Roads not taken: The Ends of History and the Politics of Inevitability in Norway and Denmark

Rasmus Glenthøj
Associate professor, Department of History, University of Southern Denmark, PhD, 2010
rasmusg@sdu.dk

Abstract
In this keynote address, I examine the conflict between history as an ideal and history as a reality by discussing how the grand national master narratives in Norway and Denmark were created and how they have shaped our perception of the past. The main emphasis will be on Norwegian history, but Denmark will provide a comparative perspective to see similarities, differences and connections and to avoid methodological nationalism. I argue that politics and ideology have played a crucial role in both Norwegian and Danish historiography, and that this has influenced the understanding both of history and politics in these two countries. My interpretation will be anti-deterministic, and the futures past will be taken seriously.

Keywords
Narratives, historiography, methodological nationalism, politics of inevitability, Norway and Denmark.

History as political weapon
"We have to remember that history is used as a weapon in today’s ongoing conflicts; that’s how it has been, and that’s how it is. [...]– Warring parties and classes derive their weapons from history." 2

Here, the Norwegian historian Sverre Steen might seem to be contradicting Leopold von Ranke’s maxim that the historian should find out «wie es eigentlich gewesen».3 Using primary sources, the historian attempts to discover the past on its own premises and not on the basis of posterity’s political requirements. There is an idealistic striving for a «value-free science» that stands in contrast to Steen’s more realistic view of history. It recognises that human beings cannot place themselves outside the frame of their own lives and the time they live in. They are political animals.5

1. This speech was given as keynote lecture at the Norwegian History Days 2022 at the University of Bergen. Some smaller changes were made to the speech for the purpose of publication.
3. Ranke 1885 [1824]: VII.
The conflict between history as an ideal and history as a reality is the theme of this keynote. I shall address it using a discussion of the grand national narratives in Norway and Denmark and the theme of this year’s Norwegian History Days, fragmentation. Here I will argue that politics and ideology have played a crucial role in both Norwegian and Danish historiography, and that this has influenced the understanding both of history and politics. In my discussion, I will pay particular attention to the events of 1814, 1864 and 1905. My interpretation will be anti-deterministic and «the roads not taken» will be taken seriously.

The fragmentation of history
The idea of the fragmentation of history derives from postmodernism, which has challenged grand national narratives. The grand narrative should be seen as a template for the overall lines of development adopted by a nation. In it, a series of central sites of memory are given prominence and interpreted in such a way that they can be incorporated and support the grand narrative. The grand narrative is often one of progress, but it will typically include many examples of adversity and threat from without before the promised land is reached – which is to say, today’s nation state. To a significant extent, the grand narrative serves to promote the formation of collective identity.6

The politics of inevitability
Francis Fukuyama’s prediction of the victory of liberal democracies and the ideological end of history had a huge impact in the West,7 where it led to what Timothy Snyder has called the «politics of inevitability». «[A] sense that the future is just more of the present, that the laws of progress are known, that there are no alternatives».8

Even though the idea of The End of History has been punctured for the time being by fear, populism and war in Europe, it is important to recognise that Fukuyama is basing his thinking upon a western tradition that sees history as having an «end». This can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, Judeo-Christian tradition, and through the nineteenth-century debate between Hegel’s idealistic philosophy of history and Marx’s historical materialism, which was influential for Halvdan Koht, prominent Norwegian historian and, later, foreign minister for the Labour Party. As a historian, Koht incorporated historical materialism into the grand Norwegian narrative, seeing one class succeeding another as the driving force of historical development, and the country’s national freedom as based on the economy, the population and the national struggle between a foreign upper class and the Norwegian people.9 As a foreign minister, Koht’s policy was influenced by lessons derived from his analysis of Sweden and Norway’s foreign policy in 1864.10

---

Traditions of Left and Right

The link between the professions of history and politics was not particular to Koht – nor to Norway. A whole range of leading Norwegian and Danish historians played a significant role in politics prior to the Second World War determining how these nations’ history should be understood, what political lessons history could teach, and what policy should be pursued.

Under absolutist rule, the power of the state ensured that history was aligned with official state patriotism in these two countries. Its fall brought with it the splintering of historical and political models associated with any democratisation. This meant that the nineteenth century took on formative significance for the relation between history and politics and for the shaping of grand national narratives. In Norway and Denmark this led to a battle for history, with historians of Left and Right variously interpreting history and its teaching with the authority accorded them by their subject and their knowledge. In the case of Norway, this gave rise to two narratives, which can be called the traditions of the Right and Left.

In the mythology of Danish history as a discipline, the defeat in the Second Schleswig War of 1864 has crucial significance for its professionalisation. The same has not attracted attention in Norwegian historiography, but maybe it should. The war of 1864 was conceived as a Scandinavian war of unification along the lines of those in Italy and Germany. Norwegian historian politicians of the time were acutely aware that this was the case. The battle for and against political Scandinavism and its aim to unify the Nordic countries was part of a general war between Left and Right and between their historians.

The conservative historians of the Right originated from the families of officials traditionally linked to Denmark and its culture. Like Ranke in Germany and the National Liberals in Denmark, they believed in the primacy of foreign policy. The future director general of the National Archives and politician Michael Birkeland, for example, saw the Norwegian nation as part of a larger European whole. The freedom that Norwegians had acquired in 1814 was seen as ‘a gift’ that was due more to external political circumstances than it was to the actions of Norwegians themselves. For him, a Scandinavian union was both the conclusion of the 1814 project and an expression of the politics of inevitability.

Political Scandinavism became, however, the history that did not happen. The defeat in 1864 not only undermined National Liberals in Denmark. It also weakened the tradition of the Right in Norway and boosted that of the Left, for whom 1814 is the provisional culmination of an inner development and a national process of liberation. Nineteenth-century historians from the Left like Ernst Sars battled, therefore, to demonstrate the national characteristics of Norwegians in the past in order to root out foreign influences in the present and to ensure Norwegians’ full cultural and political independence in the future. For historians of the Left like Sars, the lesson of Denmark’s defeat in 1864 was not only that neutrality served Norwegian interests. It also confirmed for him the politics of inevitability. Historical development would lead to a break with the political union with Sweden and the cultural union with Denmark. The end of history was the Norwegian nation state, whose core was the peasantry.

The political and historical battle in the 1860s for and against Scandinavism was, then, a clear prelude to the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian union in 1905 and Norway’s cultural severance from Denmark in the following decades. It was a battle won by the Left, just as they were victorious in the conflict about parliamentarianism in 1884. This created the impression that history itself had proved the Left to be right. The consequence was that their view of history ended up forming the core of the grand Norwegian narrative. When the Labour Party took political power, they used their own ideology to develop it, aided by their historian politicians, among them Halvdan Koht. The end of history now became the national welfare state, at whose heart were the peasants and the workers. Koht was an incarnation of this transition. Son of a Left politician, he had fought on the side of the Left in clashes relating to the union before joining the Labour Party.

The same pattern can be seen in Denmark, where a faction of the Left became the Radical Left. Since the historian politicians belonged to this wing, Danes refer to a tradition of radical historians. Foremost amongst these radical historian politicians was Peter Munch. As minister for defence during the First World War and foreign minister until the Second, Munch played the same role as Koht did in Norway.

Like other historian politicians of the time, they were positivists. It was not their view of history that was shaped by their politics, but their politics were shaped by an objective analysis of the lessons of history. This left them with the politics of inevitability. The lessons of 1864 were that the military was no use and that pursuing an active foreign policy was lethal. Norway and Denmark would have to adopt a policy of neutrality, adaptation and disarmament. It was only through cooperation between peoples and through international organisations like the League of Nations that they could nurture any hope of influence. In that sense, Koht and Munch were institutionalists and idealists.

The emergent young generation of radical historians not only transposed their own democratic and pacifist ideals onto the past but created a perception of Denmark as a peaceful little nation state throughout its history. In contrast to the conservatives, they cultivated neither kings nor their wars but, like the Norwegian historians of the Left, the peasantry. The perception of Denmark as a multinational empire bound together by dynastic loyalty that used power as a political tool clashed with their ideals. This was crucial for the history that they wrote and for the grand narrative that was created. Rather than putting national romanticism in its place, as they thought, these radical historians created a grand narrative that was more nationalist, since empire and Scandinavism were written out of history. The nation state was made the framework for all Danish history, while democracy was turned into a political prop.

Just like the Norwegian historians of the Left, radical historians wrote a national democratic history built around the primacy of domestic politics and directed at the peasantry. Time does not allow me to share the grand Danish narrative, but let us look at its counterpart created by Norwegian historian politicians.

The grand Norwegian narrative begins in the distant golden age. People lived in harmony with nature, which created a population of yeoman freeholders. They assembled at moots to decide their own affairs and with their longships they created a Norwegian power in the North Atlantic. It was built around democratic ideals and property rights. The increasing power of the monarchy and the Catholic Church undermined freedom and equality in society, while the Black Death and the lack of a strong aristocracy weakened the state in the late Middle Ages.

Norway became, first, the junior partner in the union with Sweden and later entered the union with Denmark. The monarchy, the language, and the elite became Danish. Norwegian values and the Norwegian nationality, however, lived on undisturbed in the «true» Norway among the mountains. Here, the peasantry resisted Danish-European culture. The urban elite from Denmark began to see themselves as Norwegian. Separation from Denmark in 1814, while formally due to external circumstances, had been anticipated and prepared by an internal national development that made the divorce inevitable. The democratic constitution created at Eidsvold should therefore be seen as the work of the people, which regenerated and restored the nation after four hundred years of union with Denmark.

In 1814, Norwegians recovered their domestic self-determination, while the dissolution of the union with Sweden in 1905 restored Norway to its full political sovereignty as a nation. The task of national liberation was subsequently completed when the country settled its cultural scores with Denmark. Occupation and resistance during the Second World War confirmed the significance of freedom and independence for Norwegian self-understanding, while the extension of the welfare state emphasised the importance of equality and social justice. Norwegians now, at last, became themselves, and created a Norway for the people through a Norwegian national welfare state.

This national democratic consensus narrative is as strong as it is unoriginal. It is strong because it gives a clear and cohesive narrative built upon a progressive evolution towards a predetermined end in the form of a free, independent and democratic nation state with a clear idea on what it means to be Norwegian.

If the narrative is unoriginal, it is because the same structure and the same themes can be found right across Europe. The Norwegian narrative is shaped like the letter U. History starts at a high point with the golden age; there is a decline that leads to a national nadir, followed by a national resurrection that leads the nation to a new high point. At the heart of the nation was the peasant who lived in harmony with nature shielded from the European culture. Peasant culture, therefore, contained the seed for that national resurrection. The idea of some primordial freedom of the people that was superseded by foreign suppression is a recurrent theme in almost all the grand narratives created by small nations. This reflects the fact that they did not constitute the centre of any of the empires that Europe consisted of before nation states became the norm.

---

The Whig interpretation of history

Despite fragmentation in the discipline of history, the grand national narratives continue to be prominent. Norwegians and Danes perceive their nations as being peaceful and democratic societies rooted in consensus and characterised by social care, trust and the absence of corruption.29 It is, therefore, no accident that the working title of Fukuyama’s books on *The Origins of Political Order* (2011) and *Political Order and Political Decay* (2014) was *Getting to Denmark.*30

Fukuyama’s use of Denmark was translated in the international press into the idea that Denmark had reached the end of history,31 a description that might equally apply to all the Nordic countries. Danes and Norwegians regard the Nordic democratic welfare and nation state as the end of history in the sense that only a few on the most extreme political wings seek more substantial social or political change. Concerns are about who is best to preserve, defend and improve the status quo.32

The similarity between Fukuyama’s interpretation and Nordic self-perception should come as no surprise. He bases his argument on literature, which reproduces the consensus narrative of Danish national democracy. These Nordic grand narratives bear a striking similarity to what Herbert Butterfield has called *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), which emphasised the way progressive historians retrospectively sided with all revolutions that succeeded and judged the past using the liberal yardstick of their own time. This would seem to be a lesson learnt by Norwegian and Danish historian politicians.

As Ernest Renan demonstrated as early as 1882, national consensus narratives are built on a collective amnesia.33 What unites the nation is remembered, while all that has divided it is forgotten, suppressed or played down. Nevertheless, there will always be counter-narratives that challenge the dominant narratives, and in certain cases can even take their place.34

The movement of the Left and the victory of the Labour parties in Norway and Denmark meant that their narratives were dominant until the Second World War. The attack on 9 April 1940, however, struck at the heart not only of the security policy that the historian politicians Koht and Munch had helped to shape but also of their view of history. After the war, Norway and Denmark gave up their policy of neutrality and sought protection in NATO. Koht and Munch’s idealistic institutionalism was not, however, replaced by a cynical realism. The Nordic countries believe in international cooperation *as long as* this is not regarded as a threat to their national narrative of democratic consensus.

In Norway, the Second World War brought an academic revival of the Right tradition. However, this did not mean that it acquired hegemony. The characteristic of the Right tradition is that Norwegian history should be seen in the light of European history and, as *Evaluering av norsk historiefaglig forskning* concluded in 2008, Norwegian historiography was characterised by methodological nationalism.35 A similar evaluation of Danish historiography would probably have come to the same conclusion. Norwegian history has come a long way over the past fourteen years. But the Left tradition remains dominant in the dissemination of history to the public, as does the Radical tradition in Denmark.

31. Cf. The Economist, September 27th, 2014; Meaney 2011; Morris 2011. The concept was used by *The Guardian* and *The Spectator.*
33. Renan 1990 [1882].
35. For the concept, see Wimmer & Schiller 2003.
Nevertheless, increasingly Danish history is being seen from an imperial and transnational perspective, while the narrative about how Denmark became a democracy in 1848 in academic terms has been replaced by an interpretation of the constitutional monarchy and an understanding that democracy only won through in the twentieth century.

**The problem with the Left tradition**

Domestic policy and history from below that are cultivated by the Left tradition are important. Norwegian history needs to be written in Norwegian for Norwegians about what happened in Norway. This maintains the social contract between historians and the society that pays for their work by providing an insight into the country’s past. Moreover, it is worth stressing its role in the creation of a democratic identity.

The Left tradition’s nationalist democratic tendencies, however, also bring with them a series of inbuilt historical, political and philosophical problems. Its political tendentiousness and the primacy of domestic politics mean that Norwegian history is perceived in isolation and by present-day standards. This is the root of methodological nationalism. This tradition can explain why high politics, foreign policy and security policy have taken up too little place in Norwegian historiography and why presentism has often been a feature of unions that Norway has been part of.

This is a problem not only for Norwegian historiography but also for the understanding of Norway’s complicated relationship to the EU. In contrast to the Right tradition, which is based on the realistic tradition in international politics that regards sovereignty as a matter of degree, the Left tradition is based on a perception of national sovereignty as being absolute.

**Futures past**

The greatest problems with the grand national narrative are that it makes history deterministic and prevents it being understood across borders. The Left tradition is built around the nineteenth-century perceptions of a politics of inevitability, which allowed only one future, not several. The same was true of the Right tradition, but the future it envisaged failed – first the Scandinavian union and later the union with Sweden. This, alongside their democratic appeal, is the reason for the Left tradition in Norway and the radical tradition in Denmark having maintained their powerful position.

The past did not, however, only have one predetermined future. Let me take Scandinavism as an example of «the road not taken», of the need to write history transnationally and to see national developments in a European perspective. The supposedly inevitable defeat of political Scandinavism in 1864 has been explained on the basis of structures and national cultures and in sarcastic language.

The explanations we find in historiography about political Scandinavists are taken directly from their political opponents – the so-called anti-Scandinavists. If historians have

39. For the concept, see Koselleck 2004.
characterised anti-Scandinavists as hard-headed statesmen and Scandinavists as idealistic utopians, the reason is that a piece of political propaganda has been turned into scientific truth.

The master narrative was not plucked out of thin air. When we look at the celebratory after-dinner speeches at the Scandinavist student gatherings in the 1840s, we find classic liberal ideas, which political scientists from the ‘realistic’ school associate with idealism and utopianism. Historians have overlooked the fact that political Scandinavism was formed to a far greater extent by a fear of annihilation. The origin of the state was, as a contemporary Norwegian Scandinavist, historian and politician wrote, fear, and their aim was to survive in an anarchic world. The problem was that, individually, the Scandinavian states were too small and too weak.

When Scandinavist rhetoric changed its tune in the 1850s, it was because the inability to unite Scandinavia during the First Schleswig War and the experiences of European revolutions set alongside the Crimean War and the unification of Italy had altered the scope of their expectations. They regarded the unification of Scandinavia as a precondition for the survival of the Scandinavian peoples.

Political Scandinavism as a realistic theory was clearly expounded by Michael Birkeland, who built his argument on «the idea of Nationality», which meant something other than it does for us today. Once their freedom and autonomy had been attained, «a craving for political amalgamation between closely related» nationalities had made itself felt, for the link between closely related peoples was a source of military and political strength, spiritual unity and material prosperity.

Birkeland’s thinking captures what Eric Hobsbawm has called the «threshold principle». The essence of the threshold principle was that a nation had to have sufficient size to be capable of surviving and developing. To avoid annihilation, smaller and related nations had to unite to survive and maximize their relative sovereignty. Since Norway did not have the resources to defend itself, their Danish brother nation were their natural allies. If Denmark lost its independence, Norway’s existence would be threatened. This was not simply due to the indissoluble bonds that existed between the cultures of the two peoples but also because, if Denmark became German, that would constitute a political and military threat to the rest of the Nordic countries. An annihilation of Denmark risked becoming the national annihilation of the Nordic people. One could argue that 9 April 1940 vindicated this view.

Political Scandinavism was not only ideologically but also politically a child of its time. It is simply wrong, therefore, when the master narrative claims that a Scandinavian union was made impossible by the opposition of the great powers. Quite the contrary, several of them were actively working to promote the idea. It had been mooted in Prussian foreign policy since the Napoleonic Wars, by Bismarck from 1857, Napoleon III consistently supported the idea, while Great Britain periodically did so too. Austria and Russia, on the other hand, were opposed to a unified Scandinavia.

The problems and failings of Scandinavism should neither be downplayed nor ignored, and several of the explanations provided by traditional historiography are essential. None of

44. Hobsbawm 2002 [1992]: 33, 42.
these explanations, however, are in themselves sufficient to explain why Scandinavism failed when Italian and German movements for nationalism faced the same challenges. Nationalism in these Italian and German states was not better defined, divisions were no less, and the opposition from the great powers was, if anything, greater towards these projects than in the case of Scandinavia.47

Paradoxically enough, both political Scandinavists and latter-day historians have regarded history as a cage of iron. The former saw the unification of Scandinavia as inevitable, while the latter saw the present-day nation states as the end of history. Structures determined the progress of history. And yet, in contrast to many of posterity’s historians, they had a greater understanding of the significance of chance events, timing, individuals, and politics.48

A classic Norwegian counterargument is that political Scandinavism would have failed no matter what because the Norwegians were against it. My reply is that that view overstates both Norwegian opposition and its importance. Firstly, the King of Norway and Sweden, Charles XV, was a Scandinavist, the Norwegian government was evenly divided between Scandinavists and anti-Scandinavists, and the latter had only a small majority in parliament.49 Secondly, if Charles XV had reached an agreement with the Danes with the support of Prussia, France and a reshuffled Swedish government, then Norway would not have been able to block a union. Anyone in doubt need look no further than the events of 1814, when the Great Powers forced Norway into a union.

What really happened?

In emphasising political Scandinavism and the Right tradition, my point is not to replace one form of determinism with another. The point is that we have to take the possible futures of the past seriously and that we should try to understand the political agents of the past and their ideology on their own terms instead of seeing them through the eyes of their opponents or assessing them on the basis of current ideals. In that sense, my point is completely in line with Ranke’s historist idealism. I agree with the post-modernist claim that these ideals are utopian, but I believe it is a Utopia worth pursuing.

Instead of adopting a positivistic approach to the past, history as a discipline would do better to rediscover its own historist roots and a hermeneutic approach. Historians ought to try to the best of their ability to understand all parties involved in a case.50 Using hard graft and insight, reasonable and nuanced reconstructions of the past can be created, which can be tested critically. The narratives of historians are not, then, truths inscribed in stone about «what really happened» but they are – or should be – honest and probable interpretations using the knowledge that we have to hand.51

We can use Sverre Steen’s words to understand that on the stage of history actors not only in the present but also in the past have used history as a political weapon. This is an insight that can be traced right back to Thucydides’s History of the Peloponnesian War. The father of our discipline warned us to make a careful distinction between the accounts of political leaders and their real motives. This should be self-evident, as this is something that we teach

50. Mill 1901 [1859]: 67.
our first-year students. Nonetheless, European historiography is marred by examples of how highly political narratives have been used uncritically if they fit the ideology of the historian or the grand national narrative.

Prussian historiography and The Whig Interpretation of History are prime examples, but so are the Left tradition and the Radical tradition of historians. Due to them, we have made nineteenth-century politics more democratic than it was and have misunderstood the nationalism of the period. Present-day national democratic ideals mean that we have uncritically adopted the history of the victor and turned propaganda into historical truth. The problem here is not that history as a profession and our understanding of history have been fragmented. The problem is that in one sense they have not been sufficiently fragmented.

To explore history is, to borrow Barbara Tuchman’s title, to look into «A Distant Mirror». As individual historians with the political views of our time and with familiar national narratives ringing in our ears, it is hard not to see those views vindicated or to question those narratives. That would be tantamount to airbrushing ourselves out of the mirror. But this, surely, is the mark of a professional historian. If we wish to understand Norwegian history, then Norwegian history also needs to be seen in the light of Scandinavian history and as a part of the European development. By embracing its complex, variegated and interwoven nature, we can come to a better understanding both of the past and of the present as nationalism, imperialism, and history as a political weapon is as relevant as ever. «The past is never dead. It’s not even past.»

**Literature**


---


