



“It is more than needed in our country”

Contemporary Czech images of Scandinavia through the lens of literary criticism

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Abstract

Before the age of mass media and mass travel (including tourism), cultural stereotypes were formed and communicated predominantly utilizing literature and other written sources (Fischer 1987). Nowadays, people travel extensively; they can get direct information from radio, television, and social media, yet stereotypes still seem to prevail. The general Czech contemporary notion of Scandinavian societies comes to the fore in the reviews of translated Scandinavian literature and Scandinavian (or Nordic) films, written by professionals and published in the edited press or the largely unedited social media. In these reviews, one can discern certain paradigms that doubtlessly amount to stereotypes. In this article, I will present a qualitative discourse analysis of Scandinavian stereotypes in the Czech reception of the Scandinavian arts, especially literature, taking into account the intertextual and contextual aspects of the Scandinavian ethnotypes occurring in reviews and paratexts in Czech mass media. I focus on two explicitly addressed images: The emancipated Scandinavian woman, and the alleged Scandinavian egalitarianism. Finally, I will resort to Tzvetan Todorov's typology of relations to the Other. I will try to explain the activist criticism of Czech reviewers, who tend to compare the Czech situation with the Scandinavian one, using Todorov's three axes describing the relation to alterity.

Keywords: cultural stereotypes, mass media, book reviews, Scandinavian stereotypes, Scandinavian ethnotypes, Tzvetan Todorov

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a Czech who teaches Scandinavian literature at a university and speaks Danish, I am confronted daily with my countrymen's image of Scandinavia and the Nordics and, just as frequently, moved to comment on and modify my compatriots' conceptions about them. The notion of Scandinavia in the minds of Czechs, no matter how divergent from reality, is, nevertheless, an interesting object of study in itself since it often motivates people's actions. Among them, sparking interest in young Czechs to enrol at a university to study one of the Nordic languages.

Hence, this contribution is motivated by an endeavour to make sense of the images of Scandinavia,¹ their manifestation and their function in contemporary Czech cultural discourse. Owing to the impressive number of Scandinavian books published in Czech translation each year, the corpus of literary reviews of Scandinavian novels suggests literature as an applicable subject of study, the results of which might prove to be telling. This article deals with contemporary images of the Nordics in Czech literary reviews; however, the first part of the analysis is diachronic and presents how the first Scandinavian stereotypes became established in the Czech-speaking lands. This diachronic excursus is necessary, since, as Joep Leersen has cogently argued, stereotypes are sedimentary:

The cultural history of ideas, unlike the social history of events, is cumulative rather than successive; it works by accretion rather than replacement. Later ideas do not replace or oust older ideas, but are superadded on top of them. The old remains available underneath the new. The Beatles do not abolish Bach, nor does the recent 'sociopathic murderer' ethnotype of 'Nordic noir' crime thrillers abolish the earlier Scandinavian ethnotypes of serene reasonableness (IKEA, Astrid Lindgren) or anguished moralism (Ingmar Bergman). (Leersen 2021:127f.)

This sedimentary process, however, hasn't been a natural one in Czechoslovakia due to 40 years of state-dictated propaganda. After 1948, cultural exchange was severed, books were censored and the Scandinavian countries were portrayed in communist propaganda as just a part of the alienated and hostile West – the only exception being neutral Sweden, which demonstrated a possible 'third way' or potential bridge between the first and second world. Sticking with a geological metaphor, this layer contributed to shaping the contemporary picture to a very limited degree. The prevailing contemporary stereotypes seem to have much more in common with those created around 1900 when the first Czech travellers explored Scandinavia and saw it as a possible role model for the emerging Czech civil society and the long-wished-for state of Czechs that was non-existent at that time.

Leersen aptly remarks that in the creation of stereotypes, the mechanism of contrast is decisive: "How do we frame Europe? It is a key insight in imagology that the image of a given 'nation' is always conceived in a discourse of contrast, even if that contrast is elided or left implicit" (Leersen 2021:125). Or to put it differently: to create a viable notion of the other or a heterostereotype it takes an established autostereotype. In this article, I therefore focus primarily on Czech discourse and the function of Nordic literary ethnotypes or national stereotypes.

¹ Analogue to the common English usage, in Czech-language discourse the attributes 'Scandinavian' and 'Nordic', i.e., 'skandinávský' a 'severský' are used interchangeably, and the broad public does not distinguish between them. Both adjectives or the analogous nouns 'Skandinávie' [Scandinavia] a 'Sever' [the North] refer to the Nordics inclusive of Iceland and Finland. In this paper, I focus on book reviews of books from the narrowly delineated Scandinavia: Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

In the conclusion, I make use of Tzvetan Todorov's canonical study of alterity in order to come to conclusions about Czech reviewers' relation to the European North, a region considered equal yet, in several respects, completely other and contrasting to the Czech lands.

2. METHOD AND METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Imagology is a discipline originally focused on literature. The main reservation about this method of exploring works of fiction is that this method perceives literature as a mere point of departure for making judgments about society. Consequently, imagology has been accused of dealing mainly with the social aspect of literature, which was a rather severe criticism in the decades of literary scholarship that cherished deconstructive methods, or *Werkimmanente Interpretation*, in other words, methods that focused on the work and its qualities, whereas cultural and social aspects were strictly ignored. As is well known, this omission of the social context was fuelled by German-speaking theorists and their experience or engagement in the era of National Socialism.²

Manfred S. Fischer, however, stresses that imagology does not strive to pinpoint the genuine nature of a given nation or a group of people, but instead deals with how the images function in a work of fiction and the purpose for creating them (Fischer 1987:56f.). Following Fischer's view, Leersen states that the aim of imagology is "to understand a discourse of representation rather than a society" (Leersen 2007:27), and he objects explicitly to such criticism of imagology while stressing that "imagology is not a form of sociology" because:

The ultimate perspective of image studies is a theory of cultural or national stereotypes, not a theory of cultural or national identity. Imagology is concerned with the representamen, representations as textual strategies and as discourse. (Ibid.)

My analysis of stereotypes or images through the lens of literary reviews pursues exactly this objective: To explore the discourse of the representation of Nordics in Czech society. This means the analysis should reveal something about Czech discourse and its objectives, and not define the essence of Scandinavian societies. Because the subject of study is literary critique, it follows that the analysis remains connected to literature, or to put it differently, it still deals with works of literature, albeit on a metalevel. While analysing Czech critical reflection of Scandinavian books and art, I will focus on those instances in which the critic specifically treats their Nordicness or Scandinavianness.

The genre of literary critique in popular media such as webpages and dailies oscillates on the verge between literary studies and journalism, since the critics are often trained literary scholars, but voice their critique in the mass media and therefore are in many respects closer to journalism. In past decades, several other studies have shifted their focus from literature to other fields such as journalism. The methodological approach of imagology in journalism varies from a quantitative analysis of tokens to a qualitative one; however, the core of the method is always in one way or another rooted in discourse analysis. I used search tools provided by the relatively extensive Czech national corpus during my search for both reviews on Scandinavian books and specific tokens in them to gather the largest possible number of occurrences. Yet the core of the analysis is qualitative and consists of close readings or interpretations of instances of stereotyping.

² For a more detailed elucidation, see, for example, Klaus L. Berghahn's (1979) paper "Wortkunst ohne Geschichte. Zur werkimmanenten Methode der Germanistik nach 1945".

As for the analysed media, it is important to point out that in recent years in Czechia we find in the printed media mainly reviews of bestselling books, since cultural content in Czech dailies has shrunk to a minimum. The only popular platform systematically publishing reviews of both Czech and translated books is the webpage *iliteratura.cz*. Of course, there are a handful of literary magazines; nevertheless, they are an elitist platform. For these reasons, many of the significant examples analysed in my paper are from *iliteratura.cz*, which features over 15,500 fully accessible reviews and is accessed by over 2000 unique visitors on a daily basis.³ Moreover, a major Czech book e-shop, *Kosmas*, automatically links any announced book publication with a review published on *iliteratura.cz*, greatly enhancing the influence of any review published on this portal.

The reason for choosing reviews of art, and chiefly literature, is threefold. One, I am a literary scholar myself, and the object of the critical treatment is familiar to me. Two, I adhere to Leersen's astute remark about the decisive role of literature and art in creating ethnotypes and stereotypes generally. Leersen stresses the key role of the literary canon in petrifying stereotypes and considers other types of texts such as journalism as "more ephemeral sources" (Leersen 2007:26). I deal, however, with literature seen through the lens of Czech reviewers who identify, deny, or create stereotypes, hence, in my corpus literature and journalism overlap. Three, I have assumed that literary critics might not succumb to the rather rudimentary and automatic stereotyping of, let's say, sports journalism. In his book on stereotyping in journalism, Michael Billig ascribes 'banal nationalism' to journalism as such but concludes further that "the sporting pages repeat the commonplace stereotypes of nation, place and race" (Billig 1995:120). Billig's findings are corroborated by Luc van Doorslaer who puts it this way: "Under certain circumstances stereotyping is likely to function by default in journalism, the so-called 'automaticity of stereotyping'." (Doorslaer 2021:205). Doorslaer refers to research conducted by Dominic Lasorsa and Jia Dai on (intentional or unintentional) default stereotyping as well as the "overabundance of nationality-related stereotypes" in the writing of deceptive news stories, and sums up their results as follows: "According to their study, the fewer journalists are informed, the more they stereotype" (Doorslaer 2021:208). Because book reviews are defined through the term 'criticism' and a certain education of the reviewer is implied, one could expect reviewers to be well-versed in the use of metaphors and the function of common places in literature, and therefore less prone to succumb to banal stereotyping. Moreover, my analysis of the reviews has shown that the reviewers are often graduates of Scandinavian studies. Consequently, one would expect that well-informed critics would not be prone to constructing distinct stereotypes about Scandinavia based on rather loose images.

The last methodological observation concerns the one-way character of the analysis. While juxtaposing the Czech reviews with the reception of Czech books in the North might yield telling results, such a comparison was not feasible owing to the disproportion in the number of books published in the respective countries. Some 50–60 Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish titles were published in Czech translation every year from 2020 through 2022. These years were affected by the global pandemic and a shortage of paper, but the number of published books has nevertheless remained relatively stable over the past decade.

³ The cited data was provided and documented by the main editor of the web portal, Jovanka Šotolová, on 20 September 2022.

In Scandinavia, in contrast, less than ten Czech books, published by a small handful of publishing houses, were released in the last three years, which corresponds to the overall picture over the last couple of decades. The following overview (see Table 1) was compiled by crosschecking several sources and professionals dealing with publishing and translating.⁴

Year	Czech Books in Scandinavia			Scandinavian Books in Czechia		
	Denmark	Norway	Sweden	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
2020	1	0	1	7	14	32
2021	1	0	0	9	19	26
2022	3	3	1	10	17	37
Total	5	3	2	26	50	95

Table 1. *Books in translation in Czechia and Scandinavia.*

3. TWO RECURRING REPRESENTATIONS

The images presented by the reviewers were fairly consistent, since stereotypes according to their nature are antithetical to representations of diversity. I have chosen to closely read merely two recurring images addressed explicitly by the reviewers. Both representations are closely connected and occur regularly in the reviews. One is the ethnotype of the emancipated woman and the second is Scandinavia's alleged egalitarianism. Following some preliminary observations concerning the methods used, I recall Leersen's apt observations on the sedimentary nature of ethnotypes and undertake a diachronic exploration.

3.1 THE RESIDUAL IMAGE OF EQUALITY BETWEEN THE SEXES

Prominent images of an emancipated Scandinavian woman are found in Czech discourse as early as around 1900. This is interesting, since the legal status of Czech women was not all that different from that in Scandinavia. Czech women gained election rights in 1919 but in 1908 the first three female candidates ran for a seat in the Parliament of the Kingdom of Bohemia, The Bohemian Diet. In the by-election in 1912 the Mladá Boleslav-Nymburk district, the majority of political parties agreed to run only female candidates. In the decades following the enactment of laws giving women election rights, the number of Czech female parliamentarians oscillated at around ten, indicating that equality before the law was not immediately reflected in social life. But this situation was far from unique; the numbers were similar in both the Swedish and American legislative assemblies.⁵

⁴ The list is compiled from a number of sources; the Scandinavian data stem mainly from Peter Bugge's unpublished lecture "Travel to the North – A Call in Vain? The current state of, and perspectives for the translation of Czech literature into the Scandinavian languages" held at the seminar "Colloque: Le Rêve tchèque?", organized by Sorbonne Université in Paris on 5 December 2022. Other sources include the database of Czech Literary Centre (Czechlit.cz), my personal consultation at the Norwegian portal Bokbasen.no, consultations with a translator from Czech, Tora Hedin. The Czech data stem primarily from the webpage of Skandinávský dům, which lists the vast majority of Scandinavian books published in Czech, including non-fiction (<http://www.skandinavskydum.cz/category/nove-knihy/>). The list produced from these sources might lack a book or two; nevertheless, all the listed books were definitely published, and the numbers reveal an evident disproportion. In addition, the three Czech volumes published in Norway comprised two children's books and the testimony of Richard Glazar, a survivor from Treblinka concentration camp.

⁵ In his article "Ženy v parlamentu v meziválečném Československu: komparace se Spojenými státy americkými a Švédskem" (2004), Petr Just compared the American, Czech, and Swedish parliaments between 1918–1938 and found only minor differences in terms of female representation in the early 20th century.

In Denmark as well, the numbers in this period were coincident with those for Czechs.⁶ As for education, women mainly studied to become teachers, and at the end of the 19th century, 28% of all teachers were women in Bohemia (Lenderová 1999:255).

Although the situation of women in Central European Bohemia seemed coincident with that in Scandinavia, Czech travellers and experts on the Nordic states noted at the time that women in Denmark, Norway and Sweden seemed to be more emancipated and independent.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Arnošt Vilém Kraus (1859–1943), an enthusiast of Scandinavia who can undoubtedly be considered the founder of Scandinavian studies in Prague, promoted the Scandinavian states as models for the then non-existent Czech state (Březinová 2021; Lainto 2021). Around 1900, Kraus undertook several trips and excursions to Denmark, and in his report of 1902, he notes the loose manners of the maids in Funen, as quoted by Peter Bugge in an article on Kraus' image of Denmark: “The motto of the maids of Funen ‘natten er vores’ [the night belongs to us!], fully corresponds to their habits”. Bugge adds that Kraus viewed “what in his days was called national character” as defined by “a strong sense of equality, also between the sexes (the informal ‘Du’ (‘thou’) was spreading rapidly, he observed [...])” (Bugge 2021:234).

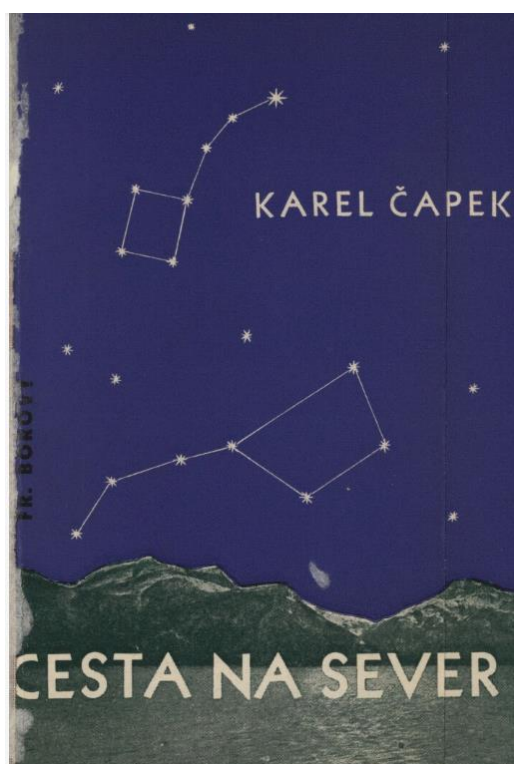


Figure 1. Cover of Karel Čapek's travelogue *Travels in the North*.

In his humorous 1936 travelogue, *Cesta na Sever* (*Travels in the North*), the Czech author Karel Čapek (1890–1938), lists 11 remarkable things about Copenhagen, and the image of the North sketched by him is consistent with Arnošt Vilém Kraus's image of Denmark.⁷ Two of Copenhagen's attractions relate to female attire as a sign of liberation. Čapek mentions the

⁶ Data available online. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.dk/da/folkestyret/grundloven-og-folkestyret/kvinder-i-politik>. Accessed 20 September 2022.

⁷ Peter Bugge concludes about Kraus' image of Scandinavia that “the image of Denmark established with such a diligence, insight, and love by Kraus before the Great War proved to be remarkably stable until the late 1930s” (Bugge 2021:236).

omnipresence of clothes shops for women in Copenhagen, and the many cheerful girls in ready-to-wear printed fabric dresses strolling the streets. Interestingly, the first attraction on the list Čapek made about Copenhagen concerns women too. Here, Čapek mentions the omnipresence of cyclists, and while doing so he explicitly mentions both the male and female cyclists, “cyklisté a cyklistky” (Čapek 1936:28), using conspicuously gendered language at a time when it was a norm to use generic masculine nouns (see Figure 2).

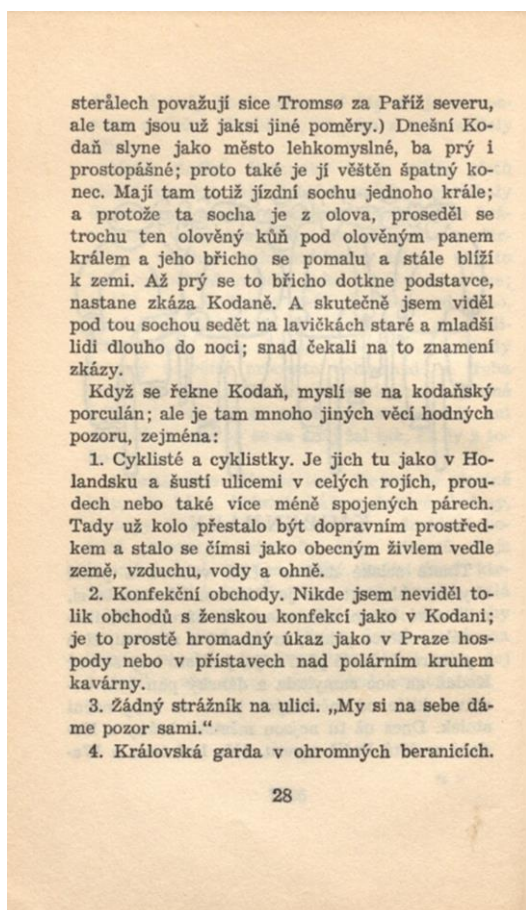


Figure 2. *Karel Čapek's description of Copenhagen full of male and female cyclists from his Travels in the North.*

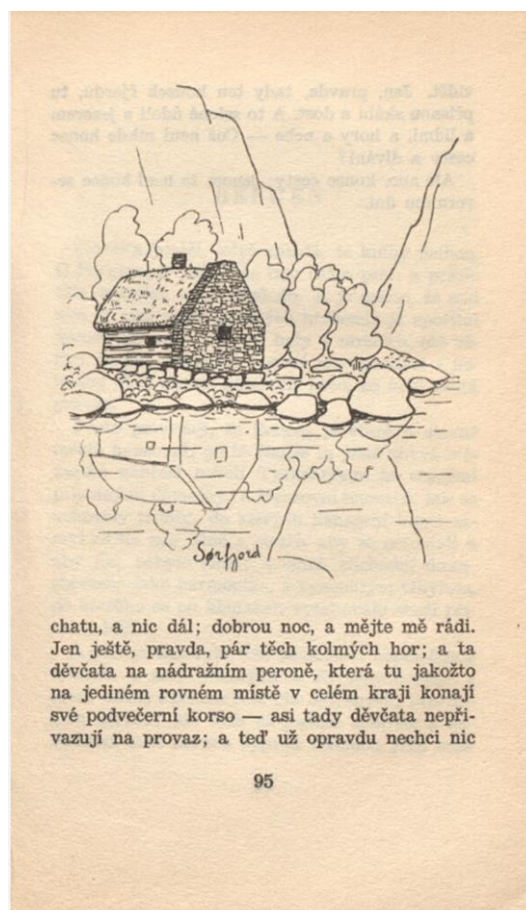


Figure 3. *Čapek's mention of the liberated Norwegian girls on an evening stroll. Čapek illustrated his travelogue himself.*

In Norway, Čapek contrasts the girls of Sørkjord with the local children, who are on a leash in order not to fall into the sea; the girls, in contrast, are parading “unleashed” in the evening, as Čapek puts it (see Figure 3).

As mentioned earlier, the 40 years of communist rule in the Czech Republic were marked by state-dictated propaganda, the role models for which were primarily of Soviet provenance. One can therefore not speak of a liberal and free media discourse at this time, which is why I omit the 1948–1989 period, focusing instead on the present time, as a detailed analysis of the Scandinavian stereotyping orchestrated by the state authorities would go beyond the scope of the present study.

3.2 REPRESENTATIONS OF SCANDINAVIAN WOMEN TODAY

The reviews I will be discussing specifically reflect the issue of women's emancipation and social equality in Czechia and Scandinavia. In them, the contemporary Czech woman is generally depicted as less emancipated than her Scandinavian counterpart.

This follows clearly from the truly activist-oriented review of Marta Breen and Jenny Jordahl's comic book *Kvinder i kamp* which translates into English as *Women in Battle*. The Czech version is titled *Neohrožené ženy* [Fearless Women], stressing the book's role model ethos. "It is badly needed in our country," the reviewer states, "to raise awareness of what feminism is and what issues it has long been dealing with. This is why the publication of *Neohrožené ženy* by Argo publishing house is such a great and praiseworthy achievement." [A zvyšovat povědomí o tom, co feminismus vlastně je a jakými otázkami se dlouhodobě zabývá, je u nás více než potřeba. Proto je vydání *Neohrožených žen* od nakladatelství Argo skvělým a chvályhodným počinem.]⁸ Similarly, the election of the first female president of neighbouring Slovakia in 2019 provoked another Czech reviewer to recall her watching the TV series *Borgen* (in Czech entitled *Vláda aka Government*). Analogous to the activist critique of *Neohrožené ženy*, the reviewer – the only reviewer cited here who doesn't hold a degree in Scandinavian studies – comments on the different stages of women's emancipation in Czechia and Scandinavia. While doing so, she indicates that the election of a female president would cause an outcry in Czechia and Slovakia:

Apart from the fact that I enjoyed watching *Borgen*, the series also made me think about where we stand. What's the difference? Of course, that women are emancipated and active in high political positions is a fact in the North of Europe; it is something these societies have become accustomed to, and the question of the sex of a given politician doesn't trigger any outcry. The reason for this might be that Denmark and Sweden are monarchies and that they have a queen who is respected by definition.

[Kromě toho, že mě sledování dánské Vlády bavilo, vedlo mě také k přemýšlení o tom, jak jsme na tom my. V čem je rozdíl. Samozřejmě v tom, že pro evropský sever je ženská emancipace a fakt ženy ve vysoké politické pozici něčím, s čím se společnost sžila a otázka pohlaví toho kterého politika nevzbuzuje žádné vášně. Tohle je možná dáno i tím, že severské země, tedy Dánsko a Švédsko, jsou monarchie a že mají královnu, kterou národ respektuje z definice.]⁹

Another review titled "A truly female novel" [Skutečně ženský román] treats Roy Jacobsen's series of novels on Ingrid Barrøy from the fictitious Norwegian island of the same name. The reviewer stresses that strong women are emblematic of Scandinavian societies:

Roy Jacobsen's series brings the Czech reader everything he or she imagines when thinking of what is branded as Nordic literature – enthralling, yet harsh nature dominated by the sea and fishing, strong, or, if you wish, emancipated female characters [...].

[Série Roye Jacobsena přináší českému čtenáři to, co si pod „značkou“ severská literatura představuje – podmanivou, ale drsnou přírodu, jíž dominuje moře a s ním spojené rybářství, silné, chcete-li emancipované ženské postavy (...)].¹⁰

⁸ Voslářová (2019). [Review of Marta Breen and Jenny Jordahl's *Kvinder i kamp*.] All English translations of the original Czech text are mine.

⁹ Zemančíková (2019). [Review of the Danish TV-series *Borgen*].

¹⁰ Grečnerová (2021). [Review of Roy Jacobsen's *Bare en mor*].

The critic further depicts the nature of Scandinavian emancipation:

Jacobsen created a female character who fully embraces all roles, but she definitely does not do so with a sigh of resignation. Ingrid is a prototype of a self-confident and unyielding woman who is aware of her talents and rights, which she is not afraid to exercise – often in spite of male disapproval.

[Jacobsen stvořil postavu ženy, která plně přijímá všechny role, rozhodně tak ale nečiní s rezignovaným povzdechem. Ingrid je prototyp sebevědomé a nepoddajné ženy, která si je vědoma svých schopností a práv, jež se nebojí uplatňovat, často navzdory mužské nevoli.]¹¹

The review concludes with the following words: “Today we repeatedly stress that women should be given more opportunities to win recognition in the public domain: In Jacobsen’s saga the whole island of Barrøy would cease to exist without them.” [Dnes opakovaně říkáme, že musíme ve veřejném prostoru dávat více prostoru ženám; v Jacobsenově sáze by bez nich ostrov Barrøy vůbec neexistoval.]¹² This section of the review is headed “Female power” [Ženská síla], and again, the critic undisguisedly presents this fictitious strong woman as a role model, both in the Scandinavian and Czech contexts.

In a critique of Edvard Hoem’s novel inspired by the life of his great-grandmother, who served as a midwife, a similar statement is made. In the very conclusion, the reviewer stresses that:

Czech readers will understand why Scandinavia is the imagined cradle of women’s emancipation. This is imprinted in literature through strong female characters, of which Stine is undoubtedly one. She leaves for a nine-month course in Oslo shortly after giving birth to her son with such determination and faith in her education that we envy her.

[čeští čtenáři díky knize pochopí, proč je zrovna Skandinávie pomyslnou kolébkou ženské emancipace. Ta se do literatury otiskuje silnými hrdinkami, mezi něž Stine nepochybně patří. Na devítiměsíční kurz do Osla odchází krátce po porodu syna s takovou odhodlaností a vírou ve vlastní vzdělání, že jí až závidíme.]¹³

The reviewer extols the will of the female protagonist to leave her one-year-old baby, hereby confirming that this very act is unheard of in today’s Czechia.

One of the most striking features of both reviews is that they ascribe the present-day equality between sexes to a natural evolution in the Scandinavian countries. According to the reviews, the roots of Scandinavian women’s emancipation are to be found in the mentality and climate, as well as the lifestyle in the north as such. To sum up this observation, I will cite the following words from the review of Hoem’s novel:

It is exactly such historical novels like those by Hoem and Jacobsen that reveal how the roots of Scandinavian equality rest on the lifestyle and organization of life there. While the men would leave for the sea for many months and were absent for the better part of the year, the women bore full responsibility for running the farms, bringing up the children, and maintaining ties with the local community.

¹¹ Grečnerová (2021). [Review of Roy Jacobsen’s *Bare en mor*].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Grečnerová (2022). [Review of Edvard Hoem’s *Jordmor på jorda*].

[A jsou to právě historické romány, jako ty Hoemovy nebo Jacobsenovy, které ukazují kořeny skandinávské rovnoprávnosti, spočívající ve stylu a uspořádání života. Zatímco muži odjížděli na dlouhé měsíce na moře a byli po velkou část roku nepřítomni, ženy s plnou odpovědností vedly hospodářství, vychovávaly děti, udržovaly vztahy s místní komunitou.]¹⁴

The reviewers' omission of the terms 'society' or 'state' in her attribution of gender equality in Scandinavia is telling, and the reason for it suggests itself. After 1948, women in socialist Czechoslovakia were pressured to take a job in the labour market, and this emancipation was often considered a direct form of oppression; to be employed was not a question of choice but a command. The employment of women meant that women began to work two shifts, one at their job and the other in the household. The outcome of this forced emancipation of women contradicted the proclaimed intentions of the mover of this process, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924), who described the dullness of the "home shift" in such a vivid manner, it seems as if he carried out such work himself:

Notwithstanding all the laws emancipating women, she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies, and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery. The real emancipation of women, real communism, will begin only where and when an all-out struggle begins (led by the proletariat wielding the state power) against this petty housekeeping, or rather when its wholesale transformation into a large-scale socialist economy begins. (Lenin 1919)

Czechoslovakian women were active in the labour market on a larger scale than the Scandinavians, but forced employment during the years of socialism was not accompanied by liberation on the domestic front. In all probability, this is why the reviewer stresses the inherent strong-spiritedness of Scandinavian woman, and presents it as an attribute that predestined women to fight for emancipation throughout the twentieth century. At the same time, the critic painstakingly omits any mention of social structures, the only exception is the structurally conditioned absence of men in the fishery, or to put it differently, the critic creates a notion that strong women have been commonplace in Scandinavia since time immemorial and emerged as such thanks to the lifestyle there.

Indeed, the state-controlled emancipation of the 1950s backfired after the fall of communism. This post-1989 renunciation of the enforced employment of both sexes provides a necessary context for understanding the last review I will analyse in terms of female emancipation. In a review of Karolina Ramqvist's novel *Flickvänen* (*A Girlfriend*), the reviewer somewhat surprisingly focuses on female emancipation, even though emancipation can by no means be described as the theme of the book. In it Ramqvist depicts the dull existence of the girlfriend of a mafia member; the protagonist has her financial needs provided for and does not work. The Swedish book teaser goes as follows: "There are many questions the book raises. Why do some women choose to live with a criminal? Why do felons in prisons get love letters?" [Det finns mycket att diskutera kring denna bok. Varför väljer vissa kvinnor att leva tillsammans med kriminella män?] In line with this, in a review in *Svenska Dagbladet*, the plot of the book is condensed into a single sentence: "It is an impressive portrayal of a provocatively superficial woman." [Det är ett imponerande porträtt av en provocerande ytlig kvinna].¹⁵ *Svenska Dagbladet*'s reviewer recommends the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Löfvendahl (2009). [Review of Karolina Ramqvist's *Flickvänen*].

reader watch the movie *Goodfellas*, because of the link between the Swedish young couple and the lives of the Mafiosos Henry and Karen. The point is that not one of the Swedish reviews focuses on the status of the housewife in *Flickvänen* in terms of emancipation and career.

This is why what provokes the most passionate reactions on the part of the Czech reviewer appears significant: Karin's choice to become a housewife. According to the reviewer, the most provocative part of the novel is not the female not pursuing goals of her own, goals concerning a job or career in particular. What is most provocative to the reviewer is the Swedish consensus – or from her perspective, dictate – concerning the necessity of women's achieving economic independence. The reviewer claims:

Among Swedish women, Karin is a rarity. She has been longing to find someone who would take care of her and provide for her. In such an equal society as the Swedish one, it is next to unthinkable to voice such a desire. Her mother blames herself for Karin's failure [...]. If it were the other way round, and Karin would provide for her boyfriend, it would be perfectly all right according to the mother...

[Karin je mezi Švédkami velmi nezvyklým jevem. Odjakživa toužila najít někoho, kdo by se o ni postaral, kdo by ji živil. V tak rovnoprávné společnosti, jako je ta švédská, je až nemyslitelné, aby žena takové přání vyslovila nahlas. Její matka ji považuje za své osobní selhání. Kdyby tomu bylo naopak, totiž že by Karin živila svého muže, bylo by to podle matky zcela v pořádku...].¹⁶

The critic's conclusion to this argument goes as follows: “Reflections on this ‘perverted feminism’, according to which the woman pursues her desires, which are not in compliance with the expectations of society, might be the most provocative part of the book.” [Úvahy o tomto „zvráceném feminismu”, v němž žena následuje svá přání, která však nejsou v souladu s očekáváním společnosti, představují snad nejprovokativnější pasáže díla.] In other words, the Czech reviewer considers Scandinavian emancipation dogmatic and unbalanced which becomes clear since the demand to be independent does not apply to the same degree to men. If we read her review closely, however, she considers the expectations of this egalitarian society and related social pressures to be the core of the novel and its most provocative part. This leads us to the second frequently discussed image of Scandinavia.

3.3 EGALITARIAN SCANDINAVIA – A POTENTIAL THREAT

The second recurring image depicts the Scandinavian peoples as markedly egalitarian. In Czech periodicals and media, a vast number of occurrences of the noun *rovnostářství* [egalitarianism] and the adjective *rovnostářský* [egalitarian] occur as objective characteristics of Scandinavia. The collocation is lexicalized to such an extent that one can speak of it as a sort of permanent epithet. For instance, a music reviewer of songwriter Jens Lekman's album describes the song “Waiting for Kirsten” as a “cute commentary on Swedish egalitarianism” [roztomilý komentář švédského rovnostářství], as the song depicts a futile wait for a famous actress who is not allowed into a bar because there are no VIP queues in Sweden.¹⁷ Symptomatic of this are the official guidelines called the “Ten Commandments for Trading”, issued by CzechTrade, a Government trade promotion agency of the Czech Republic. The fifth commandment for Czech business people trading with Danes contains this advice:

¹⁶ Podhorná (2016). [Review of Karolina Ramqvist's *Flickvänen*].

¹⁷ Turek (2017). [Review of Jens Lekman's *Night Falls Over Kortedala*].

“Collective decision-making – Danes are egalitarians. Decisions are made collectively and all opinions are taken into account. The conclusions of the meeting are announced only after thorough discussion and in successive stages.” [Kolektivní rozhodování - Dánové jsou rovnostáři. Rozhodování probíhá kolektivně a v úvahu jsou brány všechny názory. Závěry z jednání jsou známy až po důkladné diskusi a s větším odstupem.]¹⁸

Although the word egalitarianism is used in a rather positive or neutral meaning regarding Scandinavian societies in these two instances, the word itself has mostly a negative ring to it in Czech usage. The Czech National Corpus attests to this in the collocations associated with the words egalitarian and egalitarianism; the range varies from *silly* egalitarianism, *unacceptable* egalitarianism, and *embedded* egalitarianism (indicating a negative habit one rather should get rid of). Egalitarianism is frequently described as something that was forced upon the Czech people by the Communist authorities. In an interview with the daily *Lidové noviny*, the former Czech President of the Supreme Court, Pavel Rychetský, used the term in this way when explaining the current rise of populist movements in the country: “The Czech people were accustomed for many decades to living in an abnormally egalitarian society, and suddenly deep social differences emerged.” [Český národ byl po dlouhá desetiletí zvyklý žít v až nenormálně rovnostářské společnosti a najednou vznikly hluboké sociální rozdíly.]¹⁹ Rychetskýs usage connoting egalitarianism with abnormality is corroborated by the dictionary entry “rovnostářství” in the normative *Slovník spisovné češtiny pro školu a veřejnost* [Dictionary of Czech Language for School and Public] in which it is defined as “uncritical application of the principle of equality (especially in remuneration), levelling of differences: wage egalitarianism, evening out” [nekritická aplikace zásady rovnosti (zvl. v odměňování), vyrovnávání rozdílů: mzdové rovnostářství nivelizace].²⁰ In comparison, the Danish dictionary *Den Danske Ordbog* defines egalitarianism without negative connotations as follows: “political ideal of social equality for all” [politisk ideal om social lighed for alle mennesker].²¹

Let us turn now to how these contrasting approaches to the concept of egalitarianism relate to the broader topic of this article: the image of Scandinavia in book and film reviews. The way in which Scandinavian egalitarianism contrasts with Czechs’ ostensible liberalism is underscored by the reviewer of Fredrik Beckman’s essay on fatherhood *Things My Son Needs to Know About the World* (*Saker min son behöver veta om världen*), a review written by yet another graduate of Scandinavian studies.

It is questionable how far the Czech reader-parent is going to share the strong (and typically Scandinavian) fear that the son will differ from the other kids in the group or that the father himself doesn’t live up 100% to the social expectations of him as a parent. I dare say that we as Czechs are in many respects more lenient and permissive, and therefore the tense situations Backman portrays resonate more with Swedes. Besides, we still do not have so many men on paternity leave...

¹⁸ “Skandinávie – Švédsko, Dánsko, Norsko, Finsko.” Retrieved from <https://www.czechtrade.cz/czechtrade-svet/evropska-unie/skandinavie>. Accessed 18 July 2023.

¹⁹ Léko (2018).

²⁰ Retrieved from <https://prirucka.ujc.cas.cz/?slovo=rovnost%C3%A1%C5%99stv%C3%AD>. Accessed 17 July 2023.

²¹ “egalitarisme”. *Den Danske Ordbog*. Retrieved from:

<https://ordnet.dk/ddo/ordbog?aselect=egalitarisme&query=egalitarisme>. Accessed 17 July 2023.

[Je například otázka, nakolik bude český čtenář-rodíč s to sdílet autorův silný (až typicky skandinávský) strach z toho, že se jeho syn bude odlišovat od ostatních dítek v kolektivu, či že on sám stoprocentně nedostojí očekáváním, která na něj coby na rodiče společnost klade. Troufám si tvrdit, že my Češi jsme přece jen v mnoha ohledech benevolentnější, a vypjatost některých situací, které Backman rozehrává, v nás tedy nerezonuje tak jako u Švédů. A navíc stále ještě nemáme tolik mužů na otcovské...] ²²

In the opening of a review of Meik Wiking's book on *Lykke*, another critic mentions exactly these two phenomena – social pressure and egalitarianism:

Scandinavia will always serve as a model of equality and emancipation. On one hand, it fascinates us, but on the other, we perceive the obvious cultural differences, so the motto that “everybody should have the same” feels like a bit too much for us.

[Skandinávie bude vždy jistým vzorem rovnosti a emancipace, která nás na jedné straně fascinuje, zároveň ale cítíme zřejmé kulturní rozdíly, díky nimž je toho „všeho všem stejně” na nás někdy přes míru.] ²³

In the conclusion of the review, the author, nevertheless, fights off her initial caveat and is fully compliant with the advertising text accompanying the volume:

It doesn't matter how naively optimistic, engaged, or utopian Wiking's advice might sound, Denmark is a country inhabited by a vast majority of happy people, and the question arises whether the same can be claimed about us Czechs.

[Jakkoli sluníčkově, angažovaně nebo utopisticky mohou Wikingovy rady vyznít, Dánsko je zemí většinově šťastných lidí a je otázka, zda můžeme něco podobného tvrdit i o nás Čechách.] ²⁴

The conclusion of the review encapsulates the general image of Scandinavia or the Nordics: The countries are perceived as role models and sources of inspiration, and this is probably why the reviewers feel the urge to compare Czech society with those in Scandinavia. This timbre is indisputably present throughout the reviews, which often project the reviewer's own more or less stereotypic beliefs about what are the most important virtues and limitations of Scandinavian societies.

On the other hand, Czech discourse on Scandinavian society quite frequently depicts an image of a society controlled by the idea of strict egalitarianism, and a number of reviews carry an explicit warning about emancipation having gone too far. Both images are intertwined, and it is up to the preferences of the reviewer whether Scandinavian emancipation and the equality of rights connected to societal control are portrayed through positive images or negatively as a threat.

Strikingly, the reviewers with a Scandinavianist background often stressed the exceptional character of Scandinavian societies as depicted in books, and while doing so intentionally employed stereotypes and ethnotypes, making generalizing statements on the nature of Nordic societies. These well-informed reviewers, who hold degrees in Scandinavian studies from Czech universities, tended to promote Scandinavian institutions and culture as examples to follow in a rather activist manner. In many book reviews, however, no stereotypical or generalizing remarks about Scandinavianness were to be found.

²² Šík (2017). [Review of Fredrik Beckman's *Saker min son behöver veta om världen*].

²³ Grečnerová (2018). [Review of *The Little Book of Lykke: The Danish Search for the World's Happiest People*].

²⁴ Ibid.

Interestingly, the reviews concentrating merely on the aesthetic qualities of the books tended to be written by non-Scandinavianists. This fact becomes all the more visible when juxtaposed against popular reviews in social media written by non-professionals: In general, neither of these groups reflected largely upon the Scandinavianness of the novels and short stories reviewed.

4. THREE CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In conclusion, I would like to make three observations concerning Czech images of contemporary Scandinavia, and finally, as an addendum, I will turn to Tzvetan Todorov's book *The Conquest of America* (1982, reprinted 1999), since his well-supported claims concerning the relation to the other will come in handy for evaluating Czech reviewers' perspectives on Scandinavian societies. All of the stereotypes and ethnotypes discussed above are firmly rooted in the process of contrasting. Let me repeat Leersen's astute remark from the beginning of this article, in which he notes that "the image of a given 'nation' is always conceived in a discourse of contrast, even if that contrast is elided or left implicit" (Leersen 2021:125). Following on this, the three main observations are as follows:

1. There is a significant and telling imbalance in the number of translated books. Large numbers of Scandinavian books were published in Czech, while next to no Czech titles were translated into Scandinavian languages, indicating the clear cultural dominance of Scandinavia.
2. In Czech reviews of translated Scandinavian books, Scandinavia often implicitly serves as a means of comparison – or a (role) model for Czechia in one way or another. Strikingly, this comparative practice is not so noticeable in reviews of novels from other parts of Europe and the world. This juxtaposing is closely connected to the notion of Scandinavia being exceptional. In part, this frequent comparison of lifestyles in Czech reviews might be boosted by the wave of *hygge* and *lagom* books and their success in the international arena. Drawing comparisons between Czechia and Scandinavia, however, is by no means restricted to reviews of books about lifestyle. Concerning Leersen's claim of stereotyping being sedimentary, it is possible to trace the ethnotype of the strong Scandinavian woman and Scandinavian equal societies back to the very first attempts to describe Scandinavia and Denmark to the Czech public around 1900. Back then, Czech travellers and intellectuals explored the North for the first time in a more systematic way. Ever since the earliest establishment of stereotypes of Scandinavia in Bohemian and Czech discourse, the Scandinavian states have served as paragons of societies that could and should inspire the independent state wished for by Czechs. Arnošt Vilém Kraus in particular considered Scandinavia an ideal for the emerging Czech state, and his motivation for this was fuelled by his reserved or even resentful stance towards German-speaking countries. Both Kraus and Čapek were inspired by the idea of *Kleinstaatlichkeit*, while Denmark, Norway and Sweden represented small states that proved their viability *vis a vis* Germany.

3. The overall image of Scandinavia as a role model is disrupted by a caveat: The depictions of Scandinavian social egalitarianism evoke Czech experiences of oppression and enforced social frameworks during the Communist period (1948–1989). In these instances, the reviewers tend to write in an activist manner, implicitly cautioning the Czech reader against the risk of diminishing civil liberties. In this instance, the cultural dominance the reviewers attribute to Scandinavia is negated and the relation between advanced versus backward is reversed. This last observation leads me to the promised addendum, Todorov's book on America.

5. AN ADDENDUM TO THE TANGLED NOTION OF PROGRESS

Owing to the division of Europe caused by the Iron Curtain, a significant dynamic of othering was implanted in the old continent, and this division persists, or as Lary Wolff astutely notes in his book: "The iron curtain is gone, and yet the shadow persists" (Wolff 1994:3). In fact, as Wolff also shows, the dichotomy of Western and Eastern Europe, had a longer prehistory dating back to eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy. Wolff convincingly displayed the origins of this division in his article on Voltaire's introduction of the pronoun "we" in reference to Westerners, as opposed to "them", meaning those from the East (Wolff 1995:939f.). Now the Czechs vehemently call themselves Central Europeans and insist on separating themselves from an Eastern-bloc heritage, stressing their close ties to the West.²⁵ From a Western point of view, however, the Czechs are still predominantly labelled Eastern Europe even though now, officially, the label "Central and Eastern Europe" has become prevalent.

Because of this division which contains elements of othering²⁶ it is valuable to employ in the context of Czech-Scandinavian discourse Tzvetan Todorov's analytical inquiry into the Spanish colonizers' perception of the indigenous population of the Americas. While the contexts differ markedly, in his book about the tragic meeting of two cultures, Todorov sketches different stances or behaviours toward otherness, and his thoughts on how to deal with factual or alleged alterity can shed light on the practice of Czech activist reviewers.

Todorov effectively constitutes three axes on which we can locate the problem of alterity. The first, *axiological* level constitutes value judgments of the other and thus indicates whether the other is loved, hated, or viewed as superior, equal, or inferior. The second, *praxeological* level indicates the distance from the other. Here, the relation between closeness and foreignness is constitutive, posing pressing questions concerning identification, submission, rejection, or assimilation. In other words, this axis concerns the effort made to come closer to or to move away from the other. Finally, the *epistemic* level refers to the knowledge of the

²⁵ More about the Czechs' attitude to the concept of Central Europe in Ondřej Slačálek's article "The postcolonial hypothesis. Notes on the Czech "Central European" Identity" (2016). The cornerstone of this discussion is an essay by Milan Kundera "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (1984).

²⁶ The process of othering is firmly anchored in postcolonial studies the findings of which showed that the "Other" by means of essentialization, and representation is constituted as a complementary counterpart and in binary opposition to a 'we' that acts as a hegemon. Such delineation of the other is necessary for the understanding of one's own position that is understood and felt as normal, modern, civilized, etc. (see, e.g., Edward Said 1978). The Czech reviewers certainly cannot be said to perceive Scandinavia as a hegemon in the political and structural sense; however, traces of perceived cultural hegemony of Scandinavia can be detected in the reviews. With reference to Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall, Christine Riegel sums up these dynamics: "Die soziale Wirkkraft hegemonialer Diskurse zeigt sich u.a. daran, dass diejenigen, die als Andere markiert werden, sich auch selbst in diesen Diskurs einfügen und auf Konstruktionen und Zuschreibungen zurückgreifen, die sie zu Anderen machen." [The social impact of hegemonic discourses can be seen, among other things, in the fact that those who are marked as Other also insert themselves into this discourse and resort to constructions and attributions that make them Other.] (Riegel 2016:53).

other, or as Todorov puts it, whether “I know or am ignorant of the other’s identity” (Todorov 1999:185)

Applied to Czech reviewers’ discourse on Scandinavia, what is striking when employing Todorov’s dissection of the Spaniards’ perspective on Native Americans is the self-imposed positioning of Czech reviewers: In their discourse, the Scandinavian countries are in a more advanced stage of evolution and modernity. Hence, their value judgments are being made by an allegedly lesser-developed observer, yet an observer who – owing to the disproportion in the number of translated books of fiction – can be said to be more knowledgeable about the other’s identity than vice versa.

Along the axiological axis, the better part of the reviews constitutes a discourse that values Scandinavian society as *fundamentally* equal and ‘loved’. This is why the critics in several instances voice their praise for the Scandinavian female ethnotype, and in a conspicuously activist manner praise the publication of books of Scandinavian provenance because they can provide Czechs with role models.

The most thought-provoking is the praxeological level, about which Todorov speaks as of “the action of *rapprochement* or distancing in relation to the other”:

I embrace the other’s values, I identify myself with him; or else I identify the other with myself, I impose my own image upon him; between submission to the other and the other’s submission, there is also a third term, which is neutrality, or indifference. (Todorov 1999:185)

It is noteworthy that Czech reviewers readily accept the dynamic of “I impose my image upon him”, since their own actions or activism embrace the notion: “Let their image be imposed upon me”. In this respect, two tendencies in Czech review discourse can be observed. Given that Scandinavians are viewed as fundamentally equal, as seen on the axiological plan, then the differences between the two cultures must only be a question of evolution. The evolutionary scheme Todorov describes regarding Las Casas, who loved the indigenous population, is as follows: “They (over there) are now even as we (here) were once”.²⁷ The reversed motto of Czech reviewers would be: “We are now as they were once”. This, however, applies in particular to women’s emancipation. As for the postulated egalitarianism of the Scandinavian societies, the stance of the reviewers is exactly the opposite: Regarding egalitarianism, Scandinavia is now as the Czechs were once – and they clearly do not wish to turn back the clock.

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²⁷ Todorov explains the evolutionary scheme as follows: “Las Casas is content to maintain an egocentric position with regard to time as well as space. If he admits that there are differences between Spaniards and Indians that function to the latter’s disadvantage, he does so in order to reduce them immediately by evolutionary scheme: they (over there) are now even as we (here) were once [...]” (Todorov 1999:166f.).

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