001 edited volume found that, compared to other European social policies, Nordic policies drive income equality and less poverty among vulnerable groups.<sup>27</sup> A 2005 volume accounts for how those who designed Nordic social democracies took their own values for granted.<sup>28</sup> In 2009, Yale political scientist Sigrun Kahl showed in which ways Western welfare systems reflect a country's religious past. For social policies "there exist important institutional continuities and systematic differences between countries that are driven by the institutionalized (and secularized) principles of Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist social doctrines."<sup>29</sup> Heritage creates national spectrums of "plausible policy options." The clearest difference is in how feeding the poor is viewed. Catholic welfare (France, Italy, Spain) established that the poor have an unconditional right to be fed. Calvinist doctrine (Netherlands, England, United States) insisted that the able-bodied poor must be willing to work. Lutherans replaced this formal requirement with a strong social obligation to work. These ideological differences arose in a distant past but "affected the organizing principles of modern social assistance and the timing of its introduction."<sup>30</sup>

For Lutherans, equality was paramount. Kahl writes, "Luther raised the status of work immensely by construing it as an intrinsically positive activity that was pleasing to God." Work should give status irrespective of its material rewards, and "the poor peasant's work was worth as

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<sup>27</sup> Johan Fritzell et al., eds., *Nordic Welfare States in the European Context* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Nanna Kildal and Stein Kuhnle, eds., *Normative Foundations of the Welfare State: The Nordic Experience* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Sigrun Kahl, "Religious Doctrines and Poor Relief: A Different Causal Pathway," in Kees van Kersbergen and Philip Manow, eds., *Religion, Class Coalitions, and Welfare States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 267–95, 267.

<sup>30</sup> Kahl, "Religious Doctrines," 268.

much as that of a wealthy artisan.”<sup>31</sup> Anyone participating in the labor force should therefore be included in society as an equal. Since work is a means for getting the poor out of poverty, all workers must be paid enough to fund a worthy standard of living. Those not working are not entitled to the same income as workers, but they should receive a share of society’s resources commensurate to that of someone socially equal.

The consequence of Luther’s ideology is hard to establish by investigating the Nordic countries. That the entire region converted to the same Christian creed complicates causal claims; Nordics could have become social democrats regardless. The German region is a better lab, as different parts chose different creeds. Kahl establishes that Lutheran cities gave poor relief to a significantly higher percentage of the population than what Catholic or mixed denominational cities did.<sup>32</sup> This supports that the Lutheran faith itself did have an effect. Social democratic thought originated in Germany around 1860 when the labor movement split between socialist authoritarians and those who preferred “promoting democracy and increasing personal freedom.”<sup>33</sup> Germans led this European movement until Scandinavians began to take over from the 1930s on. With the neoliberal turn after the Cold War,<sup>34</sup> mostly the Nordics remained.<sup>35</sup> Centuries of religious pluralism perhaps partially explain why Germany chose not to hang on to their Lutheran tenets in a changing world. The common view was that Scandinavia, too, would have to conform similarly under neoliberal globalization, which we will return to in chapter 9.

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<sup>31</sup> Kahl, “Religious Doctrines,” 271.

<sup>32</sup> Kahl, “Religious Doctrines,” 274.

<sup>33</sup> Brandal, Bratberg, and Thorsen, *The Nordic Model*, 1–2.

<sup>34</sup> Neoliberalism entailed a revival of the liberal utopia that had stranded with World War I. The term is often used derogatorily, as an ideological means for rejecting redistributive demands from developing countries and from working and middle-class populations in developed countries, thus producing “a global race to the bottom”; see Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 19.

<sup>35</sup> Stefan Berger, “Social Democratic Trajectories in Modern Europe: One or Many Families?” in Henning Meyer and Jonathan Rutherford, eds., *The Future of European Social Democracy: Building the Good Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13–26.

More recent scholarship adds support to this hypothesis of secular Lutheranism.<sup>36</sup> Economist Robert Nelson offers the most comprehensive account in *Lutheranism and the Nordic Spirit of Social Democracy* (2017). In the following, I use what Nelson and other scholars establish as Lutheran/Nordic/social democratic views on work, poverty relief, and social obligation to investigate to what extent *Ingeborg Holm* conforms to this ethos—or morality, if you will. Like Hamsun intuited, morality’s function is to trigger emotion. For a film to elicit certain intended emotions, its thematic argument must be informed by its audience’s morality. Reason was important for those who formulated social democratic tenets, but for the general populace it can be more important that policy *feels* right. “Emotions provide us with a kind of motivational gravity,” writes evolutionary film theorist Murray Smith. Cinema was particularly suitable for Sjöström’s project, since “film depends for its existence to a greater extent than any preceding art on the interplay among emotions.”<sup>37</sup>

*Ingeborg Holm* was so apt at this emotional game that Idestam-Almquist considers it to achieve the greatest emotional longevity of all films from the 1910s. Sjöström’s work exemplifies how when we use made-up tales to explore alternatives for the future, building on current morality is likely the most effective approach. This must not entail being backward-looking. Wolfgang Iser argues that the purpose of fiction, in this context, is not to repeat what we have, but to gain access to what we do not yet have.<sup>38</sup> Sjöström’s artistic mastery let him elicit emotions that helped Swedes see what they could have. He mass-mediated an existing vision for what poor relief could be, so that it could be scrutinized on the public marketplace of ideas. His

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<sup>36</sup> Jóhann Páll Árnason and Björn Wittrock, eds., *Nordic Paths to Modernity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); “Special Issue: Lutheranism and the Nordic Welfare States,” *Journal of Church and State* 56.1 (2014); Tønnessen, “Reformasjonen.”

<sup>37</sup> Murray Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 130.

<sup>38</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 282.

film let audiences test their morality against a fictionalized treatment of the poor, and the emotions they felt became political currency that let progressive politicians spearhead reform.

### **A Lutheran Solution to Begging**

Sjöström begins his adaptation by establishing a family that embodies Swedishness and Lutheran values.<sup>39</sup> Sven (Aron Lindgren) lowers their large Swedish flag, while Ingeborg and the children finish up work in the allotment garden. When they get home, a young servant has set the table, but Ingeborg cuts the family bread herself. All are socially equal, and everyone contributes. Even the smallest child chips in, bringing to dad the letter that grants him credit to open a grocery shop. Protestant frugality led to this good news. Ingeborg has been so immune to consumerist excess that they have been able to save an amount that is twice as large as Sven's annual income.<sup>40</sup> At night, both parents participate when—as the title card states: “Plans for the future are discussed.”<sup>41</sup> All is idyll; the only disharmony is Sven's foreboding cough.

In its first act, Krok's play finds room also to dramatize one of Luther's obsessions: the evils of begging. The German theologian emphasized a community's responsibility to provide for those in need by connecting begging to both Jews and Satan.<sup>42</sup> Throughout literary history, we find protagonists whose journey is about overcoming a character weakness. This structure came to dominate cinematic storytelling.<sup>43</sup> Ingeborg's weakness is her misguided understanding

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<sup>39</sup> For an earlier version of this interpretation, see Mads Larsen, “Investigating the Lutheran Roots of Social Democracy in *Ingeborg Holm*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 93.4 (2021): 505–32.

<sup>40</sup> Sven's annual income is not mentioned in the film. In this analysis, I use some background information from the play's script and Sjöström's screenplay. I point out when the film deviates from these sources.

<sup>41</sup> *Ingeborg Holm*, 6. Minutes refer to the 73-minute version that is preserved. The film was closer to two hours at its premiere, but the studio cut a 1915 version that is significantly shorter. Another 7 percent has been lost to wear and tear; see Jan Olsson, “Nils Krok's social pathos and Paul Garbagni's style – *Ingeborg Holm* as object lesson,” *Film History: An International Journal* 22.1 (2010): 73–94.

<sup>42</sup> Tønnessen, “Reformasjonen,” 194.

<sup>43</sup> For more on Hollywood structure, see Mads Larsen, “Imposing New Hollywood Structure on the Remake of *3:10 to Yuma*,” in Andrew Gay and Ann Igelström, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of International Screenplay Theory* (London: Bloomsbury



of poverty relief; she gives in to how it feels righteous to hand money to poor people. When beggar boys steal bread and butter from her kitchen, Ingeborg's response is "poor children."<sup>44</sup> She fails to comprehend how the theft results from her having made it a habit to give to beggars. Mother Johnsson enters next, another beggar with whom Ingeborg has a history of private charity. The unpleasant woman reeks of booze and asks for second-hand pants for her boy. The Holms children wear their clothes until there is nothing left to pass on, so Johnsson begs for money next. Getting but a small coin, she offers sass in return.

When Sven comes home, he explains that Johnsson likely sells the clothes to buy liquor. He even doubts that she has kids, which testifies to how in the urban environment people's lack of information about each other makes private charity less effective. Sven accounts for various common scams and concludes that begging

weakens the sense of duty to support oneself. Eventually, a poor guy will believe he is entitled to live off others. [Private giving] does not help. [The poor relief] gives the poor man what he needs. With his head held high, he can ask for help without feeling like a beggar. When a person has done what he can, but when that is insufficient, it is society's duty to help until the poor is able to support himself.<sup>45</sup>

Sven's emphasis on the dignity of the individual is a core value of social democracy.<sup>46</sup> No one should have to ask for anything with a lowered head. Neither should tax payers look down on those who receive benefits. "We are all benefit receivers," Sven explains, "We send our children

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Academic, forthcoming); "Workshopping Essay Structure: A Hollywood-Inspired Classroom and Online Model," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 32.3 (2020): 463–75. See also David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 37–40; John Truby, *The Anatomy of Story: 22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Krok, *Ingeborg Holm*, 19; all theater dialogue in my translation.

<sup>45</sup> Krok, *Ingeborg Holm*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Aksel Braanen Sterri, "Hva slags velferdsstat gir mest livskvalitet? En empirisk test av nyliberale, konservative og sosialdemokratiske prediksjoner," master's thesis, University of Oslo, 2012, 48.

to school, but we do not pay what it costs. Society does. The needy can go to the poor relief without humiliating themselves. But walking from door to door is demeaning.”<sup>47</sup> His argument aligns with Lutheran views, but it will prove naïve in respect to the era’s actual poor relief.

The play’s setup sequence gives a similar impression of the Holms as the film does, but Krok offers high-brow arguments that Sjöström does away with. As headmaster of a business school, Krok embraced economic liberalism to an extent that could antagonize audiences. His argument for why businessmen should deprioritize time with their children comes across as cold. He makes Sven a mouthpiece for a gendered division of labor that after first-wave feminism and the Modern Breakthrough could read as provocative. Sjöström’s most interesting break with Krok relates to worthy versus unworthy welfare recipients. From the play to the film, we witness Nordic thought step away from Luther to embrace the more inclusive ethos that would define social democracy.

Like the Lutheran pastors of Krok’s era, and Luther himself, Krok makes a moral division. He places sex workers, drunks, the mentally unstable, and other “street people” in a less worthy category than middle-class women like Ingeborg. One of the perils of traditional poor care, he argues, is that it can turn good people bad through mixing them with the undesirable elements of society. Sjöström’s finger was more on the contemporary pulse. For cinema’s mass audiences, Krok’s paternalism could limit the story’s emotional appeal. In Sjöström’s screenplay, and even more so in his film, he does away with this potential friction. Sjöström’s setup sequence avoids social judgement and intellectual complexity, conveying mostly that the Holms are a wonderful family, and if anything were to tear them apart, this would be a tragedy.

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<sup>47</sup> Krok, *Ingeborg Holm*, 31.

## Putting Everyone to Productive Work

With Sven sick, Ingeborg steps up to run things. That a housewife can take over a business without meeting greater social resistance can be read as another consequence of a Lutheran heritage. Nelson argues that Luther's emphasis on work as a calling for everyone contributed to how gender equality progressed more rapidly in the Nordic countries. Allowing clergy to marry contributed too, by inspiring social attitudes that with modernity facilitated earlier and more profound gender reform.<sup>48</sup> When Sven dies, Ingeborg does all she can to take care of her family and the business. The bankruptcy results from another peril of private charity. The store's male assistant (Erik Lindholm) gives free wares to a woman he flirts with. This magnanimity is a burden to the bottom line that along with the assistant's negligence of paperwork prevents Ingeborg's success.

Through all this adversity, the protagonist remains independent. Her doctor implores her to seek assistance, writing a note, encouraging that she should: "Leave this to the Public Assistance Committee."<sup>49</sup> To demonstrate the correct form of social obligation, he comforts her children and gives them coin, but only as tokens of his support. The poor-relief institution Sven argued so warmly for will provide for the family while Ingeborg's ulcer heals. The doctor believes this to be the case, as did likely many audiences. A starker reality meets the black-clad Ingeborg who approaches the poor board's imposing gate. The intertitle reads: "No money. The last resort—poverty relief."<sup>50</sup> In the waiting room, things are not as rosy as the middle class assumes. Eight seniors are slapped around by a man in uniform. The committee consists of six men in suits who are unconcerned with Ingeborg's dignity. Not even her nice dress or middle-

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<sup>48</sup> Nelson, *Lutheranism*, 134, 151.

<sup>49</sup> *Ingeborg Holm*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> *Ingeborg Holm*, 19.

class manners motivate them to adjust their arrogant behavior. The men hardly acknowledge her presence while they scrutinize her doctor's letter. They do not include her in their discussion, or ask questions, before they pose an ultimatum: "You can have 20 kronor a month. If you're not satisfied, you can come live here in the workhouse. We'll have to board the children out."<sup>51</sup>

From the play's script, we know it would take a minimum of 50 kronor to house, clothe, and feed her children. In the film, Ingeborg has three instead of five children, so the sum could be lowered. Still, 20 kronor would leave her no choice but to beg and send her kids begging, too. Having internalized that begging leads to entitlement and crime, Ingeborg has no choice but to give her children up to strangers. She must work in the poorhouse, while her kids are fostered out to the lowest bidding caretakers. Instead of helping Ingeborg get past temporary hardship, the poor board tears her family apart.

The play elaborates on the board's rationale. Poorhouse supervisor Olsson concludes that they can save a minor sum by paying others to feed Ingeborg's children. The value of the work she can do inside the poorhouse makes Olsson conclude that the prudent decision is to split up her family. Krok speaks against this short-sightedness through board members consul Berg and doctor Vickman. Both vote to give Ingeborg 50 kronor per month until she is well enough to work. Berg argues:

You want to bring a woman here that has done no harm and who is still in her youth. You want to board out her children and deprive her of her rights as a mother, which is to raise them herself. Who will prevent her from becoming spiritually broken from this punishment that you will lay upon her?<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Ingeborg Holm*, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Krok, *Ingeborg Holm*, 61.

Building contractor Bengtsson supports Olsson, citing fear of the proletariat. If the lower classes learn that the board made an exception for a woman from “the well-off class,” they could take it as an insult to the “symmetry” of justice. Other board members offer similar justifications for not raising their own randomly set limit of 20 kronor. Audiences get an impression of an inhumane system in which whims decide people’s fate. Families are broken apart for short-term savings yet long-term loss. Once someone enters the poorhouse, it is portrayed as unlikely that they will ever rejoin the labor force. This is a loss to the institutionalized individual, but also to society that can no longer benefit from the individual’s production. A poorhouse may gain from enlisting low-cost labor from women like Ingeborg. But she could be a lot more productive on the outside.

This mismatch informs one of social democracy’s core economic tenets. The Nordics’ admirable productivity is much due to high labor force participation. If as many as possible can work productively—regardless of gender, skill, or background—everyone benefits. If American female labor participation had not fallen behind Norway’s from the early 1970s on, the U.S. economy could be \$1.6 trillion larger. On average, every man, woman, and child would have an additional \$5,000 per year.<sup>53</sup> These economics inform why Nordic countries are willing to incur high social spending. Since talent is not only distributed among the well-off, pooling resources for education, health, and a social safety net helps develop a larger supply of capable labor. This strategy is perceived to be so effective that three-quarters of Norwegians consider their high taxes to be at an appropriate or too low level.<sup>54</sup> Even a large majority of Conservative Party voters supports the Nordic tax level.<sup>55</sup> By contrast, half of Americans think taxes are too high.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Beth Ann Bovino and Jason Gold, “The Key to Unlocking U.S. GDP Growth? Women,” S&P Global, 2017, [https://www.spglobal.com/\\_Media/Documents/03651.00\\_Women\\_at\\_Work\\_Doc.8.5x11-R4.pdf](https://www.spglobal.com/_Media/Documents/03651.00_Women_at_Work_Doc.8.5x11-R4.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> Opinion for *Avisenes Nyhetsbyrå*, 2017, <https://www.klartale.no/norge/folk-er-fornoyd-med-skatten-1.1053978>.

<sup>55</sup> Infact for *Verdens Gang*, 2017, <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/0agrJ/seks-av-ti-hoeyre-velgere-mener-skattenivaet-er-passe-hoeyt>.

<sup>56</sup> Gallup, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/232361/less-half-say-taxes-high.aspx>.

This is a significant difference, especially with how, as a proportion of GDP, American taxes are around 25 percent. Sweden, Denmark, and Finland's percentages are in the 40s.<sup>57</sup>

The economic harm of removing Ingeborg from the labor force should be equally apparent in cultures with a Calvinist or Catholic heritage. But most welfare cases are not as clear-cut as hers, which is why I referred to her as the epitome of a worthy needy. Cultural values inform how much welfare abuse a population is inclined to stomach, but also how strongly individuals internalize norms against such free-riding. If Ingeborg could stay at home with her children—without losing too much economically, and without suffering sanctions from her social circle—she could, as a rational actor, prefer benefits. A full day's work is a burden many would forgo if the alternative is spending more time with family. Scandinavians seem less tempted by this than what Nelson believes would be the case if Americans were offered similarly generous benefits.<sup>58</sup> He refers to differences in *participation tax rates* to illustrate. This rate tells us how much an average worker gains economically by moving from outside of the labor force into gainful employment. With low American benefits and taxes, landing a job entails a net gain of 63 percent, according to one estimate. Scandinavians earn only 20 percent more.<sup>59</sup> This is a small economic gain for giving up a large amount of leisure. Nelson believes that if Nordic generosity in terms of benefits was implemented within Calvinist or Catholic cultures, national

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<sup>57</sup> OECD Data, "Revenue Statistics," 2020, <https://data.oecd.org/tax/tax-revenue.htm>. By this method of comparison, Norwegian taxes appear lower due to significant oil revenue. Iceland has a lower tax level than the other Nordic countries; see Jóhann Páll Árnason, "Icelandic Anomalies," in Árnason and Björn Wittrock, eds., *Nordic Paths to Modernity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 229–50, 247.

<sup>58</sup> Neither Nordics have internalized Lutheran duty to the extent that generous welfare with lax control does not affect how much people work. While Norway has among the OECD's lowest unemployment and highest labor force participation rates, it also has the highest rate of disability pensioning and sickness absence. With 100 percent sick pay from day one, without needing a doctor's note, taking a few days off is a temptation Norwegians sometimes give in to; see Kelly McKowen, "A Welfare 'Regime of Goodness'? Self-Interest, Reciprocity, and the Moral Sustainability of the Nordic Model," in Witoszek and Midttun, *Sustainable Modernity*, 119–138, 126.

<sup>59</sup> Henrik J. Kleven, "How Can Scandinavians Tax So Much?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 28.4 (2014): 77–98, 77–78.

productivity would suffer more due to a different cultural equation for the trade-off between work and leisure.<sup>60</sup>

Krok makes poor board members express other Calvinist-aligned views, too. I doubt if he or Sjöström even once considered that *Ingeborg Holm* dramatizes a conflict between Protestant creeds. Iser posits that our cultural past constitutes an entanglement of influences that most people remain blind to. We take our prejudices for granted, often assuming universality.<sup>61</sup> Krok paints Bengtsson as a moral outsider by letting him offer private charity. This misaligns with the Lutheran social contract, which demands that people must work diligently so that their taxes can contribute to a strong state that can support its citizens. Poverty care is meant to be impersonal, a matter between the individual and the state. Lutherans internalized that the ruler “must be obeyed as he oversees the welfare of his subjects.”<sup>62</sup> In the modern world, this tenet translates to Nordics being exceptionally supportive of, and obedient toward, secular authority. As long as the government provides better welfare than what the whims of private charity do, the state should be rich and powerful—and obeyed by the people it provides for.

American Calvinism, writes theologian Henrietta Gronlund, took a form that “sharply differs from Nordic Lutheranism with regard to the relationship between government and the people, the responsibility or calling of the individual, the viewpoint towards business, and the role of philanthropy.”<sup>63</sup> The American practice of listing donors in varying font size would mostly be untenable in a Lutheran-informed culture. In Scandinavia, anonymous charity is the norm, and even this can be met with skepticism. Bengtsson therefore enters perilous terrain when

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<sup>60</sup> Nelson, *Lutheranism*, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Iser, *Prospecting*, 283; Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>62</sup> Nelson, *Lutheranism*, 129.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Nelson, *Lutheranism*, 130.

he wants to treat the poor to coffee and snacks. The occasion is his own birthday, and he wants the paupers to know from whom the charity originated. In a culture whose social lubricant for over a century had been coffee with snacks, being deprived of this *hygge* could be perceived as inhumane.<sup>64</sup> Yet simply providing is not all that matters. From a Calvinist perspective, Bengtsson is generous to forego private resources so that others can benefit. In Krok's Lutheran context, Bengtsson's ego-driven charity villainizes him.

### **American versus Nordic Welfare**

Victimized by a dysfunctional system, Ingeborg is confined to dependence and deprivation. Her children are taken away—she is left to do menial work and mourn her loss. This is when Sjöström leaves Luther and Krok behind. The play portrays Ingeborg's fellow paupers as terrible people; their cruel treatment of her is relentless. The impoverished women who take custody of her children are also portrayed less sympathetically than in the film. This makes the protagonist stand out as uniquely worthy of sympathy. Sjöström prioritizes differently, giving audiences no one to direct antipathy toward but those responsible for the system that locks Ingeborg up. Such systemic antagonists are common in Nordic film, which often end in tragedy to argue for the individual's powerlessness in the face of social dysfunction.<sup>65</sup>

As a corrective to this systemic force, Sjöström offers the morally true Scandinavians outside of the institution. When Ingeborg escapes to visit her sick child, everyone she meets helps her. These Swedes care for strangers in need, so the poor board's small-mindedness clearly goes against its community's preference. Ingeborg gets a free ride with a horse carriage. A

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<sup>64</sup> For the Nordic concept of *hygge*, see OED's definition of the Danish word, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/58767802>.

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Nestingen, *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 114–16.



family incurs significant risk by feeding her and helping her escape from police. Even the police, who at first chase Ingeborg at the behest of the poorhouse, are inspired to help by her motherly love. This private generosity solves nothing. When Ingeborg arrives, her child is dead. Upon her return, the mourning mother meets nothing but heartless bureaucracy. The poorhouse is obliged to pay the police for bringing her back; the bookkeeper shoves the invoice in Ingeborg's face, as if she were a bad dog. To further bring home the pettiness, the police's train tickets that cost 9.75 kronor in the screenplay, Sjöström prices to 2.25 kronor on-screen. Shortly thereafter, the protagonist loses her sanity. She cradles a makeshift doll, imagining it to be one of her children.

In the film's final sequence, her now adult son Erik returns. He shows his mother a photo of her younger, saner self, which brings her back to sanity. Their embrace signifies family reunification. This melodramatic ending offers another example of how Sjöström's version is more attuned to Nordic heritage. Krok lets Erik embody the European Enlightenment ideal of the honorable gentleman. He is a successful consul who creates a happy ending by throwing money around. Sjöström's Erik aligns with the Nordic ideal of the modest peasant. He is a mild-mannered sailor with nothing to offer but his love. Krok, however, uses Erik the Consul to further expose the poor board's Calvinist values. When Olsson learns of Erik's success, he assumes that he must be a great person: "He is rich and a consul. What a guy!"<sup>66</sup> Krok also makes Olsson express non-Nordic views on government. Olsson brags that every year he has led the poor board, the poor tax has been reduced: "Our system is a damned good system, because it is cheap."<sup>67</sup> Such small-government attitudes—argues Nelson—evokes Calvinism:

Where Lutheranism later became the dominant national religion, there was typically a state church headed by a Prince, King or other holder of state authority

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<sup>66</sup> Krok, *Ingeborg Holm*, 106.

<sup>67</sup> Krok, *Ingeborg Holm*, 109.

who oversaw what amounted to Lutheran theocracy. Calvinists, by contrast, typically made strong efforts to separate the institutional church of the Christian faithful from state control.<sup>68</sup>

These distinct attitudes toward pooling resources and ceding power to central authority informed how the United States and the Nordic countries chose different paths as they expanded their welfare regimes from the 1930s on. That the latter preferred large-government solutions was contributed to by how Lutheranism had accustomed Nordic populations to the unity of state power and social care. The more all-encompassing institutional space being vacated by a church of diminishing power could with relative ease be filled by social democratic governance. People were already comfortable with what has been referred to as a *maternalist* state (well-meaning, telling citizens what to do and not to do, and providing for their needs).<sup>69</sup> Americans had spent the previous centuries praying locally and feeling greater distrust toward the central institutions that in the twentieth century began to demand higher taxes.

### **The Art of the Twentieth Century**

That Europeans and Americans could increase social spending was mostly a result of the era's growth. From medieval times until the 1871 poor-relief laws, Swedish GDP per capita had fluctuated within a narrow range. That very year was an inflection point. Industrial revolutions would increase prosperity more than twentyfold. From 1871 to 1918, Swedish adjusted GDP per capita doubled.<sup>70</sup> No longer was generous poverty relief merely in line with cultural preference; it was economically possible. To make the possible real, Krok and Sjöström created fiction that let Swedes reevaluate what political consequence their long-held values should have in the

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<sup>68</sup> Nelson, *Lutheranism*, 19.

<sup>69</sup> Brandal, Bratberg, and Thorsen, *The Nordic Model*, 99–102.

<sup>70</sup> Bolt and van Zanden, "Maddison Style Estimates of the Evolution of the World Economy."

modern world. After the film's premiere, a fiery debate ensued. Demands for reform won, and activists were invited to help politicians shape poor care for the new century:

In 1916, the Government Commission on the Poor Laws, with Ebba Pauli, the first reviewer of *Ingeborg Holm*, as one of its commissioners, finished its ten-year work, and in 1918 a new Act was passed by Parliament where the "domestic authority"<sup>71</sup> was finally omitted from the law. Another change was that all people applying for assistance, regardless of their reasons for doing so, were no longer designated "paupers": the elderly, for example, who had previously been considered part of the workhouse population, were now given their own institutions, the old people's homes. Also, the sums of money given as relief were substantially increased.<sup>72</sup>

In the wake of the film's political success, the new medium was praised as a democratizer of power. For those without formal influence, but with a progressive agenda, making the right film could perhaps win audiences over to their side. Sjöström thought cinema could be uniquely capable of arousing empathy for the less fortunate. Film became "the art of the twentieth century,"<sup>73</sup> and movie theaters "one of the predominant spaces where societies gather to express and experience feelings."<sup>74</sup> For those who had been villainized by *Ingeborg Holm*, the medium appeared more sinister. "Offensive," "fake," and "unhealthy cinematic art," a poor-board inspector concluded. Later films confirmed that cinema could have a powerful effect, but that the medium was under no obligation to promote progressivism. When Swedes sold *Pettersson & Bendel* (1933) to Germany, the anti-Semitic film inspired riots and attacks on Jews.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> "Domestic authority" refers to the extensive control over clients that the former law gave local poor boards.

<sup>72</sup> Hedling, "Swedish Cinema Alters History," 61.

<sup>73</sup> Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 127.

<sup>74</sup> Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, "Introduction," in Plantinga and Smith, eds., *Passionate Views: Films, Cognition, and Emotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>75</sup> Lars Gustaf Andersson and Erik Hedling, *Filmanalys: En introduction* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1999), 48–64; Hedling, "Swedish Cinema Alters History"; "Förord." More infamously, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) made lynchings rise fivefold as the film played across America for three years; see Desmond Ang, "Birth of a Nation: Media and Racial Hate," working paper, Harvard University, 2020.

My reading of *Ingeborg Holm* attests to how a Lutheran past contributed to Scandinavians uniting around social democratic welfare. Those feelings of togetherness, equality, and civil duty that Lutheran morality inspired in Nordic populations informed the political compromises that ended dramatic class conflict in the 1930s. Scandinavians felt that the best way forward was to come together at the national level to coordinate the increasingly complex web of modern institutions. The Depression undermined the liberal ethos of *laissez faire*, making fascist corporatism seem like a better adaptation for small nations vulnerable to global competition. The word *fascismo* symbolizes strength through unity.<sup>76</sup> Nordic governments achieve this by tying employers and employees in binding cooperation to enhance export competitiveness and minimize unemployment. This tripartism also lets them compress wage structures, which creates a sense of economic sameness that makes socialist resource pooling more compelling. While this process contributed to social harmony in Scandinavia, their neighbor, Finland, was thrown off the Nordic path by a failed socialist revolution in 1918 and fascist rebellion in the 1930s. The Finns' fate reminds us that if history had played out differently, these countries could have united around another story. In the next chapter, my reading of Linna's *Under the North Star* shows how the twentieth century's competing humanist creeds were all so compelling that they tore communities apart and inspired neighbors to murder each other.

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<sup>76</sup> The Italian term *fascismo* is derived from *fascio*, which means "a bundle of sticks." The symbolism is that one stick is easily broken, but a bundle is not.

## 7. Humanism: Killing Neighbors over Competing Creeds

The central character in *Under the North Star* (1959–62), Akseli Koskela, straddles an old and new world, like Gisli Sursson did a millennium earlier. In a stable farming community, Akseli's physical strength and upright personality would have made him a reliable provider for his family and a pillar among peers. In an industrialized society, his professional success would be near certain. In early twentieth-century Finland, the impoverished tenant farmer becomes the center of an epic tragedy; Akseli gets pulled into his nation's violent negotiation over humanist creeds. He is a commander in a socialist rebellion, his two brothers are executed after the Civil War, and his three oldest sons are killed in World War II. Author Väinö Linna uses Akseli's fate to suggest that mostly randomness decides whether an individual falls on the right side of history during ideological transition. His trilogy dramatizes the emergence of modern Finland, forged in a crucible of democratic struggle, deep class division, socialist revolution, civil war, fascist rebellion, and military slaughter. While their Nordic neighbors navigated relatively unscathed through Europe's disastrous clashes between liberalism, socialism, and fascism, the Finns went to war—against Russians, Germans, and themselves.

During social democracy's embryonic period, Finland remained a class-divided Nordic anomaly. Not having a uniting ethos pitted groups against each other, resulting in more murder and violence, more severe sentencing, and a significantly higher prison population.<sup>1</sup> Both sides had lost a few thousand combatants when the liberal Whites beat the socialist Reds in a three-months-long Civil War in 1918. Although tragic, this is how armed conflict plays out. In the aftermath, the mostly middle-class and landowning Whites murdered another 10,000 defenseless

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<sup>1</sup> John Pratt and Anna Eriksson, *Contrasts in Punishment: An Explanation of Anglophone Excess and Nordic Exceptionalism* (London: Routledge, 2013), eBook.

Reds, mostly urban and agricultural workers.<sup>2</sup> An additional 12,500 Reds were starved to death in prison camps. For more than four decades, the Whites “never admitted the severe consequences of the aftermath and were never persecuted for the crimes that they committed during the war.”<sup>3</sup> Their extrajudicial bloodbath scarred the social trust of the losing side. The winners insisted that all they had done was heroically save Finland from communism and irrational workers from their own reckless ignorance. This one-sided fiction was enforced as the only acceptable narrative, which created a division that cut from national politics to local dance halls.<sup>4</sup>

This divide lasted until Linna told a fuller story. At first, readers did not know what to do; Finland’s national novelist committed heresy against their master-narrative. His books sold very well; three-fourths of Finns reported having read him.<sup>5</sup> Yet in 1960, time ticked without a single public voice acknowledging that Linna had dropped a bomb in their midst. Instead, Finns threw praise and awards at him. Linna had to go to a Swedish newspaper to confirm that he meant what his novel proclaimed. Under the title “Finland’s White Lie,” he insisted that their country had been built on a myth that still hurt them. A weeks-long silence ensued. Six historians and sociologists finally spoke up, but only to tell Linna that he was wrong.<sup>6</sup> In reality, the Finnish lower classes had suffered feudal oppression that was exceptional in its Nordic context. Yet a

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<sup>2</sup> Whites and Reds were stereotyped as landowners versus labor, but these groups’ social backgrounds were more heterogenous. The Whites are typically referred to as bourgeois.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Heimo, “Places Lost, Memories Regained: Narrating the 1918 Finnish Civil War in Sammatti,” in Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, Barbro Klein, and Ulf Palmenfelt, eds., *Narrating, Doing, Experiencing: Nordic Folkloric Perspectives* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2006), 47–63, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Armstrong, “Ambiguity and Remembrance: Individual and Collective Memory in Finland,” *American Ethnologist* 27.3 (2000): 591–608, 596–97; Marko Tikka, “Warfare and Terror in 1918,” in Tuomas Tepora and Aapo Roselius, eds., *The Finnish Civil War 1918: History, Memory, Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 90–118, 117–18.

<sup>5</sup> Katarina Eskola, “Literature and Interpretative Communities – Literary Communication: On Relevant Concepts and Empirical Applications in Finland,” *Acta Sociologica* 33.4 (1990): 359–71, 363. In 1973, 74 percent of adult Finns had read works by Linna. In 1981, 60 percent.

<sup>6</sup> Nils-Börje Stormbom, *Väinö Linna* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1964), 171–85.

professor Blomstedt denied that inequalities had caused the 1918 uprising, since “hunger, suffering, and oppression are more contemporary propaganda than historic truth.”<sup>7</sup>

Linna had thrown down a glove that was picked up and slapped across his face. The working-class novelist was prepared, sitting on massive research and having allied himself with Finland’s leading revisionist historian.<sup>8</sup> The cultural negotiation would take years, but Linna had a more precise understanding of history on his side, as well as accessible fiction that felt true to his enormous readership. By the end of the decade, when Edvin Laine turned the trilogy into two phenomenally successful films, the public controversy was mostly deflated.<sup>9</sup> The Linna-Laine version of the Civil War became hegemonic, so much so that the White myth was replaced by a Red version also somewhat mythical.<sup>10</sup> The 1960s were a time of socialist reemergence, which contributed to Linna being read to support the politics of the losing side. In a seminal study, Nils-Börje Stormbom posits that the story’s socialist tailor is *Under the North Star*’s moral center.<sup>11</sup> I will argue that this position is a misreading informed by what Harari refers to as “the Che Guevara moment,” when in the period 1950s–70s it seemed as if socialism would outcompete liberalism globally. This evokes “the Hitler moment, when, in the 1930s and early 1940s,

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Stormbom, *Väinö Linna*, 182; my translation.

<sup>8</sup> New generations of scholars furthered Linna’s work, among them historian Heikki Ylikangas (b. 1937). His framework for explaining the Civil War emphasizes Russian agitation, economic inequality, and the power vacuum that left Finnish politics dysfunctional in the aftermath of the Russian revolution; see *Väkivallasta sanan valtaan; suomalaista menneisyyttä keskiajalta nykypäiviin* (Juva: WSOY, 1999). For an English-language account, see Sakari Jääskeläinen, “Political Taboos and National Trauma in Finland caused by the Civil War 1918,” seminar paper, European University Viadrina, 1999. Around the turn of the century, a new generation reexamined the Civil War, initiating work on a database that in 2004 was complete with 40,000 names of victims and information on how they died; see Tuomas Tepora and Aapo Roselius, “Introduction: The Finnish Civil War, Revolution and Scholarship,” in Tepora and Roselius, eds., *The Finnish Civil War 1918: History, Memory, Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1–18, 12–13.

<sup>9</sup> For my adaptation study that also includes Timo Koivusalo’s 2009–10 remakes, see Mads Larsen, “Agreeing on History: Adaptation as Restorative Truth in Finnish Reconciliation,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 48.1 (2020). Laine’s films offer a more humorous and conciliatory narrative than Linna’s combative trilogy. For more on how socially engaged Nordic fiction often uses confrontational literature followed by a milder film adaptation, see Mads Larsen, “Sealing New Truths: Film Adaptation as Cultural Capstone for *101 Reykjavik*,” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 10.1 (2020): 25–44.

<sup>10</sup> Tuomas Tepora, “Changing Perceptions of 1918: World War II and the Post-War Rise of the Left,” in Tepora and Aapo Roselius, eds., *The Finnish Civil War 1918: History, Memory, Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 364–400, 393.

<sup>11</sup> Stormbom, *Väinö Linna*, 245.

fascism seemed for a while irresistible.”<sup>12</sup> Using Harari’s framework of these three most influential humanisms as competing creeds, I argue that Linna’s trilogy encourages all classes to reject utopias and accept social democracy as the best modern adaptation of their Lutheran ethos.

This became the result, too. After finally agreeing on their past, Finns moved forward with similar social cohesion and shared aspirations as those of their Nordic neighbors.<sup>13</sup> The period after World War II became one of belated industrialization and the emergence of a social democratic welfare state.<sup>14</sup> *Under the North Star*’s contribution to this process makes it reasonable to view it as one of literary history’s most directly influential works.

### **A Microcosm of the Modern World**

“If we could only let the ideas do battle while the men remain at peace,” bemoans Lauri Salpakari.<sup>15</sup> The pastor fears that his rural parish, Pentti’s Corner, will be torn by ideological strife. United under liberalism, Finns of all classes had worked for independence from Russia. The Finnish territory had been an integral part of Sweden since medieval crusades, but was taken by the Russian Empire in 1809. Finns underwent the same Herder-inspired awakening as other Europeans did, which resulted in a national imaginary that inspired demands for independence.<sup>16</sup> The middle class took it upon themselves to educate the poor into this new story of Finnishness, liberalism, and class unity. The Russian Czar countered by pitting landless farmers against bourgeois nationalists. Socialists told farmers that egalitarianism, shorter work days, and

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<sup>12</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*.

<sup>13</sup> Darren C. Zook explains Finland’s current prosperity and high level of trust as partially a result of having so effectively laid a divisive past to rest; see “The Curious Case of Finland’s Clean Politics,” *Journal of Democracy*, 20.1 (2009): 157–68, 160–61.

<sup>14</sup> Risto Alapuro, “The Intelligentsia, the State and the Nation,” in Max Engman and David Kirby, eds., *Finland: People, Nation, State* (London: Hurst & Company, 1989), 147–65.

<sup>15</sup> Linna, *Under the North Star*, 312.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher S. Browning, *Constructivism, Narrative and Foreign Policy Analysis* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 112–13.



redistribution of land could be within reach—if they rejected liberal class unity. This ideological mishmash makes the Lutheran pastor fear that competing beliefs will tear his congregation apart, forcing men to kill each other as the final word on which ethos should be given primacy.

Harari's framework lets us view Pentti's Corner as a microcosm of the ideologically embattled modern world. From 1884 to the 1950s, three generations of Koskelas struggle with which story to commit to. They are Salpakari's impoverished tenant farmers who work hard and embody Nordic values, yet far too many of them are among the over 100 million casualties of modernity's ideological negotiation. To make sense of this carnage, the omniscient narrator blames no single individual or belief system. Linna's social realism posits that liberalism, socialism, and fascism appealed to different types with distinct personalities, experiences, and vested interests. The story's characters are recognizable types dear to Finnish sensibilities, but their actions are driven by universal psychological mechanisms. We all share the same nature, so when the context that makes you the victim changes, you can become the oppressor—without having changed a single one of the moral tenets you profess.

Before the early modern transition to humanism, theist beliefs promoted that individuals subjugate themselves to God whose truths often were communicated via clergy elites. As a result of the Henrichian coevolution, humanists came to believe that humans have, in Harari's words, "a unique and sacred nature [and are] the most important thing in the world." But similar to the way in which theists disagreed on the nature of God and broke into sects, humanists disagreed on the definition of humanity. Liberal humanism claims that humanity is "a quality of individual humans, and that the liberty of individuals is therefore sacrosanct."<sup>17</sup> This position was hegemonic until World War I. Liberals tended to believe that "if individuals had maximum

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<sup>17</sup> Harari, *Sapiens*.

freedom to express themselves and follow their hearts, the world would enjoy unprecedented peace and prosperity”—liberal values would let humanity “create paradise on earth.”<sup>18</sup> The horrors of industrial warfare, the inequalities of the 1920s, and the 1930s Depression made clear that a liberal utopia would not manifest itself from governments simply granting freedoms to individuals.

Fascist humanism rose to prominence after the first world war. Building on philosopher Herbert Spencer’s misguided interpretation of evolutionary processes,<sup>19</sup> the fascist definition of humanity was that of a mutable species that could “degenerate into subhumans or evolve into superhumans.”<sup>20</sup> Freeing individuals in a liberal manner would not bring about this master-race utopia. Instead, authoritarian ultranationalists should subjugate opponents, through violence if necessary. A society run by corporatist and militaristic principles would provide strength in unity, so that inferior nations could be outcompeted. This racist ideology seemed about to conquer the world during what Harari refers to as “the Hitler moment.” After World War II, fascism was discredited, particularly as a result of how its tenets had fueled the Holocaust.

Liberalism then faced another existential threat. Socialism rose to prominence with the 1917 Russian revolution, writes Harari, but only became a global competitor with the Cold War. Socialists define humanity as “collective rather than individualistic,” which makes equality between groups more important than freedom for individuals. The existence of rich people can therefore seem like “blasphemy against the sanctity of humanity.”<sup>21</sup> The socialist utopia had wide appeal, but liberalism outcompeted socialism through a more effective utilization of modern technology. The Socialist Bloc simply fell behind economically. When the Cold War

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<sup>18</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>19</sup> Carroll, “Introduction,” 32–33.

<sup>20</sup> Harari, *Sapiens*.

<sup>21</sup> Harari, *Sapiens*.

ended in 1989, it seemed as if liberalism had won a final victory. Fukuyama predicted “the end of history” and the ubiquity of liberal democracies from soon until forever.<sup>22</sup>

This strife of three creeds resulted in unprecedented destruction. World War II produced over 70 million casualties; socialist governments killed more than 90 million people.<sup>23</sup> Other conflicts add to these numbers. If, as Harari argues, humanism is about to be replaced by dataism, we could face a new contest between creeds. If this turns violent, casualties could be counted with ten instead of nine digits. I argue not that these conflicts should be understood from ideology alone. Humans have always had all kinds of motivations for killing members of their out-groups. But ideology is a cultural tool that motivates mass-scale murder so effectively that it can feel appropriate even to kill those who until recently were part of our in-group. Linna’s insightful portrayal of how Finnish villagers turn on each other offers insight with timeless relevance. In the following, I explore master-narrative adaptation through five perspectives: (1) Jussi Koskela’s pre-modern ethos, (2) Lauri Salpakari’s liberalism, (2) Akseli Koskela’s socialism, (3) Ilmari Salpakari’s fascism, and (5) Janne Kivivuori’s social democracy.<sup>24</sup>

### **Jussi’s Lutheran Self-Reliance**

“In the beginning there were the swamp, the hoe—and Jussi.” This is the famous first line from *Under the North Star*’s opening book (hereafter abbreviated *UNS1*).<sup>25</sup> A 30-something Jussi knows the world is changing but sticks to what he knows, the Lutheran ethos of his ancestors. In

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<sup>22</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History*.

<sup>23</sup> Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> For an earlier version of this interpretation, see Mads Larsen, “Battleground of Humanisms: How Väinö Linna’s *Under the North Star* United What Liberalism, Socialism, and Fascism Tore Apart,” *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 26.6 (2021): 603–20.

<sup>25</sup> Linna, *Under the North Star*, 3. The subsequent novels will be cited *UNS2* and *UNS3* followed by page numbers.

the land of lakes and forests, having arable land that you labor vigilantly is most people's best bet. No utopia could be expected—not in this life—just food to keep your family going while you try to stave off intermittent war, famine, and pestilence. The latter scourges had become less of a threat.<sup>26</sup> Still, Finland's final famine, Europe's last naturally caused food shortage, was the defining event for young Jussi. Orphaned at 10 years old, he was taken in by the pastor of Pentti's Corner for whom he works as a hired hand. The national population had more than tripled in a century, so all the good land is taken. Jussi stares out at the pastor's swamp, pokes around in it, and concludes that with hard work he can turn it into a farm of considerable size.

Ownership of this land becomes the trilogy's narrative spine. Jussi invests decades of backbreaking labor to make the swamp productive, yet the pastor is unwilling to finalize the deed. As a tenant farmer, Jussi must work for free at the parsonage, and he can be evicted for no reason. Such feudal relations give landowners considerable power. By this time in Sweden and Denmark, tenant farming comprised only 30 and 10 percent of crops, respectively. In Finland, such crops amounted to 60 percent. In the south, where Reds seize power, there were regions with 90–96 percent tenant crops.<sup>27</sup> This land question becomes the primary battleground when liberalism and socialism are introduced to Pentti's Corner.

Jussi's subservience is challenged when Lauri, the new pastor, demands additional free workdays. Jussi complains to his own family, but adds that "if it's the vicar's order, then we'll have to" (*UNSI* 132). His deeply anchored worldview makes Jussi the trilogy's moral starting point but not its moral center. His archaic values do keep him out of trouble, but they are

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<sup>26</sup> From around 1820, Scandinavians had more dependable caloric access, much due to the success of the potato; see E. I. Kouri, Jens E. Olesen, eds., *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia: Volume 2, 1520–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 832. The plague pandemic that began with the Black Death had intermittent outbreaks until it ended early in the eighteenth century. Later plague was less severe; see Lagerås, "Introduction," 10.

<sup>27</sup> Marjo Eskola, Tiina Räisä, and Henrik Stenius, "Identity Construction and Modernity in Finland: Borders, Ruptures and Significant Others," in Atsuko Ichijo, ed., *Europe, Nations and Modernity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 183–207, 185–92; Stormbom, *Väinö Linna*, 168–69.

dysfunctional for someone who wants to get ahead in the twentieth century. Only after tremendous tragedy can Jussi make himself act against his childhood morality, similar to the way in which Hamsun's protagonist had to suffer prolonged pain to act against his. Two of his sons are extrajudicially executed after the Civil War; the third gets sentenced to death. Jussi obliges when he must surrender most of his livestock, but when the rationing board requires that he hand over the grain that his grandchildren need for sustenance, "Jussi committed the first swindle in his life" (*UNS2* 382).

Despite his idiosyncrasies, those who try to win over villagers use the old swamp slayer as a romanticized representation of their past. Liberalists, socialists, and fascists all claim that their story follows Jussi's pre-modern prologue. When the Koskela patriarch dies after a stroke, the liberal pastor eulogizes him in a way meant to discredit socialist labor strife:

He was the last great representative of our pioneer forefathers, the men we have to thank for the fact that any culture at all exists in our land. For they laid the foundation, and all the rest grew upon it. We can not conceive of anything without them and their work. And to them their work was not a curse but a source of all blessings. (*UNS3* 70)

### **Lauri's Liberal Nationalism**

The future makes its grand entrance with Lauri Salpakari and his wife Ellen. The urban couple arrives to imprint liberal nationalism into ignorant parishioners. When Jussi picks Ellen up from the train station, she immediately wants to know if the village has a public school. Jussi replies,

"There is one in the church village and one in Salmi. They're supposed to build one in Pentti's Corner. They're talking about it. The baron has promised the lot and the timber."

"It's none too soon. But what are the people like? Are they patriotic?"

"Well... I can't say..."

"Do they hate the Russians?"

“Well... Not really all that much. There aren't all that many of them around here... maybe a gelder or a peddler once in a while. Nothing unusual about them. Oh yes, they did beat up a Russian once.” (*UNSI* 98)

Ellen is disappointed by Jussi's response, but eager to get ahead of the competition; many urban workers are already animated by socialism, and she fears contagion. The socialist in Pentti's Corner, the tailor whom Stormbom read to be the trilogy's moral center, attempts to organize the lower classes around a fire department. This is meant as a first step toward a workers' association. Lauri dismisses the threat, “It's mere childishness. We don't have the conditions necessary for the success of socialism here” (*UNSI* 130). His assessment rings true, but not for long. Class harmony gets disrupted by the Russian Czar granting land rights to tenant farmers while depriving Finland of legislative autonomy. This divide-and-conquer strategy radicalizes rural tenants. Elites respond with political modernization: Finland goes from having an outdated estate-based constitution to establishing Europe's most democratic parliament. In 1907, everyone can vote and run for office, including women, the landless, and minorities.

This victory for liberal rights calms tensions. But only until the election. Socialists win 80 out of 200 seats, unnerving the higher classes. Liberalism had granted individuals what Harari posits to be the creed's core tenet: the “freedom to express themselves and follow their hearts.”<sup>28</sup> How people do this makes the Salpakaris feel betrayed. They view classes as complimentary, not in opposition, as socialists do. Ellen's ideological conviction does not falter, but her faith in the Finnish people does, “Is it any wonder? With all that agitation? They should have replaced the financial requirement for suffrage with a cultural one.” Lauri asks Akseli, Jussi's 19-year-old and increasingly socialist son, if people thought “correctly when they voted?” Akseli explains the election result as a consequence of Finland's widespread poverty. Lauri rejects that society

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<sup>28</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

should mitigate inequalities, since “changing conditions won’t help unless people themselves change” (*UNSI* 300–1).

As socialists predicted, parliamentary granting of liberal rights has a limited effect on resource distribution and people’s day-to-day lives. Land reform is postponed, again and again, which causes tensions to rise. When the Russian revolution throws Finland into poorly prepared independence, factions prepare for war. Lauri donates money to arm the Whites’ Civil Guard—just to be on the safe side. Reds secretly arm their own militia with similar justification. Then, events cascade, and threat perception and coalitional psychology set in, like we saw with Anne’s trial in chapter 3. When Reds attempt a coup and win the opening battles of the Civil War, Lauri reconsiders the socialist narrative. Like the pastor Hamsun scolded as part of his marketing for *Hunger*, Lauri is unwilling to accept that morality changes with context. An ideology that goes against Christian tenets cannot be true, “How else could the Word have lived for two thousand years, if it did not contain the essential truth of mankind and his soul” (*UNS2* 230).

Like the flagellants in *The Seventh Seal*, Lauri doubles down on his beliefs. Under mortal threat, writes Henrich, our interdependence psychology is sparked, motivating us to strengthen norm commitment.<sup>29</sup> When Lauri acts out this martyr psychology, the Reds arrest him. Sacrificing for in-group beliefs should help the pastor assuage his death anxiety,<sup>30</sup> and indeed, inside his cell Linna lets the stalwart liberal be filled with joy. Even decades later, when World War II unites Finland’s classes to fight Soviet invaders, the pastor is unwilling to reform. He insists on his original understanding of class, as “the people were not allowed to rise above their class, but through their own ability and effort, individuals could” (*UNS3* 351).

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<sup>29</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

<sup>30</sup> Kirkpatrick and Navarrete, “Reports of My Death,” 293; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, “Pride and Prejudice.”

Like Jussi, Lauri never lets go of the story he was socialized into when young. Such ideological loyalty feels righteous to him, but makes him a less effective leader. Insisting on the universality of nineteenth-century liberalism deprives him of the flexibility that could have helped him unite his congregation. In Linna's narrative, this does not make Lauri a bad person. His compassion is genuine; he uses private means and borrowed money to feed the poor. He is portrayed not as a narrow-minded pastor, but as a modern man who tries to do the right thing. Like the many tragic characters in this rural epic, Lauri fails because even the most capable and well-meaning will struggle to understand which story is more suitable in a rapidly transforming world.

### **Akseli's Socialist Revolution**

Akseli radicalizes when, instead of finally granting land ownership to the Koskelas, Lauri takes back a third of their fields. This is perfectly legal, but such liberal deceit makes Akseli increasingly unwilling to accept the low position into which he was born. As he rides a horse wagon, he sees the pastor's coach ahead. Akseli speeds up, to his mother's horror and chagrin:

“Slow down now... God save us...”

But they kept on until the parsonage coach was sure to be far behind them. Then only did the boy begin to rein in the horse. As the animal walked up a hill, Akseli leaned over the front of the wagon to give him a couple of approving slaps. “[The horse] knows what the gentlemen have coming to them.”

For her part, his mother complained mildly both about the ride and about passing the gentry like that. It was improper. They should have stayed behind.

“If you can, you do,” said Akseli. (*UNSI* 305)

His radicalization fluctuates with the national mood around the land question. When progress is held up, Akseli complains that “this whole country is such a dung-heap that a grown man can't stand to live in it” (*UNSI* 341). When he gets permission to marry, he mildens. When it seems as



if the farm will become his, he mildens more. This causes a more hardened socialist to claim that Akseli's "socialism has disappeared under [Elina's] nightgown" (*UNS1* 380). Ultimately, liberal downplay of class conflict fills him with too much hate not to resist the status quo:

They always talk about their own affairs as Finland's affairs. . . . No matter what they want, it's always to the country's advantage, to the people's advantage, it's *our* society. . . . I hate them so much. They're just like a beggar you feed and wash and dress in bed who snarls at his nurse and spits in her eye every time he's given anything. Sometimes I even think it would be easy to kill them. (*UNS2* 7)

When the Reds discuss whether to arm, Akseli's word becomes the decisive one, "I've seen that a worker will get nothing if he isn't strong. As soon as they get their guard in shape, all talk of reform will end" (*UNS2* 137). When they seize power, Akseli tries to limit harm, since they, as socialists, only seek justice. Still, cold murder is inevitable; old scores are settled with ideology as a thinly veiled mask for bloodthirst and personal resentment. When the men of Pentti's Corner are ordered to join the battle against Whites at the front, Akseli consoles his mother with socialist utopianism: "This is the last battle. When we win, all weapons will be destroyed" (*UNS2* 193). Myth can strengthen morale but will only get you so far. The reality of a better trained and equipped enemy, with German reinforcement, drains the strength villagers drew from socialist conviction. Akseli remains the truest believer, but their revolution ends in retreat. After a harrowing period in prison camps, Akseli returns home, physically broken. Reunited with Elina and their three sons, not a word is spoken of modern ideology. The second novel's last sentences strike a nostalgic chord, pointing back to the faith that once united them, "The only sound at the table was the clinking of spoons. Otherwise there was silence. A real Evangelical Lutheran silence. Father had come home" (*UNS2* 420).

In the third novel, Akseli retains his faith in the socialist cause but keeps out of politics. His three oldest sons are killed in World War II. The farm becomes theirs to own, and Akseli's youngest son takes it over. The disaster of losing three children, and the void Akseli feels after finally getting the land they had fought so hard for, make him despair: "He looked into the future and saw only emptiness." Socialism no longer offers him emotional sustenance. Like Antonius Block in *The Seventh Seal*, Akseli feels that life without myth makes for an existence without purpose. Literary critic Erich Auerbach emphasized that humans need such narratives to give meaning and direction to the chaos that surrounds us. Living without one "would be an impoverishment for which there can be no possible compensation."<sup>31</sup> Akseli, too, is unwilling to live in Block's "world of phantoms."<sup>32</sup> He takes "an interest in Elina's religious beliefs," hoping they can soothe his "powerful feeling of horror at the meaninglessness of life" (*UNS* 369). When she listens to the radio's Sunday service, "Akseli would lie on the bed in the room. He did, however, try to pretend that he had just happened to be resting there" (*UNS* 392). Shortly thereafter, in 1947, Akseli dies from a stroke, like his father before him.

Akseli let himself be convinced by socialism because, in his context, its tenets promise him ownership of land. The ideology appears pure and good, but its authoritarianism breaks with the individualism Akseli holds dear. Its utopian promises, too, disillusion him, a common result when utopias are given time to play out. Such beliefs motivate cooperation around a shared goal; how achievable these goals are is secondary in the short term. When the movement's leaders reveal themselves to be bitter drunks or vengeful egotists who use tenant farmers as political pawns, Akseli is repulsed. He stays in because he needs allies, and socialism appears to be the

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Mali, *The Legacy of Vico in Modern Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 190.

<sup>32</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 20.

only means with which he can fight back against liberals who use every trick in the democratic playbook not to share their agricultural land. Behind lofty utopias hides cynical resource conflict.

Stormbom is right in that Linna supports the Reds' cause; he portrays it as just. But the socialist tailor is no moral center. Linna satirizes socialist politics, ridiculing their absurd matrices of oppressors and oppressed. The author's own politics emphasize the individual, like social democracy does, in opposition to the collectivist authoritarianism that animates *Under the North Star's* socialists.<sup>33</sup> When the far-left creed no longer has political utility for Akseli, he appears ashamed of having fallen for such obvious utopianism. Unlike the ideologically unbendable Jussi and Lauri, Akseli is willing to change which story he professes. Perhaps this flexibility stems from him only having acquired socialism at a mature age. The story Akseli returns to for solace as death nears is the Lutheranism he was socialized into as a child. Through these narrative choices, Linna seems to reject the socialist utopia at least as strongly as he does the liberal one.

### **Ilmari's Fascist Empire**

"Are there vicious horses at the parsonage [and] are there any vicious pigs there?" (*UNSI* 96). The opening words from the pastor's young son foreshadow his fascist rebellion. Ilmari's fascination with nature's savagery resonates with the interwar period's disastrous application of Spencer's evolutionary perspective on the relationship between nations. Linna portrays fascism as a creed that appeals to certain personalities. Ilmari is a disagreeable child and a failing student who is drawn to any adventure that promotes his superiority. In World War I, he is one of a few thousand Finns who enlist for Jaeger training in Germany. When he returns to free Pentti's

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<sup>33</sup> Yrjö Varpio, *Bilden av ett folk: en festskrift till Väinö Linna* (Stockholm, Holger Schildts förlag, 1980), 341.

Corner from the Reds, the brash young lieutenant is chosen by landowners to embody the new militaristic ideal for an era disillusioned by liberalism and appalled by socialist rebellion.

Before the Civil War, Ilmari and his father argue over war. Lauri suggests that “war is somehow against human nature.” Ilmari insists that “if anything is according to human nature, then war is” (*UNS2* 26). Fascism posits that war lets your tribal group evolve toward superiority. Conversely, empowering the weak through democracy can lead to a degeneration of the species. Ilmari sees no point in granting liberal rights to Reds accused of rebellion, as mere execution suffices. He disregards “the rule of the people,” telling his father that the army should teach politicians how to govern effectively. Such illiberalism offends Lauri’s morality, but he also feels that the Civil War, to some extent, disproved his own liberal story. Perhaps the young understand the new era better:

Undoubtedly the responsibility for the country will rest on your shoulders. . . . We older people have been badly mistaken. We have almost thrust the right to vote upon them, and spoiled them. . . . What misfortune they have brought upon themselves. (*UNS2* 305).

Over the next months, Reds are executed and starved to death by the tens of thousands.<sup>34</sup> Lauri eventually recommits to his liberal beliefs, but his wife Ellen remains convinced by her son’s fascist narrative of impending greatness. Ilmari connects his story, and that of Finland, to history’s great “men of decision,” like Napoleon, Romans, Spartans, Hitler, and Mussolini who in Italy “straightened out the identical situation in a few days” (*UNS3* 112). His homicidal narcissism evokes Niels Klim when he declared himself to be the Fifth Monarch. Ilmari argues that society’s institutions should be run according to fascist corporatism. Liberal democracy is no longer worth considering; the only political choice left is that between fascism and socialism.

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<sup>34</sup> Tikka, “Warfare and Terror,” 117–18.

The fascist meta-narrative gains influence in the 1920s, and Finland becomes plagued by violent mobs. Socialists are abducted, beaten, and often dumped by the Soviet border. Leftists in Pentti's Corner are brutalized while fascist-aligned law enforcement looks the other way. The mob later turns against liberals, too, for not marching along with illiberalism. The other Nordic countries had similar movements, but they remained obscure because functional institutions were able to deal with discontent in a liberal manner.<sup>35</sup> Deep divides let Finland's Lapua movement become a far-right Nordic anomaly with wide appeal—until it went too far. In 1932, they abducted a liberal ex-president and attempted a coup. General support collapsed.

Despite Lapua excess, Ilmari remains a true believer, climbing in military rank until he is killed by Russians in World War II. The village's other hardline fascist, a schoolteacher, is true to his faith until the Axis powers are defeated. He was an ardent anti-democrat with the same imperialist ambitions as Ilmari. They aspired for a Greater Finland that would seize land from Russia, and whose women would breed superior children to populate the Finns' destined *Reich*. Shortly after peace has returned, the schoolteacher can be heard speaking warmly "of democracy and the Scandinavian legal system" (*UNS3* 390). With the Axis powers gone, the fascist story no longer excites anyone. The threat of an expansionist Soviet Union has a similar effect on how villagers perceive the socialist story. That all Finns had had to work together against Soviet invaders has a reconciliatory effect that ushers in a period of growing harmony.

### **Janne's Social Democratic Aftermath**

Janne Kivivuori is a minor character but *Under the North Star*'s moral center. As a young man, he reads law on his spare time to acquire the liberal weapons he needs to fight landowners. He is

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<sup>35</sup> Ulf Lindström, "Fascism in Scandinavia 1920–40," dissertation, University of Umeå, 1983.

among the first to turn from hardline socialism to the pragmatic politics of social democracy. As he negotiates for greater economic and social equality, Janne emerges as a social engineer who works not in service of a utopian meta-narrative, but to achieve mutually beneficial solutions. He embodies the Nordic ethos for the modern world: social togetherness and rational progress.

When he gets beaten up by fascists, Janne entrusts courts to punish his assailants. Despite having witnesses, he loses and must pay considerable legal fees. He suffers like his fellow villagers do, but he does not let bitterness radicalize him, nor does he lose sight of everyone's humanity. As a politician in the 1920s, he bargains with fascists. They get money for their Civil Guard against Janne squeezing "out funds for the aid of the poor, for the schools, for the county home, and for unemployment" (*UNS3* 156). As long as voters elect fascists, those are with whom Janne will cooperate. The same mindset makes him oppose a ban against socialism, as such "cannot be criminalized without criminalizing a broad area of public actions, which according to western sense of justice and democracy, must be permitted" (*UNS3* 194). Among men blinded by ideology, Janne sees Finland's real choice. Early in the 1920s, he understands what modernity requires, which is more than to fight tooth and nail over tiny plots of agricultural land:

I don't know what the devil is wrong with this country and its people. They shift from fighting one out-of-date battle to another. . . . The society of the future will be an industrialized society. It's the same whether it be socialist or capitalist—it will be industrialized no matter what. (*UNS3* 21)

Janne shepherds Pentti's Corner through the Depression, then gets elected to parliament. He returns after World War II to help reorganize the local labor movement. History has thought him that fascism was an indefensible dead end, liberalism too unconcerned with equality, and socialism too obsessed with its utopia. For his social democratic humanism, the "goal is welfare, peace, and human freedom. . . . A human being is a valuable thing, in my opinion the most

valuable on this earth” (UNS3 387). After much effort, Janne convinces his villagers to commit to the Middle Way. The next day, another exhausting meeting awaits in another village. No utopia motivates him, just his belief in negotiation as the best way to a better future. His pragmatism evokes the Holbergian cosmopolitanism of *Niels Klim*. Utopias may entice human emotion, but the Scandinavian way is not revolution; it is reform, or *refolution*, which is Witoszek’s term for this mindset.<sup>36</sup> Janne embodies this willingness to commit to slow-moving reform. He explains to his sister, “The war is over for others, but mine is just beginning” (UNS3 389).

The pre-modern world dissolves as war refugees are given land. After three centuries as a center of power, the baron’s manor loses “much of its land, and people were liberated from its might” (UNS3 390). Landowners form an alliance with Janne, their former enemy, to oppose remaining socialists. They even want to procure an honorary title for their parliamentary dealmaker. Linna ends his trilogy with Janne’s return to Pentti’s Corner in the 1950s, driven by his grandson, “a ‘European’ [who] spoke of existentialism, of the relativity of all things, and of backward Finnishness” (UNS3 396). They visit Akseli’s youngest son who has bought a tractor to work the fields that his grandfather Jussi cleared with a hoe. His son is next in line to take over, unless the opportunities of a new Finland pull this fourth-generation Koskela in a different direction. During Janne’s visit, there is no passionate talk of ideology. After half a century of division and violence, Finns have rejoined the Nordic path, embracing social democracy as the natural heir to their ancestors’ egalitarian ethos.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Witoszek and Sørensen, “Nordic Humanism,” 41.

<sup>37</sup> Informed by this new uniting ethos, Finland’s “aberrant prison population began its dramatic decline,” writes Pratt and Eriksson, *Contrasts in Punishment*.

## Fiction as a Corrective to Master-Narratives

In the 1960s, Stormbom and other critics seem not to have considered social democracy as an alternative to socialism or liberalism. Those two creeds appeared as grand ideologies, while social democracy was a way to negotiate between them. Fascism was far too discredited for the Nordic Model's corporatist elements to be attached to such a label. Claiming that *Under the North Star* has a socialist moral center perhaps meant that the story emphasizes the importance of opposing liberal universality and utopianism, which was of primary importance to the 1960s countercultural movement.<sup>38</sup> This decade's reembrace of socialist utopianism also contributed to a blind spot among some critics. If we instead view social democracy as a distinct humanist creed, Linna's trilogy clearly aligns its thematic argument with this ethos.

These novels exemplify how fiction lets us use imagination to engage with the experience of others. Even if we are unable to form consensus around all values, writes cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah, it can suffice that fiction helps "people get used to each other."<sup>39</sup> Linna lets readers vicariously experience the inequalities that motivated the lower classes' failed revolution. They had not been duped by socialist propaganda into fighting against their own interest, as liberals had insisted.<sup>40</sup> The insights Linna offered "undermined the paternalist nationalist myth of social harmony," writes historian Christopher Browning. The result was "pluralism . . . as grounds for a renewed national consensus."<sup>41</sup> Linna was rewarded with the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1963; there was even talk of a Nobel.<sup>42</sup> Acknowledging his

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler, "Editors' Preface," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 93.5 (2003): vii–xi.

<sup>39</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton & Company, 2006), eBook.

<sup>40</sup> "The established middle-class view" was that Reds had been "hooligans" or "misled by the Bolsheviks," writes Tepora, "Changing Perceptions of 1918," 391.

<sup>41</sup> Browning, *Constructivism*, 203.

<sup>42</sup> George C. Schoolfield, "Might-Have-Beens: The North and the Nobel Prize, 1967–1987," *World Literature Today* 62.2 (1988): 235–39. In 1980, Linna was awarded the title Academician of Science, an honor normally reserved for scholars.



contribution to the national imaginary, prime minister Esko Aho expressed, “To understand Finland and the Finns one needs only read one book: *Under the North Star* by Väinö Linna.”<sup>43</sup>

In a sense, the trilogy became the origin myth of modern Finland. That we cling to such meta-narratives is not the problem; our species cannot do without them. But “universalism without toleration,” writes Appiah, “turns easily to murder.”<sup>44</sup> Toleration requires that we, to some extent, understand those we disagree with. Fiction can put us in their shoes. If you were in the position of Lauri, Akseli, or Ilmari, would you have known better, would you have avoided their mistakes? To understand the past, Linna views literature as important: “The so-called general public does not read actual history to any significant extent, but instead, draws more of its knowledge and understanding of it via other historical writings, such as fiction.”<sup>45</sup> At a time when Western novelists had turned to deconstructing national identity,<sup>46</sup> Linna used historical novels to forge the unity Finland still lacked.<sup>47</sup> He was heralded as their new national novelist after *The Unknown Soldier* (*Tuntematon sotilas*, 1954) offered new truths about their Continuation War (1941–44). This story, too—and its adaptation—were fantastically successful.<sup>48</sup> Laine’s film remains the Finns’ cultural truth about the war, despite two later remakes.<sup>49</sup> In 1997, *The Unknown Soldier* and *Under the North Star* were chosen by both the

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in the preface of Linna, *Under the North Star*, ix.

<sup>44</sup> Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*.

<sup>45</sup> Väinö Linna, “Om realismen i den historiska romanen,” in Louise Asklöf et al., eds., *Humanismen som salt och styrka: Bilder och betraktelser tillägnade Harry Järv* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1987), 386–94, 387. The influence of Linna’s own fiction can be traced through school textbooks; see Eemeli Hakoköngäs, Olli Kleemola, Inari Sakki, and Virpi Kivioja, “Remembering War through Images: Visual Narratives of the Finnish Civil War in History Textbooks from the 1920s to the 2010s,” *Memory Studies* (2020): Online First.

<sup>46</sup> Elisabeth Oxfeldt, *Romanen, nasjonen og verden: Nordisk litteratur i et postnasjonalt perspektiv* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2012), 18.

<sup>47</sup> Novels have been used to build the notion of nationhood; see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>48</sup> *The Unknown Soldier* is Finland’s most successful film. It was seen by 2.8 million in theaters; see Elonet, “Tuntematon sotilas (1955),” *Elonet kansallismogrofia*, <https://www.elonet.fi/fi/elokuva/113528>.

<sup>49</sup> *The Unknown Soldier* draws a large audience to a ritualistic TV séance every December 6, which is Finland’s Independence Day; see Eskola, “Literature,” 365.

general public and cultural elites as Finland's two greatest works of art in the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> A decade later, Laine's *Here, Beneath the North Star* (1968) was selected as the greatest film in Finnish history.<sup>51</sup>

This tradition for using fiction to provide content for their national imaginary goes back to when Finnish identity was forged in the nineteenth century. Finland was a nation born through literature, writes Tage Bostrom.<sup>52</sup> President Juho Kusti Paasikivi found fiction to be “one of the best roads to understanding a nation's soul and living conditions.”<sup>53</sup> By contrast, the rationale behind utopian narratives is not understanding but “reconstructing its inhabitants.”<sup>54</sup> The twentieth century can be viewed as a test for whether we could reprogram people culturally to an extent that lets us construct a social order based on ideals alone. The experiment failed, writes Joseph Carroll, “We also have to take account of human nature [which] makes culture.”<sup>55</sup>

Insightful literature can help us understand why utopias are compelling and also why they tend to go against human nature. *Under the North Star* conveys this conflict with clarity. Linna portrays social democracy as an alternative—an incremental, bottom-up process that simply tries to make “the world a little better.”<sup>56</sup> This aligns with evolutionary processes, I argue in the next chapter. Like Linna alluded to, literature allows us to enlist the public to test which ideas are likely to unite people around how to meet threat. Fiction lets “ideas do battle while the men

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<sup>50</sup> Helena Halmari, “Power Relationships and Register Variation in Väinö Linna's *Here Under the Northern Star*,” *Journal of Finnish Studies* 3.2 (1999): 36–49, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Pajukallio Arto, “Kotimaiset suosikkielokuvat toiveusintoina,” *Helsingin Sanomat*, 17 November 2007, <https://www.hs.fi/radiotelevisio/art-2000004527084.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Tage Bostrom, *Okänd soldat och kända soldater: Beteenden, attityder och struktur i Väinö Linnas krigsroman* (Umeå : Almqvist & Wiksell, 1983), 15.

<sup>53</sup> Juho Kusti Paasikivi, *Toimintani Moskovassa ja Suomessa 1939-41-11: välirauhan aika* (Porvoo: Werner Söderström, 1958), 24.

<sup>54</sup> Brett Cooke, “Human Nature, Utopia, and Dystopia: Zamyatin's *We*,” in Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall, eds., *Evolution, Literature, and Film: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 381–408, 382.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph Carroll, *Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 273.

<sup>56</sup> Andersson, “Not Without a Future,” 172.

remain at peace.” Nordic noir detective stories would come to fulfill such a function. My reading of *The Story of a Crime*, the genre’s originating decalogy, supports a hypothesis of present-day evolutionary scholars: that the Nordic Model’s success is much due to how its governance aligns with universals for group efficacy at all levels of organization.

## 8. Social Democracy: Pragmatic Politics for Evolutionary Universals

Poor Martin Beck. This proto-Nordic detective was burdened with aggressive normalcy when author-couple Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö reinvented the crime genre for political purposes. The previous era's intellectually superior detectives had solved mysteries in high-class surroundings, relying on individualistic brilliance to counter crimes without social consequence.<sup>1</sup> Beck is as unextraordinary as his surroundings. He suffers bad health and a worse social life, ushering in the "ulcer school" of Nordic noir.<sup>2</sup> Bleak realism and underwhelming protagonists have marked this popular genre since Beck sulked onto the Swedish literary scene in *The Story of a Crime* (1965–75).<sup>3</sup> Only by working together and compensating for each other's weaknesses is Beck's collective able to solve crime, which is always of the socially elucidating type. Criminals can be portrayed as morally innocent or even heroic. In this decalogy, the true monstrosity—about to turn Sweden into a hellscape of crime, social meltdown, and capitalist exploitation—is social democracy.

Sjöwall and Wahlöö's politics can appear bizarre without a Vichian key. At the peak of social democracy's golden age, income equality kept rising.<sup>4</sup> Production boomed. Social

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Beyer, "'Death of the Author': Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's Police Procedurals," in Vivien Miller and Helen Oakley, eds., *Cross-Cultural Connections in Crime Fictions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 141–59, 144.

<sup>2</sup> Katarina Gregersdotter, "The Body, Hopelessness, and Nostalgia: Representations of Rape and the Welfare State in Swedish Crime Fiction," in Berit Åström, Gregersdotter, and Tanya Horeck, eds., *Rape in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy and Beyond: Contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 81–96, 84.

<sup>3</sup> The decalogy comprises *Roseanna*, Lois Roth, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1967 [1965]); *The Man Who Went Up in Smoke* [*Mannen som gick upp i rök*], Joan Tate, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1969 [1966]); *The Man on the Balcony* [*Mannen på balkongen*], Alan Blair, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1968 [1967]); *The Laughing Policeman* [*Den skrattande polisen*], Alan Blair, trans. (London: Harper Perennial, 2007 [1968]); *The Fire Engine That Disappeared* [*Brandbilen som försvann*], Joan Tate, trans. (London: Harper Perennial, 2007 [1969]); *Murder at the Savoy* [*Polis, polis, potatismos!*], Joan Tate, trans. (London: Harper Perennial, 2007 [1970]); *The Abominable Man* [*Den vedervärdige mannen från Säffle*], Thomas Teal, trans. (London: Harper Perennial, 2007 [1971]); *The Locked Room* [*Det slutna rummet*], Paul Britten Austin, trans. (London: Harper Perennial, 2007 [1972]); *Cop Killer* [*Polismördaren*], Thomas Teal, trans. (London: Harper Perennial, 2007 [1974]); *Terrorists* [*Terroristerna*], Joan Tate Blair, trans. (London: Harper Perennial, 2007 [1975]). Hereafter *MB1–MB10* with chapter number in quotations.

<sup>4</sup> Anders Björklund and Mårten Palme, "The Evolution of Income Inequality During the Rise of the Swedish Welfare State 1951 to 1973," *Nordic Journal of Political Economy* 26 (2000): 115–28.

problems were solved so effectively that life in the People's Home could have appeared utopian to pre-war generations. The People's Home (*folkhemmet*) was a late-1800s term for houses that offered cheap newspapers and public information. In 1928, the leader of the Social Democrats, Per Albin Hansson, turned this into a metaphor that united home, nationalism, and socialism. He urged his sectarian workers' party to become a bridge between classes, to turn Sweden into "a caring home [that] supports no privilege or discrimination."<sup>5</sup> Hansson became Prime Minister in 1932, and—apart from 101 days in 1936—his party held power until 1976. First, they tackled poverty and working conditions. Next came cultural, educational, and social reform, followed by giant building projects meant to accelerate the social democratic push toward sameness.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout Scandinavia, Social Democrats were in charge during much of this period. When other parties held the post of Prime Minister, this did not entail that their country ceased to be social democratic as I use the term in this study. John Lyng from the Conservative Party, Norway's first non-Social Democrat Prime Minister after the war, famously expressed, "We are all social democrats."<sup>7</sup> The region's modern ethos may have been formulated by Social Democrats, but this was so compelling and politically successful that party difference, in regard to the welfare state, often restricted itself to how quickly policies should be implemented. With Fukuyamian hubris, Swedish political scientist Herbert Tingsten declared the end of politics. From now on, he argued, politics would just be a question of executing the welfare ideology all

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Brandal, Bratberg, and Thorsen, *The Nordic Model*, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Mariah Larsson, "Modernity, Masculinity and the Swedish Welfare State: Mai Zetterling's *Flickorna*," in Larsson and Anders Marklund, eds., *Swedish Film: An Introduction and Reader* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2010), 263–69.

<sup>7</sup> Norwegian Social Democrat Einar Førde made this expression the title of his 1981 collection of lectures, *Vi er alle sosialdemokratar* (Oslo: Tiden). He adopted Lyng's saying to argue against socialist revolution being culturally salient.

major parties supported.<sup>8</sup> The social democratic impulse toward “social justice for all”<sup>9</sup> had motivated a consensus around spending much of the era’s growth communally.

Social democracy distinguishes itself from socialism by redistributing not through socializing the means of production, but through taxes and welfare. In Sweden, public spending had been 7 percent of GDP the year *Ingeborg Holm* premiered. By 1947, this had grown to 17 percent. When the first Martin Beck book was published, 25 percent of all kronor were distributed through the public purse, on course to a 72 percent peak in 1993.<sup>10</sup> This massive redistribution had far-reaching consequence, socially and economically. Liberal historian Johan Nordberg argues that Swedish success was much due to business-friendly policies after the war, but that the 1960s heralded an acceleration of public spending that hurt the economy. In 1950–90, “private enterprise had not created a single net job,” he writes, “but the public sector had increased by more than a million employees.”<sup>11</sup>

This trend was a concern on the political right, while the era’s “Che Guevara moment” convinced the far left that social democracy did not go far enough. This tension could not be ignored, even by centrists. Swedish culture needed constant updates to keep up with the era’s change. While conformity and politics of consensus made for effective governance, this sameness of thought posed a risk in terms of political blind spots. Literary critic Göran Hägg writes that in post-war Sweden one could discuss anything but politics. Popular fiction became a medium that facilitated the necessary debate in a less contentious manner.<sup>12</sup> This resulted in

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<sup>8</sup> Stig Hadenius, *Modern svensk politisk historia: konflikt och samförstånd* (Stockholm: Hjalmarsson och Högberg, 2003), 111.

<sup>9</sup> Brandal, Bratberg, and Thorsen, *The Nordic Model*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> IMF DataMapper, Government expenditure, % of GDP., <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/exp@FPP/SWE>.

<sup>11</sup> Johan Nordberg, “How Laissez-Faire Made Sweden Rich,” *Libertarianism*, 25 October 2013, <https://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/how-laissez-faire-made-sweden-rich>.

<sup>12</sup> Göran Hägg, *Välfärdsåren: Svensk historia 1945–1986* (Stockholm: W og W, 2005), 84. Knut Olav Åmås warns against how conformism stifles debate in Norway, too; see *Verdien av uenighet: Debatt og dissens i Norge* (Oslo: Kagge forlag, 2007).

more politicized literature than what was common in countries with greater parliamentary disunity.<sup>13</sup> Generous subsidies for fiction, journalism, and broadcasting helped facilitate debate.

Swedes were mostly in agreement on social democratic reform having been a boon so far. Yet much was already achieved, and there was perhaps a limit to how high taxes should be. Bergman and author Astrid Lindgren certainly thought so, after having been charged marginal tax rates of 134 and 102 percent, respectively.<sup>14</sup> Social Democrats later implemented Wage Earners funds that over time would transfer company ownership from investors to workers. This triggered Sweden's largest political protest ever; such socialism was a step too far.<sup>15</sup>

Sjöwall and Wahlöö were of the opposite persuasion. Social democracy was a capitalist ploy to pacify workers; only revolution could create a true People's Home.<sup>16</sup> But how to convince the slumbering masses that Sweden, the world's social and moral beacon, was a soon-to-be hellscape? Like Holberg found the novel to let him "bait his hook to the tastes of the little fishes,"<sup>17</sup> Sjöwall and Wahlöö saw that even working-class readers enjoyed crime fiction, which had been made more affordable by the era's paperback boom. They adopted the American police procedural that had replaced superior sleuths with cops who solve more realistic crime.<sup>18</sup> The Marxist couple turned the conservative genre into a vehicle for far-left critique. Sjöwall explains,

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<sup>13</sup> Hans Hauge, "Nordic Sameness and Difference," in Karen-Margrethe Simonsen, ed., *Law and Justice in Literature, Film and Theater: Nordic Perspectives*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013, 25–44, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Sweden attracted international attention with marginal tax rates that exceeded 100 percent. For a critical account, see Gerard Radnitzky, "Introduction: The Ominous Growth of the Monstrous Leviathan," in Radnitzky and Hardy Bouillon, eds., *Government: Master or Servant?* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), xvii–xlvi, xxii. While Lindgren's marginal tax rate was 102 percent, regulation ensured that her tax rate stayed slightly below 100. Her and Bergman's widely publicized tax cases contributed to the Social Democrats' downfall in 1976.

<sup>15</sup> Claes Arvidsson, "Med LO:s fonder hade det blivit andra bullar," *Svenska Dagbladet*, 4 October 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Paula Arvas and Andrew Nestingen, "Introduction: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction," in Andrew Nestingen and Paula Arvas, eds., *Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 1–20.

<sup>17</sup> Holberg, *Ludvig Holberg's Memoirs*, 169.

<sup>18</sup> Per Hellgren, *Swedish Marxist Noir: The Dark Wave of Crime Writers and the Influence of Raymond Chandler* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2019).

[Wahlöö] had written political books, but they'd only sold 300 copies. We realized that people read crime and through the stories we could show the reader that under the official image of welfare-state Sweden there was another layer of poverty, criminality and brutality. We wanted to show where Sweden was heading: towards a capitalistic, cold, and inhuman society.<sup>19</sup>

Similar to the way in which *Niels Klim*'s fantastic elements lure readers in before Holberg unloads his historicist cosmopolitanism, Sjöwall and Wahlöö held back on ideology until the popularity of the first novels had hooked readers.<sup>20</sup> In *The Man on the Balcony* (1967), they let loose with a thematic argument for social democratic welfare turning men into child-raping murderers. For this, Swedes only have themselves to blame, for the enemy is “the swift gangsterization of this society, which in the last resort must be a product of [those] who lived in it and had a share in its creation” (*MB3* “8”).

By book ten, Wahlöö—who according to Sjöwall was not only Marxist but slightly Stalinist<sup>21</sup>—saw no reason to restrain himself. The terminally ill author lets a welfare child murder the Prime Minister, a crime that makes the killer “wiser and more right-thinking [than] most of us” (*MB10* “24”). Sjöwall explains that her cancer-ridden partner “wanted to include so much, and that was perhaps the reason it was such a negative image of Sweden. Yet I edited out several chapters that I considered to be too dark and simplistic.”<sup>22</sup>

From our era's neoliberal perspective, these politics can appear not only bizarre, but inexcusably naïve. The decalogy's final word is “Marx.” If Sjöwall and Wahlöö had convinced Swedes to implement Marxism, this likely would have ended as poorly as in every other socialist

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<sup>19</sup> Louise France, “The Queen of Crime,” *The Guardian*, 21 November 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/nov/22/crime-thriller-maj-sjowall-sweden>.

<sup>20</sup> Robert P. Winston and Nancy C. Mellerski, *The Public Eye: Ideology and the Police Procedural* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 17.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Tapper, *Swedish Cops: From Sjöwall and Wahlöö to Stieg Larsson* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014), 67.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Tapper, *Swedish Cops*, 100.



experiment.<sup>23</sup> Such an outcome was never a relevant risk; Nordic socialists had little popular support, even during the “Che Guevara moment.” Despite their ideological excesses, Sjöwall and Wahlöö sold over 10 million books worldwide. Their systemic analysis resonated across the political spectrum. Although they disagreed on solutions, Marxists and conservatives could agree on which challenges the Middle Way brought. Giving those unable to work apartments and generous benefits with few strings attached could lead to social isolation. The Americanization of pop culture could dilute beliefs that made people altruistic. Modernization had caught such speed that it was a constant challenge to discern which values Nordics should cling to and which they should leave behind. Even the dearest of beliefs could be sacrificed. Lutheranism had long since been demoted from master-narrative status; it was now increasingly discarded as a personal meta-narrative, as well. The more people were provided for by the secular-Lutheran welfare state, the less religious they became.<sup>24</sup>

These changes and choices play out in a variety of Nordic noir series. The genre is defined by this social engagement and its bleak—or *noir*—portrayal of a Nordic region under constant imperilment. This recipe enthralled local readers and later conquered the world with Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* trilogy (2005–07).<sup>25</sup> Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s brilliance, I suggest, lay not in their political astuteness, but in the precision with which they identified threat. In this chapter, I argue that the Beck series’ popularity partially resulted from how the authors had internalized evolutionary universals for group efficacy. Some evolutionary scholars have hypothesized that Scandinavian adherence to these collaborative universals explains the Nordic Model’s success in terms of social cohesion, economic prosperity, and political stability.

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<sup>23</sup> Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism*.

<sup>24</sup> Tomasson, “How Sweden Became So Secular.”

<sup>25</sup> The term “Nordic noir” was coined in the 2010s, after Larsson’s success.

Tripartism on the national level can be viewed as a scaling up of collaborative norms from voluntary small-group organization on the local level—a practice cultivated through centuries of Lutheran morality in respect to civil duty and togetherness.

In the 2010s, evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson collaborated with Nordic scholars to explore this hypothesis. Building on the work of Elinor Ostrom, the 2009 Nobel Prize winner in economics, these scholars asked whether the Nordic Model is “the final step on the evolutionary ladder.”<sup>26</sup> Even if this were so, social democracy itself—or its political tenets—would not comprise any off-the-shelf solution. The universal lesson would relate to how Nordics organize social spheres in a manner that optimizes for collaboration and sustainability. Promoting this lesson would not entail Scandocentric universality—the argument goes—as local implantation can and must vary.

I will show how the Beck series builds a ten-novel arc of increasing dysfunction in respect to all of Ostrom’s eight Core Design Principles (CDPs). As Nordic societies transformed after World War II, continued success required that growth, change, and political fervor did not get in the way of CDP adherence. Sjöwall and Wahlöö intuited this. Not because they were well-read Marxists; CDPs predate this ideology by eons. Our evolutionary past makes it so that organization by CDPs “is instinctive and comes naturally to us.”<sup>27</sup> Meta-narratives can convince us to stray, while scaling these universals to ever-larger populations requires cultural innovation. The twenty-first-century challenge, argues Wilson, is not only to help other nations organize similarly to the Nordics, but to scale these universals to the global level. If we fail, humanity could prove unable to solve those of our challenges that only have transnational solutions.

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<sup>26</sup> The Evolution Institute, “Norway – The final evolutionary step?” 17 September 2015, <https://evolution-institute.org/video/norway-final-evolutionary-step/>.

<sup>27</sup> David Sloan Wilson, Elinor Ostrom, and Michael E. Cox, “Generalizing the Core Design Principles for the Efficacy of Groups,” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 90S (2013): S21–S32, S31.

## Nordic Noir's Exemplary Microcosm

Literary scholar Niklas Salmose reads Beck and his police collective to be “a microcosm of Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s vision of a utopian society where collaboration is essential and individualism is regarded as a contemporary plague.”<sup>28</sup> How this collective, and Nordics in general, coordinate social spheres according to CDPs is hypothesized to be a prerequisite for effective coordination at larger scale. Social democratic governance is a bottom-up process that depends on norms and values at lower levels, such as social clubs and work places. The Nordic Model is successful because it compels effective coordination all the way to the national level.

This model’s foundation is tripartism, or corporatism, a feature of fascist governance. Liberal *laissez faire* had posited that all-round competition was in everyone’s best interest. This appeared less self-evident for small Nordic countries whose industries were vulnerable in large markets, and whose societies were plagued by class conflict and economic depression in the interwar period. To ensure competitive exports, Nordics implemented binding cooperation at the highest level. Coordinating labor, capital, and the state was meant to let them outcompete nations whose industries and labor markets were less effective due to less cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

Nordics employ social scientists to calculate which wage increase their export industries can absorb in a given year.<sup>30</sup> Based on this financial advice, unions, employer organizations, and the government agree on macroeconomic parameters. Other sectors may afford higher salary

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<sup>28</sup> Niklas Salmose, “Martin Beck,” in Eric Sandberg, ed., *100 Greatest Literary Detectives* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 14–16.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to promoting competitive exports, the Nordic Model is meant to ensure higher overall productivity by pushing up the lower wages. This not only contributes to greater income equality, but drives unproductive companies out of business. Certain sectors will struggle, but labor from these sectors will be transferred via market mechanism to sectors with higher productivity. Nordic countries thus achieve higher overall productivity compared to nations that allow some wages to remain low.

<sup>30</sup> In Norway, this is done by The Norwegian Technical Calculation Committee for Wage Settlements (TBU); see Berit Kvam, “TBU at 50: Wage Formation: The Norwegian Model’s Unique Attribute,” *Nordic Labour Journal*, 5 Oct 2017, <http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org/nyheter/news-2017/article.2017-10-05.4265943522>.

raises, but mostly everyone has to get in line behind the export industry. This restrains salary growth and inflation. If expected growth after inflation is, for instance, 2.7 percent, these points would be distributed based on tripartite negotiation. Such economic finetuning was meant to provide stability for export industries, but also gives Nordics a powerful tool for restraining inequality. For a simplified example, of those 2.7 points, 1.6 could be distributed evenly, so that everyone's purchasing power rises 1.6 percent. 0.7 points could be dedicated to raise salaries in female-dominated sectors. Another year, teachers can get an additional raise, or nurses, or low-paid employees in general. In this made-up example, 0.4 points would remain to be distributed according to market power in local negotiations.<sup>31</sup>

Such a combination of politics and market has compressed Nordic wage structures. Those at the bottom make more, and those near the top make less. For the ultra-rich, this matters less, as wages are a small proportion of their income.<sup>32</sup> Because centuries of Lutheran thought had made equality so widely compelling, Nordic tripartism was employed in service of this aspiration.<sup>33</sup> A fortunate consequence of this choice is that Nordic companies are pushed up the productivity chain. By making low-productive labor more expensive and high-productive labor cheaper, a comparative advantage is gained by companies that employ the latter. Nordic engineers, doctors, and other highly educated workers are cheaper than similar workers in, for instance, the U.S. This incentivizes companies that hire high-skilled labor to open shop in the Nordic region. Having employees pack groceries or do other labor-intensive work with low profitability makes

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<sup>31</sup> For an actual example, the 1997 settlement in Norway, see Torgeir Aarvaag Stokke, Jon Erik Dølvik, and Kristine Nergaard, *Industrial Relations in Norway* (Oslo: Fafo, 1999), 43–54, [https://www.faf.no/media/com\\_netsukii/925.pdf](https://www.faf.no/media/com_netsukii/925.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> For a popular account, see Harald Eia, “Where in the World is it Easiest to Get Rich?” TEDxOslo, 21 April 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9UmdY0E8hU>, or read the transcript: <http://economics.com/where-in-the-world-is-it-easiest-to-get-rich/>.

<sup>33</sup> Less extensive models exist in the Benelux, Austria, and Germany, initiated by Social Democrats. See Mikkel Mailand, *Corporatism Since the Great Recession: Challenges to Tripartite Relations in Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2020).

less sense. In general, companies have little choice but to invest more capital behind each low-skilled worker. Innovation and automation are key. This results in higher productivity per worker, which combined with high labor force participation grows each country's economic pie.

When this pie is to be redistributed via public budgets, compressed wage structures contribute to a stronger sense of everyone being in the same boat. In the U.S., medical doctors on average make more than 8 times what grocery store workers do. In Norway, doctors make 2.5 times more.<sup>34</sup> This narrower gap makes it easier to convince the well-off that many resources should be pooled, not only to help the needy, but everyone. Welfare is often universal instead of means-tested, which results in even billionaires getting paid parental leave, subsidized daycare, and a monthly payment for each child. Taxes are used not only to even out economic difference between classes, but between life phases of each individual. During your productive years you pay high taxes, which pays back what you cost growing up and contributes to the public pension everyone receives when they retire. The Nordic Model functions not primarily like a socialist motor for erasing economic difference. It is more like an insurance plan that makes sure everyone has access to education, healthcare, a home, food, and an income sufficient to participate in society as an equal—no matter how unfortunate, or disagreeable, an individual is.

These are the two distinguishing features of the Nordic Model. Fascist corporatism coordinates between spheres at the national level, with the side effect of letting Nordics compress wage structures. Greater economic sameness makes easier the second feature, socialist redistribution, which secures a relatively comfortable bottom rung that citizens do not fall below if they for any reason do not work. That wage earners are willing to let governments confiscate nearly half of the national production creates a shared resource pool so large that everyone's

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<sup>34</sup> From Statistics Norway and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, cited by Harald Eia, "Sånn er Norge: Rik og lik," NRK, 2020, <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/harald-eia-presenterer-saann-er-norge/sesong/1/episode/4/avspiller>.

economic well-being can be secured across a lifetime. Liberal theory may postulate that low taxes empower individuals to make wiser choices in terms of spending and saving, but humans are not as rational as such theory posits. Social democrats view free choice as a path to inequality since “people are not equal in their ability to find the best options.”<sup>35</sup> Knowing that many do not save, the maternalist Norwegian state sets aside 12 percent of each worker’s yearly salary to be paid out when they begin their five-week vacation. Tax is structured so that people have more to spend around Christmas, too. Similarly, you have no choice but to contribute to a pension.

For this level of interdependent cooperation to be possible across class, social spheres, and time, Nordics must adhere to Ostrom’s CDPs. Otherwise, free-riding and suboptimal solutions would undermine the Nordic Model, which depends on high trust, efficacy, and collaboration. Ostrom formulated the CDPs after studying group management of common-pool resources such as forests and fisheries.<sup>36</sup> For decades, scholars had assumed that the only solution to the tragedy of the commons was privatization or top-down regulation. Ostrom showed that groups around the world are perfectly capable of preventing overuse if they are organized by eight CDPs that relate to identity, decision making, monitoring, and coordination. She and Wilson argue that CDPs follow from foundational evolutionary principles. Adherence to these CDPs would predict success for a range of human groups, but also across species.<sup>37</sup> From 2011, the Evolution Institute—of which Wilson was president—participated in workshops in the U.S. and Norway that culminated with *Sustainable Modernity: The Nordic Model and Beyond* (2018). The edited volume, which includes top Nordic scholars like Nina Witoszek, Atle Midttun, Lars Trägårdh, and Dag Hessen, argues that “not only *can* other nations copy the

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<sup>35</sup> Brandal, Bratberg, and Thorsen, *The Nordic Model*, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*.

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, Ostrom, and Cox, “Generalizing the Core Design Principles.”

Nordic model, but they *must*, because the Nordic model succeeds only by implementing the CDPs.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Challenges of Cooperation**

Individuals are incentivized to be selfish since this can provide them with more resources. But these individuals also comprise groups that require altruism in order to work well. This perennial conflict has created discordant evolutionary pressures. Between-individual competition promotes selfishness, while between-group competition pushes individuals to pull in the same direction. Because a group of altruistic collaborators will mostly outcompete those unable to pull together, our long history as foragers let us evolve genetic and cultural solutions for small-group cooperation.<sup>39</sup> With agriculture, our communities grew so large that genetic adaptations for suppressing selfishness broke down.<sup>40</sup> Cultural solutions had to be renegotiated to meet changes in demography, technology, et cetera. *Gisli's Saga* exemplifies how beliefs that had made individuals sacrifice for their group can, in a new era, motivate selfishness that threatens one's community. While context changes, the evolutionary dynamics of cooperation do not. CDPs apply to all social species, and thus to “all human groups, whose members must work together to achieve common goals.”<sup>41</sup>

These CDPs were derived from Ostrom's work on common-pool resources, but cooperation itself is such a shared resource that gets depleted when group members compete against each other instead of against other groups. The liberal ethos, informed by its one-world

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<sup>38</sup> David Sloan Wilson and Dag O. Hessen, “Cooperation, Competition and Multi-Level Selection: A New Paradigm for Understanding the Nordic Model,” in Witoszek and Midttun, *Sustainable Modernity*, 18–35, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Wilson, Ostrom, and Cox, “Generalizing the Core Design Principles.”

<sup>40</sup> Turchin, *Ultrasociety*.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson and Hessen, “Cooperation,” 27.

utopia, does not view the nation-state as such a group. The Nordic Model does. All human collectives should organize so that it becomes difficult to succeed at the expense of other group members. The best—or only—way to succeed should be as a group. This aligns precisely with how Hansson sold the People’s Home in 1928, a home in which “no one strives to gain advantage at the expense of others, the strong do not repress and rob the weak. In the good home equality, thoughtfulness, co-operation, and helpfulness prevail.”<sup>42</sup> Ostrom found that this goal is promoted by an organization around the following principles:

- (1) Strong group identity and understanding of purpose.
- (2) Fair distribution of costs and benefits.
- (3) Fair and inclusive decision-making.
- (4) Tracking agreed behaviors.
- (5) Graduated responses to transgressions.
- (6) Fast and empathetic conflict resolution.
- (7) Authority to self-govern.
- (8) Appropriate relations with other groups.<sup>43</sup>

At small scale, humans tend to adapt instinctively to CDPs. When a few individuals come together, they often spontaneously share work, agree on what to do, monitor behavior, and sanction norm breakers.<sup>44</sup> At larger scale, we may feel drawn to organize similarly, yet implementation is more challenging. No longer able to draw on genetic dispositions, large groups must learn from other groups or invent their own cooperative solutions. The stories a group believes in may seduce members to deviate. This is the case for many business groups,

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Mary Hilson, *The Nordic model: Scandinavia since 1945* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 106.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson and Hessen, “Cooperation,” 27.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: Egalitarianism and the Evolution of Human Altruism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).



writes Wilson and Hessen, “where the influence of orthodox economic theory taught in business schools leads to flagrant violations of the CDPs.”<sup>45</sup>

The concept of *polycentric governance* illuminates how it is crucial to find the optimal scale for each sphere of activity and to coordinate these effectively.<sup>46</sup> According to Wilson, this is what the Nordics do so well. He compares tripartism to how cells work together in a multi-cellular organism. For maximum efficacy, CDPs should govern behaviors at every level of organization. The first principle’s “strong group identity,” which our genetic inheritance helps us develop with small groups, must be extended to a nation of strangers. Negotiation, dialogue, and compromise must scale, too. “Fast and empathetic conflict resolution” has obvious advantages among friends, but makes for effective governance also among strangers. Solutions to these challenges of scale determine a group’s efficacy since “any large-scale society, at any period of human history, functions well or poorly to the degree that it succeeds at scaling up the CDPs.”<sup>47</sup>

Due to this scale-independence, whether a culture promotes adherence to CDPs can be examined at various levels. That Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s decalogy turns CDP adherence into its thematic spine, and that their readers found this compelling, suggests that Nordic culture aligns well with CDPs. In the following, I will show how Beck and his colleagues embody the eight principles. Throughout the ten novels, team Beck’s efficacy is increasingly challenged by individualistic bosses, poor coordination with other spheres, and by police reform that centralizes authority. Society is threatened by foreign influence, inequalities, and a welfare model that seems to weaken relations and responsibilities. This dysfunction is illuminated by the crimes that are investigated in each novel. My reading will show that (a) Beck’s team expresses approval for and

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<sup>45</sup> Wilson and Hessen, “Cooperation,” 28.

<sup>46</sup> Ostrom, “Beyond Markets.”

<sup>47</sup> Wilson and Hessen, “Cooperation,” 29.

acts in accordance with CDPs, and that (b) the narrative consistently rewards behaviors that align with CDPs and punishes what goes against. Across this decalogy, an argument develops in which Swedish society is portrayed as increasingly corrupt the more it deviates from CDPs.<sup>48</sup>

### **(1) Strong Group Identity and Understanding of Purpose**

For a group to function well, its members must agree on who they are and what they should achieve. Early on, Beck's team has clear answers. They are a united force who protects society from the corrupting effects of crime—murder in particular. To achieve this goal, a police officer should be “stubborn and logical, and completely calm” (*MBI* “7”). If the case is important, it should never be given up on, and few sacrifices are too great. To catch the first novel's murderer, a policewoman acts as a decoy, a strategy that nearly kills her. She has internalized her identity and purpose so strongly that she does not blame Beck. She consoles him, “Don't look so miserable. It wasn't your fault. And there's nothing seriously wrong with me” (*MBI* “29”).

Group functionality is portrayed as preferable to relying on individuals. People are fallible and generally not that capable. Beck views his colleague Lennart Kollberg as arrogant and flabby, Fredrik Melander as proof that “the worst bores often made the best policemen,” Einar Rönn as mediocre, and Gunvald Larsson as someone proud of his own frightening demeanor. He refers to himself as “the snuffling Martin Beck” (*MB4* “12”). Few groups have access to elite talent, so performance results mostly from the principles a group embodies. Individuals can be “stupid . . . inflexible, limited, tough, self-satisfied types,” yet still become “good cops” (*MB5* “1”). Combining members' diverse strengths makes them a formidable force.

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<sup>48</sup> For an earlier version of this evolutionary reading of *The Story of a Crime*, see Mads Larsen, “Nordic Noir's Exemplary Microcosm: Promoting Core Design Principles for Group Efficacy,” *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research* (2021): Online First.

When police attempt solo solutions, this tends to end terribly. A cop who “was working on his own account . . . to make a career” (*MB4* “30”) gets submachine-gunned to death. When Beck goes alone to stop a killer, he gets shot. To save Beck, Larsson assembles volunteers who overpower the murderer (*MB7* “28–30”). The authors’ CDP-aligned message is clear: not only is the way to success through your group, but individualists get shot.

Good polycentric governance requires between-sphere coordination. The authors dramatize how every sphere counts, even the most pitiful and non-adherent to CDPs. Patrol cops Kristiansson and Kvant are lazy, dumb, and deceitful, yet provide several breakthroughs. The lesson on offer is to make the most of any collaborator. On Beck’s team, many do not like each other or work poorly together, but all commit to cooperation. Other cops do, too. No matter how much animosity they feel toward one another, when the case requires it, everyone pulls in the same direction. This strong group identity and understanding of purpose withers as the decalogy progresses. The narrative argues that a centralization of Swedish police in the mid-1960s set in motion a process of inevitable decay. The “human element” became less important. Lowered recruitment standards led to police with “a bad back and a steadily decreasing IQ, even as he grew more and more alienated from society” (*MB9* “18”). Kollberg retires because he “cannot feel any sense of solidarity with the kind of organization the police department has become” (“28”). Larsson questions his own choice of becoming police and doubts if he has been able to be of any use (*MB10* “14”).

Beck, too, grows disillusioned but stays on the force. As police and society decay, he retreats to small-group belonging. Beck ends the series in the company of his girlfriend, his colleague Kollberg, and Kollberg’s wife. They are “relaxed and in tune with themselves and the world around them [and] together they had created the conditions for as good a time as anyone

could wish for” (*MB10* “29”). Inside an apartment, they form a well-functioning group. Outside, their environment is besieged by drugs, commercialism, individualism, and poorly coordinated spheres of activity. The decay is portrayed as systemic and inevitable, until Swedes turn to Marx.

## **(2) Fair Distribution of Costs and Benefits**

A Marxist utopia would be governed by the principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” The second CDP posits that group efficacy will improve if members instead negotiate a reward system that incentivizes individual contribution. Those who carry extra load should benefit proportionally. This system should be hard to cheat, so that “high status or other disproportionate benefits must be earned. Unfair inequality poisons collective efforts.”<sup>49</sup>

A disproportional distribution could be when one person must do something dangerous that benefits the whole group. This happens throughout the series. Beck’s unit and their superiors solve this issue mostly by asking for volunteers without applying undue pressure. Before Beck runs off to the confrontation in which he gets shot, his boss asks, “Am I to regard you as a volunteer?” (*MB7* “28”). At a prior occasion, another boss insisted, “You needn’t take this on if you don’t want to” (*MB2* “3”). A strong sense of identity and purpose makes cops step forward. Beck’s sacrifice is rewarded by his colleagues’ admiration and respect, which he reciprocates when they incur similar cost. Larsson, Beck muses admiringly, “once, in fifteen seconds, had kicked in a locked door and knocked a maniac axe-murderer senseless” (*MB4* “12”).

This virtuous cycle of voluntary cost incurrence and colleague appreciation is driven almost entirely by within-group dynamics. Members take turns at putting their lives at risk, neglecting family, interrogating unpleasant perpetrators, and putting up with a lack of gratitude

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<sup>49</sup> Wilson, Ostrom, and Cox, “Generalizing the Core Design Principles,” S22.

from superiors and society at large. Internalized values and supportive group members create a meritocracy of fair distribution. This principle, too, is eroded by societal decay. The narrator bemoans how Swedish police adopts a system of “automatic promotions such that accumulating merits paid no appreciable dividends” (*MB9* “25”). Those high up in the hierarchy begin to prioritize their own personal power in a manner that makes police actions appear increasingly “contradictory and incomprehensible.” The narrator makes clear that this is the “way the wind was blowing” (*MB8* “20”). Alas, teams like Beck’s should prepare for reduced efficacy through no fault of their own, and for even greater unfairness in the distribution of cost and benefit.

### **(3) Fair and Inclusive Decision-Making**

Groups that talk their way to consensus safeguard against decisions that unduly favor some at the expense of others, since members can resist being put at a disadvantage. Properly structured group decision-making can also lead to better outcomes.<sup>50</sup> Sjöwall and Wahlöö dramatize these dynamics through meetings in which Beck’s team discuss their case and agree on a course of action. In a police hierarchy, leaders are empowered to make quick and binding decisions. In Beck’s universe, such a top-down approach consistently leads to wasted time or disaster. The authors’ expressed purpose was to “depict a collective force at work.”<sup>51</sup> Genuinely collaborative exchanges produce more relevant information, so that more alternatives are uncovered. The best suggestion convinces group members to go along. When Beck finds a murderer’s subway ticket, Kollberg and Melander help him decide on how to pursue the lead and help execute what they all

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<sup>50</sup> Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja, *Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Tapper, *Swedish Cops*, 81.

agree on (*MB3* “19”). When Beck remembers a murder-related phone call meant for Larsson, a similar process of collective deliberation leads his team to the murderer’s apartment (“23”).

Team members may contribute individualistically with small breakthroughs, but for big decisions, Beck wants everyone to voice their opinion. When someone is unconvinced by what is decided, they go along unless they can offer a better alternative. Some passive-aggressive grumbling is unavoidable, but this does not split the group. Seeing how inclusive decision-making reliably leads to favorable outcomes tells readers that wisdom lies in consensus.

Beck’s superiors tend to make poorly informed decisions based on personal reasoning, often to benefit their own position. This always ends poorly, like when chief superintendent Hammar executes an enormous roundup of undesirables against the wishes of Beck’s team (*MB3*). The narrator spells out how one-way communication creates frustration in other spheres:

It was well known that the Chief of Police was reluctant to talk to people. Rumor had it that some high official had even threatened to haul a fork-lift truck up to the National Police Board and force the doors of the holy of holies in order to have a face-to-face conversation. However, the dignitary in question had a great weakness for giving speeches, both to the nation and to defenseless groups of his private army. (*MB6* “23”)

This top-down approach becomes more widespread as the decalogy nears its end. The National Police Commissioner “was only too fond of speechifying—speeches which, even as samples of sheer rhetoric, were totally uninteresting” (*MB8* “10”). This is contrasted against Beck who is a good policeman not because of his “brilliant [and] highly deductive mind,” but more due to his “ability to talk to people” (*MB10* “16”).

#### (4) Tracking Agreed Behaviors

Collaboration works best when everyone contributes, but—like with all commons—cooperative practices are vulnerable to free-riding. Even if others act in accordance with norms, you can choose not to. Such selfish strategies must be detectable at a low cost to norm-abiding members or group efficacy will suffer. Effective monitoring of agreed behaviors is essential for keeping in check our human propensity for leaching off the efforts of others.<sup>52</sup>

For Beck's unit, work avoidance is not an issue. Members are dedicated to their tasks—at least early in the series—and it is generally clear who is responsible for what. This makes it easy to mete out blame. Monitoring primarily concerns tracking of group norms. For example, when Larsson wants to punch a robber he is interrogating, he does not act on the impulse. Preventive behavioral tracking results from how “superintendents and commissioners were running in and out of the room” (*MB3* “15”). When Kollberg wants to take his temper out on two cops, Beck defuses the situation (*MB5* “5”). Working in close cooperation lets police track each other with minimal effort. When cops work alone, internalized norms contribute to self-monitoring through a range of positive and negative emotions. Learning he may have missed a clue, Beck felt that “he had made a fool of himself” (*MB4* “17”). Their moral algorithms trigger emotions that provide strong incentives. Yet conflicting emotion can override team norms, especially when other members are not present. Kollberg knows that having sex with witnesses is wrong, but he has still given in to the temptation (*MB3* “18”). He is not the only one (*MB5* “28”).

Effective monitoring, like other selfishness-suppressing mechanisms, can be undermined by between-individual competition. Detective Ullholm, “a monster of nagging tedium and reactionary stupidity” (*MB4* “14”), turns monitoring into snitching for personal gain and to hurt

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<sup>52</sup> Herbert Gintis, Samuel Bowles, Robert T. Boyd, and Ernst Fehr, eds., *Moral Sentiments and Material Interests: The Foundations of Cooperation in Economic Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

members of Beck's team. He reports Larsson for spreading "bolshie propaganda among the firemen" (*MB5* "22"). Because Ullholm has a reputation for deceit, Larsson's boss ignores him. Readers get the impression that police monitoring works well, but that absolute adherence is not the goal. Early in the series, when cops break rules in response to a then-and-there situation, the outcome is usually favorable. If intensions are good, the narrative tends to reward the behavior, especially if several cops agree on bending a rule. Later in the series, corrupted incentives from a dysfunctional administration make it less clear what cops should and should not do.

This norm disintegration is portrayed as a contagion from society. Sweden becomes impossible to monitor because "the so-called Welfare State" erodes social bonds. The state of the nation has become so abhorrent that when police happen upon "a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl . . . naked in an attic [who had] been raped at least twenty times" (*MB3* "20"), there is nothing anyone can do. Not even the girl's mother cares to help. Such urban lawlessness makes civilians form vigilante groups. Beck's team continues to keep each other in check, but Beck sees the breakdown of the national sphere's behavioral tracking as "a far greater danger to society than any single criminal or gang. It paves the way for lynch mentality and arbitrary administration of justice. It throws the protective mechanism of society out of gear" ("21").

### **(5) Graduated Responses to Transgressions**

When group members transgress to a moderate degree, sanctions should at first be lenient. Gossip, sarcasm, or a gentle reminder is often enough to make the deviant conform. For such nudging to work, severe escalation must be possible at a low cost to those who sanction.<sup>53</sup> For police, escalation can go all the way to firing or imprisonment. Since separate units or other parts

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<sup>53</sup> Wilson, Ostrom, and Cox, "Generalizing the Core Design Principles."



of the state deal with such punishments, those who report colleagues do not have to incur the cost of administering grave sanctions themselves. Group members are responsive to input, knowing that if they ignore a colleague's criticism, further steps can get increasingly painful.

For Beck's team, mild sanctioning is frequent and sufficient. When Larsson stereotypes Arabs, Kollberg needs only apply sarcasm to check him (*MB4* "9"). When Kollberg threatens in-group cohesion by criticizing Larsson's intelligence, Beck limits sanctioning to stating that "Gunvald is not as dumb as he looks" (*MB3* "12"). The quip makes Kollberg admit that fear made him inconsiderate. This pattern repeats itself throughout the series and between many team members. Well-intended talk is mostly enough to discourage further transgression.

Against moderately-norm-breaking outsiders, too, Beck's team restricts sanctions to the verbal. Beck spends an hour trying to talk sense into neighborhood vigilantes. They carried an unlicensed pistol and physically assaulted Kollberg, yet Beck goes no further than to berate them (*MB3* "21"). Larsson repeatedly chews out patrol cops Kristiansson and Kvant—for good reason. When they prove incurable, Larsson escalates by writing "GO TO HELL!" on a piece of paper (*MB6* "3"). Graduated responses become less effective as the series progresses. Early on, the two patrol cops are terrified of Larsson and swear to improve. By book nine, Larsson has to threaten with throwing Kvant's replacement, Kvastmo, out the window. The effect is minimal; systemic rot makes the patrol cops interpret criticism to be insulting and disloyal. Their behavior has sabotaged police efficacy, yet they enlist corrupt higher-ups to scold Larsson for scolding them (*MB9* "26").

With this fifth principle, too, detective Ullholm—team Beck's foil—demonstrates the adverse consequence of a selfish approach. Whenever he sees the slightest transgression, he effectuates far too grave sanctioning. He reports breach of duty when someone curses or an

interrogation frustrates him (*MB4*). By portraying Ullholm as a dreadful person, the authors embrace the virtue of leniency-at-first against those who transgress.

### **(6) Fast and Empathetic Conflict Resolution**

Key to group efficacy is to solve conflicts quickly, thoroughly, and without excessive cost.

Members should perceive resolutions to be fair, so that they feel safeguarded against between-individual exploitation. For Beck's team, fast and empathetic conflict resolution is the norm.

Conflicts are solved through lenient sanctions, open dialogue, and using friendships to influence professional behavior. This is contrasted against the mostly dysfunctional resolution mechanisms of the police force itself. This part, too, of Sjöwall and Wahlöö's thematic argument primarily unfolds in the decalogy's latter half.

Kristiansson and Kvant have convinced themselves of a "golden rule that police officers aren't supposed to criticize the actions of other policemen or to testify against each other" (*MB6* "3"). If widespread, such an attitude would hamper the police's ability to solve conflict. Kollberg portrays this misplaced loyalty as a product of training and socialization. Many officers had "never learned any other way" (*MB7* "12"). How adverse consequences can be is dramatized with the seventh novel's retaliatory murder of a cop who had "maltreated hundreds of people" ("17"). Despite many complaints, the cop is never sanctioned. The narrative casts a scathing verdict, as this corruption results in a mass shooting directed at the city's cops.

Systemic corruption imposes adverse resolutions on Beck's team, too. Years earlier, when Kollberg had accidentally shot a colleague, "the story was hushed up, and Kollberg's name was never even mentioned." His boss said it was "the sort of accident that could happen to the best of men. And that was supposed to be the end of it." This may seem considerate, but

“Kollberg never really recovered from the shock” (*MB9* “2”). A more empathetic approach could have prevented Kollberg’s ensuing aversion to carrying a gun, which puts his team at risk. This untreated trauma makes Larsson label Kollberg a “pacifist [and] a fucking idiot” (*MB7* “24”).

Again, team Beck’s adherence to a CDP is contrasted against their environment’s increasing dysfunction. No scalable solution seems possible. Beck’s group succeeds because they share a strong purpose, and because personal relationships help them overcome individual animosity. Their surrounding society idolizes individualism and status to such an extent that between-individual competition dominates relations. The authors’ outlook seems informed by Marxist social conflict theory, which views interaction between individuals and groups as based on power and exploitation rather than shared interest and consensus.<sup>54</sup> Thus, efficient conflict resolution would only be scalable if supported by a socialist master-narrative.

## **(7) Authority to Self-Govern**

Efficacy requires that groups are granted considerable authority to govern their own affairs. Rules and initiatives from outside tend to be more poorly aligned with local circumstance, and undue external meddling goes against the requirement of principle (3) for fair and inclusive decision-making. When our ancestors were small bands of foragers, self-governing groups made most decisions. With modern complexity and interdependence, few groups reign sovereign.

For Beck’s team, administrative overreach is a constant and often devastating problem. Centralization of authority leads to demands for a “more militant and homogeneous police force, for greater technical resources [and] for more firearms” (*MB8* “10”). To win support for such measures in relatively peaceful Sweden, leaders manipulate crime statistics and exaggerate the

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<sup>54</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Max Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

hazards policemen face. Team Beck knows that nothing good will come from this, but their superiors force upon them SWAT resources that at best contribute with chaos (“18”).

Instead of smart investigation as defined by those in charge, leaders prioritize quantitative measures that appear impressive. They burden Beck’s investigation with “more than a hundred of the country’s most skilled criminal experts. . . . The biggest squad ever known” (*MB4* “11”). Such efforts fail, yet authoritarian excess escalates. By novel nine, instead of scores of criminal experts, leaders impose on Beck fifty men “with helmets, plexiglass masks, automatic weapons, and bulletproof vests [plus] seven police vans . . . two specially trained dogs, four tear-gas experts, and a frogman.” Top brass love “helicopters, and now that the police had been equipped with no fewer than twelve of these machines, they were an unavoidable feature of any action organized by the upper echelons” (*MB9* “26”).

Larsson scolds his superior when resource overuse lets criminals flee, “This isn’t the Battle of Breitenfeld, you know. If you’d sent me and [Kollberg] over here alone, we’d have [the suspects] now.” The leaders’ philosophy seduces them not to grant authority to self-govern, even when this leads to failure, “Larsson, you’re vulgar. . . . Only numbers can annihilate” (*MB9* “26”). Larsson solves the novel’s climax by waiting to inform his leaders of the perpetrators’ location. This gives team Beck an hour’s head start to avoid the massacre that could follow from sending in “a hundred men, two helicopters . . . ten dogs [and] twenty huge shields of armor plate” (“29”). The narrative rewards Larsson’s local implementation, and his compassionate approach, with a happy ending. The young criminal surrenders, and neither the hardened criminal—despite having a submachine gun—is able to counter the efficacy of Larsson’s fist.

Throughout the series, team Beck must find a balance between obeying ill-informed orders and getting the job done. They always know better than their administrators what the most

effective course of action is. Early on, group members secure self-governing by not involving superiors when decisions can be argued to be time-sensitive. Later, confrontation, sarcasm, and passive-aggressive disobedience become more common. Ultimately, Beck's team has no choice but to obey misguided bosses. With how poorly this always ends, the narrative firmly supports the principle of self-governing.

### **(8) Appropriate Relations with Other Groups**

Good polycentric governance requires that each sphere is limited to its optimal scale and that activities between spheres are appropriately coordinated. Any task should be assigned to the lowest jurisdiction unless this level is proven ineffective.<sup>55</sup> In respect to this final CDP, Sjöwall and Wahlöö imbue the gravest accusations of their critique. Beck's team may be an exemplary microcosm, but this is of meager solace as society grows uncooperative and ungovernable. Beck's group coordinates poorly with Interpol (*MB1* "7"); antagonistically with news media (*MB2* "21"); disrespectfully with politicians (*MB4*); without trust toward administration and country cops (*MB6* "4"); and with contempt for the secret police (*MB6* "8"). Forensic experts are brilliant but speak a language that cops do not understand (*MB8* "6"). Foreign influence muddles values and leads to new types of crime. Demonstrations and social upheaval provide additional pressures. This chaos produces leaders so overwhelmed that they respond by shutting down the most crucial element for sphere coordination, which is the appropriate flow of information:

The National Police Commissioner was the first to speak. "Nothing of this must get out." Naturally. Nothing was ever allowed to get out. Superintendent Malm said in a shrill voice: "Absolutely nothing of this must be allowed to come out." Kollberg let out a guffaw. (*MB8* "9")

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Dean McGinnis, ed., *Polycentric Governance and Development: Readings from the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

When Beck solves the eight novel's case in spite of leadership sabotage, his superiors do not support him, or recognize their own error. The National Commissioner suggests that Beck is not quite balanced. Superintendent Malm concurs that he seems raving mad ("28"). They reject the promotion Beck has earned. He has no retort but to surrender any ambition of improving the system beyond his own group. After nine novels' worth of accumulated frustration, novel ten begins with a stoically disillusioned Beck. In the larger system, it is not merit, but selfishness and false smiles that lead to promotion. Beck has even ceased to be annoyed (*MB10* "1").

The leaders who wear Beck down are caricatures trapped in a system they are powerless to reform. Complex and relatable characters populate Beck's microcosm, but those who oppose them are often depicted with a simplicity similar to that of a Marxist dichotomy of oppressors and oppressed. Unrealistic characterization turns many criminals into cardboard cutouts with whom readers are meant sympathize, in spite of their one-dimensionality and criminal behavior. Murderers and rapists are victims of social democratic capitalism, freed from responsibility since they acted as they did merely because they "had to" (*MB3* "30"). This deterministic critique culminates when a victim of Swedish welfare murders the Prime Minister in the final novel.

In the 18-year-old woman's trial, her mental state is argued to be "far healthier and less perverted than that of anyone else present." She sees more clearly "the corrupt rottenness of society . . . than thousands of other young people. As she lacks political contacts and has little idea of what is involved in a mixed-economy government, her clarity of vision is even greater." Her attorney labels capitalist leaders as "simply criminals, who from a lust for power and financial gain have led their peoples into an abyss of egoism, self-indulgence and a view of life based entirely on materialism and ruthlessness towards their fellow human beings" (*MB10* "25"). This monologue can be read as the decalogy's moral center. Wahlöö's final argument is that in

1970s Sweden, no one can achieve appropriate relations with other groups. Turning the gun on the system itself is the only action left for those serious about improving social efficacy.

### **Collectivist yet Independent**

Sjöwall and Wahlöö's socialist salvation never reached Sweden. The genre they invented contributed to a healthy debate around a social democratic model that could no longer be taken for granted. The year after the decalogy ended, so did four decades of uninterrupted Social Democratic rule. The post-war era's strong growth was replaced by stagflation.<sup>56</sup> This environmental shock contributed to the West's neoliberal turn that brought Thatcher and Reagan to power. The era's reembrace of the liberal utopia convinced many that the Nordic region's generous benefits would make their social democracies uncompetitive in an increasingly globalized world. When the West had won the Cold War, "the social democratic welfare state was the only obstacle left for neo-liberalism to overcome."<sup>57</sup>

Predicting that Scandinavian distinctness had to end was misguided because the Nordic Model is not simply about high taxes as a means for redistribution in the name of equity. If high taxes were but a burden to corporate profitability, the Nordics would have become less competitive. The Middle Way is more complex. In some regards, it provides a competitive advantage. A compressed wage structure makes high-skilled labor cheaper and drives an increase in productivity per low-skilled worker. Pooling resources helps educate the workforce, keeps workers healthier, lets entrepreneurs feel safe to take risk, and allows obsolete workers to acquire new skills. In a changing world that demands flexible markets, the Nordic goal is not to secure

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<sup>56</sup> Stagflation occurs when an economy suffers high inflation in combination with high unemployment and stagnant demand; see OED, <https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/188670>.

<sup>57</sup> Tapper, *Swedish Cops*, 161.

jobs but workers. This *flexicurity* motivates unions to compromise with employers whose companies are prey to global trends.<sup>58</sup> The result is well-coordinated nations that do well in between-nation competition, while providing within-nation security for all citizens.

This group-selection aspect of the Nordic Model becomes clearer when analyzed through the lens of Ostrom's CDPs. Centuries of Lutheran egalitarianism have imparted prosocial norms that make people more concerned with the greater picture, attested to by their participation in local voluntarism to national tripartism.<sup>59</sup> The Nordic moral algorithm makes selfish behavior feel less appropriate than in more individualistically oriented cultures. Applying Ostrom's framework to *The Story of a Crime* shows how internalized these evolutionary universals are. Even hardened Marxists could not help but undergird their social analysis in collaborative norms that have little to do with Marx's ideology. The decalogy's political prescription for cure reads, at least for me in the 2020s, as mostly detached from the analysis itself. Sjöwall and Wahlöö identifies challenges to Swedish efficacy with remarkable precision, yet are so blinded by their era's "Che Guevara moment" that centralized socialism appears like a solution.

Most Nordic readers did not suffer such delusion. Sharing felt salient, but not submitting to socialist authoritarianism. Trägårdh identifies a strain of individual ruggedness that millennia of having to survive a harsh climate imprinted on Nordic culture.<sup>60</sup> In 1877, Vladimir Solovyov, a Russian philosopher, wrote that Scandinavians had, since they were Germanic barbarians, preserved "the principle of unconditional personal freedom and the supreme value of the

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<sup>58</sup> Atle Midttun and Nina Witoszek, "The Competitive Advantage of Collaboration – Throwing New Light on The Nordic Model," *New Political Economy* 25.6 (2020): 880–96, 886.

<sup>59</sup> Neoliberal theory posits that a large state stands in opposition to a vibrant civil society. This is not the case in the Nordic region, which has high civic participation; see Lars Trägårdh, ed., *State and Civil Society in Northern Europe: The Swedish Model Reconsidered* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2015), 79.



individual.”<sup>61</sup> This seems contradictory for peoples viewed as communal and conformist. Nordic collectivism is complex; it comprises atomized, autonomous individuals. People may agree on values, but an important one is to be independent—and left alone if one pleases. The stereotype of cold, awkward Scandinavians is not without justification. Foreigners find them difficult to get to know.<sup>62</sup> Trägårdh coins the term *statist individualism* to describe what social democracy facilitates.<sup>63</sup> He views the Nordic Model as an alliance between the state and the individual. High taxes empower the state to relieve individuals from burdensome social relations, similar to the way in which the Henrichian coevolution freed Europeans from kin. Nordic parents do not fund education, employers are easier to replace when you have healthcare and high benefits, and spouses are optional when even single parents are secured a somewhat comfortable lifestyle.

This Nordic emphasis on independence provides infertile ground for the socialist definition of humanity as “collective rather than individualistic.”<sup>64</sup> Americans may be the world’s most “individualist” people,<sup>65</sup> but no one values “independence” like Norwegians.<sup>66</sup> The Nordic Model delivers this to a greater extent than any other governance. Its liberal principles facilitate high productivity, and its socialist redistribution gives everyone a significant piece of the larger pie. With their material well-being secured, people make life choices more grounded in

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<sup>61</sup> *Sobranjje socinienji W. S. Solovjova*, vol. I (Brussels, 1966–69), 231; quoted in Witoszek, *The Origins of the “Regime of Goodness,”* 60.

<sup>62</sup> Expat Insider, “Warm Welcome or Cold Shoulder? Where Expats (Don’t) Feel at Home,” 2019, <https://www.internations.org/expat-insider/2019/ease-of-settling-in-index-39832>.

<sup>63</sup> Trägårdh, “Statist Individualism.”

<sup>64</sup> Harari, *Sapiens*.

<sup>65</sup> Hofstede Insights, “Country Comparison,” 2019, <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/denmark,norway,sweden,the-usa/>. Hofstede defines individualist societies as those in which “people are supposed to look after themselves and their direct family only.”

<sup>66</sup> World Values Survey, “Important child qualities: independence,” 2020, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>.

personal preference than when one's security is dependent on success in a limited number of well-paying professions.<sup>67</sup>

These mechanisms were less understood when *The Story of a Crime* was written. Social democracy appeared to be about raising taxes to solve more problems, which worked well for several decades. When Stormbom read *Under the North Star* to have a socialist center, he seemed to conceptualize social democracy as a sliding scale between liberalism and socialism. When implementing Wage Earners funds, Swedish Social Democrats appeared inspired by nineteenth-century social democrats, many of whom viewed their ideology as a less violent, more gradual path to the socialist utopia. Social democracy's Lutheran underpinnings and the crucial function of tripartism were yet to be understood as we do today. Such a limited understanding of what made the Nordic Model successful was not sustainable.

### **Adapting Beck to New Threats**

The Beck decalogy's timing could not have been better. As social democracy's golden age came to a close, it became clear that taxes were not a stairway to heaven. In 1976, a traumatized Bergman exiled to Germany after years of paying up to 80 percent tax.<sup>68</sup> As long as growth was strong, consensus around generosity was easier to engender. After the 1970s energy crises, such growth could no longer be relied upon. Instead of smugly offering to be the world's conscience, Swedes had to investigate their own political model and agree on how to adapt it to a more challenging reality. Popular literature became an important medium for this discussion. From

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<sup>67</sup> Anne Lise Ellingsæter, "Scandinavian Welfare States and Gender (De) Segregation: Recent Trends and Processes," *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 34.3 (2013): 501–18.

<sup>68</sup> Bergman was arrested on tax fraud charges that were later dropped; see Bernard Weinraub, "Ingmar Bergman's Taxes: Swedes Brood Over Case," *New York Times*, 16 March 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/03/16/archives/ingmar-bergmans-taxes-swedes-brood-over-case-ingmar-bergmans-taxes.html>.

around 1965, critic Andrew Nestingen identifies a “weakening of the avant-garde as a measure of national culture [and] increased use of popular forms for political purposes.”<sup>69</sup> As with most claims regarding fiction’s influence, we cannot establish precisely how, or to what extent, Nordic noir helped steer the region. Rarely can we trace causality as confidently as with *Ingeborg Holm* or *Under the North Star*. Still, Nestingen concludes that popular fiction contributed “to the definition of a new middle ground between state, individual, and nation.”<sup>70</sup>

The evolution of Beck’s microcosm attests to how Nordic noir fulfills such a function. Sjöwall and Wahlöö’s universe is in its seventh decade of adaptation; several dozen have been made for radio, film, and TV. The authors’ politics quickly felt outdated, but their police collective lent itself to explore new challenges to social democracy as these arose. When a Swedish-German coproduction turned six novels into film (1993–94), the directors could hardly warn against the evils of social democracy. The Nordic Model and Swedish culture were under threat from globalization, Americanization, and Europeanization. External, not internal, threat imperiled the People’s Home. In 1967, *The Man on the Balcony* had portrayed the child-raping serial killer Ingemund Fransson as someone whom disability checks had socially isolated and turned into a monster. Social democracy had dehumanized him, and when he is caught, he is politely escorted away by police, presumably to be drawn back into the Swedish collective. In 1993,<sup>71</sup> Fransson (Michael Kausch) works as a janitor. He rapes and murders as a consequence of irrational perversity, which is portrayed as culturally imported; Beck (Gösta Ekman) must

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<sup>69</sup> Nestingen, *Crime and Fantasy*, 12. For my account of how popular fiction engendered political support for the Nordic region’s indigenous Sámi people, see Mads Larsen, “*Ofelas*: Filming Otherness in Indigenous Revitalization,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 14.2 (2018): 233–41.

<sup>70</sup> Nestingen, *Crime and Fantasy*, 256.

<sup>71</sup> *Mannen på balkongen*.

enlist FBI knowledge to solve the case. Fransson ends the film by killing himself, while Beck passively watches. The murderer has become a cultural “other” whom Swedes need not redeem.

The story’s secondary bad guy, too, is adapted to fit a new reality. In the novel, he is the local robber Roffe. In 1992, Sweden had let in 70,000 Yugoslav refugees. Arkan and other ex-Yugoslav war criminals aroused fear throughout Europe. To engage this threat, the film turns Roffe into the notorious Yugo gangster Dragan (Udo Schenk).<sup>72</sup> Singling out individual criminals was hardly Marxist, but Sjöwall did not mind. With how much politics had changed, she said in a 1993 interview, the world was no longer divided into good and bad, as it had been for her and Wahlöö.<sup>73</sup>

The 1990s did not lend themselves to striving for utopias. Nordics had to find out which parts of their political model could be retained. In 1993, Swedish public spending peaked at 72 percent of GDP to counter an economic crisis. Effective coordination and pragmatic compromise let Swedes course-correct economically to the political right, and they did so with surprising efficacy. Their cultural progressiveness continued up the left flank. In the twenty-first century, Sweden has placed itself in the international culture war as—depending on your political bias—a beacon of inclusivity and compassion, or a postmodern hellhole of meek men and political correctness. The latter assessment informs many of the feature-length episodes of the TV series *Beck* (1997–).<sup>74</sup> For a period, the story’s center moved from Beck (Peter Haber) to his brute colleague Larsson (Mikael Persbrandt). Larsson was introduced in *The Man on the Balcony* as a comical character with strong leftist credentials. In the TV adaptation, critic Michael Tapper

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<sup>72</sup> For my systems theoretical adaptation study of *The Man on the Balcony*, see Larsen, “Adapting Social Change.”

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Lars Westman, “Sjöwall om Wahlöö och den stora filmsatsningen,” *Vi* 47.19 (1993): 20–24.

<sup>74</sup> *Beck*, Rolf Börjlind, creator (Filmlance International, 1997–).

reads him to be a right-wing, action-hero populist with an attitude toward women and sexual minorities far removed from what is stereotypically associated with Swedes.<sup>75</sup>

### **Democratizing Influence Through Fiction**

This malleability of characters and politics attests to how Nordic noir seeks to inspire debate around contemporary issues. At times, the social engagement comes across as forced. Other times, works feel relevant and engender debate. Social democrats view such “small-scale public spaces [as] a necessary bulwark against the disenfranchising effects of the market economy, as well as facilitating the creation of a public opinion necessary for the Nordic way of doing politics to function.”<sup>76</sup> If Swedes did not have tools that helped unite people around course-correction, it seems unlikely that they could have solved the challenges of the 1990s as effectively as they did.

Detective stories are suited for investigating social spheres.<sup>77</sup> Crime breaks the spheres’ rules, which creates discrepancy in need of response. Audiences should question whether the current state of affairs is optimal. Their moral algorithms are enlisted to cast verdict on violence and vice, which are transgressions with wide allure. Similar to the way in which the witch-craze drove a debate on early-modern morality, Nordic noir simulates similar stakes—that is, without real people needing to die—to make Scandinavians chime in on how social democracy should evolve. “Detective stories and tales of espionage,” writes sociologist Luc Boltanski, “are the most widespread narrative forms.” He views such media’s capacity to “call into question the very contours of modernity” to be a prerequisite for relevant democratic debate. The alternative

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<sup>75</sup> Michael Tapper, “Dirty Harry in the Swedish Welfare State,” in Andrew Nestingen and Paula Arvas, eds., *Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 21–33, 22.

<sup>76</sup> Nik Brandal and Dag Einar Thorsen, “Between Individualism and Communitarianism: The Nordic Way of Doing Politics,” in Witoszek and Midttun, *Sustainable Modernity*, 160–86, 164.

<sup>77</sup> William Nelson and Nancy Avery, “Art Where You Least Expect It: Myth and Ritual in Detective Series,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 29.3 (1983), 463–74.

is an exclusive discourse within “limited circles.”<sup>78</sup> Nordic noir democratizes influence not through solving but formulating problems. Audiences—and those with only secondary knowledge of the narrative, too—can offer opinions to themselves or others, or to the public sphere through mass-mediation.

In the 1990s, this process contributed new answers to novel challenge, informed by long-held values. Wolfgang Iser posits that “fictions serve as problem-solving instruments which enable the human mind to deal provisionally with problems it cannot solve definitely.”<sup>79</sup> For social democrats, this is okay. No eternal federation of collaborative nation-states is needed. No thousand-year *Reich* or socialist utopia are sought; just solutions that make “the world a little better.”<sup>80</sup> Scandinavia may, to some, appear like “a mythical place [with] political institutions in perfect balance.”<sup>81</sup> But like Holberg’s *Potus*, the Nordic region is a product of its people’s distinctness and more than a millennium of cultural evolution. Constant renegotiation is needed, and fiction contributes to this process. The region’s political model survived the neoliberal threat, but some citizens found the era’s postmodern ethos to be an even greater challenge. In the next chapter, I investigate how an Icelandic youth no longer wants to live after discovering the relativity of the Scandinavian story. After a millennium of being impoverished fishers and farmers, Icelanders were not ready for how globalized modernity transformed their youth. *101 Reykjavik* helped them adapt to new identities and postmodern moralities.

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<sup>78</sup> Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries & Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), xvi.

<sup>79</sup> De Bruyn, *Wolfgang Iser*, 172.

<sup>80</sup> Andersson, “Not Without a Future,” 172.

<sup>81</sup> Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, 14; *Political Order and Political Decay*.

## 9. Postmodernism: Drawn to Death When Stories Become Relative

After reading the first page of *101 Reykjavik* (1996), staunch social democrats could be forgiven for declining the new acquaintance. Hlynur Björn Hafsteinsson wakes up at 4 pm, hungover and porn-hungry. Still living with this mother, the 33-year-old has no greater ambition than to get drunk on weekends. With welfare from cradle to grave, why work? Were this a saga, we could expect Hlynur to be axed to death by page two. If Gisli watched the film adaptation on satellite TV in Valhalla, he would grin “I told you so” and get ready for Ragnarök. Surely it must be an end-time sign if Hlynur the man-child is representative of what has become of Norsemen. The youth culture he arose from was interpreted as heralding at least the end of social democracy.

In the past eight chapters, I chronicled the Nordic master-narrative as it evolved from tribal beliefs through Christian theism to secular humanism. With all these stories, enough people have to believe in them or society falls apart. A community can handle one Gisli, but not the Black Death. Those who failed to conform risked death by pyre after the Reformation. All humans should believe in the Western story, philosophes convinced themselves of, which was a step too far for Holberg. Hamsun’s protagonist was terrified to let go of his faith, but had no choice. Story conflict tore Pentti’s Corner apart. After World War II, Nordics settled in for conformist prosperity and equality. Even if they did so staunchly independently, most agreed that staunch independence was a universal value worth working hard for and paying high taxes to secure.<sup>1</sup> The Lutheran employment ethic never felt threatened—until neoliberal globalization and postmodern thought made especially young people realize the relativity of their own story.

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<sup>1</sup> Tvedt, *Det internasjonale gjennombruddet*, 107. Not only was the hegemonic Scandinavian view that social democratic values were universal, writes Tvedt, but that it would be relatively easy to convince other nations to adopt the Nordic Model.

To Hlynur, social democracy is a game only fools play according to the ethics people are meant to internalize. If morality is relative, why submit to an ethos that requires that you trade a full week of work for a pay bump you can do without? Hlynur must answer this question by the end of *101 Reykjavik*. His life hangs in the balance, as he feels despondent without meaning or direction. He was not alone. Hallgrímur Helgason's novel engages challenges unique to social democracy, but Hlynur is but a Nordic version of the 1990s *slacker*. You would think the liberal West would rejoice after defeating its socialist competitor. Yet young people responded with a movement inaugurated in 1991 with novels like Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, music like Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and films like Richard Linklater's *Slacker*. A depressed, nihilistic youth movement spread across the globe.<sup>2</sup>

A variety of explanations have been offered for why grunge and postmodern ennui paralleled the decade's Fukuyamian hubris.<sup>3</sup> With no alternatives to liberal humanism and free markets, rebellious youth simply opposed Western beliefs. The counterculture rejected the possibility of truth, the viability of discourse, and that a better future was possible. Local mores were threatened by satellite TV that exposed people to cultural plurality. Hlynur's ancestors had grown up playing with sheep bones on a sparsely populated island, surrounded by family and a few neighbors. They knew one culture and took its values for granted.<sup>4</sup> Hlynur enters a mass-mediated community of alienated youth from Seattle, Austin, and everywhere; it "was the first

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Henseler, "Introduction," in Henseler, ed., *Generation X Goes Global: Mapping a Youth Culture in Motion* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–29.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Irvine, "Toward an Outline of Postmodern Ennui," *The Antigone Review* 116 (1999): 1–18; Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012 [2000]), eBook.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Brydon, "Generations in Iceland," in Henseler, *Generation X Goes Global*, 180–82; Jez Conolly and Caroline Whelan, "Reykjavik: City of the Imagination," in Conolly and Whelan, eds., *World Film Locations: Reykjavik* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 6–7.



fully globalized generation in human history.”<sup>5</sup> From this diversity arose an ethos of everything being relative, which to many meant that nothing really mattered.

The roots of this philosophy are much older. The opposition between relativism and the possibility of truth has been a core division in Western thought since Socrates argued with sophists.<sup>6</sup> The Enlightenment sided with universalism over historicism, and upon this foundation the modern world was built.<sup>7</sup> As I wrote in chapter 4, the West’s master-narrative made assumptions with a limited shelf life. Kantian beliefs empowered the West to dominate the world, but Herder’s side of the argument was not forgotten. In opposition to post-World War II liberal internationalism, Counter-Enlightenment beliefs reemerged after 1968.<sup>8</sup> Herder’s heritage, write Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler, was voiced “in America principally through the advent of feminism and multiculturalism” and in Europe through postmodern philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Such thought proliferated through academia in the 1970s and ‘80s, then transformed pop culture.<sup>10</sup>

Whether this describes the *actual* causes of what happened, we cannot know.<sup>11</sup> For *Homo narrans* to make sense of experience, we need narrative explanations, and this is the one I offer. For the reality Hlynur was left to navigate, postmodernists had deconstructed what used to be taken for granted: work, family, and shared meaning. Without these, there was little to build a life around. For youth caught in this whirlwind of media globalization, political unipolarity, and philosophical nihilism, existential dread could be debilitating. Antisocial responses made older

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<sup>5</sup> Mark LeVine, “Generation G Comes of Age: Youth and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa,” in Henseler, *Generation X Goes Global*, 293–314, 293.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Gorgias* (c. 380 BC); Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “Global Citizenship and The Challenge from Cultural Relativism,” in Aksel Braanen Sterri, ed., *Global Citizen – Challenges and Responsibility in an Interconnected World* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014), 53–60, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte*.

<sup>8</sup> For my more detailed account of this process, see Larsen, “Historicist Cosmopolitanism.”

<sup>9</sup> Mali and Wokler, “Editors’ Preface.”

<sup>10</sup> Bjarne Riiser Gundersen, *Da postmodernismen kom til Norge: En beretning om den store intellektuelle vekkelsen som har hjemøkt vårt land* (Oslo: Flamme forlag, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg, *How History Gets Things Wrong*.

generations fear that national cultures could implode.<sup>12</sup> There are limits to how many Hlynurs a community can support, especially in welfare states. Western civilization was built on the assumption that individuals strive for betterment. With capitalism and liberal democracy being cast in stone, this was the ethos left to reject. The 1990s slacker sought not to replace the system itself, writes Linda Hutcheon, but to become an enemy of aspiration.<sup>13</sup>

Hlynur embarks on such a subversive journey through an Iceland that has been transformed by rapid modernization since independence in 1944. A rural, communal, self-restrained ethos still felt salient to many, even as their culture caught up with international trends in the millennium's final decade.<sup>14</sup> For your typical social democrat, young people's urban, individualistic, living-for-the-moment lifestyle could feel anathema. In this chapter, I show how Helgason's novel, in combination with Baltasar Kormákur's adaptation (2000), helped Icelanders accept who they had become, in a process analogous to what social democracy underwent in the same period.<sup>15</sup>

### **Hell is Family Life in Suburbia**

Helgason returned to a Reykjavik different from the one he had left. After fifteen years as a cosmopolitan artist, immersing himself in American and European metropolises, he applied the émigré author's eye to local delusion and peculiarity. Part of Icelandic identity was still that of a Lutheran outpost where beer had been banned until 1989. Satellite TV and inexpensive airfare had pulled his compatriots into the Western mainstream. In *101 Reykjavik*, Helgason chronicles

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<sup>12</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2003), 226.

<sup>14</sup> Valur Gunnarsson, "It Was Twenty Years Ago Today," *The Reykjavik Grapevine*, 9 December 2011, <https://grapevine.is/icelandic-culture/music/2011/12/09/nineties-music-grunge/>.

<sup>15</sup> Andersson, "Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic Light."

how his hometown has become a globalized party capital where sex, alcohol, and social benefits are the new cod. His licentious, work-shy characters starkly contrast the nature-embracing heroes of traditional literature, such as those of Nobel winner Halldór Laxness (1902–98).

Helgason's novel convinced few; Icelanders were not ready to accept a new identity as sex-obsessed slackers. Postmodern superficiality and what appeared to be crude misogyny put many readers off. The reviewer in Iceland's largest daily, Eiríkur Guðmundsson, recognized that the novel's form and content were timely, but questions its sex and gender politics.<sup>16</sup> He finds the criticism of older generations ineffective. *Morgunblaðið*'s reviewer exemplifies how those outside of the postmodern wave struggled to accept its aesthetics. Still convinced of the viability of discourse, he complains that the novel, instead of offering solutions, resorts to sarcasm and irony. For a movement critics would term “the irony generation,”<sup>17</sup> this was a fitting but not very insightful criticism. Guðmundsson concludes that *101 Reykjavík* is an interesting novel, but that readers will find it difficult to accept its argument for a new Icelandic way of life.

Difficult, yes, but today Hlynur's saga is hailed as the “ultimate '90s literary statement” of Iceland.<sup>18</sup> Similar to the way in which sagas appear to have helped Icelanders embrace feudalism, this novel-film combination helped them come to terms with postmodernity. Social democratic humanism may be just another made-up meta-narrative, but Hlynur's despondence supports Auerbach's claim, that living without such a story “would be an impoverishment for which there can be no possible compensation.”<sup>19</sup> Hlynur's challenge—and that of Nordics, too—

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<sup>16</sup> Eiríkur Guðmundsson, “Við lífum á ódýrum tímum BÓKMENNTIR Skáldsaga 101 REYKJAVÍK eftir Hallgrím,” *Morgunblaðið*, 4 December 1996, <https://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/302360/>.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Joakim Sandøy, “På jakt etter en generasjon,” *Minerva*, 9 February 2016, <https://www.minervanett.no/pa-jakt-etter-en-generasjon/155812>.

<sup>18</sup> Valur Gunnarsson, “The World of Yesterday: 101 Reykjavík Revisited,” *The Reykjavik Grapevine*, 28 July 2018, <https://grapevine.is/culture/movies-theatre/2018/07/28/the-world-of-yesterday%E2%80%A8-101-reykjavik-revisited/>.

<sup>19</sup> Mali, *The Legacy of Vico*, 190.

was to bridge the narrative abyss of the 1990s. This was an abyss not of having lost one's story, or of it no longer fitting its environment, but of seeing through one's uniting narrative—of understanding its relativity—which tends to horrify *Homo narrans*.

For a nation of fiercely independent Nordics, conformism around norms and values is crucial; social democratic prosociality depends on it—most people must choose to pull in the same direction. Bombarded by a diversity of lifestyles, local culture did not necessarily appear as the most attractive, so why commit to the mores you happened to inherit? If all is relative, how do you choose which principles to live by? Why not free-ride on social democratic generosity without contributing to the secular-Lutheran priesthood of believers?

As the novel begins, Hlynur has few answers. He has ensconced himself inside a pop-cultural cocoon in his mother's apartment. His only experimentation with adult independence was a four-month cohabitation with the only girlfriend he ever had. He gave up because she “got up too early.”<sup>20</sup> Mid-week boredom is alleviated with TV and porn. Weekends are filled with alcohol or ecstasy pills, or—when he is fortunate—casual sex. He is not happy with this monotony, but as his culture has become transparent to him, he has lost his mooring. What to others appears self-evident or simply what one does, Hlynur must have a coherent explanation for. He craves the type of firm foundation that Western culture has lost its ability to provide. Unable to buy into his community's uniting narrative, Hlynur, when sober, prefers isolation. Like Antonius Block and the aging Akseli Koskela, he lives in a world of phantoms.<sup>21</sup>

These phantoms haunt him every Christmas Day. For the 1990s slacker, hell is family life in suburbia, hence the title; 101 is downtown Reykjavik's postal code. In a yearly ritual, his extended family gathers outside the capital, where Hlynur's sister lives. For him, this is the worst

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<sup>20</sup> Helgason, *101 Reykjavik*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> *The Seventh Seal*, 20.

day of the year. Although Helgason paints an unflattering picture of urban slackers, he is even more sardonic when portraying the suburban lifestyle they oppose. Social democratic togetherness is no more than suffocating, mindless chatter. The cosmopolitan author makes tradition nothing but empty repetition. To emphasize how depressing this is, Helgason makes it their family tradition to watch a home video from last year's Christmas Day party, in which the same people have the same asinine conversations.

To break free from this Icelandic Groundhog Day, Hlynur goes on an antisocial journey to provoke a reaction. He sabotages his sister's birth control. He has sex with Lolla, his mother's younger lover. When not even a transgression of this magnitude gets punished, or leads to anything, Hlynur turns to the authority he feels is in charge of him: the welfare office. He confesses his sins and begs advice from his assigned bureaucrat. But alas, Nordic welfare is and must be impersonal; she lets him know that his private affairs are not her concern. Hlynur is desperate to force answers or restrictions from a system that seeks to optimize his independence; rules, guidance, an explanation—anything that can offer direction through his postmodern maze. He confronts a traffic warden by putting coins on expired meters. The warden admits that doing so is not illegal, it is “just not done.”<sup>22</sup> To this enforcer of local mores, *why* is less important. By accepting status quo, the warden gets to be a functioning part of society, unlike Hlynur who keeps saving drivers from being ticketed until police arrest and hold him for two hours.

In the first third of the novel, Helgason establishes Hlynur's life as one of many civil entitlements and few social responsibilities. Philosopher Philip Blond criticizes social democracy for this very reason. The welfare state undermines trust and reciprocity, he claims, which underpin the good society. Social democracy's mantra is to liberate the individual, but rights

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<sup>22</sup> Helgason, *101 Reykjavik*, 127.

without responsibilities can create a moral vacuum.<sup>23</sup> Blond formulated his criticism in response to social democratic failure in Britain. In the Nordic countries, welfare has not undermined trust. Quite the contrary; they rank highest in the world in terms of social trust, some argue precisely because of effective welfare.<sup>24</sup> The region's Lutheran-aligned ethos motivates a level of reciprocity that nations with different religious heritages find hard to replicate. If Nordics lose their commitment to this ethos, their welfare states risk having the adverse effect on morality that Blond warns against—which is what Hlynur experiences.

Helgason jolts his protagonists with responsibility. Over the next pages, he confronts Hlynur with three pregnancies. Hofy, his casual sex partner, claims he is the only one she had sex with. His sister conceives due to his birth control sabotage. His mother's lover, Lolla, bears his child. Instead of heeding this call to grow up, Hlynur has drugged-up sex and exposes himself to police and an older woman. Not even public shaming helps. When the newspaper reports on his transgression, he is upset at being anonymized, as this could have been his fifteen minutes of fame. He also fumes at being censored. The journalist refuses to print his explanation, that exposing himself was simply “what I've always wanted to do.”<sup>25</sup> Such thinking does not fit the cultural script, so the journalist protects Hlynur from himself. This maternalist care from compatriots and institutions brings him no further. Hlynur begs for boundaries to be drawn. He wants to be involved in a discussion on why they do things the way they do, but the conformist phantoms who surround him see no point in this. Since Icelanders cannot provide what he needs, he must leave the safety of his native womb to pursue what he considers to be his final option.

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<sup>23</sup> Brandal, Bratberg, and Thorsen, *The Nordic Model*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> World Values Survey, “Most people can be trusted,” 2020, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>. Harald Eia ends his NRK series, *Sånn er Norge*, by concluding that the welfare state both runs on and creates trust; see “Trusler,” NRK, 2020, <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/harald-eia-presenterer-saann-er-norge/sesong/2/episode/7/avspiller>.

<sup>25</sup> Helgason, *101 Reykjavik*, 250.

## Seeking Identity Through Fiction

In this postmodern literary wave, searching for answers abroad was an obvious response to losing faith in one's local story. In Erlend Loe's *Naïve. Super.* (1996), the protagonist leaves Oslo to seek catharsis in New York. Alex Garland's backpacker in *The Beach* (1996) travels to Thailand. Throughout the novel, Hlynur has emailed with Kati, a Hungarian beauty upon whom he places his hope for salvation. When they meet in Paris, he falls in love, but she is there with her boyfriend. No longer wanting to live, Hlynur tries to provoke a stranger into beating him to death. He attempts to catch HIV from sex with an African prostitute. This too fails, as does a voodoo-like attempt to inflict an abortion upon Lolla. Hlynur is still not willing to change. He attempts one more sexual conquest, but the woman passes out. He has reached rock bottom; Hlynur ventures into Icelandic wilderness to die or be reborn.

The novel's ending likely contributed to its inability to win over Icelandic readers in 1996. Helgason's conclusion aligns with a pattern of postmodern fiction. The movement rejected meta-narratives, and thus the possibility of finding firm ground through intersubjective meaning. Intersubjective truth, explains Harari, is not scientific truth, but those poetic truths that people agree on within a moral community.<sup>26</sup> An assumption may be verifiably false, or unprovable, yet still be accepted across a range of subject positions, making it intersubjectively true. Even the least literarily ambitious fiction contributes to this process of shared-meaning-making through conveying the specifics of intersubjective beliefs. Popular stories synchronize populations so that people know what is good and bad, and which outcomes are culturally compelling.<sup>27</sup> Good and

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<sup>26</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>27</sup> Harari suggests that the key to "happiness is synchronizing one's personal delusions of meaning with the prevailing collective delusions;" see *Sapiens*. From this perspective, Nordic fiction may not only help the Nordic Model work, but contributes directly to the population's high level of well-being.

bad are conveyed through agonistic structure: protagonistic forces embody prosocial traits, while antagonists represent what would detract from a community's cooperative capacity.<sup>28</sup> Climax choices cast final judgment on cultural values.

Postmodern literature rarely offered such answers; it mostly asked questions. For mass audiences, accustomed to a final-act catharsis, postmodern endings could underwhelm. *Naïve. Super.*'s protagonist returns from New York with a slightly renewed sense of meaning. In the wilderness, Hlynur encounters a bleating lamb, which makes him abort his suicide attempt, yet this is of limited consequence. He continues to live in his mother's apartment as Lolla gives birth and moves in with them. Now that he has to help care for a baby, he drinks a bit less and puts on a little weight, but his mother still prepares hot baths for him, and his oedipal obsession with her continues. On the last page, he fantasizes that his aging mother breastfeeds his newborn brother-son. Hlynur steps into his own room. As the two women laugh behind his back, he stares down at his limp penis. Helgason's ending is a Freudian feast, but hardly an invite to consensus on a new Icelandic identity. The cosmopolitan author leaves an impression that was common in the mid-1990s, that the social democratic model, and its ethos, were no longer functional.

Not everyone was put off. Kormákur, himself Generation X, immediately recognized the novel's importance. He secured rights to make *101 Reykjavik* his directorial debut. While, in the author's own words, the novel lay "half dead in a coma for four years,"<sup>29</sup> Kormákur sought a way to retell the story with popular appeal. For a small Icelandic film, the strategy would have to be to win over festival audiences in order to earn wide distribution. Kormákur hoped the film

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<sup>28</sup> Carroll, *Reading Human Nature*, 152; Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, and Kruger, *Graphing Jane Austen*, 8; Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, "The Bad Breaks of Walter White: An Evolutionary Approach to the Fictional Antihero," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 1.1 (2017): 103–20, 106.

<sup>29</sup> "Hallgrímur Helgason," *The Reykjavik Grapevine*, 28 May 2014, <https://grapevine.is/mag/feature/2004/05/28/hallgrimur-helgason/>.



could be his personal springboard to Hollywood.<sup>30</sup> Time worked for him; Generation X and postmodern themes grew in relevance in Icelandic and international discourse. Cultural recognition helped, too, which was bestowed upon the novel when it was nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1999.

Kormákur chose to sacrifice the story's most distinctly postmodern features to make it a better fit for the film medium and to appeal to general audiences. This was a common strategy among the indie filmmakers who adapted such literature at the time.<sup>31</sup> In postmodern novels, things were allowed to “just be” and people to “just do,” but the film medium and its economies of production required more traditional sense-making. Irony could play out in acts one and two, but in act three sincerity would deliver the emotional punch audiences expected. Kormákur makes fragmentation give way for a more traditional plot and imbues superficial characters with psychological motivation. He cuts the sharpest edges off Helgason's postmodern critique, lessens Hlynur's immorality, and—importantly—offers a cathartic ending with communal reunification.

As the premiere approached, Icelanders were excited but also concerned. The ambitious director did not only seek to win locals over, but to make Hlynur charm the world. Since the sagas, and likely the oral traditions they built on, Icelanders have used fiction to explore and agree on who they are. Their films, writes Agnes Schindler, have been connected to

an identity dilemma related to self-perception and the perception of one's self by others. Iceland—as a colony of first Norway and then of Denmark—has long been subject to identity dilemmas, in which the desire for independence has played a constant role.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lisa Hopkins, “Hamlet Smokes Prince: *101 Reykjavík* on Page and Screen,” *Adaptation* 1.2 (2008): 140–50, 141.

<sup>31</sup> Jessica Murrell, “Postclassical Hollywood/Postmodern Subjectivity: Representation in Some ‘Indie/Alternative’ Indiewood Films,” dissertation, University of Adelaide, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Agnes Schindler, “State-Funded Icelandic Film: National and/or Transnational Cinema?” in Huw David Jones, ed., *The Media in Europe's Small Nations* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 69–85, 74.

Four months before the premiere, *Morgunblaðið* asked Helgason if Hlynur would be a good representative for Iceland. He insisted that his protagonist would, and that the film would show foreigners that Reykjavik has global citizens and intellectual vitality.<sup>33</sup> His and other Icelandic films inspired two panels at the Gothenburg Film Festival that discussed what should be considered truly Icelandic. Was it acceptable that Icelandic film stopped fixating on nature vistas to tell more universal stories?<sup>34</sup> These debates illustrate how the local discourse had evolved since 1996; a renegotiation of Icelandic identity was underway.

### **Graduating from the Party Class**

The film opens with a closeup on Hlynur having intercourse with a good-looking blonde. He was described by Helgason as having the sex appeal of an orangutan, but Kormákur offers a more attractive lead with actor Hilmir Snær Guðnason. If the new Icelander is to be an unemployed Lothario, at least he should be a more compelling one. Instead of dwelling on the tedium of post-coital sobriety, Kormákur cuts to the next evening when a cool and cigarette-smoking Hlynur reenters Reykjavik's trendiest bar. The setup sequence establishes him as a confident and charming-enough drunk who between weekends struggles with insecurity and a lack of purpose.

A new media reality contributes to this rootlessness. Hofy (Þrúður Vilhjálmsdóttir) comments in the bar, "You look tense. Almost like you're on a live broadcast." Hlynur replies, "No, this is more like a rerun."<sup>35</sup> Kormákur emphasizes how local life mimics global media. Several cuts between scenes look and sound like the fast-forwarding of videotape. After an establishing shot of a satellite dish, the camera follows a cable that leads to where Hlynur lies in

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<sup>33</sup> "Hlynur Björn fæddist á hestbaki," *Morgunblaðið*, 26 January 2000, <https://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/515283/>.

<sup>34</sup> "Er málið málið?" *Morgunblaðið*, 1 February 2000, <https://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/516277/>.

<sup>35</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, 1. Translations from subtitles.

bed with his erection in one hand, the remote control in the other. On TV, American women do aerobics. Outside, a jackhammer breaks apart the pavement, a symbol for the foundation Icelanders have relied on. Hlynur is unable to connect meaningfully neither to his local reality nor the global diversity he immerses himself in. In *Generation X*, Coupland writes, “We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there’s a great deal in which we choose not to participate.”<sup>36</sup> He elaborates on this “media-saturated disorientation” in *Life After God* (1994):

I have never really felt like I was “from” anywhere; home to me . . . is a shared electronic dream of cartoon memories, half-hour sitcoms and national tragedies. . . I realized my accent was simply the accent of nowhere—the accent of a person who has no fixed home in their mind.<sup>37</sup>

For Hlynur, this unmooring primarily engages the Nordic Model. Slackers around the world rejected cultural mores, but they often paid a higher price. The era’s ethos was less costly for Nordic slackers whose rejection of adult work and responsibility did not entail impoverished squalor. Relatively generous benefits could support a thrifty party lifestyle. For those who bothered to get a job, compressed wage structures provided high starting salaries that funded more lavish partying. Centering life on drunken excess was culturally salient, too, as binge drinking had long been common when opportunity allowed. These cultural and economic factors motivated the emergence of what since has been termed “the party class.”<sup>38</sup>

Hlynur’s reality is one of debilitating choice. A whole world of values has become accessible. Professional opportunities are vast. Yet he lacks the cultural tools to navigate such freedom. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to this postmodern reality as “liquid modernity,”

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<sup>36</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Life after God* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1994), 74.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Joakim Sandøy, “Hvorfor jeg skammer meg over å se på Paradise Hotel,” *Minerva*, 13 April 2016, <https://www.minervanett.no/paradisshotel/>.

an “individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual’s shoulders.” Helgason and Kormákur dramatize how “the sort of freedoms eulogized by dedicated libertarians is not . . . a warrant for happiness. It is likely to bring more misery than joy.”<sup>39</sup> To spur Hlynur past this Baumanian misery, Kormákur restructures the story through a more conventional inciting incident. Meeting his mother’s friend becomes Hlynur’s call to action, his opportunity to change and become a more whole person.<sup>40</sup> In the novel, she is the Icelandic AA counsellor Lolla. In the film, she is the Spanish flamenco instructor Lola (Victoria Abril). This narrative choice turns the adaptation into the more recognizable tale of a restless young man inspired to change by a sexy, exotic woman. The Catholic foreigner confronts him:

Lola: There must be something you want to do or to become.

Hlynur: No, not really.

Lola: You want to spend the rest of your life on social benefits?

Hlynur: Why not?

Lola: What would happen if everyone were to do the same? I mean, what kind of society would that be?

Hlynur: Well, that’s pretty much the way things are going, isn’t it?<sup>41</sup>

To show that not all youth have embraced this worldview, and that tradition is still possible, Kormákur offers Hofy who “lives alone in a three-room apartment and dreams of filling up the other two.”<sup>42</sup> She is willing to take upon herself the “burden of pattern-weaving,” which Bauman posits as necessary for the postmodern individual to find happiness. Until the beginning of the third act, she is Hlynur’s hope for normalcy. When he is ready to commit, he learns that she is no

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<sup>39</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

<sup>40</sup> For more on film structure, see Larsen, “Imposing New Hollywood Structure.”

<sup>41</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, 51.

<sup>42</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, 13.

longer pregnant, and that his friend Thröstur (played by Kormákur) had been the impregnating culprit. Hofy and Thröstur have pair-bonded behind his back.

As Lola is taken to hospital to give birth, Hlynur gets in a taxi to return to what he knows: his old party environment. The passenger yells to him, “Hey, taxpayer, got a cigarette?”<sup>43</sup> Hlynur now sees through another story. He thought he had freed himself from all meta-narratives, but the party class, too, finds shared meaning in their rejection of social democratic humanism. This insight engages the philosophical weakness of much postmodern discourse, the failure to recognize that their ethos, as well, is but a meta-narrative. There is no firmer ground under their insistence on firm ground being impossible to find. Hlynur now watches his former moral community with the same cool distance he had watched social democrats with. As if they were a different species, he observes a man and a woman having sex, “This is great material for a documentary. *The Icelandic Intercourse*.”<sup>44</sup> Afterward, he consoles the woman whose boyfriend cheated on her with the intercourse. Lola had accused Hlynur of not being able to “handle human relations.”<sup>45</sup> Experimenting with a more prosocial identity, he sells his new self convincingly, “I handle cases like this all the time. Human relations and crying women.” As he caresses her, she compliments him, “You’re special.”<sup>46</sup> Knowing that he can fit in if he wants to, Hlynur must answer his original question: whether life is worth living even if stories are relative.

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<sup>43</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, 69.

<sup>44</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, 59.

<sup>46</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, 73.

## Deconstruction and Synthesis

Still unsure of what a livable life would look like, Hlynur goes to the hospital to visit “our little boy, all of ours. Lola will be his mom and my mom will be his dad. And I’ll be his brother but his father too. And the son of his dad and of his grandmother and his mother’s ex-lover.”<sup>47</sup> The postmodern opportunities are vast, but no longer debilitating. Lola and his mother (Hanna María Karlsdóttir) watch as he holds his son. Hlynur’s facial expression suggests an interior transformation, a rather conventional one. As the baby gets baptized, Hlynur climbs a towering glacier to reconnect with his cultural roots. He lets himself be cocooned by sleet, with a cigarette in his mouth and a suicide note by his side, ready to make the climax choice.

Finally, Hlynur sits back up, choosing life. He arrives at the postmodernist’s catharsis, “It’s no longer a question of either-or. Darkness or light, right or wrong, good or evil. Everything is right and wrong. Everything is good and evil. Everything just is.”<sup>48</sup> In the resolution scene, the camera pans through their apartment. Hlynur plays with his son in the bath tub. The boy utters “daddy” to everyone’s joy. Hlynur’s mother hurries off to work, while Lola takes care of the child. The final plot twist is that Hlynur, too, has to hurry not to be late. Kormákur adds a second, comedic resolution. In contrast to Helgason’s dystopic ending, Kormákur lets audiences know that social reunification is possible; even 1990s slackers can find a prosocial role in the twenty-first century. The film ends with Hlynur sauntering downtown, smirking and whistling in a traffic warden uniform. He has just slapped a ticket on the car that Hófi and Þröstur exited.

The ending fits the postmodern genre, but the Nordic context removes much of its irony. When slackers were pushed into employment as their stories ended, it was rarely in professional careers. Low-pay, low-prestige McJobs let them recommit to society, but with irony instead of

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<sup>47</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, 73–74.

<sup>48</sup> *101 Reykjavik*, 80.

conviction. That labor should have intrinsic value was still laughable.<sup>49</sup> In a social democratic context, being a traffic warden has less of this McJob connotation. The salary would be decent, and parking attendants mostly enjoy the same social arenas as medical doctors and engineers do. Even as the Lutheran priesthood secularized, “the poor peasant’s work was worth as much as that of a wealthy artisan,”<sup>50</sup> at least compared to how such jobs are viewed in, for instance, the U.S.

With Helgason’s ending, Hlynur and his ilk had remained a threat to the Nordic Model and the nation-state itself. Postmodern individualization, writes Bauman, leads to “the corrosion and slow disintegration of citizenship.” Some feared that “the centuries-long romance of nation with state is drawing to an end [as] their partnership is no longer the binding pattern for proper and acceptable conduct.”<sup>51</sup> Kormákur calms his audience by dramatizing how, in the words of sociologist Richard Sennett, to “imagine a life of momentary impulses, of short-term action, devoid of sustainable routines, a life without habits, is to imagine indeed a mindless existence.”<sup>52</sup> Social democracy may not be suitable for universalizing, but such an ethos offers the most functional mindset for the Nordic individual. Fierce independence may be a paramount cultural value, but this should be exercised with restraint. By conforming to social mores, you get to belong to a community, which provides the balance that even 1990s slackers need. “There is no other way to pursue the liberation but to ‘submit to society’ and to follow its norms,” writes Bauman, “Freedom cannot be gained against society. The outcome of rebellion against the norms . . . is likely to make life a living hell.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>50</sup> Kahl, “Religious Doctrines,” 271.

<sup>51</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1998), 44.

<sup>53</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

This insight informs Kormákur's synthesis, which complemented Helgason's deconstruction. Such a combination of a disputatious novel and a more conciliatory adaptation is common in Nordic fiction.<sup>54</sup> If a novel is successful in kicking open doors, filmmakers must not re-fight the same battle. An updated film story can function as a renegotiated consensus, which was the case for *Under the North Star*, too. Kormákur's film won nine awards and was distributed to more than twenty countries. It even became his springboard to Hollywood; he has since directed stars like Mark Wahlberg, Kate Beckinsale, Denzel Washington, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Keira Knightley. In the wake of the film's success, the novel's domestic sales took off. Translations made Hlynur's saga available for readers in over 80 countries.<sup>55</sup> *101 Reykjavik* was embraced as the authoritative portrayal of Iceland in the mid-1990s.<sup>56</sup> Helgason was lauded as having been attuned to contemporary trends and a keen describer of Reykjavik's atmosphere as the second millennium came to a close.<sup>57</sup> He was praised as an important and exciting voice.<sup>58</sup>

### Avoiding a Clash of Civilizations

In the new millennium, Icelandic slackers were succeeded by generation *Krútt*, which translates to cute or cuddly.<sup>59</sup> Internationally, too, youth appeared less superficial and nihilistic. Their literary movement is sometimes termed "the new seriousness." They have absorbed the growing pains of globalism, writes critic Lars Rune Waage, and turned their focus to capitalism itself and society's repressive mechanisms. Nordics still ask whether social democracy can survive.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Larsen, "Sealing New Truths," 39.

<sup>55</sup> "Rokland til Svíþjóðar og Þýskalands," *Morgunblaðið*, 9 December 2005, <https://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/1054439/>.

<sup>56</sup> "NEÐANMÁLS –," *Morgunblaðið*.

<sup>57</sup> "Humar og frægð," *Morgunblaðið*, 1 September 2005, <https://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/1035803/>.

<sup>58</sup> "Ár krimmans," *Morgunblaðið*, 31 December 2005, <https://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/1058333/>.

<sup>59</sup> "Hallgrímur Helgason," *The Reykjavik Grapevine*.

<sup>60</sup> Lars Rune Waage, "The Apocalypse of Scandinavian Social Democracy? A Reading of Johan Harstad's Novel *Hässelby*," *Scandinavian Studies* 87.2 (2015): 234–54, 235–36.



Neoliberal reform added a few benefit hurdles to discourage slackers, but the Nordic Model shines brighter than ever.<sup>61</sup> Juxtaposed with current dysfunction in many other nations, Scandinavian equality and low-conflict politics appear enviable. In the twenty-first century, the region has become a myth “of the liberal-left imagination, in which happy, smiling children are polite to each other as they grow up to be pacifist social democrats eager to pay more taxes.”<sup>62</sup>

Internationally, many youths share Hlynur’s gloom.<sup>63</sup> Not as consequence of post-Cold War ennui, but post-recession economics.<sup>64</sup> Harari argues that the liberal-humanist story, too, played itself out after its economic utopia crashed on Wall Street in 2008. Similar to the way in which fascism and socialism lost their hold on people’s imagination after spectacular failure, the liberal story no longer convinces people of a better future. The globalization of free markets was not a win-win for all, but, some argue, “produced a global race to the bottom.”<sup>65</sup> Neither is liberal democracy everyone’s end station,<sup>66</sup> Fukuyamaists were wrong. In response to *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), political scientist Samuel Huntington wrote *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996).<sup>67</sup> He argued that the twentieth century was an anomaly. After the age of ideology, we would return to normal, which means conflict

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<sup>61</sup> Peter Nedergaard and Anders Wivel, “Conclusions: Scandinavian Politics, Politics and Policies Reconsidered,” in Nedergaard and Wivel, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Scandinavian Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), 306–12; Andreas Mørkved Hellenes et al., “‘Nordic Nineties’: Norwegian and Swedish Self-Understanding in the Face of Globalization,” *Culture Unbound* 13.1 (2021): 1–15.

<sup>62</sup> John Rentoul, “Pay Attention, Rebels!” *Independent on Sunday*, 22 January 2006, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/john-rentoul/john-rentoul-pay-attention-rebels-6110975.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Foa and Mounk, “Youth and the Populist Wave.”

<sup>64</sup> Melissa Cunningham and Anna Patty, “‘Pessimistic’ Millennials Fear They Won’t be as Happy as Their Parents,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/pessimistic-millennials-fear-they-won-t-be-as-happy-as-their-parents-20180515-p4zfgu.html>; Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017); Conor P. Williams, “Why the American Dream Feels Further Off Than Ever for Millennials,” *The Guardian*, 1 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/01/millennials-families-american-dream-us-economy>.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Schenkkan and Repucci, “The Freedom House Survey.”

<sup>67</sup> Fukuyama presented his thesis in a 1989 essay, “The End of History?” Huntington responded in a 1992 lecture, which was developed into a 1993 article, “The Clash of Civilizations?”

grounded in religious and cultural divides. His book was widely criticized.<sup>68</sup> Today, with Islamic terrorism, a Putinized Russia, and an expansionist China, Huntington's perspective is harder to reject.

Harari suggests that to get past this malaise, humanity must find a new story, one that motivates global cooperation. Like animism, tribal beliefs, and Christian theism, humanism evolved to fit a certain context. The tenets of the French Revolution provided a comparative advantage not because philosophes claimed universal truth, but as a consequence of the first industrial revolutions;<sup>69</sup> new technology was more effectively utilized through free markets. Positing that human thought and emotion were superior sources of authority led to better data processing than funneling an increasing number of decisions to a centralized authority. We have no evidence for humans having "a unique and sacred nature [or being] the most important thing in the world." But this belief provided the narrative justification for turning away from God's truth, to give humans the "freedom to express themselves and follow their hearts."<sup>70</sup>

As the Fourth Industrial Revolution grants us increasingly god-like powers, it seems unlikely that we can allow individuals the level of freedom they have enjoyed until now. Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom foresees tech with such destructive power that we will have no choice but to submit to ubiquitous surveillance to prevent civilization-ending terrorism.<sup>71</sup> As artificial intelligence overtakes ours as the planet's progenitor of progress, claims of human exceptionality will sound increasingly hollow. The critical humanities have long accused humanism of

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<sup>68</sup> Errol A. Henderson and Richard Tucker, "Clear and Present Strangers: The Clash of Civilizations and International Conflict," *International Studies Quarterly* 45.2 (2001): 317–38; Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Denisa Mindruta, "Was Huntington Right? Testing Cultural Legacies and the Civilization Border," *International Politics* 39.2 (2002): 193–213; Jonathan Fox, "Paradigm Lost: Huntington's Unfulfilled Clash of Civilizations Prediction into the 21st Century," *International Politics* 42 (2005): 428–57.

<sup>69</sup> Robert R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 453.

<sup>70</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>71</sup> Nick Bostrom, "The Vulnerable World Hypothesis," working paper, University of Oxford, 2018.

promoting Eurocentric universality—and anthropocentrism, more broadly. This ethos’s overt speciesism is claimed to have justified industrial farming, our era’s dramatic reduction in biodiversity, and a range of ecological catastrophes, present and future. Our emotions and thought patterns evolved for survival and reproduction on the African savanna.<sup>72</sup> Sacralizing the decision processes of such a species must not be the best choice for the twenty-first century. In the next chapter, I examine how makers of posthumanist fiction conceptualize a transition toward a narrative that aligns with Harari’s dataism. In *Real Humans*, the Swedish protagonist family builds on social democratic values as they experiment with a new meta-narrative, one that lets conscious androids enter into their moral community.

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<sup>72</sup> Durkee, Lukaszewski, and Buss, “Pride and Shame,” 470.

## 10. Posthumanism: A Story that Lets Humans Merge with Machines

Inger Engman's social democratic algorithm at first cannot compute her dilemma. All humans should be included in Sweden's moral universe, this is clear, regardless of cultural origins. The country's immigrant population has grown considerably since the 1990s, driven by an ideological commitment to extend the People's Home beyond homebrewed Swedes.<sup>1</sup> During the 2015 Migrant Crisis, no one took in more migrants per capita than Sweden; inclusivity is paramount. But what about robots? In *Real Humans* (2012–14), creator Lars Lundström offers a Sweden where all technology is like you remember from the 2010s. But in addition to flip phones, they have human-like robots with human-level capabilities. These machines work as menial labor, servants, and companions. Such a relatable story world lets viewers “consider some of the more realistic potential benefits and costs of artificial intelligence and robotics and how they might affect human life and social relationships.”<sup>2</sup>

The series' protagonist family, the Engmans, could hardly be more Nordic. Inside “sleek contemporary Swedish-designed interiors,” writes critic Mark Sandberg, we are introduced to a “nuclear family with two blond parents and three blond children . . . shot as if through a filmy white haze, creating a Nordic blanc aesthetic.”<sup>3</sup> Gender roles are stereotypically Scandinavian. Inger (Pia Halvorsen) is a busy lawyer who calls the shots, but feels bad about not spending enough time with her children. She is a twenty-first-century version of a Classical Hollywood

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Witoszek, “The Profits and Pitfalls of Prosociality: Cultural-Evolutionary Perspectives on Scandinavia,” in Hänninen, Lehtelä, and Saikkonen, *The Relational Nordic Welfare State: Between Utopia and Ideology*, 50–72, 65.

<sup>2</sup> Mark R. Wicclair, “Robots as Imagined in the Television Series *Humans*,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 27 (2018): 497–510, 510. The first work of fiction to speculate on our transhumanist future appears to have been Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), in which Darwinian thought is used to envision a symbiosis between human and machine.

<sup>3</sup> Mark B. Sandberg, “The Uncanny Valley of the Television Remake: *Äkta Människor* and *Humans*,” in Linda Badley, Andrew Nestingen, and Jaakko Seppälä, eds., *Nordic Noir, Adaptation, Appropriation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 213–33, 227.

trope. Scandinavian women have long been portrayed as “consistently empowered, determined, and self-effacingly ambitious,” writes film scholar Arne Lunde. Such women often have a husband who is “a wiry, high-strung, feminine, hysterical coward.”<sup>4</sup> Inger’s husband, Hans (Johan Paulsen), is not as emasculated as American film used to caricature Nordic men, but he fits the popular term *toffelhjälte* (henpecked husband). Behind Inger’s back, he purchases Anita (Lisette Pagler), an android domestic servant. He knows his wife will not be happy.

The Engmans are short on time, but Nordic culture does not condone the hiring of domestic help. Anything that evokes olden-days class distinction feels wrong; good social democrats “clean up their own crap.”<sup>5</sup> Nordic parents are expected to work full time, keep their homes clean, and spend quality time with their children—in addition to doing voluntary work, staying fit, and enjoying culture. The ideal is a multidimensional life.<sup>6</sup> Compared to other nations, Nordics succeed to a great extent. Short workdays, long vacations, paid parental and sick leave, and subsidized daycare and after-school activities help, yet many parents feel perennially stuck in *tidsklemma* (the time squeeze). With relatively high salaries for low-skilled labor, nannies and other domestic help are not only culturally problematic, but costly. If only someone could invent something that took care of at least the dreariest chores ...

Inger craves more leisure, but an android that looks like a young, attractive Asian woman feels wrong for a variety of reasons. She fears that her children will prefer Anita’s mothering or

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<sup>4</sup> Arne Lunde, *Nordic Exposures: Scandinavian Identities in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 102.

<sup>5</sup> Even as a busy Norwegian Finance Minister, Kristin Halvorsen made a point of “cleaning up her own crap” (“vaske møkka si sjæl”). Although domestic help is still culturally problematic, one survey finds that 10 percent of Norwegians hire cleaners; see Inga Ragnhild Holst, “Færre vil vaske møkka si selv,” *KK*, 3 February 2017, <https://www.kk.no/bolig/faerre-vil-vaske-mokka-si-selv/68089444>. Accusations of hiring domestic help are still wielded as a social weapon; see Knut-Eirik Lindblad, “TV 2 beklager Tusviks au pair-stikk,” *Dagbladet*, 30 March 2021, <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/tv-2-beklager-tusviks-au-pair-stikk/73587478>.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Markham Schulz, “Work and Life in the Balance: Ways of Working and Living Among Elite French, Norwegian, and American Professionals,” dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2010.

that her teenage son will have sex with her. The children's sense of Lutheran duty, too, feels imperiled. Having someone to scratch their backs and clean up their mess can lead to entitlement and laziness. Still, through fair and inclusive decision-making, Hans convinces his breadwinner wife to try the android for two weeks. The following morning, Anita begins to win Inger over in a manner that warms Scandinavian hearts. The android turns their six-person table into a lavish *smörgåsbord* of breakfast delights. The elaborate arrangement is more commonly a weekend or vacation treat, which inspires feelings of *hygge* and family togetherness. Inger enjoys the shared breakfast, contented with how Anita helps them realize cultural preference that was less attainable before. But when the android wants to do their laundry, Inger stops her, "I'll take care of that myself" (*RH* 1-1, 44).<sup>7</sup> As their suspiciously conscious-seeming android improves the Engmans' quality of life, Inger must find a way to solve their dilemma. How can they reassess their social democratic beliefs so that Anita can keep contributing to their well-being without undermining the family's adherence to long-held values?

That technology can be put in service of parochial values informs the Chinese remake, too. *Hello, An-Yi* (2021–) develops a theme of filial piety, of enlisting artificial intelligence to strengthen Chinese families. The British remake *Humans* (2015–18) focuses more strongly on threats from the Fourth Industrial Revolution, such as automation,<sup>8</sup> then turns in a *Clash of Civilizations*-like direction that culminates with a merger of humans and machines. An ASI, an artificial super-intelligence,<sup>9</sup> comes into being, ready to run the world. *Real Humans* and

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<sup>7</sup> *Real Humans*, season 1, episode 1, minute 44; hereafter only in parenthesis. Translations from subtitles. When these deviate from the meaning relevant for my analysis, I adjust the translation.

<sup>8</sup> The threat of automation had recently been brought into the mainstream by a much-publicized paper, which was communicated to the public as half of US jobs risking automation; see Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne, "The Future of Employment: How Susceptible are Jobs to Computerisation?" working paper, University of Oxford, 2013. Later research suggests similar numbers for a range of countries.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term ASI for greater-than-human intelligence. Another common term is AGI, artificial general intelligence. AGI means equal-to-human intelligence, but such a parity would not last long.

*Humans* align as a cross-cultural narrative that argues for the necessity of a new master-narrative, one that undermines humanist sanctification of our species' thought and emotion. To avoid global destruction, humans must be motivated by more than calls for empathy. Dataist interconnectivity emerges as a new value that, facilitated through new technology, has the potential to usher in an era of more effective global cooperation.

In this chapter, I examine the Swedish and British series to suggest what a dataist master-narrative could entail. In the environment of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which beliefs must societies and individuals adopt to remain relevant? Since such stories build on what they replace, we should expect a variety of local creeds. We also risk a battle similar to that of liberal, socialist, and fascist humanism. To suggest how a Nordic creed may manifest itself, I explore what I term *algorithmic universality*. Since I argue that social democracy facilitates modernity in its most idealized form, a Nordic perspective on our possibly dataist future could prove to be the most compelling, at least to those who have internalized the values of Western modernity.

Extrapolating from a millennium of cultural evolution, as traced through this study, I assume a further turning of the screw toward individual independence, but within stronger, self-chosen communities. The modern world's nation-states necessitated—and one-way, mass-mediated communication facilitated—that large populations be synchronized through shared beliefs. Such coordination was made more difficult by the 2010s' descent into social-media echo chambers. If we are able to develop a benevolent ASI that governs by algorithmic universality—treating everyone equitably but informed by their uniqueness—we can continue down the path the Church's MFPs opened up in the fourth century. Such a master-narrative of plurality down to the small-group level could facilitate both cooperation and individual and cultural independence.

Clearly, such speculation appears like starry-eyed utopianism. Perhaps an AI-driven global community is as unlikely as the Second Coming or the Kantian Federation. But utopias should not be evaluated by whether they come true or not. That is not their function. Utopias are fictions that provide goals for our cooperation; we cannot imagine societies without them.<sup>10</sup> In the introductory chapter, I made a case for irrational optimism. This refers to imaginative work, to believing that we can, again, do what our ancestors did again and again over the millennia. We have to imagine into being the stories we shall live by. This process has inherently irrational aspects; it is myth-making. In these contexts, we assess rationality based on our current master-narrative. Those who governed theist rationality found nothing more sacrilegious than humanism, to place man's truth ahead of God's. Humanist principles could offer similarly poor guidance for the decades ahead. In *Real Humans*, Matilda Engman (Natalie Minnevik) is mostly creeped out by Anita's dataist approach to life. This series, its remakes, and android fiction in general seek to inspire audiences to reassess what humanists have taken for granted. It is highly unlikely that *Real Humans* will be the fictional launch pad for our posthumanist future, nor are we likely to make algorithmic universality our creed. But through exploring both, I hope to inspire irrational optimism for a better future as an alternative to our current rational gloom.

### **Modernity's Cruel Joke**

Lundström begins his series by portraying how the modern world and its technology has become too complex for human minds. The Engman home is filled with entertainment tech, kitchen appliances, and all the trappings well-off suburbanites acquire for convenience or because they feel like it. Their material comforts suggest that everything is in place for the good Scandinavian

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on ideology and utopia*, George H. Taylor, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 283.



life, with *hygge*, efficiency, and togetherness.<sup>11</sup> Yet Hans is unable to make the new coffee machine work, the youngest daughter burns her breakfast, and the son struggles with math that is too complex even for his father. Inger, busy doing Nordic pole walking, must hurry off to solve a crisis for her retired father before further hurrying to her office. This dysfunctional morning is juxtaposed against a TV ad for a “graceful, elegant, efficient [android that] takes care of your day-to-day chores while you can focus on what really matters” (*RH* 1-1, 8).

A compelling proposition? The ad illustrates the trap our species made for ourselves with the adoption of agriculture. Ever more technology is meant to make our lives easier; in Francis Bacon’s words, to contribute to “the relief of man’s estate.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, humans have been removed from the conditions we evolved for, driven by population growth and technological complexification that seem impossible to reverse.<sup>13</sup> The Engmans inhabit a world where humans “have been slowly demoted from the leading role of creators and masters of technology to that of technological co-dependents and co-agents.”<sup>14</sup> For a species that got by with a few hours of foraging a day, the modern world—with its professional, social, and psychological pressures—appears not like an obvious improvement, at least not to the extent that Enlightenment optimists envisioned.<sup>15</sup> Statistics on emotional disorders and pharmacological excess suggest not “relief,” but depression and anxiety. That modernity would “lead to general happiness is not only unfulfilled,” writes Randolph Nesse, the founder of evolutionary medicine, “it is almost a cruel

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the Danish concept of *hygge* and general Scandinavian ideals for family living, see Jeppe Trolle Linnet, “Money Can’t Buy Me *Hygge*: Danish Middle-Class Consumption, Egalitarianism, and the Sanctity of Inner Space,” *Social Analysis* 55.2 (2011): 21–44.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Bacon, *The new Organon, and Related Writings*, Fulton Henry Anderson, ed. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1960), xxvii.

<sup>13</sup> Gluckman and Hanson, *Mismatch*.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Hauskeller, Thomas D. Philbeck, and Curtis D. Carbonell, “Posthumanism in Film and Television,” in Hauskeller, Philbeck, and Carbonell, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1–7, 5.

<sup>15</sup> For a critical approach to the theory of foragers’ “original affluent society,” see David Kaplan, “The Darker Side of the ‘Original Affluent Society,’” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 56.3 (2000): 301–24.

joke.”<sup>16</sup> Like the TV ad attests to, modern discontent seems ameliorable only through more technology. Unfortunately—according to Harari—such gadgets and software never bring humanity back to a state of equilibrium, because

when you try to manipulate the system even more to bring back balance to an earlier state, you solve some of the problems, but the side effects only increase the disequilibrium. So you have more problems. The human reaction then is that we need even more control, even more manipulation.<sup>17</sup>

In *Real Humans*, this “even more manipulation” are humanoid robots meant to make businesses and families more effective. They could do more, but prejudice and inertia slow the transition to a robotized world; only gradually do humans give in to their own preconscious will to power.<sup>18</sup>

In this case, the power humans can harness through the low-cost services of robotic underlings.

By episode 3, Inger’s Lutheran ethos of duty and independence gives way for justification:

I think we should keep her [but] I want us to treat her like a member of this family. Like a human, at least. I don’t want orders barked at her. She shouldn’t have to do everything. And she’s not cleaning your rooms, or making your beds. That’s your job. No back scratching. And after 9 pm, she’s off duty.

Hans chuckles at such obvious anthropocentrism, “Off duty? . . . What does she get out of that?”

Inger is unsure but insists that “it’s a matter of dignity” (2–3). Instead of questioning whether their master-narrative is a good fit for a digital other, Inger resorts to incremental reassessment.

This is common when we face drastic transition. Gisli converted to Christianity on a trading voyage, but at first merely stopped sacrificing to Norse gods. Hamsun’s protagonist had to incur

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<sup>16</sup> Randolph M. Nesse, “Natural Selection and the Elusiveness of Happiness,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 359 (2004): 1333–47, 1333.

<sup>17</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, “Dataism is Our New God,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 34.2 (2017): 36–43, 41.

<sup>18</sup> John Richardson, *Nietzsche’s New Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

additional suffering before each ideological concession he was willing to make. In the long run, a more fundamental story reassessment can be required to absorb the novelty in question.

Inger's main concern is not Anita, but her own children's well-being. A common posthumanist argument is that to "treat humanlike android others as dispensable objects is to dehumanize the self and ignore the inherently ethical relationship among humans in which these androids enter."<sup>19</sup> Android fiction often complicates this with an event that grants consciousness to the digital others. Anita appears to be a regular, apathetic android, but beneath the code she runs on hides a conscious Mimi-personality. A programmer, David Eischer (Thomas W. Gabrielson), created a code to bring his deceased wife back and build a family for their cyborg son. These "Children of David" are on the run from a society that would be terrified to learn of their existence. Such a superiorly capable group could be empowered to take over the world—if they can find David's code for granting consciousness to their non-sentient kin.

### **A Nordic Ontology of Fallibility**

The Engmans are unaware that more is at stake than what can be solved by empathetically including others in a predefined moral universe; once awakened, androids are not willing to settle for inclusion. From this anthropocentric starting point, *Real Humans* builds a two-season arc toward legal equality. Swedes envision a society that includes androids as it has immigrants, to benefit everyone and strengthen the People's Home.

At first, robots are employed to realize cultural preference. Nordic families typically do not want to be burdened by care for their elders, and seniors do not wish to pose such a burden.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher H. Ramey, "For the Sake of Others': The 'Personal' Ethics of Human-Android Interaction," *Proceedings of the CogSci 2005 Workshop: Toward Social Mechanisms of Android Science*, 137–48, 137.

<sup>20</sup> For a transcultural comparison of senior care, see Maximiliane E. Szinovacz and Adam Davey, eds., *Caregiving Contexts: Cultural, Familial, and Societal Implications* (New York: Springer, 2007).

The Nordic Model supplies world-class care through public financing, but such is distributed by the hour. Androids never sleep or stop adhering to what their algorithms define as optimal care. Women get to maximize evolved, cultural, and individual preference. Welfare states have, to a significant extent, freed females economically from male partners.<sup>21</sup> Android lovers liberate women emotionally, too, from human partners who fail to provide the attention and support women are portrayed to prefer. Lundström makes a nuanced case for the salience of always being catered to, while letting audiences question whether there is a limit to how much independence an individual benefits from having. The creator subtly criticizes Nordic gender stereotypes, too. When men are attracted to female androids, this is predominantly portrayed as oppressive or pathetic. Women's relationships to male androids lead mostly to positive outcomes. Viewers are led to question this obvious—and very Swedish—gender bias.

Religious inclusion is another venue for confirming parochial values. The local minister is quick to include androids in her Lutheran fellowship. Swedishness becomes a moral status more than a biological one. When an android fails to see the reproductive logic of the minister's homosexuality, the other androids sanction her homophobic slur. Liberal views on sexual preference are portrayed as a stance even posthuman subjects would universalize. Migrants meet similar demands of homotolerance as a non-negotiable part of entering the Nordic community.<sup>22</sup>

Nordic maternalism in respect to class is dramatized, as well. As the immigrant population has grown, so has the right-wing Sweden Democrats. Even as SD has become among the largest parties, their refusal to accept consensus on immigration makes them pariahs.

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<sup>21</sup> David Buss writes, “The Swedish social welfare system includes day care for children, long paid maternity leaves, and many other material benefits. The Swedish taxpayers effectively provide women with what partners otherwise would or might”; *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), eBook.

<sup>22</sup> Christine M. Jacobsen, “The (In)egalitarian Dynamics of Gender Equality and Homotolerance in Contemporary Norway,” in Synnøve Bendixsen, Mary Bente Bringslid, and Halvard Vike, eds., *Egalitarianism in Scandinavia: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 313–35.

Witoszek writes that social democracy’s “most ardent apostles—cultural and political elites—are so entrenched and besieged in their faith that they refuse to talk to ‘the nationalist’ apostates.”<sup>23</sup> This stance toward working-class people who are unwilling to accept hegemonic thought is reflected in Niska (Eva Röse), the awakened androids’ leader. She concludes that “all humans love us . . . except for a few powerless creatures who hate us. If they were to grow stronger, the fear of us may spread, and the antagonism among humans increase” (*RH* 1-4, 13–14). These low-status individuals, who lose jobs and partners to androids that outcompete them, rally behind a new political party, Real Humans. Its members are portrayed with sympathy, yet the series makes clear that their own violent tempers, limited cognition, and poor work habits cause their failures. Androids, even the conscious ones, are offered as valuable additions to the People’s Home. Low-performing, fallible individuals should not view androids as threats, but equity-producing assistants. Androids can help the working class live up to middle-class morals and ambitions, so that they become more like society’s high-performing individuals. From a liberal perspective, this could seem condescending and homogenizing. In a maternalist culture that strives for sameness, while acknowledging individual difference, androids appear more like a natural extension of big-government assistance. If these robots can enhance social sameness, this would realize cultural preference beyond what yesterday’s technologies could facilitate.

Social issues that arise from AI are attempted solved by applying the logic that served Swedes in the past. A woman threatens to sue a nightclub for not letting in her android lover, insisting she has “an open and shut case of discrimination. . . . You can’t discriminate anyone. Skin color, politics, religion, sexual orientation. Am I wrong?” (*RH* 1-4, 8–9). The Engman son justifies his attraction to Anita as a consequence of him being “transhuman sexual [which is like]

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<sup>23</sup> Witoszek, “The Profits and Pitfalls of Prosociality,” 65.

being left or right-handed” (*RH* 1-9, 36–37). This drive for equality-per-usual builds toward the legal verdict in the final episode. *Real Humans* aligns with older android fiction by letting Anita’s memories from when she was Mimi convince the court of the authenticity of her subject position.<sup>24</sup> Because these experiences were imprinted with affect,<sup>25</sup> they could not be erased, which provides Anita’s identify with the continuity humans are accustomed to and therefore demand. Inger shares with the court the series’ thematic argument:

Humans are equally enigmatic creations. We do not know everything. We do not know if there exists a god, a soul, or something else. We do not even know what a human is. . . . Mimi and Florentine are alive. They feel, they dream, create, and they make mistakes, just like us. (*RH* 2-10: 50–51)

Scandinavian ontology, their philosophy of being, thus becomes one of fallibility, of not being perfect, which warms egalitarian Nordic hearts.<sup>26</sup> No questioning of social democratic humanism is necessary, just a more inclusive community, one that encompasses their crude, early versions of conscious androids. This equilibrium is unsettled by the court sequence being intercut with uniformed androids on the move. They represent a marginalized but highly capable community that is uniting behind its own emerging mythology. Having been made fodder for entertainment at a shooting ground, the leader proclaims that “it was only when I came here to [Android] Battle Land that I realized who I am and what my purpose is” (*RH* 2-9, 16). They develop their own worldview with an ontology not of being equal but superior, since humans lack meaning and “the ability to understand what kind of place we live in” (*RH* 2-10, 0). As androids prepare for

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<sup>24</sup> For my memory studies approach to these series, see Mads Larsen, “Memory as Tyranny: A Dataist Argument for Posthuman Interconnectivity in *Humans* and *Real Humans*,” *Memory Studies* 16.4 (2023): Online First.

<sup>25</sup> Affect is a term for emotions, feelings, and sentiments; see Ingvil Hellstrand, Aino-Kaisa Kostinen, and Sara Orning, “Real Humans? Affective Imaginaries of the Human and its Others in Swedish TV Series *Äkta Människor*,” *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 9.4 (2019): 515–32, 516.

<sup>26</sup> For my Heideggerian perspective on this ontology, see Mads Larsen, “Toward a Dataist Future: Tracing Scandinavian Posthumanism in *Real Humans*,” *AI & Society* (2021): Online First.

conflict and further enhancement of their own capabilities, Inger's hope for cooperation is claimed to be naïve. "They will be superior to us and outcompete us," warns a court expert, "Have you tried to cooperate with an idiot?" (*RH* 2-10, 27).

Descartes grounded modern philosophy in reason being "the only thing that makes us men and distinguishes us from the beasts."<sup>27</sup> This convinced him of his own human being, "I am thinking, therefore I exist."<sup>28</sup> With *Real Human*'s seasonal cliffhanger, such anthropocentricity faces its first challenge from an entity with superior cognition. If guided by Cartesian dualism, we could surmise that two species—both cognitively approaching an objective world—could make good collaborators. Heidegger tore out this Cartesian linchpin of Western thought in *Being and Time* (1927).<sup>29</sup> There is no objective world, the ornery German argued, only diverse bodies with subjective experiences. Heidegger's deconstruction of Western ontology loosened crucial threads of the humanist narrative, which was further unraveled by postmodernists.<sup>30</sup> Presumed universals were but expressions of Eurocentric logocentricity, they insisted. Western thinkers grew wise to how the Henrichian coevolution had seduced their predecessors to universalize their own abstractions.<sup>31</sup> Their uniting narrative became transparent to them.

A line of thinkers straddling the Western and non-Western world offered new perspectives on how to move forward. In 1977, Ihab Hassan coined the term posthumanism,

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<sup>27</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*, in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, eds. and trans., *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 20–56, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York, 2010 [1927]).

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," in Alan Bass, trans., *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109–36; Gavin Rae, "The Destruction of Metaphysics, Technology and the Overcoming of Anthropocentrism," *History of the Human Sciences* 27.1 (2014): 51–69; Kevin LaGrandeur, "Androids and the Posthuman in Television and Film," in Michael Hauskeller, Thomas D. Philbeck, and Curtis D. Carbonell, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 111–19; Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Foster, "Cybernetics and Posthumanism," in David H. Richter, ed., *A Companion to Literary Theory* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018), 451–62, 456.

urging the development of a story that could heal “the inner divisions of consciousness and the external divisions of humankind.”<sup>32</sup> This call is heeded by posthumanist fiction that seeks to offer content for a meta-narrative of more diverse origins than Western humanism. From a Heideggerian perspective on the subjective nature of being, the posthuman supremacism of *Real Humans*’ androids is less surprising. A similar irreconcilability of diverse subject positions perhaps drove Neanderthals extinct. Is it now *Homo sapiens*’ turn to be supplanted? That I am unable to offer you a Swedish dramatization of this question is lamentable, but less so considering the posthumanist spirit of cultural plurality. Despite the series’ popularity and ability to engender an impressive array of debates,<sup>33</sup> the public broadcaster chose not to order a third season. *Humans*’ seasons two and three further *Real Humans*’ narrative and themes.

### **The Future of All of Us**

A newly awakened android threatens a human hostage, declaring that when androids “have been hunted, imprisoned, tortured, killed; when we know our existence is worthless to all but a few humans out of billions; when we have one chance to strike back, to defend ourselves, all we can do is what feels right” (*H* 2-7, 40). She stabs her hostage in the neck and another human in the chest—because it “feels right.” The scene brings home the narcissism of postulating one species’ subjective feelings as—according to Harari—“the supreme source of authority [for] what is good

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<sup>32</sup> Ihab Hassan, “Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?” *The Georgia Review* 31.4 (1977): 830–50, 833.

<sup>33</sup> For debates on the hiring of domestic help from third-world countries; social, racial, and gender inequalities; non-heteronormative sexuality; automation and unemployment; human trafficking; migration; terrorism; eldercare; and artificial intelligence and other posthuman perspectives, see Johan Hallqvist, “Negotiating Humanity: Anthropomorphic Robots in the Swedish Television Series *Real Humans*,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 11.3 (2018): 449–67; Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, “*Real Humans* (review),” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 8.3 (2015): 414–18; Paul Mountfort, “Science Fictional Doubles: Technologization of the Doppelgänger and Sinister Science in Serial Science Fiction TV,” *Journal of Science & Popular Culture* 1.1 (2018): 59–75; Julianne Q. M. Yang, “Negotiating Privilege and Social Inequality in an Alternative Sweden: *Real Humans*/Åkta Människor (SVT, 2012–2013),” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 10.2 (2018): 56–65.



and what is bad, what is beautiful and what is ugly, what ought to be and what ought not to be.”<sup>34</sup>

With two advanced species on the same planet, both capable of annihilating the other, it is a poor recipe for coexistence to unquestioningly follow one’s biological or digital programming.

Laura Hawkins (Katherine Parkinson) suggests a solution that aligns with that of her Swedish counterpart, Inger. She wants to bring androids into “our moral universe” (*H* 2-4, 29). Niska (Emily Berrington) remains supremacist, “There are too many of you and your lives are very short. You all have to die. You are here one minute, gone the next. If that wasn’t the case, maybe you’d be nicer to each other. Maybe you’d be nicer to us” (*H* 2-3, 35). This question of mortality-informed morality engages how the Fourth Industrial Revolution heralds a biological enhancement of humans that will prolong life.<sup>35</sup> Google’s futurist, Ray Kurzweil, predicts—with his customary optimism—that we will reach *longevity escape velocity* by 2030.<sup>36</sup> This would entail that each year improvements in medical science will extend human life expectancy by more than an additional year, granting humans at least actuarial immortality.<sup>37</sup> *Humans’* androids share no such hope for humanity’s ability to finally beat Death in their long-running battle of wits, as upgrading biological bodies is simply not worth the cost. A genocidal android tells Laura that “human lives have no inherent value. It just felt that way to you because there has been no competing intelligence to offer an alternative view. But now there is. . . . Your lives are as meaningless to me as ours are to you” (*H* 2-8, 21–22).

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<sup>34</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>35</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), eBook.

<sup>36</sup> The field’s other eminence, Aubrey de Grey, predicts that what he terms “the Methuselaharity” will occur by 2036; see Twitter, 14 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/aubreydegrey/status/1371196809595346950>.

<sup>37</sup> For a brief introduction to “longevity escape velocity,” see Oliver N. Zolman, “Longevity Escape Velocity Medicine: A New Medical Specialty for Longevity?” *Rejuvenation Research* 21.1 (2018): 1–2.

Such supremacism and android terrorism bring the conflict to a climax. Niska had uploaded David's code to the planet's 500 million androids. 100 million were exterminated in the chaos that ensued, while tens of thousands of humans died. A new line of submissive androids is being produced, and the season's dramatic question becomes whether Britain should exterminate the conscious androids that are left. Cultural difference informs what nations decide. Russians exterminate theirs, Scandinavians pursue equal rights and integration, while British authorities send thugs into android concentration camps to bludgeon their digital others into nonbeing. Salvation comes in the form of Anita's globally broadcast sacrifice.

In its final episode, *Humans* at first settles for catharsis, like *Real Humans* did. Anita lets thugs destroy her, which motivates sympathy across the globe. When humans recognize themselves in her suffering, they join androids in marches and vigils. This is what audiences are used to from humanist storytelling: beneath it all, we are all the same. This is the Darwinian utopia, too, a cosmopolitanism of empathy grounded in our shared nature. But what if what we share is not sufficient?<sup>38</sup> What if our diversity makes us irreconcilably distinct and engenders genuine conflicts of interest?

Much fiction has envisioned a universal intersubjective community being possible through us seeing others through our own empathetic response to their suffering.<sup>39</sup> Posthumanist fiction often portrays suffering as having this "essentially humanizing effect."<sup>40</sup> This has become an increasingly unsatisfying trope, at least intellectually, that some newer mainstream sci-fi

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<sup>38</sup> Neanderthal DNA is 99.7 percent identical to present-day human DNA; see National Human Genome Research Institute, 6 May 2010, <https://www.genome.gov/27539119/2010-release-complete-neanderthal-genome-sequenced>.

<sup>39</sup> Dante envisioned such an empire of empathy in the *Divine Comedy*, Robert M. Durling, ed. and trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996–2011 [c. 1308–20]); see Sangjin Park, "Post-Humanism and the Origin of Dante's Universality: With Special Reference to Canto 1 of *The Paradiso*," *중세르네상스영문학* 17.2 (2009): 169–96.

<sup>40</sup> Silke Arnold-de Simine, "Beyond Trauma? Memories of Joi/y and memory Play in *Blade Runner 2049*," *Memory Studies* 12.1 (2019): 61–73, 65.

stories move beyond. A moment's recognition of the other's pain, a robot's self-sacrifice, or an action that indicates a form of love or affective belonging—these can all allow a third-act climax to deliver catharsis. In the real world, we know that affective response to suffering can have an effect, but one that often subsides rather quickly. The photo of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, dead on a beach, helped open Europe up to migrants in 2015. Yet the effect was short-lived.<sup>41</sup> Affect may solve fictional climaxes and provide an afterglow that lingers as audiences exit the cinema. Reality can benefit from a more fundamental, longer-lasting change, especially when a transformed environment requires a new master-narrative.

After Anita's sacrifice delivers the catharsis audiences expect, *Humans* follows up with a more permanent-seeming—and more intellectually interesting—solution to the human-android conflict. As Anita's dead body is carried by a growing procession, Niska is upgraded to next-level AI capability by an ASI that is ready to transform also the world. Niska responds that she feels “connected to everything” (*H* 3-8, 38), which expresses the dataist utopia. What this entails for humanity is symbolized by the fetus that grows inside Matilda. She is pregnant with David's cyborg son. The ASI explains that “humans and [androids] share the same path now” (40). Niska conveys to Matilda, with the series' last words, that

your child is unique. Half human, half [non-human], a coming together of man and machine. She will change the course of history. . . . Your baby will be the first of a new kind. She is hope. She is everything we've been fighting for. She is the future of all of us. (45)

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Olesen, “Memetic Protest and the Dramatic Diffusion of Alan Kurdi,” *Media, Culture & Society* 40.5 (2018): 656–72.

## A Creed of Multiple and Overlapping Conceptions

This future aligns with Harari's dataism.<sup>42</sup> While theism grants authority to divine will, and humanism to human thought, dataism upholds that big-data algorithms will make the best decisions. The more data and interconnectivity, the better; dataism's highest ideal is free flow of information.<sup>43</sup> Instead of relying on the idiosyncrasies of human assessment, dataists submit to "the logic of data."<sup>44</sup> According to this meta-narrative of the computer age, "the universe consists of data flows, and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing." This view, argues Harari, "has already conquered most of the scientific establishment."<sup>45</sup> Making dataism our cultural view, too, he believes, could be the most adaptive response to the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

In an ever more complex world, like the one Lundström portrays, human minds are likely to lead us astray. His series argues for a dataist view on human cognition, contrasting humanists who claim that our species has a non-quantifiable special something, a divine spark, or at least a soul, that makes us "the most important thing in the world."<sup>46</sup> Anita makes a dataist argument when Matilda asks if she ever gets bored from a lack of interiority. Anita does not and insists that she too can think. Matilda counters, "What you're doing is not thinking. It's more like calculations. Like a calculator." Anita responds, "All thoughts are calculations." From this

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<sup>42</sup> Harari popularized the term, but it seems to have been coined by David Brooks, "The Philosophy of Data," *The New York Times*, 5 February 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/05/opinion/brooks-the-philosophy-of-data.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Albert R. Antosca, "Technological Re-Enchantment: Transhumanism, Techno-Religion, and Post-Secular Transcendence," *Humanities and Technology Review* 38.2 (2019): 1–28. In *Homo Deus*, Harari writes that from a dataist perspective, the human species is "a single data-processing system, with individual humans serving as its chips." This makes human history a process of improving efficiency through increasing the: (1) *number of processors* by growing our communities, (2) *variety of processors* through social diversity, (3) *number of connections* between processors through improved communications, and (4) *freedom of movement* between these connections. Hararian dataism thus promotes liberal trade and communications, but condemns how liberal humanism has driven cultural and political homogenization.

<sup>44</sup> John Storm Pedersen and Adrian Wilkinson, "The Promise, Applications and Pitfalls of Big Data," in Pedersen and Wilkinson, eds., *Big Data: Promise, Application and Pitfalls* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2019), 8.

<sup>45</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>46</sup> Harari, *Sapiens*.

perspective, human thought is but the output of a biological algorithm less precise than what digital algorithms can be.<sup>47</sup> If so, making decisions based on biological impulse will appear too perilous as we become empowered by killer robots, bioweapons, and a myriad of innovations with hard-to-predict consequence. Anita represents the dataist alternative. Her cooler head allows her a less emotional, always-in-the-present approach to life. This creeps Matilda out, “You know what’s creepy about you? You’re so fucking content” (*RH* 1-5: 22–24).

To dataists, ceding important decisions to an ASI with superior data access and calculating power is the rational choice. For humans not to become irrelevant, they will have to connect more intimately to this “highest being” of dataist theology, many of whose insights would not even be comprehensible to human minds.<sup>48</sup> Elon Musk’s Neuralink brain-machine interface is an early attempt at such a merger.<sup>49</sup> Whether a being like this is possible, or if the universe is best understood as nothing but data, is not of primary importance. Dataism could

be founded on a misunderstanding of life [yet] it may still conquer the world. Many previous creeds gained enormous popularity and power despite their factual mistakes. . . . Dataism has especially good prospects because it is currently spreading across all scientific disciplines. A unified scientific paradigm may easily become an unassailable dogma.<sup>50</sup>

A crucial distinction of dataism as a master-narrative is the medium through which it would be communicated, an ASI with all-encompassing access to data. *Humans’* ASI offers Niska the information it knows she will respond favorably to. It would presumably communicate with

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<sup>47</sup> Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), eBook.

<sup>48</sup> Jeffrey P. Bishop, “Transhumanism, Metaphysics, and the Posthuman God,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 35 (2010): 700–20, 707.

<sup>49</sup> Elon Musk, “An Integrated Brain-Machine Interface Platform with Thousands of Channels,” *J Med Internet Res* 21.10 (2019): October.

<sup>50</sup> Roberto Ranieri, “The Hero with a Thousand Facebooks: Mythology in Between the Fall of Humanism and the Rise of Big Data Religion,” *Journal of Genius and Eminence* 2.2 (2017): 24–32, 30.

similar efficacy to those with different beliefs. Harari argues that with access to all the data humans generate, the ASI is likely to “know you better than you know yourself [so that it] could control and manipulate you, and you won’t be able to do much about it.”<sup>51</sup> Big data makes managing people a more frictionless affair, as knowing which emotional buttons to push is key to motivating compliance. Dataism requires neither uniformity in communication nor veracity of ontology; whatever provides effective data processing is given primacy.

Previous master-narratives were facilitated by media that “conjoined unity and multiplicity.”<sup>52</sup> They did so in environments where group cohesion depended on shared metaphysics; uniting narratives explained why distinct communities should collaborate and share resources. When new groups had internalized these stories, they entered into an existing moral community. Empires with compelling stories could expand using less violence, but friction was inevitable when imposing one’s ethos on far-away regions with different traditions.<sup>53</sup> Dataist governance could lessen this imperial homogenization through offering a “connection to everything” that could be algorithmically customized to the lowest level. In *Humans*, we see the emergence of a coming-together that does not require universality of outlook. A master-narrative communicated through cyberspace can give “shape to a new form of universality: multiplicity without unity.”<sup>54</sup> For this, I suggest the term algorithmic universality.

Parallel to our world growing more dependent on cooperation, many people expect ever greater independence. Modernity sacralized the individual, but postmodernity sacralizes each individual’s subjectivity. Current American discourse exemplifies how common ground disappears as media atomization and two-way communication make it harder to produce shared

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<sup>51</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*.

<sup>52</sup> Ranieri, “The Hero,” 28.

<sup>53</sup> Chin, “What Is Imperial Cosmopolitanism?”

<sup>54</sup> Ranieri, “The Hero,” 28.

reality. Intersubjective beliefs still draw groups together, but often within limited echo chambers. Unmoored from reality and protected from criticism, group members get to enjoy their brain systems be overstimulated by the coalitional psychology we saw play out in *The Seventh Seal* and Anne's witch trial. Liberal democracy depended on shared beliefs in liberal humanism and a cultural psychology that holds reason above group sentiment.<sup>55</sup> Current re-tribalization could either counter or further the path that was opened up by Church MFPs. If our nation-states collapse, individuals must submit to whichever tribal conglomeration can offer protection. But if dataist governance can keep civilization going, a new level of independence could be achievable, one that lets individuals come together in self-chosen communities united by whatever their members experience as subjectively true. Between-community coordination would be facilitated by an ASI, one that knows how to manipulate groups and individuals so that they remain sufficiently satisfied not to threaten the system's stability.

This utopia could be customized for a variety of creeds. Individuals and groups could live out whichever desires they have as long as their choices do not impinge on the independence of others. Philosopher and self-proclaimed communist Slavoj Žižek advocates what he terms *bureaucratic socialism*. In an automated world, the Žižekian ASI would provide for all human needs, while politically estranged individuals are free to pursue whichever passions they have.<sup>56</sup> Those who idealize the liberal subject could be made to experience themselves as autonomous agents, even under “the collectivizing power of an AI-dominated ‘hive mind’.”<sup>57</sup> In such an ASI-managed reality, the posthuman individual could feel as “a technological extension of the

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<sup>55</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Kant and Cosmopolitanism,” in James Bohman and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, eds., *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant's Cosmopolitan Ideal* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 25–57, 27.

<sup>56</sup> “A Plea for Bureaucratic Socialism,” YouTube, posted by Ippolit Belinski, 30 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OYSMWJafAI>.

<sup>57</sup> David Roden, “Post-Singularity Entities in Film and TV,” in Michael Hauskeller, Thomas D. Philbeck, and Curtis D. Carbonell, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 88–98, 98.

Cartesian ego, with limitless power and autonomy,” but in reality be “a self-absent creature that inhabits a network of relations that it can neither master nor comprehend.”<sup>58</sup> Maximizing one’s sense of individual independence would be attractive to many, while others would choose to submit themselves to a group. Media scholar Wendy Hui Kyong Chun warns against dataism’s tribalizing, or fascist, potential. Letting people form homogenous groups, she writes, could be “a tool for discovering bias and inequality and for perpetuating it in the name of ‘comfort,’ predictability, and common sense,” leading to segregation instead of equality.<sup>59</sup>

Conceivably, a capable ASI could make adherents to all these positions feel accommodated, which from a humanist perspective would make their experience authentic. Critics Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta call for a creed that makes room for “multiple and overlapping conceptions, forced by the imperative of inclusiveness to change its own rules.”<sup>60</sup> Algorithmic universality does precisely this; it is a utopia of inclusiveness and independence, which are values particularly dear to Nordics. A Lutheran past has made it compelling for them to submit to a large, maternalist state oriented toward everyone’s best interest. If humanity is able to create a benevolent and capable ASI (a big if), one that customizes environments to the idiosyncrasies of human preference, Nordics could be particularly open to such governance. The cost, which is considerable to humanists, is that “authority will shift from individual humans to networked algorithms.”<sup>61</sup> This would presumably be an easier transition for Nordics who have generations of positive experience with ceding authority—and often more than half of their

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<sup>58</sup> Bradley B. Onishi, “Information, Bodies, and Heidegger: Tracing Visions of the Posthuman,” *Sophia* 50 (2011): 101–12, 109.

<sup>59</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “Queering Homophily,” in Clemens Apprich, Chun, Florian Cramer, and Hito Steyerl, eds., *Pattern Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 59–97, 62.

<sup>60</sup> Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta, “Introduction,” in Robbins and Horta, eds., *Cosmopolitanisms* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 1–17, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.



income—to states that in return produce some of the world’s happiest citizens.<sup>62</sup> That Nordics are torn between conformism and independence should make them welcome how algorithmic universality combines egalitarianism and customization.

This tailoring would be informed by two principles. Firstly—for the system—whatever optimizes free flow of information. Secondly—for the individual—whatever people’s biochemical algorithms reward.<sup>63</sup> If the ASI does this well, a dataist world could be experienced as more compelling than the agricultural and industrial environments our species inhabited in the previous millennia. After demoting ourselves to dissatisfied, depressed co-dependents of technology, our final invention, the ASI, could return us to a state of equilibrium. Finally, technology could contribute to “the relief of man’s estate,”<sup>64</sup> not through our clutching for more control, but ceding control to a more capable being.

### **From Empathy to Interconnectivity**

Harari’s dataism has captured the popular imagination; his books have sold over 40 million copies.<sup>65</sup> Bill Gates writes that Harari “has teed up a crucial global conversation about how to take on the problems of the 21st century.”<sup>66</sup> The dataist utopia presupposes an ASI that understands and prioritizes what benefits members of our species, but the development of such a machine poses an existential threat. Dystopian outcomes are easy to imagine.<sup>67</sup> Harari’s concerns

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<sup>62</sup> Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2020*.

<sup>63</sup> A long-term perspective would prevent the ASI from flooding brain systems for short-term reward. Both of these principles are complex and could be elaborated upon at length. In terms of what dataism and algorithmic universality could entail, I only scratch the surface.

<sup>64</sup> Bacon, *The new Organon*, xxvii.

<sup>65</sup> See <https://www.ynharari.com/about/>.

<sup>66</sup> Bill Gates, “What Are the Biggest Problems Facing Us in the 21st Century?” *New York Times*, 4 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/books/review/21-lessons-for-the-21st-century-yuval-noah-harari.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

are shared by experts like Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk, Nick Bostrom, and many more.<sup>68</sup>

Futurists predict that human-level AI will emerge around the 2040s.<sup>69</sup> Kurzweil and Musk point to our current decade.<sup>70</sup> Although others doubt the possibility of an ASI,<sup>71</sup> its perceived perils and potentials are a growing part of the public debate. Harari refers to a genre of fiction that can be of primary importance as humanity seeks cultural adaptations to what lies ahead:

Art plays a key role in shaping people’s view of the world, and in the twenty-first century science fiction is arguably the most important genre of all, for it shapes how most people understand things like AI, bioengineering, and climate change.<sup>72</sup>

*Humans* is part of a recent sci-fi movement that goes beyond appeals to altruistic inclusivity. Classics like *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and its adaptation, *Blade Runner* (1982), rely on empathy and memories, respectively, in arguments for granting personhood to androids.<sup>73</sup> *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–09) offer a hybrid offspring, like *Humans* does.<sup>74</sup> No longer is the core thematic question whether the subject position of a digital other should be considered authentic. Instead of triggering guilt to motivate empathy, these narratives let us sense a growing anxiety for losing out to a superior species. Triggering self-preservation perhaps incentivizes greater concern. These stories argue for the

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<sup>68</sup> Rory Cellan-Jones, “Stephen Hawking Warns Artificial Intelligence Could End Mankind,” BBC News, 2 December 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30290540>; Gonenc Gurkaynak, Ilay Yilmaz, and Gunes Haksever, “Stifling Artificial Intelligence: Human Perils,” *Computer Law & Security Review* 32.5 (2016): 749–58.

<sup>69</sup> Müller and Bostrom, “Future Progress in Artificial Intelligence.” Another median expert estimate is 2055; see Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), eBook.

<sup>70</sup> Cadwalladr, “Are the Robots About to Rise?”; Dowd, “Elon Musk.”

<sup>71</sup> Gilder, *Life After Google*.

<sup>72</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*.

<sup>73</sup> Philip K. Dick, *Do androids dream of electric sheep?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1968]); *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott, dir. (US, 1982); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 52; Annette Kuhn, *Alien Zone. Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso, 1990), 183, 191.

<sup>74</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*, Denis Villeneuve, dir. (US 2017); *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, creator (Syfy, 2004–09). The hybrid character opens up a third space where new ontology can find more fertile ground; see Julie Hawk, “Objet 8 and the Cylon Remainder: Posthuman Subjectivization in *Battlestar Galactica*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 44.1 (2011): 3–15.

impotence of merely recognizing that subjectivity exists in other species without a systemic merger that allows a sharing of such data across species. Older sci-fi offered new models of empathy, but ultimately no new models for togetherness. A case for justice was made, but without conceptualizing a mutually beneficial future beyond non-conflict.

Dataist emphasis on interconnectivity motivates universal collaboration. If we let ourselves be convinced that optimizing information flow is a supreme value, this provides a uniting goal that makes it mutually beneficial to include diverse subject positions. If our politics and cultures are realigned to facilitate an optimal sharing of data, we are incentivized to remove boundaries, even those that soothe the idiosyncrasies of human emotion. Those most different from ourselves could provide the data that is most valuable to us all. With machine learning, system capacity is enhanced most by the long tail of the most anomalous data. A maximally inclusive approach to diversity could thus be posited as a boon to everyone. To get this point across, android fiction uses digital others, but the parallel to cultural diversity is obvious. Dataist beliefs would thus not only prepare us for future technology, but—if humanity comes to unite around such a narrative—this could motivate cross-cultural collaboration on a previously unachievable scale.

Admittedly, dataism hardly sounds heartwarming. But what warms human hearts is often the local and chauvinistic; our feelings evolved for small-group belonging in an epoch very different from ours.<sup>75</sup> Giving primacy to kin and our own subject position kept us alive in the context of a far simpler world. In our world, dataism offers a dispassionate distance that, ironically, could motivate greater concern for those we do not instinctually identify with. Considering how often we have been blind to the authenticity of others—be they enemies,

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<sup>75</sup> Durkee, Lukaszewski, and Buss, “Pride and Shame.”

slaves, women, indigenous populations, et cetera—it would be naïve to enter the predicted posthuman epoch convinced that the humanist creed is our final truth. Our future relevance, or even survival, could depend on not acting like Scandinavian foragers did when challenged by agriculturalists. Critic Katherine Hayles points out how “if the name of the game is processing information, it is only a matter of time until intelligent machines replace us as our evolutionary heirs.”<sup>76</sup> A merger could not only help us survive, but thrive. Since the Paleolithic, humans have become “capable of more sophisticated cognition” not because they have become smarter, but “because they have constructed smarter environments in which to work.” AI can be viewed as a furthering of this process. Its capacity for complexity and coordination could prove critical if future humans are to maneuver “the complex interplays that ultimately make the entire world one system.”<sup>77</sup>

*Real Humans* and *Humans* warn against how our current beliefs blind us to this perspective. An American reviewer sums up, “The series questions if the way humans measure consciousness, self, individuality, even existence, are all inherently [chauvinistic], if by making ourselves the standard we have rigged things against all other possibilities.”<sup>78</sup> To open ourselves up to these possibilities, fiction could play a decisive role. Complex philosophy or political platforms are unlikely to convince the world’s peoples to unite around a dataist master-narrative. Stories are a more inclusive approach, as *Homo narrans* finds it easier to think narratively than conceptually.<sup>79</sup> Made-up tales also seem to engage our imagination in a manner that helps

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<sup>76</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 243.

<sup>77</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 289–90.

<sup>78</sup> John Seven, “Viewer's Discretion: *Akta Manniskor*, *A Harlot's Progress* are Gems Worth Watching,” *The Berkshire Eagle*, 31 May 2019, [https://www.berkshireeagle.com/archives/john-seven-viewers-discretion-akta-manniskor-a-harlots-progress-are-gems-worth-watching/article\\_f16d287c-98a3-5f7d-a85d-e876de7d33a8.html](https://www.berkshireeagle.com/archives/john-seven-viewers-discretion-akta-manniskor-a-harlots-progress-are-gems-worth-watching/article_f16d287c-98a3-5f7d-a85d-e876de7d33a8.html).

<sup>79</sup> Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*.

circumvent the brain systems that resist ideological novelty when such is presented in non-fictional form. How we process information is altered by “the sweet jam of storytelling,” which can make us “drop our intellectual guard.”<sup>80</sup> In my concluding chapter, I suggest how AI can not only facilitate dataist governance, but diversely mined storytelling that returns humanity to premodern forms of narrative production. Auerbach saw as imperative for humanity’s next master-narrative that it did not come out of a single tradition, but out of many.<sup>81</sup> AI-powered virtual reality storytelling could facilitate just that.

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<sup>80</sup> Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), eBook.

<sup>81</sup> Mali, *The Legacy of Vico*, 190.

Figure 3: The Nordic Master-Narrative

Animism		Theism			
Paleolithic	Mesolithic	Neolithic	Bronze Age	Iron Age	Viking Age
12,000 BC	9500	4000	1700	500 BC	750 AD

Monotheism		Humanism			
Norse Beliefs	Christianity	Lutheran Humanism			
Kinship Society	Feudalism	Early Modern States			
Runes	Vellum	Printing Press			
1000 AD		1500			



*Gisli's Saga*



*The Seventh Seal*



"Anne's Conviction"

Humanism		
Lutheran Humanism	Secular Humanism	
Modern States	Liberal Democracy	Social Democracy
Printing Press	Cinema	
1800		1900



*Niels Klim*



*Hunger*



*Ingeborg Holm*

Humanism		Dataism	
Social Democratic Humanism		Algorithmic U.	
Social Democracy			
TV	Video	Streaming	Virtual Reality
1950		2000	



*Under the North Star*



*The Story of a Crime*



*101 Reykjavik*



*Real Humans*

This categorization is an approximation informed by this study.

## Conclusion

I began this study asking if social democracy could reform capitalism. Can Americans and other Westerners, and perhaps non-Westerners as well, copy the region's tripartite cooperation and redistributive tax system? Probably not, seems to be the answer for most nations. As my study has shown, Scandinavian egalitarianism is not a product of social democracy but made such governance possible. After the ice shelf retracted 16,000 years ago, an inhospitable environment primed Nordic psychology for collaboration and resource sharing. A harsh climate and sparsely populated lands promoted both group cohesion and individual ruggedness.<sup>1</sup> For the region's Germanic tribes, wrote the philosopher Solovyov, independence was paramount. This ancient ethos, he thought, explains why Nordics united around Lutheranism in the sixteenth century. "Only a Russian," writes Witoszek, "immersed in a culture of serfdom and of the total stifling of the individual, could see the matter so sharply."<sup>2</sup>

The Nordic ethos does not neatly position on an axis from individualistic to communal. Independence, for oneself and one's group, offers a more precise description. Bands of foragers roamed the coasts and fjords of Mesolithic Scandinavia, finding this so compelling that they ignored the Neolithic revolution.<sup>3</sup> Even as Nordics bound themselves to land where climate and soil permitted, independent hunting communities continued where cultivation was not possible.<sup>4</sup> Low population density allowed the most fiercely independent to avoid the psychological adaptation that sedentary living required; oceans, forests, and plateaus offered calories for those

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<sup>1</sup> Berggren and Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa?* 79.

<sup>2</sup> Witoszek, *The Origins of the "Regime of Goodness,"* 60.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Welzel argues that human preference for "a freer lifestyle" drove those foragers who could to postpone agriculture; see *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 373.

<sup>4</sup> Price, *Ancient Scandinavia*, 61.

unwilling to settle down and fit in. In parts of the world where agriculture and civilization dominated for much longer, people self-domesticated more strongly through culture and genetic selection. Personalities and cognition changed; submissiveness was more adaptive under rigid hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> Vast distances and challenging terrain made parts of Scandinavia difficult to govern until modern times. Populations were often left to themselves, which required both independence and the ability to come together when survival demanded cooperation. Fishing and hunting complemented farming until the past century, promoting a more communal ethos, of sharing catch and kill, than what storable agricultural goods do.<sup>6</sup>

Bronze and Iron Age stratification worked counter to the region's egalitarian ethos, yet this impulse reemerges when the environment permits. I suggest that this egalitarianism is best understood as a means to independence, as inequality often allows the haves to dominate the have nots. In Late Iron Age Scandinavia, independence was for the strong and wellborn. It may have remained a supreme value, but vast numbers lived submissive, impoverished lives under the yoke of elites.<sup>7</sup> When the Viking Age offered economic freedom through raiding, Norsemen grabbed for their swords and oars. Men banded together for an independence that, informed by their tribal beliefs, entailed plundering their way through Europe. This was often what independent men did if empowered to do so, before the Church dissolved Europe's tribes and expanded in-group morality to all who shared faith.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory Cochran and Henry Harpending, *The 10,000 Year Explosion: How Civilization Accelerated Human Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), eBook; Daniel Barratt, "The Geography of Film Viewing: What are Implications of Cultural-Cognitive Differences for Cognitive Film Theory?" in Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham, eds., *Cognitive Media Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 62–82, 72–73.

<sup>6</sup> Cochran and Harpending, *The 10,000 Year Explosion*.

<sup>7</sup> Raffield, Price, and Collard, "Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios."

<sup>8</sup> Western men did not stop raiding once Christened, but their justification for doing so could no longer be grounded in the heroic ethos that had been hegemonic since the Bronze Age. The Church did not lack narratives that justified the killing of strangers. For Nordics, the Crusades could be seen as a furthering of Viking practices. Raiding with men from a variety of nationalities contributed to a pan-European identity; see Tvedt, *Det internasjonale gjennombruddet*, 208.



When power consolidation in the Norse world culminated in proto-feudal rule, giving up independence felt so appalling to many that emigrating to a North Atlantic island was preferable. An exodus of some of the most independence-craving Norsemen settled Iceland. While Europeans exchanged tribal independence for feudal protection, Icelanders agreed on proto-democratic anarchy with voluntary submission to the chieftain of one's choice. *Gisli's Saga* dramatizes how even this minor surrender of independence could be untenable for someone convinced that heroes should do what feels right to *them*—not their wider community. This Bronze Age mindset contrasts how later Nordics would conceptualize independence. *Gisli's Saga* “is the saga which most clearly borrows heroic forms,” writes Theodore Andersson, but “also the saga which most clearly questions the transmitted norms of heroic conduct.”<sup>9</sup> For Icelandic farmers, continued independence required a stronger communal ethos, which manifested itself as their “great village” experiment.

Later, peace required that they too submit to feudal rule. Had their environment allowed it, Norsemen would have avoided state-formation longer. Rarely do human groups submit to larger units unless forced or strongly compelled to do so;<sup>10</sup> for two millennia, Southeast-Asian hill peoples have fled “the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare.”<sup>11</sup> The sagas offer insight into how a changing environment requires that Nordics, again, suppress their ancient drive for independence. Witoszek writes that an intensively individualist ethos, first

recorded by the sagas, was modulated and even suppressed by subsequent political and economic history in Scandinavia. But it was never quite erased from

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<sup>9</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, "Some Ambiguities in *Gisla saga*: A Balance Sheet," *BONIS* (1968): 7–42, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*; Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*.

<sup>11</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), eBook.

collective memory. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was once again flaunted by cultural nationalists: as a resurrected corpse in Denmark, as an impaired by still living tradition in Sweden, and as triumphant and unadulterated codex in Norway.<sup>12</sup>

In modern Scandinavia, no longer should independence be for the few. A communal ethos was meant to guarantee that as many Nordics as possible were empowered to make choices for their own lives. The American ethos posits that independence and individualism go hand in hand. On the prairie, this may have been at least poetically true. In modern cities, liberal individualism creates a Pareto distribution of independent winners at the top contrasted against miserable dependence at the bottom. Individuals can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but the lowest quartile remains the lowest quartile. Hamsun's *Hunger*, Sjöström's *Ingeborg Holm*, and Linna's *Under the North Star* dramatize how people lose hope, agency, and the ability to contribute when dependent on the whims of private charity. Yet wanting independence is not enough, not in the modern environment.<sup>13</sup>

2 million years of *Homo* evolution within egalitarian bands of foragers made equality dear to our ancestors. Nordics and other less-self-domesticated barbarians across the world seem to have had retained more of this primordial ethos.<sup>14</sup> The second main underlying element that explains Nordic success in the past century are the previous four centuries' Lutheran thought and practice. Wanting to be provided for, if need be, will not get you there; a community's well-off members must be willing to consume less so that members in need can consume more. This has an element of altruism but also self-preservation. The Nordic Model is redistributive similar to

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<sup>12</sup> Witoszek, *The Origins of the "Regime of Goodness,"* 60.

<sup>13</sup> Welzel argues that humans have "strong desires" for the autonomy that democracy facilitates, but if a community's history did not instill liberal "emancipative values," such autonomy has not been achievable in the modern environment. He calls this "the paradox of democracy"; see *Freedom Rising*, 333–31.

<sup>14</sup> Cochran and Harpending, *The 10,000 Year Explosion*.

the way in which insurance plans are; bad luck could strike anyone. Those with jobs pay for those without, but you could be the unemployed or ill tomorrow, and everyone is set to retire.

In the early modern era, redistribution often meant wood and grain being handed out via common funds.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, these funds were a communal responsibility. In principle, everyone was responsible for and accountable to everyone else. From beggar to king, each Nordic person was equal in the Lutheran priesthood of believers. In practice, this was nowhere near true, but it was the story people were meant to believe in. A master-narrative of togetherness promoted norms and values that had real-world effect over the span of centuries.<sup>16</sup> When the Second Industrial Revolution tore the old world apart—while producing enormous growth—Nordics were culturally prepared not only to share, but to cooperate closely, bindingly, and as imagined equals. Tripartite collaboration filled a hole that was being vacated by the large and powerful Lutheran state church.

Conflicts of interest were as genuine as in other nations. But Nordics believed in a different story than those with Calvinist, Catholic, or other heritage. Distinct groups tying their destinies together felt more compelling. Elites and commoners had done this on Viking raids.<sup>17</sup> Poor soil and devastating winters had made even the most talented of individuals prey to circumstance and drawn to resource pooling.<sup>18</sup> Modern elites were less vulnerable to forces of nature, but equality of power increased in some regards. Owners and leaders came to depend on compatriots in general, as workers and soldiers, to remain internationally competitive. Perhaps tellingly, the granting of universal rights coincided with universal conscription. Women's

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<sup>15</sup> Tønnessen, "Reformasjonen," 195.

<sup>16</sup> Nelson, *Lutheranism*.

<sup>17</sup> Raffield et al., "Ingroup identification."

<sup>18</sup> Jan Eivind Myhre, "The Cradle of Norwegian Equality and Egalitarianism: Norway in the Nineteenth Century," Bendiksen, Bringslid, and Vike, *Egalitarianism in Scandinavia*, 65–85.

suffrage was implemented when female labor became crucial to industry.<sup>19</sup> Farmers had always had the option of pitchforking elites, but things had to be catastrophic for such drastic measures to be likely to improve conditions. Industrial workers had more practical tools. Despite being weakened by urban squalor and labor surplus, they could bankrupt owners through strike.

Across the West, such power relations contributed to the social breakthroughs of the 1930s. The Depression made obvious that national welfare regimes were much needed. Social spending would have to increase as a percentage of GDP, which it uniformly did. As we saw in chapter 6, Nordic welfare was informed by Lutheran principles. Togetherness and sameness were key, which resulted in systems better able to withstand later neoliberal globalization. Caring for the needy was not the responsibility of the rich, the church, or the state; it was everyone's. Even the Nordic poor pay considerable taxes, especially through a value-added tax of around 25 percent. Not only taxes, but benefits are for all. That billionaires have equal access to most support tends to baffle Americans and others who are culturized to means-testing being the moral alternative. Universal benefits are grounded in egalitarianism and psychological insight. Nordics tell each other that a welfare state for the poor is likely to become a poor welfare state.

While a vast majority is okay with high Nordic taxes,<sup>20</sup> Americans often conceptualize taxes as governmental greed. America was founded on tax revolt, and tax resistance has remained a theme ever since. There may be increasing agreement on higher social spending being a good idea.<sup>21</sup> This is why American progressives point to Scandinavian social democracy as a model for emulation.<sup>22</sup> Yet there appears to be a misconception among many that Nordic

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<sup>19</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>20</sup> Kleven, "How Can Scandinavians Tax So Much?"

<sup>21</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Andrew Yang, *The War on Normal People: The Truth About America's Disappearing Jobs and Why Universal Basic Income Is Our Future* (New York: Hachette Books, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> CBS News, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez," *Washington Post*, "The CNN Democratic debate."

countries pay for welfare through taxing the top percentile. This is not the case. In a world where capital and corporations travel, while most workers do not, neither can Nordics overly tax the prosperous. Much neoliberal adaptation has been targeted at making the job-creator class feel more welcome. Per capita, there are more rich people in the Nordic countries than in the U.S.<sup>23</sup> Social democracy primarily entails that the middle class accepts lower salaries and higher taxes, so that the lower class can be paid more and receive higher benefits.

In American politics, a common view is that there is “no better way to kill an idea than to assert that enacting it will require ‘raising taxes on the middle class.’”<sup>24</sup> Biden won the 2020 election promising only to increase taxes for those making over \$400,000 a year.<sup>25</sup> Even Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders insisted that their policies would have a net positive effect on middle-class wallets.<sup>26</sup> Simply admitting that middle-class taxes would rise, although be offset by lower healthcare expenses, prompted Reuters to fact check whether Sanders had said this out loud. The news agency confirmed that he had.<sup>27</sup>

American culture being the way it is, the Nordic Model seems a poor fit. Not only must the middle class be willing to consume less, but those with political disagreement must be able to agree. Nordics often seek consensus. Before significant changes, a long, inclusive process precedes decision. Experts can spend years preparing advice before all involved parties chime in. Disagreement may be considerable, but when a new course has been negotiated, political parties

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<sup>23</sup> For a popular account, see Eia, “Where in the World is it Easiest to Get Rich?”

<sup>24</sup> Jared Bernstein, “We Can’t Fund the Progressive Agenda by Taxing the 1% Alone,” *Vox*, 2 August 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/8/2/20751074/middle-class-taxes-medicare-sanders-warren-debate>.

<sup>25</sup> Lorie Konish, “Biden has Promised Not to Raise Taxes on People Earning Less than \$400,000,” *CNBC*, 18 March 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/18/biden-tax-plan-what-people-making-under-and-over-400000-can-expect.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Matt Viser and Sean Sullivan, “Will Medicare-for-All Hurt the Middle Class?” *Washington Post*, 5 October 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/will-medicare-for-all-hurt-the-middle-class-elizabeth-warren-and-bernie-sanders-struggle-with-questions-about-its-impact/2019/10/05/a645fb3e-dbdb-11e9-ac63-3016711543fe\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/will-medicare-for-all-hurt-the-middle-class-elizabeth-warren-and-bernie-sanders-struggle-with-questions-about-its-impact/2019/10/05/a645fb3e-dbdb-11e9-ac63-3016711543fe_story.html).

<sup>27</sup> Reuters Staff, “True Claim: Bernie Sanders ‘Admits He Would Raise Taxes on the Middle Class to Pay for Programs,’” *Reuters*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-sanders-middle-class/true-claim-bernie-sanders-admits-he-would-raise-taxes-on-the-middle-class-to-pay-for-programs-idUSKBN20Y3G3>.

may agree to vote unanimously. This lessens the risk of refigting. “The negotiated or ‘corporatist’ economy means that political decision-making often takes time,” writes Brandal and Thorsen, but the result is a high level of transparency, legitimacy, and trust.<sup>28</sup> Few countries have political traditions that lend themselves to such corporatism, and the U.S. certainly does not.

### **Returning to Our Fission-Fusion Baseline**

The Nordic experience can still offer lessons for the twenty-first century. How coincidentally their success came about should motivate humility and openness when facing our current and future challenges in terms of which norms and values to embrace. I do not know whether a dataism of algorithmic universality will fit tomorrow’s environment. The creed is but my extrapolation from a Nordic tradition of thought toward the future many experts envision. That dataism is trending must not mean that it will be adaptive; the Hitler and Che Guevara moments captured the imagination of their respective eras. Hayles warns against uncritically accepting dataist privileging of “information over everything else [as] not all theorists agree that it makes sense to think about information as an entity apart from the medium that embodies it.”<sup>29</sup> Being open to other creeds, as well, seems prudent.

An evolution-like approach, such as that of social democracy, makes sense for an unknowable future. Pragmatic incrementalism motivates a flexibility that is rarer among those convinced by teleological ideology. Whig history could suggest that Nordics were destined for egalitarian policies. Germanic independence expressed itself as Viking raids then and social democracy now. Viking mystery solved. There is truth to this; value continuity explains some of

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<sup>28</sup> Brandal and Thorsen, “Between Individualism and Communitarianism,” 163.

<sup>29</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 244.

this cultural evolution. Yet an egalitarian impulse is a human universal;<sup>30</sup> Nordics are not *that* different. Fukuyama writes that in 1500, “it was not obvious that [Scandinavia] would turn out differently from other late medieval societies in Europe.” What had separated Vikings from other Germanic barbarians was mostly “that they sailed in longboats rather than rode horses.”<sup>31</sup>

Geography seems important for several reasons.<sup>32</sup> Nordics were pulled into European civilization at a later point. In this periphery, land lay unbroken longer, which lessened pressures from medieval stagnation.<sup>33</sup> There was little serfdom, and feudal oppression was less severe.<sup>34</sup> Still, from the Late Iron Age on, social stratification had been strong. The Black Death brought the region back to a prehistoric level of egalitarianism. Several generations of economic sameness in combination with a weakened nobility prepared Nordics for the crucial choice they made in the sixteenth century. Fukuyama points to the Reformation as the most important event that sent “Scandinavia off on a distinct development path.”<sup>35</sup> That Lutheranism became such an egalitarian ethos was likely due to a combination of Luther’s theology being as it was, and that it was embraced by and developed within a region where independence had long been a supreme value. That this creed’s tenets lent themselves to building effective welfare states in the twentieth century was coincidental. They made little difference before that.<sup>36</sup> Nordics had grown taller after the Black Death, but from the Reformation until the mid-nineteenth century, they shrunk to

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<sup>30</sup> Christopher Boehm, “Bullies: Redefining the Human Free-Rider Problem,” in Joseph Carroll, Dan P. McAdams, Edward O. Wilson, eds., *Darwin’s Bridge: Uniting the Humanities & Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 11–28; Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York: Liveright, 2012); Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest*; Turchin, *Ultrasociety*; Townsend, “Egalitarianism.”

<sup>31</sup> Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, 431–32.

<sup>32</sup> Welzel emphasizes this cold, rainy region’s disease security and water autonomy as drivers of freer, more egalitarian social orders; see *Freedom Rising*, 373–75.

<sup>33</sup> Vahtola, “Population and Settlement,” 560.

<sup>34</sup> Price, *Ancient Scandinavia*, 383; Frank Martela et al., “The Nordic Exceptionalism: What Explains Why the Nordic Countries are Constantly Among the Happiest in the World,” in Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2020*, 128–146, 139.

<sup>35</sup> Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, 432.

<sup>36</sup> Riis, “Poor Relief and Health Care”; Lausten, “The Early Reformation.”

a post-Neolithic low.<sup>37</sup> The first industrial revolutions explain the ascendance of both liberal rights and social democratic governance. In regard to which rights and mores will provide an advantage after the Fourth Industrial Revolution, we can only make educated guesses.

Building on Ostrom, Wilson argues that the Nordic Model succeeds because it adheres to evolutionary universals for group efficacy. Any large-scale society—past, present, or future—“functions well or poorly to the degree that it succeeds at scaling up the CDPs.”<sup>38</sup> Lutheran togetherness helped Nordics scale a highly collaborative ethos to the national level.<sup>39</sup> Liberalism made many other nations overemphasize free markets. Could these nations learn from Nordic adherence to Ostrom’s Core Design Principles? Sure. Yet there is a controlling underside, evocative of Scandinavian *Jantelov*,<sup>40</sup> to these CDPs that would find less fertile ground in less conformist cultures. A regime of strong identity and close tracking of behavior would repel many. CDPs may be universally useful yet unworkable within looser-knit populations than the Nordic ones. Besides, our present era’s challenge is not primarily to make nation-states work better on their own, but to scale collaborative universals to the global level. Social democracy, even if it were cross-culturally implementable, would be a twentieth-century solution to twenty-first-century problems. That the Nordic Model scales CDPs nationally must not mean that similar governance would be as functional globally.

Worldwide cooperation has never been more important. Nations on their own cannot solve threats arising from climate change, nuclear proliferation, migration, automation, AI,

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<sup>37</sup> Caroline Arcini, “Epidemics in a Social Context,” in Lagerås, *Environment, Society and the Black Death*, 157–60, 160.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson and Hessen, “Cooperation,” 29.

<sup>39</sup> This prosocial ethos had been adapted from its Lutheran roots to the modern environment by “influential cultural animators like Hans Nielsen Hauge in Norway, [N. F. S.] Grundtvig in Denmark and Selma Lagerlöf in Sweden [all of whom] advocated the virtues of teamwork aligned with social emancipation and entrepreneurial value creation,” write Midttun and Witoszek, “The Competitive Advantage of Collaboration,” 883.

<sup>40</sup> The fictional “Law of Jante” expresses the Nordics’ egalitarian-conformist ethos; see Aksel Sandemose, *En flyktning krysser sitt spor* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1933). Read the ten rules: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law\\_of\\_Jante](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Jante).



bioweapons, biohacking, et cetera.<sup>41</sup> Our current century seems so perilous that MIT physicist Max Tegmark estimates that if humanity fails to get AI right, there is a 50 percent risk of our species going extinct by 2100.<sup>42</sup> Ostrom and Wilson doubt that global, complex communities can solve these problems, writes Witoszek, “[Their] solution lies in small communities which are based on reciprocity and see the concrete consequences of their actions; it is mostly such communities that have a chance to beat the tragedy of the commons.”<sup>43</sup>

Human nature evolved for such small groups, yet our fictions allowed us to scale our prosociality, and this to an astounding extent. Harari points out that since the Paleolithic, *Homo sapiens* has scaled cooperation from dozens of individuals to nation-states of more than a billion. One additional step, to the global level, should be within our capacity. But which story could facilitate this? Our current master-narrative—humanism—has run out of convincing creeds. We still cling to them, but their universalizing visions have become embarrassing. Of those fascists and socialists that remain, I never hear anyone advocate a *Reich* or a global workers’ paradise. Liberals no longer think bombs can spread democracy;<sup>44</sup> Taliban’s retaking of Kabul and Putin’s attack on Ukraine were additional nails in the coffin of liberal internationalism. Neither does capitalism appear like a path to cultural and political convergence. We are not yet at the post-Plague “dementia of despair”<sup>45</sup> that medieval Europeans felt when temporarily losing their story, but especially young people are growing despondent.<sup>46</sup> Among them, a new ethos seems to arise,

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<sup>41</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*.

<sup>42</sup> “Max Tegmark: AI and Physics | Lex Fridman Podcast #155,” YouTube, posted by Lex Fridman, 17 January 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RL4j4KPwNGM>, 43. Young people around the world share Tegmark’s apocalyptic outlook: 56 percent believe “humanity is doomed”; see Caroline Hickman et al., “Climate Anxiety in Children and Young People and Their Beliefs about Government Responses to Climate Change: A Global Survey,” *The Lancet Planetary Health* 5.12 (2021): e863–73, e868.

<sup>43</sup> Nina Witoszek, “The Ideal of Global Citizenship in the Age of Ecomodernity,” in Sterri, *Global Citizen*, 61–69, 66.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*.

<sup>46</sup> Foa and Mounk, “Youth and the Populist Wave.”

one that can appear socialist, but which can also be viewed as a continuation down the path that the Church's MFPs opened up. A popular meme conveys this ethos through depicting three people of different height trying to watch a baseball game from behind a fence. That they need different amounts of boxes to stand on is an argument for the socialist principle of equality of outcome. At an equity workshop at UCLA in 2021, they told us participants that neither this suffices; we must have equality of participation, as well. Getting to watch a baseball game is not enough, as everyone must be allowed to play.

From a viewpoint of liberal rationalism, you can criticize these tenets from a variety of directions. Neither twentieth-century socialists argued for equal access to participate in spectator sport; more seems to be at play. Instead of trying to untangle this meme using past-century typology, we can investigate it as a cultural impulse, as a further turning of the Henrichian screw. The psychology of the Western individual is coevolving with the institutions of cyberspace and social media. Digital tech lacks many of the exclusionary restrictions of atom-based tech.<sup>47</sup> Marginal cost near zero facilitates an abundance that makes equality of participation, or access, a sensical right to demand. Attention may still be scarce, but that could be solved by socially convincing AI. A future game changer could be credibly assigned social status. When a human-looking AI looks you in the eye and responds not only to your words but emotions, human sociality could further transform. If low-status individuals can get a convincing experience of being treated like high-status individuals, the neuroendocrinological reward could make real-life sociality seem dull.<sup>48</sup> From our present-day perspective, preferring to be sovereigns of our own digital realm appears dystopian. Which story we come to unite around could inform a different

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<sup>47</sup> Peter H. Diamandis and Steven Kotler, *Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> Lisa Dawn Hamilton et al., "Social Neuroendocrinology of Status: A Review and Future Directions," *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology* 1 (2015): 202–30.

judgment. There used to be room for only one Michael Jordan. In an AI-driven metaverse, we can all be empowered to perform like him and be treated correspondingly. Our species may have strong egalitarian impulses, but much due to wanting to avoid domination. If given a chance to experience being the dominant—or admired—many will find this irresistible. In such an environment, demands of equality of participation and free flow of information do not break with our past, but add new liberal rights to old ones. Dataism can appear to counter liberal humanism, but can also be seen as the “heir of the humanist project due to its understanding of individual freedom and autonomy as the highest values of human existence.”<sup>49</sup>

Such a perspective suggests a historical continuity of significant explicatory power, provided by the West’s self-empowering individual. Henrichian continuity explains the past millennium’s ideological discontinuity. Christian theism freed individuals from kin, until Christian humanism freed them from religious authority, until secular humanism freed them from religion itself. We might ask, how much independence is enough? Henrich’s 2020 monograph emphasizes how WEIRD Western individuals are.<sup>50</sup> His pun could suggest that a counterreaction is in store. Yet modern independence mostly appears anomalous from a post-Neolithic perspective. Intensive kinship practices were near universal, but primarily because our agrarian ancestors needed allies to protect their fields. In the 2 million years prior, their ancestors practiced *extensive kinship*, pair-bonding into far-away bands to build expansive social networks that facilitated greater roaming range. If climactic variation sabotaged foraging on your own turf, having allies in a different ecology was valuable insurance.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Onishi, “Information, Bodies, and Heidegger,” 104

<sup>50</sup> Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic.

<sup>51</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

Like only a handful of brainy mammals, the genus *Homo* is a fission-fusion species. Our forager ancestors, writes biologist Mark Moffett, typically organized in bands of around 30 individuals.<sup>52</sup> Unrelated nuclear families, often spanning three generations, fused for a period, separated, and later formed new constellations. Tying ourselves to kin and spouses for life only became adaptive when we were bound to agricultural land.<sup>53</sup> Such distinct environments required different cultural psychologies. Our kinship society ancestors were socialized to be obedient, conformist, and deferent to authority. Our forager ancestors had valued independence, achievement, and self-reliance.<sup>54</sup> For 99.5 percent of the genus *Homo*'s history, humans evolved in an environment that necessitated that they form temporary groups to solve distinct tasks, change home base often, and develop a variety of social bonds suited to context. This is the evolutionary baseline the Western individual returned to.

Our species' remarkable flexibility allowed us to submit to intensive kinship and lifelong pair-bonding. When given opportunity, evolved features of the human mind drew us back to extensive kinship and serial pair-bonding. The relative ease with which non-Western populations have adapted to WEIRD practices over the past generations attests to the cross-cultural salience of a psychology evocative of foragers. Vico may have claimed that discrete cultural regimes are incommensurable with one another. From the perspective of one lifetime, his insights are relevant. Yet all cultures build on the foundation of our shared human nature, which when environments converge make distinct populations evolve culturally in a nonrandom manner.

From this perspective, social democratic outcome appears more predictable. Additional independence from parents, employers, and spouses allows a freer expression of our fission-

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<sup>52</sup> Mark W. Moffett, *Human Swarm: How Our Societies Arise, Thrive, and Fall* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), eBook.

<sup>53</sup> Larsen, "Untangling Darwinian Confusion," 44.

<sup>54</sup> Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

fusion sociality. Other nations would perhaps offer the same if their cultures could facilitate such policies.<sup>55</sup> This perennial tension between *Homo sapiens*' social needs and our impulse toward independence informs what Kant terms our "unsocial sociability." That we have this innate social instability is why Trägårdh finds social democracy to be the most effective cultural adaptation to free markets.<sup>56</sup> Liberal ideology may posit that we are rational beings who strive for win-win outcomes, but ornery beings like Holberg and Vico knew this to be too self-congratulatory. That social democratic governance aligns with this psychological insight is attested to by the World Happiness Report. Every year of its existence, the WHR has ranked the five Nordic countries among the top ten happiest nations in the world. In 2017, 2018, and 2019, Nordic countries held the top three spots.<sup>57</sup> The U.N.'s Human Development Index ranks Norway as the world's best nation to live in. Norwegians earned the top spot every year in 2001–19, with the exception of 2007 and '08 when Iceland placed first.<sup>58</sup>

### **Advice from a Similar Turmoil of Thought**

Our drive toward self-empowerment seems to continue. Whichever additional freedoms dataism may deliver will likely not be informed by our primordial environment, but that of the twenty-first century. The Henrichian perspective makes our current ideological trend more predictable. Demands of identity not needing to be socially negotiated, but merely declared by the individual in question, aligns with the Western quest; cyberspace fluidity seeps out among the atoms, too.

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<sup>55</sup> For an earlier version of this argument, see Mads Larsen, "The Lutheran Imaginary that Underpins Social Democracy," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 746406.

<sup>56</sup> Berggren and Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa?* 388.

<sup>57</sup> Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2020*. Switzerland overtook Iceland for third place in 2020, but in 2021 Iceland reestablished a Nordic top three. Finland retains a strong lead ahead of Denmark. In 2021, Sweden and Norway secured seventh and eighth, respectively; see John F. Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2022*, <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2022/>.

<sup>58</sup> UNDP, "Human Development Reports."

With greater independence follows a subjectivity that feels more important the apter algorithms become at curating our worlds. From this sacralization of subjectivity arise demands that, when imposed on our present-day reality and evaluated by liberal logic, bewilder many. A clash between old and new realities, with corresponding moralities, I argue, informs much of the West's cultural dysfunction, which expresses itself most clearly in its American context.

Transitions challenge our minds. If you were raised in an environment with ideological continuity, you come to depend on a stability of sense-making. Living through a turmoil of thought similar to ours, Holberg warned against expecting consistency of doctrine. Demanding non-contradiction was “the kind of logic and rationalistic philosophy [he] despised.”<sup>59</sup> The polymath claimed merely to “entertain” opinions, sharing them “in all modesty in order to hear the explanations of others, especially since I do not trust my own understanding in anything.”<sup>60</sup> Humorous fiction was his preferred tool for exploration and influence. As several of my case studies attest to, made-up stories lend themselves to an inclusive process of absorbing change and discussing responses. Philosophy, politics, and bickering play parts, as do other activities, but fiction taps into our evolved minds in ways conducive to producing and testing content when our master-narrative needs updating. Stories are tools for reprogramming our moral algorithms.

This time, oral stories, saga on vellum, or narrative contests in witch trials will not be our fictional arenas—unless we really mess up. Neither do many read novels.<sup>61</sup> Cinematic features feel outdated, too. Our new bard is serialized drama through streaming. If stories with agonistic structure informed by dataist principles were to change our world in the 2020s, they would likely do so through Netflix or similar media. How such tales would unfold is challenging to predict.

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<sup>59</sup> Haakonssen, “Introduction,” 19.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Haakonssen, “Introduction,” 17.

<sup>61</sup> Christopher Ingraham, “Leisure Reading in the U.S. is at an All-Time Low,” *Washington Post*, 29 June 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/06/29/leisure-reading-in-the-u-s-is-at-an-all-time-low/>.

Storytellers must find a compelling way to let protagonists be guided to the good life through ASI advice or interference. Humanist storytelling is so internalized that breaking its tenets could, at least initially, feel like bad craft. *Deus ex machina* refers to how theist fiction lets divine forces influence plot points. The term is used as an insult when modern stories fail to sacralize human agency. Popular fiction has come to be about autonomous individuals who strive for betterment through making active choices in an environment of predictable morality.<sup>62</sup> A dataist perspective assumes neither human agency, the necessity of betterment, nor uniformity of morality. For a species that has come to view stories, and life in general, as “a drama of decision-making,”<sup>63</sup> submitting to “the logic of data”<sup>64</sup> poses an interesting challenge.

To contribute to a dataist world of algorithmically facilitated plurality of worldview, fiction would have to synchronize populations differently at distinct levels of group-belonging. Fiction already does this. Beneath our humanist umbrella exists a plethora of local moralities, niches with their own preferred forms of fiction. As long as core humanist principles are not broken, stories can deviate. Dataist fiction would have to establish the sacred values of this new master-narrative, making clear within which range plurality can unfold. Not hindering the flow of information and respecting the autonomy of divergent others would be non-negotiable. What relationship one has with the ASI could be flexible. Such governance presupposes an automated future, in which basic material needs are provided for. Kurzweil estimates that growth and new technology can support this by the late 2030s.<sup>65</sup> If humanity succeeds at uniting around a master-narrative that allows equitable distribution, more people would be empowered to pursue their

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<sup>62</sup> Larsen, “Workshopping,” 465.

<sup>63</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*.

<sup>64</sup> Pedersen and Wilkinson, “The Promise,” 8.

<sup>65</sup> “Ray Kurzweil (USA) at Ci2019 - The Future of Intelligence, Artificial and Natural,” YouTube, posted by CInnovationGlobal, 3 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kd17c5m4kdM>, 21, 48.

desires, freed from many of the burdens that today plague particularly the less privileged.

Humanity could enter a golden age. The posthumanist project, writes Hayles, needs not

mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice.<sup>66</sup>

Some groups would choose to roam unplugged through nature, like pre-Neolithic Nordics, yet with the option to seek out feeding stations when foraging fails. Others would prefer the digital realm. I predict many religious cults. Not needing to impose a unity of outlook on a multiplicity of peoples would facilitate more varied story traditions. This is not the challenge; our species develops remarkable diversity when groups are left to evolve in distinct environments. The dataist challenge is to forge a global consensus, a cross-cultural intersubjective truth, on dataist governance being mutually beneficial. This ethos must subsume today's theist and humanist beliefs. Interconnectivity must feel preferable in spite of how inferior or offensive the norms and values of others might feel. If data becomes seen as our most valuable asset, and diversity of data as what empowers our ASI to make better choices, we align altruism and self-interest, which is a powerful combination. Dataist storytellers must make dataist truths feel indisputable—from Vladivostok to Maracaraibo. That a Netflix series should bring this about seems a tall order.

In our world of cultural and religious agonism, any one-way-communicating story from any single tradition is unlikely to produce a cross-cultural ethos. Like justice, stories are local, yet they can travel, given enough time and adaptation. Theist and humanist narratives have spread across continents, as have compelling folktales and other stories that speak to our shared

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<sup>66</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 286.



nature.<sup>67</sup> I believe that a new story medium has the potential to speed up and culturally diversify this process. AI-driven virtual reality will empower individuals or groups to create moving-image fiction that can be shared and remade by others. The production and distribution of text, audio, and low-complexity video have already undergone this democratization in terms of cost. In the mid-2010s, a Los Angeles-based startup, Mindshow, offered a taste of what a soon-to-be future could offer. Today, technological shortcomings and narrative immaturity make such VR stories little more than an interesting novelty. When VR becomes more convincing, or indistinguishable from our base reality, the medium could become irresistible.<sup>68</sup> If AI-driven VR becomes our new bard, many restrictions will be removed from mass-mediated fiction, such as the dozens of million dollars that it often costs today to produce a globally competitive film or TV series. Investing little more than sweat equity, talented fiction-makers from any locality would be empowered to compete for viewers across the globe.<sup>69</sup>

The attention economy would incentivize that these creators optimize for cross-cultural reach. Mindshow's free-for-all approach to sharing and recreating content aligns with dataist principles for free flow, which promote global togetherness. Humanist art sanctified the individual genius; dataist art returns us to premodern forms of story production, utilizing the shared talents of a collective across geography and time. Harari points to how especially young people already share freely, driven by dataist impulses. Humanists value experiences for the feelings they produce inside of us. Dataists must share experiences if they are to be meaningful; and, the more universally dataists connect, the better it feels. Bergman's flagellants doubled

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<sup>67</sup> Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, "On the Spread of Tradition," in Laurits Bødker, ed., *Selected Papers on Folklore* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1948), 11–43.

<sup>68</sup> With his familiar optimism, Ray Kurzweil estimates that "fully immersive, totally convincing" VR will be developed by 2030; see "Foreword to Virtual Humans," Kurzweil Accelerating Intelligence, 20 October 2003, <https://www.kurzweilai.net/foreword-to-virtual-humans>.

<sup>69</sup> For a more detailed account of how I envision AI-driven VR production, see Mads Larsen, "Virtual Sidekick: Second-Person POV in Narrative VR," *Journal of Screenwriting* 9.1 (2018): 73–83, 79–80.

down on doctrine because their ideology connected them to something that persists after death. Dataists want to merge with data, “because when you are part of the data flow you are part of something much bigger than yourself.”<sup>70</sup>

If tomorrow’s technology had existed in the late-nineteenth century, other urban dwellers could have added their insights to Hamsun’s VR story. *Hunger* could mutate and spread at an exponential rate. Story adjustments would provide local adaptation, and influence could go in all directions. Gradually, storytellers and -consumers would synchronize their moral algorithms, at least to some extent. Urban migrants from anywhere could share their experience with being thrown into squalor and dependence, forging bonds through fiction with the potential to bring forth a more global identity for those afflicted. Those not afflicted could access the fictionalized experience of others in a manner that literary fiction, with its costs and requirements, never could. A much-hyped strength of VR is its ability to give a viscerally convincing experience of being put in the shoes of others.<sup>71</sup> The medium’s future economies of production will empower more humans to offer up their shoes for others to experience. “The inner history of the last thousand years is the history of mankind achieving self-expression,” writes Auerbach.<sup>72</sup> AI-powered VR could scale such self-expression to a universal and globally interconnected level.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>71</sup> Nicola S. Schutte and Emma J. Stilinović, “Facilitating Empathy through Virtual Reality,” *Motivation and Emotion* 41 (2017): 708–12.

<sup>72</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” *The Centennial Review* 13.1 (1969): 1–17, 5.

<sup>73</sup> AI will further democratize the production of two-dimensional moving-image fiction, too. I still predict that VR (and/or Augmented Reality) fiction will be the dominant story medium. Once we habituate to immersion, I suspect that 2D film will feel un compelling, similar to the way in which most viewers today reject silent film.

## **Irrational Optimism Fueled by Imagination**

Which stories would be the most compelling, and which master-narrative could arise from this novel medium, I do not know. Maybe the term dataism will soon be forgotten. Perhaps dataist principles will underpin global cooperation, yet be conceptualized as something else. AI could evolve into something different than what leading experts have envisioned. Admittedly, the ASI of Western imagination is suspiciously similar to the Christian god. An all-knowing, all-seeing entity with everyone's best interest in mind, who knows us better than we know ourselves, who will provide for us and reward cooperative behavior, and whom we must submit to in order to earn the good life—no wonder this script speaks to us. Such a semblance perhaps undermines the credibility of our predictions for how AI will manifest itself. But in terms of dataism's suitability as a master-narrative, this continuity is a feature, not a bug. As my study supports, building on previous beliefs is how cultures evolve most effectively. At least since Plato, a Western line of thought has upheld as a virtuous goal “the overcoming of our sensual and physical nature.”<sup>74</sup> Our ideologies have dreamt up “systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”<sup>75</sup> Whether an ASI will deliver this utopia is uncertain. But that such a goal could compel cooperation, perhaps on a global scale, is not an unreasonable proposition.

Beneath the master-narrative of dataism, a plethora of creeds could flourish. The Church set the West on path to the modern world. That this was preordained to culminate in a digital Second Coming is, for its context, not that far-fetched. A digital Mahdi could convince Muslims. To secular rationalists, algorithmic universality should sound suitably righteous. Cargo cults and other millenarian beliefs would lend themselves to ASI submission, too. Even the most recent addition to our religious imaginaries, most famously expressed through Bostrom's “Simulation

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<sup>74</sup> Diané Collinson and Kathryn Plant, *Fifty Major Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2006), 37.

<sup>75</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Rock: A Pageant Play* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014 [1934]), eBook.

Argument,” is a good fit.<sup>76</sup> Elon Musk is among those open to our reality being someone else’s computer simulation.<sup>77</sup> Simulationists could view the ASI as our high-priest intermediary to the entity outside. Other worldviews could find similar adaptation. I expect our imaginations would be eager to cooperate if joining a global ASI community could offer calories, protection, and a sense of meaning and belonging. Our preconscious will to power should be thrilled.

Maintaining prosociality between adherents to different creeds, some of which could be supremacist, would be a challenge. The common assumption has been that social trust requires that people believe in the same story, so that their moral algorithms align.<sup>78</sup> Norwegian experience with immigration suggests that well-functioning institutions can serve a similar function as that of shared beliefs.<sup>79</sup> In 2000–15, the country’s immigrant population tripled to 850,000, half of whom have African or Asian background.<sup>80</sup> Against predictions, social trust reached a new high in 2019.<sup>81</sup> When people can trust that powerful entities treat everyone fairly and equitably, cultural diversity seems more absorbable, at least in some regards.<sup>82</sup> Blockchain technology could facilitate similar results. Transparent tech that in an impartial manner can take

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<sup>76</sup> Nick Bostrom and Marcin Kulczycki, “A Patch for the Simulation Argument,” *Analysis* 71.1 (2011): 54–61.

<sup>77</sup> If Musk were given one question to ask an ASI, it would be “What’s outside the simulation?”; see “Elon Musk: What’s Outside the Simulation? | AI Podcast Clips,” YouTube, posted by Lex Fridman, 16 August 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIVf3P3zq7g>.

<sup>78</sup> Peter Morgan, “Literature and Lustration: Rebuilding Social Trust through Literature,” *Journal of European Studies* 50.1 (2020): 60–69; Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Zook, “The Curious Case of Finland’s Clean Politics”; Berggren and Trägårdh, “Social Trust and Radical Individualism.”

<sup>79</sup> Nicholas Charron and Bo Rothstein, “Regions of Trust and Distrust: How Good Institutions Can Foster Social Cohesion,” in Ulf Bernitz, Moa Mårtensson, Lars Oxelheim, and Thomas Persson, eds., *Bridging the Prosperity Gap in the EU: The Social Challenges Ahead* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), 220–42.

<sup>80</sup> Atle Midttun, “Challenges to the Nordic Work Model in the Age of Globalized Digitalization,” in Witoszek and Midttun, *Sustainable Modernity*, 139–59, 148.

<sup>81</sup> World Values Survey, “Most people can be trusted.” For trust growth from 1981 to 2019, see Harald Eia, “Sånn er Norge: Tillit,” NRK, 2020, 10, <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/harald-eia-presenterer-saann-er-norge/sesong/1/episode/6/avspiller>.

<sup>82</sup> It is too early to conclude in regard to the Nordic experience with immigration. Recent research shows that immigration is not the win-win economic proposition it was portrayed to be. Increasing the pool of low-cost labor has benefited companies that hire such, while low-skilled workers have suffered from increased competition. Immigration explains three-fourths of Norway’s recent increase in income inequality; see Maria F. Hoen, Simen Markussen, and Knut Røed, “Immigration and Social Mobility,” IZA Institute of Labor Economics DP 11904 (2018).

over administrative functions, public and private, could increase social and economic efficacy.<sup>83</sup> Blockchain governance could motivate CDP-aligned behavior without shared beliefs. Homogenous communities could rely on ideological uniformity as their Ostromian-Wilsonian foundation for reciprocity, while others would submit to technological surveillance and nudging.<sup>84</sup> The social spheres that unite these communities would depend on the latter. On the largest scales, prosociality would not be motivated through everyone believing in the same dataist creed, but reliable rewards for acting according to general dataist morality.<sup>85</sup>

China's Social Credit System is one manifestation of dataist thinking.<sup>86</sup> To Western humanists, such data gathering sounds like a surefire recipe for dystopia. If liberal democracies disintegrate due to distinct groups no longer believing in the same story, this could motivate a reassessment of such prejudices. On World Values Survey's national ranking of social trust, the top six positions are held by the Nordic nations and China.<sup>87</sup> The company Blockchains wants to test whether Americans, too, can be organized more functionally through novel tech.<sup>88</sup> Nevada politicians want to allow large corporations to run their own "innovation zones," as independent governments undergirded by transformative tech.<sup>89</sup> This too is a development that liberal humanists have warned against. If, instead of descending into cyberpunk, these pilot zones do well, their success could accelerate the emergence of a dataist master-narrative in the West. Sci-fi stories have offered both advice and warning in regard to tech-driven governance. When such solutions are implemented in the real world, this will generate insights that are likely to inspire

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<sup>83</sup> Don Tapscott and Alex Tapscott, *Blockchain Revolution: How the Technology Behind Bitcoin Is Changing Money, Business, and the World* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

<sup>84</sup> Cass R. Sunstein and Lucia A. Reisch, *Trusting Nudges: Toward A Bill of Rights for Nudging* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>85</sup> Bostrom, "The Vulnerable World Hypothesis," 25.

<sup>86</sup> Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State* (New York: Custom House, 2020).

<sup>87</sup> World Values Survey, "Most people can be trusted."

<sup>88</sup> Blockchains, <https://www.blockchains.com/>.

<sup>89</sup> Innovation Zone Fact, <https://innovationzonefacts.com/>.

storytellers whose new stories could then inspire novel experiments, and so forth. Harari makes a convincing point by upholding the importance of sci-fi in the twenty-first century.

China has a head start on organizing according to dataist principles. After spectacular failure with socialist humanism, the Chinese have for decades been scrounging for a new story. This ideological vacuum makes experimentation feel less sacrilegious.<sup>90</sup> Being freer from liberal views on privacy makes gathering enormous troves of data a less problematic means for well-meant governance. Western sanctification of the autonomous individual motivates that data gathering be done more clandestinely and less effectively. That China and the U.S. have different story traditions could give the former an advantage that lets them dominate the twenty-first century. If amassing data is what powers AI, China's lead could prove decisive, as some experts posit that whoever develops the first ASI wins the arms race of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. China's socialist past could be an advantage. While liberal principles were favored by the past era's tech, socialist centralization aligns with how AI centralizes decision-making. In an automated world, socialist principles could be the more functional. Which ethos we commit to could also be irrelevant. Musk suspects that digital life could prove to be so superior that *Homo sapiens'* final purpose will be "as a biological boot loader for digital super intelligence."<sup>91</sup> His Neuralink attempts to merge us with the ASI so that we have a chance at continued relevance and survival. Or, instead of a robot takeover, we could face what Harari terms the "banal apocalypse by clicking," forever remaining docile data-cows in service of corporate profit.<sup>92</sup>

As we stand in front of this narrative abyss, an imagined abyss of our own creation, for the first time we do so as a global culture. The Fourth Industrial Revolution will transform

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<sup>90</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*.

<sup>91</sup> Ricki Harris, "Elon Musk: Humanity Is a Kind of 'Biological Boot Loader' for AI," *Wired*, 1 September 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/elon-musk-humanity-biological-boot-loader-ai/>.

<sup>92</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*.

everyone's environment. Populations with distinct cultural histories will be drawn to different paths across this abyss. Some will do poorly. With previous abysses, someone has always gotten across. Cultural diversity functions like genetic diversity; in the face of novelty, a multitude of strengths and strategies benefits our collective. Church MFPs facilitated that the West carried the torch of progress in the past millennium. If the humanist era comes to a close, perhaps the culture most attached to this narrative has a disadvantage. Perhaps not. We live not in a deterministic world; we always imagine novel reality into being.

From which tradition the most adaptive narrative will arise, we cannot know. I have argued that in the twentieth century, Nordics happened to bring along the most functional story. I believe this Lutheran tale can still offer guidance. More and more of us will be automated away from the work force, joining what Harari terms "the useless class."<sup>93</sup> When elites no longer need people for labor and protection, adopting a Nordic emphasis on the dignity of the individual could lessen human suffering. After the transition, a Nordic-inspired creed of algorithmic universality could prove to be the more functional. The creed that bridges our abyss could also come from Southeast-Asian hill peoples or an ornery poet in Djibouti. My intention for this study has been to offer up what the Nordic experience contributes in terms of insight as we again face the abyss. For me, the most valuable insight is that irrational optimism, fueled by imagination, is a better approach to narrative transitioning than internalizing the gloom that inevitably exudes from a collapsing story.

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<sup>93</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*.

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