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Introduction

First of all I would like to thank very warmly the organisers for inviting me here today. It's really an honour for me to speak in Finland, a country which I often visit and that I particularly like. And of course, it's an honour to take part in a conference about libraries. I personally think that libraries are one of the very few collective spaces – along with churches- that are able to resist the narcissistic individualism of our western countries. As an aside, I would like to share with you a brief personal anecdote. When I arrived in Sweden in 96, I became very friendly with an old excentric Norwegian women, Lisa Waldèn. One day she took me to the local library. When I arrived I discovered a bookshelf full of French books. I took one by Julien Green, an excellent French author with American parents. Lisa took the same book in Swedish and over the coming days we read it at the same time making comments about the story or the psychology of the heroine. It was my first encounter with a Nordic library and it's a very enlightening and warm memory.

So, back to business, you invited me, after having lived and travelled more than 10 years in Nordic countries, to tell you how I view your societies.

L'homo nordicus

Of course it's a little simplistic to discuss the Nordic countries as a concept, as these countries are in fact different. Considering first the geographic situation there is not much in common between the Danish beaches, the Finnish lakes, the Icelandic volcanoes and the Norwegian mountains! You could even say that the differences have had a tendency to increase between the Nordic countries during the last 20 years. Two of the countries are not members of the European Union but members of NATO, two are members of the EU but not in the Euro zone and only one of those, is a member of NATO and the others not, another one, this country, has full membership of the European Union and is in the Euro zone but is not a member of NATO. When you start to think about it, it's rather complicated for just 25 million inhabitants! Anyhow, a Swedish sociologist said that the Nordic people are quick to point out their differences but often fail to recognise their similarities, they are victims of the sibling effect :

to exist in a family you need to be different. In my opinion, Nordic countries belong to the same cultural family, they share the same history and the same difficult climate, with the need to live in inhospitable environment. In fact, there exists an Homo Nordicus who has the same mentality, the same values and the same concept of welfare and democracy.

First of all, these societies have been developing in an environment – you could say a culture- quite different from the continental one. This is why I personally believe that there's no meaning if one talks about the Nordic countries without mentioning the Nordic mentality.

Values and norms –that is - « cultures » have been systematically underestimated not only by politicians but also by social scientists or economists. A French researcher takes the argument even further claiming that the different economical and social models are founded on cultural differences. He exemplified that statement with the Danish flex security that is high on the agenda nowadays all over Europe. As you know it's a system that combines generous social protection with a very flexible labour market. This same researcher believes that the reason why the flex security system has not been exported to France is due to the lack of public duty, "civisme", citizenship as we say in french. Based on research 90 % of the Danish population thinks for example that it is never acceptable to unduly receive state benefits compared with only 40 % in France and 20 % in Greece. So we can see that a national mentality has a big impact on the economical and social life of the country because in this example there is a clear correlation between the weakness of the social protection and the very protective labour market laws. The major problem with such a finding is that there is a strong inertia in terms of cultural values and that it is rather difficult to change these values.

Having been poor

What is surprising when you arrive in the Nordic countries from France is the size of the population in comparison to the size of the territory, with the exception of Denmark (and still with Greenland, even Denmark is huge). It means that nature occupies a vast area of these countries; in fact the natural world is not only a setting but also a real character. Nordics respect and love nature. Almost all festivals and traditions are connected to nature, it's almost a sort of paganism, a mystic relation to nature. The Homo Nordicus is never so happy, as when he is sitting on a stone eating a sandwich, drinking a cafe in a plastic mug and looking at the birds...

As a French national, you very quickly feel that these small disseminated nations living in huge territories, confronted with hard climatic conditions, have been very poor, almost

constantly during their entire history. You discover that even a rich country like Sweden has fake marble in all the castles and speaking about castles, what the Swedes call castles, we refer to as a manor house in France. These countries have neither experienced the luxury of the Roman Empire nor the abundance of a temperate climate. It's just recently that this poverty has disappeared, just one or two generations ago, and the memory of this poverty is still there, very present in the social subconscious. I'm sure that in this assembly everybody has a story –be it his own, or a family story- of extreme poverty if not concerning his relatives, concerning an acquaintance. This is not the case in a country like France on a big scale. Lets consider my family from my father's side, they were very poor as they came from Bretagne to settle in the Bordeaux area in order to flee famine. But this happened around the 1830's, 6 or 7 generations ago, and the memory is lost. Just at the end of 1890 you could read in Le Figaro terrifying news items such as stories of butchers who took the meat from corpses in graves in Paris and were selling them as beef; Every morning newborns were abandoned in Vincennes Castle's pits. But anyhow in France we lost the memory of this widespread poverty and eventually we lost the sense of our own fragility. Nordic countries have not lost this sense, not yet. Consider this anecdote: some months ago the Swedish television showed a documentary with a 80 year old farmer, born in the twenties, who told the story of how he had been sold with the bidding like a child and how when he got married did not even have enough money to pay the music in the church...

To survive in these difficult conditions, I have the feeling that the Nordic countries developed collective answers influenced by the Lutheran religion, through popular movements, social democracy and trade unions. I believe that a strong expression of individualism could have threatened the balance of this society.

Education

If we now take history as our point of reference, the Nordic countries are the only European countries to have not undergone the Greek-Roman civilisation. The consequences of this are still evident, the layout of the towns for example. Nordics call a village, what we in France would call a hamlet. When the Roman empire was a "stone civilisation", the Nordics countries were a "wood civilisation". It sounds just like an anecdote but it's very important because wood suggest humbleness, wood grows slowly –especially on these latitudes- and is rapidly destroyed by fire or water. An expert told me recently that only one in 8 buildings in Helsinki were built before 1940. To take another image, I think that Nordics are more "flow than

stock", more Yin than Yang. Wood is also a very democratic element, everybody can work with wood and all Nordics have a carpenter deep in their soul.

Democracy and equality are key words for these countries. It's very deeply rooted in their mentality, because with the exception of Denmark, they haven't experienced serfdom, farmers were free and the society not so hierarchic. Compared to France, nowadays, the Nordic societies are flatter, more egalitarian and this is evident in gender parity.

As a foreigner when you arrive in these countries, it's surprising how informal everybody is in public. A simplicity that extends to the work place : shoes come off, lunch is cooked... There is a home sweet home feel at the office. And yet it seems to be quite the opposite in people's private lives. Here, there are codes to be adhered to and duties to carry out. In fact, Nordic life is written on squared paper. I say squared because it's the picture I have in my mind. You could say that the French write their lives on plain, unlined paper, with all the risks associated with it – not writing neatly for example- whilst the Nordics write on squared paper. But freedom, this plain, unlined paper, also presents a risk, the risk of losing oneself. Man is an animal who is aware of his own weakness and looks to others for reassurance and sense of worth. No one can grow and developed without self esteem. But where do you find it ? In the first instance it comes from our parents and then at school. And this is truly one of the great victories of the Nordic countries. When I say this, I'm not simply referring to the excellent ranking Finland has achieved in Pisa's survey, but the entire Nordic attitude towards child and adult education.

The French model of scolarity is knowledge based, it's an elitist system and therefore poorly adapted to the educational needs of the masses. The Nordic system is pupil centered, and dedicated to the success of the child, so if the child fails, it's the system that has failed. The Nordic pupil is autonomous, he is able to self asses, he is aware of his strengths and weaknesses. Grades come late and this evaluation is positive where as in France evaluation is critical. But the Nordic system is very standardised, you don't learn how to debate, to question the system. But in fact why should you question a system ? Why do you need the skill of debate ? Let's face it : in a consensus culture is it really important to develop an « esprit critique » ?

So it's a system which places personal integrity above the developement of the intellect. Consequently, the pupil and the young person are respected. And a respected young person is a self confident young person.

Confidence

Confidence is key. It's extremely surprising when you arrive in these countries and see the level of confidence displayed by different members of society. It means that people are closer to the establishment, whereas in France the centralized structures create a gulf between the two. In France, the establishment has an extremely deficient knowledge of the people's needs and ways of life, because they do not share the same life. The same could be said about the political system. The French distrust their politicians far more than the Nordic citizens do and one reason is because the political system is less corrupted here. There is also in the North a great will by different parties to collaborate together for the good of the country whereas France finds its logic in standing confrontation, you could almost say internal wars. You can find the same pattern within companies. When a link in the confidence chain is damaged democracy pays a high price, and so does business.

Modernity

There is a huge mismatch between the fame of the nordic countries and their size, the total population of the five nordic countries is less than 25 million people (24,7 to be precise) ! This mismatch is the result of marketing. Nordic countries know how to sell what little they have. And living here makes you aware that France is a very conservative country. The Nordics enjoy modernity, you could say that modernity brought welfare to them. Consequently the French also maintain a great distrust of globalisation, But the difference is that the GDP of France is coming for only 26 % of exchanges outside its borders in comparison with 50 % and more for the Nordic countries. France is prey to a conflict between traditions and revival which does not exist in the nordic countries. I called that book « Resurgence of the nordic model » because it implies a second life, and you could say a resurrection of the nordic model which after being cheered in the Seventies was brought to shame in the Eighties and Nineties. But the nordic countries reacted with determination through drastic reforms. The nordic countries identified before others the limits of their social model. With the growing age of the population, they understood that a more effective welfare system was needed. With globalisation, the Nordic countries understood that it is necessary to invest massively and nationally in innovation.

Every rose has its thorn

Of course, not everything is rosy in the Nordic countries. This simplicity, this humbleness is also the "Jante law" which you are all probably familiar with, implying that you believe you are not someone special etc... This law leads to very strong social control of the individual. The squared paper is like a framework, which gives stability but also suffocates. The individual can suffer from a lack of spontaneous debate or intellectual discussion. It always comes as a surprise to me that the great Nordic philosopher is Søren Kierkegaard from Denmark, the south in fact when you consider that Copenhagen is situated on the 55 ° parallel and yet the Nordic region extends to the 71° parallel.

Personally, I also dislike the extreme functionalist attitude of the Nordic societies. When it's a question of mobile phone, car or furniture production or an approach to globalisation, I applaud and cheer the ingenious Nordic pragmatism but when this mentality enters the realm (royaume) of personal relationships or love, it lacks a certain romance.

This brings me to the end of my lecture.

Thank you very much