

THE CULTURE OF SCANDINAVIA*

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No fruitful discussion of cultural problems and phenomena is feasible unless the very term "culture" is, at least, tentatively defined.

Alfred Louis Kroeber, an American theoretician of culture, in his study entitled "The Nature of Culture" (Chicago, 1965), provides approximately thirty different definitions of culture. I should not, however, be much surprised to discover that since the publication of Kroeber's work (1950-51) the number of such definitions has more than doubled. It is not my purpose here to engage in a detailed discussion of cultural theory, definition or typology; I merely wish to state that my point of departure is Edward Burnett Taylor's anthropological view of culture first expounded in his work "Primitive Culture" (London, 1871). Ever since that date it has been customary to regard culture as an outcome of man's conscious and deliberate activity elevating us humans (in the positive and in the negative sense) above the world of Nature.

As the foregoing statement may appear rather general, we need – for practical purposes – to provide here a more precise cultural typology based on the theoretical assumption just outlined. I therefore envisage culture as comprising five distinct spheres of activity:

1. Artistic culture comprising all those human products and artefacts which, in the course of their historical development, have been endowed with artistic expression, i. e. sculpture, painting, literature, theatre, film, etc.
2. Intellectual culture encompassing all those spheres of human mental activity that find their expression in philosophy, science, education, intellectual trends and movements, etc. One must also include under this heading the various institutions designed to advance intellectual inquiry.

3. Sociopolitical culture embracing the totality of interpersonal relationships and phenomena and their institutionalised forms.

4. Moral and religious culture, i.e. all ideas and notions of ethical, magical, mythological, and religious nature.

5. Technological and civilisational culture encompassing the development of various means of production and all other tools and devices designed to make human life easier together with the processes involved and their influence on human social organisation.

This typology, I believe, covers all or – to be more cautious – almost all the spheres of human activity inferrable from the conception of culture initially postulated.

It also appears desirable to define more precisely the notion of Scandinavia as the exact meaning of this term varies depending on the criteria adopted, on whether they are predominantly geographical, historical, linguistic and ethnic, political and administrative. I propose to employ the last of these criteria as a point of departure without, however, losing sight of the fact that the present-day political-administrative boundaries of the Scandinavian countries have, historically speaking, been subject to considerable change and fluctuation. We should also bear in mind the importance of other criteria just enumerated. Scandinavia then – in sense in which I use the term here – comprises all the states and autonomous regions that constitute the Nordic Council, a body which represents in the legal and organisational sense the culmination of several centuries of efforts aimed at giving substance to the idea of Scandinavism, i.e. of close co-operation, in various fields, of all those states of Northern Europe that share geographical, historical and cultural affinities. Thus, proceeding westward, this region – or rather, macroregion – is seen as embracing the following states and autonomous territories: Finland and the Aland Islands, Sweden, Norway, the so-called Insular Scandinavia, i.e. Spitsbergen, the Faeroese Islands, Iceland, Greenland and a country that does not fit the current administrative and national organisation of Scandinavia, namely Lapland, situated in the north of Finland, Sweden and Norway and beyond Scandinavia's geographical borders (the Kola Peninsula).

The countries listed above collectively form a cultural macroregion which, notwithstanding its affinities with European and world culture, exhibits cultural idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. The same holds true of culture of the German-speaking countries, of Anglo-Saxon culture, of Roman (Latin) culture and of Slavonic culture, to mention only the European counterparts of Scandinavia. This paper, however, will focus entirely on Scandinavian culture.

As will have been noted, Scandinavia and its culture can be seen as both homogenous and heterogenous. Let us begin with the differentiating factor. Two examples will help to clarify the matter. The Scandinavian peoples and ethnic groups are not ethnogenetically identical. The Nordic group comprises the peoples of North Germanic origin, i.e. the Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, Faeroesians, and Icelanders. Another division includes the peoples of Ugro-Finnic descent, such as Finns, Karelians, and Lapps. The inhabitants of Greenland, Aleut, Eskimos, also called Inuit, represent still another ethnic entity.

Numerically and culturally, Scandinavia is dominated by the representatives of the Nordic group (18.300.000 people) who account for 78 per cent of the entire population of the region. They are followed by the Ugro-Finnic peoples represented by 5.000.000 Finns and Karelians and 35.000 to 55.000 Lapps, i.e. 21.8 per cent of the region's population. Finally, there are about 54.000 Greenlanders (0.2 per cent). Evident ethnic differences, however, tend to be if not entirely levelled out then at least diminished by historical intermingling of these various ethnic elements. A case in point is Finland where, as a result of the Swedish incursions of the 12th and 13th century and of the political association of the two countries, dating from the 19th century, a sizeable Swedish population is to be found. The Swedes living in Finland, however close their ties with that country may be, still from their own linguistics enclaves. Hence there are two official languages in Finland, Finnish and Swedish.

Another source of Scandinavian diversity is to be seen in the differences in the historical development of the various national and ethnic groups residing in the region. There is thus in Scandinavia both an "older" and a "younger" culture. The former is represented by Danish and Swedish culture which has enjoyed continuous and virtually uninterrupted development since the Middle Ages. The "younger" cultures of Scandinavia, namely, Norwegian Finnish, Icelandic, and Faeroese, are those that, having experienced a period of Danish or Swedish cultural dominance, underwent a process of national reawakening or became conscious of their national identity in the 19th and 20th century. The cultures of Lapland and Greenland have only recently begun their transition from folk culture to the so-called "high" culture. In this respect, too, the differences have tended to become less pronounced because the "younger" cultures, in the course of their rebirth and redefinition of their national identity, have assimilated the heritage of the "older" cultures. Finland can once again serve as good example here. There the process of national self-definition was initiated by the so-called Fennomen, active during the Enlightenment and especially so, at the time of Romanticism. In Norway numerous followers of the prominent Romantic poet Johan

Welhaven (1807-1873) likewise exploited the cultural achievement of the epoch of Danish domination. Cultural lag was, moreover, compensated for by the dynamism and vigour of the "younger" cultures. Thus the culture of Norway, where the process of national rebirth began in mid-19th century, had by the end of that century become almost a synonym of Scandinavian culture in Europe, largely due to such prominent figures as the novelist Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), the composer Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) or the painter and engraver Edvard Munch (1863-1944). The situation was similar, if somewhat less spectacular, in Finland whose culture won European recognition thanks to the composer Jean Sibelius (1865-1957), the writer and Nobel Prize winner Eemil Sillanpää (1888-1964) or the painter and engraver Axel Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931).

As can be seen, I perceive the culture of the Scandinavian macro-region not as a mechanical sum of its individual nation and ethnic cultures but as a kind of synthesis. Focusing on that which is culturally common to all Scandinavians, I intend to do justice to the differences as well. We are nevertheless, I think, justified in assuming that the culture of Scandinavia represents "a unity of diversity", which, according to Albert Camus, is a characteristic feature of the European continent.

While viewing of Scandinavian culture as a separate and complete entity, it is necessary to single out those factors that, notwithstanding various important affinities with the rest of Europe, make it different from other supranational cultures, Anglo-Saxon, Roman or Slavonic. There are, I believe, three such motive forces in the development of Scandinavian culture that endow it with a distinct character of its own. They are 1) Nordic antiquity; 2) Christianity; 3) folk tradition.

Nordic antiquity testifies to the cultural advancement in the early Middle Ages of the Nordic Scandinavians, i.e. Norwegians, Danes, Swedes and the inhabitants of the territories they controlled in the Viking period. The Viking epoch (800-1050) represents Nordic antiquity at the peak of its development. It was at the time that the Scandinavians, while cultivating their own tradition, successfully assimilated and adopted the various cultural influences of the East (East Slavonic territories, Byzantium, even Baghdad caliphates) and the West (Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, German, Frankish, Ibero-Arabic, Italian, and Hellenic cultures). As a result, the Nordic culture of the time flourished and thrived as is evidenced, for instance, by the runic writing system used from the 3rd until the 13th century, occasionally even until the modern times. One must note that only those cultures that had reached a sufficiently high level of civilisational development (Greek, Latin, Phoenician, and Egyptian cultures) succeeded in evolving their own writing systems.

The Scandinavians of that time also had a mythology of their own which, though generally viewed as part of a common Germanic heritage, was preserved and written down in Iceland, primarily in the so-called Older Edda. They also possessed an original and artistically sophisticated literature represented by the Eddas, sagas and skaldic poetry. It is worth noting that the narrative technique of the sagas shows an affinity with contemporary behaviouristic prose, and that the formal and technical sophistication of skaldic poetry found its artistic equivalent in the poetry of European Baroque.

The Scandinavia of that era also produced a varied and original art evidence of which can be seen in bas-relief stone sculpture, wood engraving, jewellery and goldsmithery. The civilisational achievement of the Scandinavia is comparable, in terms of its cultural importance, to that of ancient Greece and Rome in the Mediterranean culture. Nordic antiquity functions in the same way – it testifies to the religion's historical greatness and is a point of cultural reference and a source of inspiration, especially so whenever Scandinavia's cultural development is threatened or otherwise hampered.

The importance of Christianity for the evolution of Scandinavian culture must be examined in its two historical phases, i.e. Western (Roman) Christianity and Protestantism. Western European Christianity was relatively slow to take root in Scandinavia; the process continued from the second half of the 10th century until the mid-13th century, and in Lapland until the 17th century. That was mainly due to the fact that Scandinavia was situated beyond the borders of the Roman Empire where this kind of religion became definitely established in the 4th century.

The Christianisation of the Scandinavian peoples began thus in the second half of the 10th century and the new creed and ritual was introduced in four distinct ways. The feudal manner of transition to the new religion consisted in the monarch's baptism followed by the baptism of his subjects (Denmark, Norway, Sweden). In Iceland, where there was no central authority, the process was democratic in character – all the free populace of the islands gathered together in a special meeting (allting) and collectively resolved to adopt Christianity as their faith. Finland was Christianised as a result of the Swedish crusades. And, finally, Lapland switched to the new faith under the influence of the missionaries who spread it within that country.

Discussing the introduction of Christianity in Scandinavia we must also note an important and significant fact – the first missionaries and clergymen refrained, in principle at least (or did so to a considerably lesser extent than was the case in, for instance, the Slavonic countries

(from destroying the relicts of the old pre-Christian, therefore pagan, culture. And thus the runic writing system, used also for magical purposes, coexisted with the Latin alphabet in the course of several centuries. Mediaeval monuments, shrines and other relics, for instance, baptismal fonts, sepulchres, church walls often carry runic inscriptions. Monastic scribes wrote down the songs of the Eddas, long present in the oral tradition and full of mythological stories; They also transcribed the old sagas and numerous specimens of skaldic poetry. All that testifies to the tolerance and wisdom of those missionaries and clergymen and to their appreciation of the high achievement of Scandinavia's pre-Christian culture.

A factor of some importance might also have been the cultural affinity between the Nordic culture and that represented by the German and Anglo-Saxon missionaries. Thus in mediaeval Scandinavia Christianity was in a sense "de-Europeanised". "de-Europeanisation" is a phenomenon only recently observed in the Roman Catholic Church, principally during the pontificate of John Paul II; it is aimed at adapting Christianity to local, often exotic, customs and traditions ("inculturisation"). As can be seen, mediaeval Scandinavia experienced that process relatively early in its history.

We have shown that, beginning with the 10th century, all the Scandinavian countries found themselves within the orbit of Western European Christianity; that, quite naturally, entailed important cultural ramifications. Most significantly, Scandinavia's exposure to Latin culture and to the heritage of Europe's Graeco-Roman antiquity resulted in its being drawn into the sphere of Mediterranean culture. That is why, notwithstanding its individual peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, Scandinavia has ever since been regarded as a part of Western Europe.

Protentastism was early adopted in Scandinavia; in 1527 the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) passed a bill establishing the supremacy of the State over the Church, which made possible the severing of the hitherto existing ties with Rome. A gathering of the representatives of the Danish estates in Copenhagen in 1536 resulted in the adoption of Protestantism in that country. Finland came within the orbit of the Swedish Reformation; following Denmark, the Reformation embraced (1550) Norway, Iceland and the Faeroese Islands. And thus virtually the whole of Scandinavia became a stronghold of European Protestantism and the Evangelical Augsburg (Lutheran) denomination. A discussion of the historical causes and circumstances of the developments just outlined is beyond the scope of this paper, it is however necessary to consider here the consequences of the adoption of Lutheranism in Scandinavia, especially so since, as I believe, it has had a considerable influence on the emergence and evolution of Scandinavia's modern culture.

As we know, the organisational structure of the Protestant Church is decentralised and considerably more "democratic" than that of the strongly centralised and hierarchical Roman Catholic Church. As a result the Lutheran Churches contributed significantly to the democratisation of the Scandinavian society. At the same time, however, Martin Luther's stand in the matter was definitely anti-individualistic: "There is no deadlier poison or anything more noxious or devilish than a rebel". (Martin Luther, *Wieder die räuberischen und mörderischen Rotten der Bauern*, 1525). Lutheranism thus additionally resulted in greater social discipline, a factor of considerable importance in the development of modern democratic societies. That consideration, incidentally, provides a religious justification for Max Weber's well-known contention that market economy developed more successfully in Protestant rather than in Roman Catholic countries; Scandinavia is a good illustration of the validity of Weber's claim.

Lutheranism resulted in the introduction of the vernacular in religious services and rituals, which may have affected the development of Scandinavia's national languages, including – apart from the language of liturgy – the language of literature (Biblical translations). It may also have prevented some languages from becoming completely extinct, a distinct enough possibility in Swedish-dominated Finland.

One should also note that Pietism (end of the 18th century onward) called for a daily reading of the Scripture in all Protestant families; as a result Scandinavian farmers were on the whole literate. That in turn could have affected the general intellectual level of the people at large. It could also account for the affinity between the world of the Bible and art, closer and more profound in Scandinavia than elsewhere, a case in point being the titles Ingmar Bergman (1918-), himself tending towards agnosticism, gave his three films, "The Seventh Seal" (1956), "As in a Mirror" (1960), and "Face to Face" (1975) – all are Biblical quotations.

The greatest significance of Protestantism for Scandinavian culture is, I think, to be found in the fact that that type of theology, with its doctrine of predestination and its exclusion of auricular confession, compelled the believer to confront, face to face, the stern God of the Old Testament. That may have result in the tragic existential vision of the world so characteristic of the Scandinavian North. A philosophical generalisation of that vision is to be found in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855).

The third factor of considerable importance in the development of Scandinavian culture is its predominantly folk character and its folk tradition embodied in its folklore. The social factor is not uniquely Scandinavian; the culture of Poland is, for instance, often described as

shaped primarily by the landed gentry of that country; Spanish culture is viewed as essentially aristocratic in character whereas Bohemian or German culture is seen as that of the middle class. The distinguishing criteria one adopts here depend on the role that those social groups have played in shaping and evolution of modern national cultures regardless of their current status in the social hierarchy.

It is rather important to note here that the Scandinavian farmer has never been as profoundly affected by the system of feudal serfdom and *corvée* as his counterpart in other European countries, Central-Eastern Europe in particular. Without losing sight of the internal stratification of Scandinavian peasantry as a social group, one nevertheless must admit that its principal representative, the "bone", tilled his own land, was entitled to civil liberties, and, in principle belonged (in the eyes of the law) to an estate equal to those of the gentry, clergy and the middle class.

We must not ignore the importance of folk culture in the regeneration and development of the "younger" national cultures, especially in the Romantic period, for the ideology of the Romanticism called for a fuller appreciation of folk tradition. And thus Scandinavia's folk culture became a recognised part of the region's official culture.

How does the folk tradition, discussed here, manifest itself in the culture of Scandinavia? What is it that testifies to its predominantly folk character? The answer may perhaps be found in the Scandinavians' special attitude to Nature which they tend to see as an integral component of human existence, but also as a potent power that may easily endanger and threaten that existence. At times this unusually close rapport with Nature results in a peculiar kind of mysticism evident, for example, in such literary works as Knut Hamsun's *The Blessing of the Earth* (1917) or Tarjei Vesaas's *The Great Game* (1934). This kind of attitude appears quite typical of peasant mentality.

Folk beliefs and folk stories also account for the fantastic in Scandinavian culture. Trolls, nymphs, sirens and other supernatural beings of Scandinavian folklore are frequently found in the art of the region and in the works of its most prominent writers. Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867) is an excellent example of a particularly successful adaptation of folklore to literature.

The predominantly folk character of the region under discussion is likewise reflected in Scandinavia's considerable contribution to the world's ethnographical studies and research. It may be interesting to note that ethnographical open-air museums called "skansens" derive their name from the name of such a museum in Stockholm. The Scandinavians have also contributed to the creation and development of the in-

stitution of the so-called folk university or people's university, a fact of more than regional significance.

The opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer in February 1994 was a vivid symbol and manifestation of Scandinavia's continuing folk tradition. Norwegian and Lappish folk customs, ancient legends and folk stories were all included in that spectacular event. The ceremony, televised to about a hundred countries around the world, was attended by Queen Sonja of Norway (born 1937) and Princess Märtha Louise (born 1971), both wearing national folk costumes. It is rather difficult to visualise members of any other European royal family attending a public function in that kind of apparel.

Finally, let me propose a tentative general typology of Scandinavian culture. In the context of that culture man is shown as confronting the harsh, often hostile, world of northern Nature and its severe climate; he is, however, also shown as, at the same time, extremely concerned with fundamental moral questions and ethical dilemmas.

Consequently, two factors seem to determine the cultural status of an inhabitant of northern Scandinavia. One of them is external and material and is embodied in the world in which he lives; the other one is internal and spiritual and consists in his extreme ethical sensitivity. The apparent antinomy of these two factors is also evident in other areas. Thus, for instance, Scandinavian aesthetics manifest a leaning both towards Classicism and Romanticism, towards the realistic and the fantastic; it is receptive of the cultural stimuli of Europe and the world at large yet it is profoundly rooted in its own cultural tradition. In its philosophy of life the antinomy of Scandinavian culture can be perceived in optimism combined with a sense of tragedy, in pragmatism coexistent with idealism. Finally, the *weltanschauung* of that culture combines rationalism with a marked tendency toward mysticism, secularism, at times indeed atheism, with a profound attachment to religious tradition.

The Scandinavian tend to view the world in terms of dialectical contradictions. That characteristic trait of their culture seems to accord especially well with the mentality of the modern man. It may also account for the continuing interest in the culture of Scandinavia in other European countries and in the world at large.