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Epilogue for a special issue on Post-Imperial Sovereignty Games in Norden

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Abstract

The two pre-Napoleonic Nordic polities are best understood as empires. Drawing on recent analytical and historical scholarship on empires, I argue that 17th and 18th-century Denmark, on which the piece concentrates, was very much akin to other European empires that existed at the time. Read in light of this, national identities within the fragments of the empire appear similar. Nationalisms are all shaped directly on the Danish model, having at the same time Denmark as their constitutive cultural other. The introduction notes that, where all European imperial experiences are concerned, overseas territories had the most wounds inflicted upon them. We would not know this if we looked at Faroese, Icelandic and also Norwegian nationalisms in isolations. These polities, and particularly Norway, partook in and benefited from the colonial policies of the empire. This notwithstanding, their national identities insist that these nations were on the receiving, as opposed to the imposing, side of imperialism. This is a historically unwarranted and ethically problematic stance, which is in need of further discussion.

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Keywords:

NORDEN, EMPIRE, COLONIES, MEMORY STUDIES, NATIONALISM

Bionote

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In the introduction to this special issue, Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ulrik Pram Gad (<REF HERE>) observed that ‘the most important experience which the world has had with European imperialism is not related to its neighbouring territories’, but has rather concerned overseas areas in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. The observation has served as an explicit or implicit point of departure for the other contributors as well. The observation presupposes that Denmark and Sweden are empires. Since the traditional view is that these two polities are states, (or, in the case of Denmark, a composite state) rather than empires, see Østergaard 2002), this point has to be argued rather than presupposed. Concentrating on the case of Denmark, my first task here is to warrant Adler-Nissen and Gad’s presupposition by drawing on recent Tillian and Koselleckian literature on empires. Having established that Denmark was indeed an empire in an analytical sense, in the second part I turn to one practical consequence of this, namely that not only Icelandic, Faroese and Greenlandic, but also Norwegian, nationalisms are isomorphic to other European imperial breakaway identities in being derivative of the Danish one. Adler-Nissen and Gad (<REF HERE>) highlight how Danish Grundtvigian nationalism has informed these ‘post-Danish’ breakaway nationalisms, which see the ideal relation between state, nation, language, culture, religion, economy as being one of total coincidence. A corollary of this is that present post-Danish national identities are tied to Danish national identity by being founded on what Nietzsche termed ‘ressentiment’, meaning that they are a negative of the original positive. In conclusion, I concentrate on one specific use of this, namely how Norwegian nationalism to this day has been able to feed off its post-colonial past by presenting Norway’s history not as part of the imperial European centre of the Danish empire, but rather as a colonial past, opposed to European colonialism. Here we have an ongoing sovereignty game that has served to exempt Norway from its imperial history in the eyes of many Norwegians.

European Empires

The overall history held out by this special issue is how two became eight. The transfers of Finland from Sweden to Russia and Norway from Denmark to Sweden during and after the Napoleonic Wars were geopolitical affairs, but they also involved the first concrete political effects in Northern Europe of the doctrine of nationalism, namely that people who hold themselves to have an exclusive culture should also form a state. The Åland solution covered by Joenniemi (1920s), Iceland's internal sovereignty (1918) and finally its unilateral declaration of Independence (1944), the Faroese parallel attempts (1946) and the ensuing introduction of home rule (1948), and Greenland's continuing extrication from Denmark (1979, 2009) – it all adds up to a history of fragmentation of the two continuous polities in Northern Europe, Denmark and Sweden.

This begs the question of what Denmark and Sweden were before fragmentation set in. The traditional view is that they were states, with Sweden being an unhyphenated state and Denmark being what has since the 1970s increasingly been referred to as a composite one. For reasons that remain obscure, but probably have to do with state-centeredness and a certain unwillingness to work with historical materials, the debate about nature of the Danish polity has been conducted almost exclusively by historians. Historians were also the first to note the imperial traits of the Danish polity (Bregnsbo and Jensen, 2004). It is time that social scientists followed suit and joined the fray regarding how best to categorise the Danish and Swedish polities. One hypothesis that I want to try out here, is that they were empires. Analytically, empires are polities where middle men with a territorial base play a central role in key practices, and where the power bargains between the centre and the middle men are not uniform, neither ideally nor in practice

(Nexon and Wright, 2007; Nexon, 2009). However, as do all concepts that of empire comes with a politically loaded history. Before we can ask the question that is interesting in the context of this special issue -- about the degree in which Denmark and Sweden may be understood as empires on a par with other contemporary European polities such as the Netherlands or England/Great Britain – we need to disentangle the question from its very specific political meaning during the 19th and 20th century. The best way to do that is to provide a nutshell sketch of the concept's use in that period.

In the 19th century, partly in reaction to Napoleon's imperial ambitions, the concept 'empire' became a key issue in the political battles of the time. From around 1850, 'empire' turns into what the German conceptual historian, Reinhart Koselleck (1979), calls a 'battle-concept'. Napoleon's empire lasted only ten years, but the mark he left on the concept lasted all the way through the 19th century. Nationalism and imperialism merged in a narrative of progress where 'we' are civilising the strangers. In France, 'imperialism' was used synonymously with 'bonapartism' and 'caesarism', as a demarcation against a practice of rule that was associated with Napoleon I and III (Pagden, 1995). 'Imperialism' became another word for tyranny, or for rule built on oppression and military power in general. Even if economic models of explanation – imperialism as a strategy to acquire new markets for domestic industry – steadily emerged, the traditional political meaning persisted. In Britain, liberal politicians began to use the concept of 'imperialism' in domestic political debates attacking Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (Armitage, 2000; Mehta, 1999). In Germany, the concept primarily served as a demarcation against, and an attack on, British colonial policy (Fisch, Groh and Walther, 1982). Imperialism was something terrible and immoral that the British were doing. The Germans, on their part, was doing what was in their eyes something very differently, namely *Weltpolitik* (world politics).

Imperialism and *Weltpolitik* became what Koselleck (1979) refers to as ‘counter-concepts’: constellations of two concepts where one is used to describe the speaker and the group he or she belongs to and the other to describe the others, those who are regarded as strangers or enemies. What makes these concepts ‘asymmetrical’ is that they speak of the enemy in a derogatory way. They are one-sided; the counterpart feels addressed, but not recognised. In the national debate in Germany the concept of ‘imperialism’ first picked up momentum in social democratic criticism. The social democrats use the concept – perfectly in accordance with earlier meanings – to criticise what they call the ‘new war movement’. This use of the concept was a ringing historical success, which first spread to Russia, where it was, characteristically, stylised by Lenin, who saw imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism and something that found at its root the struggle between capitalist great powers about world markets that would inevitably lead to war, and then to the rest of the world. For example, Johan Galtung’s (1971) structuralist reading of imperialism leant heavily on the idea that global imperial structures depended on a Western worker aristocracy that collaborated with local elites worldwide.² A few decades later, in the period of National Socialism, it is still impossible to use ‘imperialism’ as a self-referential concept, partly because the communists and the socialists had retained their definitional power, and partly because it was reserved for the policy of the Western powers (instead, terms such as *Großraum* and *Lebensraum* were used). The semantic struggle over the concept was won by the left. Hence, during the Cold War ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ was used worldwide in an explicitly asymmetrical way, in order to denigrate the way others went about their political ordering. In the United States, Soviet foreign policy was considered imperial. Particularly during the Vietnam War the home opposition to American foreign policy routinely referred to it as imperial. In

² Galtung is the only Nordic theorist of empire worth mentioning. The dearth of serious intellectual (as opposed to political) analysis of this category has doubtlessly been one precondition for the lack of debate about whether Denmark and Sweden should be categorized as empires.

Chinese discourse from the 1960s onwards, American and Soviets were both running dogs of imperialism. The struggle for national self-determination was everywhere referred to as an anti-colonial struggle, in which the concept 'colony' took its force from the hierarchically subaltern place relative to a centre within an empire (e.g. Mondlane, 1969). Frantz Fanon and others (Fanon, [1961]1967, compare e.g. Memmi, [1957] 1991) also pioneered studies of how colonisations of polities have their parallels in the colonisation of life worlds and personal identity formation of the colonised. Broader comparative work has also attempted to decentre Europe from overall global history by noting how Europe was a newcomer to colonising practices, which already had a very long history when Europe hit its stride in the 16th century, that Europe did not really establish global hegemony before around 1800, and that there are plenty of historical examples of how Europeans have been on the receiving end of imperial practices (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2000; Zhang, Suzuki and Quirk, forthcoming). There was an interesting counter-move towards using 'empire' and 'imperialism' in a benign and self-referential sense in the US during the last decade, but that proved ephemeral. In the case of Europe, we have examples of self-referential use of the term by people in leading positions, as when by European Commission President José Manuel Barroso referred to the European Union as the 'first non-imperial empire' (meaning, presumably, imperialistic; see Marks 2011: 2; also Adler-Nissen and Gad, 2012). As a result, our understanding of 'empire' and 'imperialism' remains heavily tainted by politics. This is a usage that we have to bracket when our aim is to categorise the Danish and Swedish polities analytically. What we need is rather a sketch of what empire meant in 16th to 18th-century Europe that may serve as a baseline for discussion.

In the 16th century, ‘empire’ simply referred to a political unit which was bound by no foreign power.³ In the context of conceptual history we can say that the notion of ‘empire’ in both the Russian and the English examples goes from having several specific references to having a single, more or less abstract, reference. The meaning of empire becomes fixed (a conceptual historian would say that it becomes a ‘collective singular’). As a consequence, the term lends itself to being applied to ever new areas and phenomena. The English example further illustrates a central tug-of-war in European political history, namely the emergence of a system of sovereign states. From the perspective of conceptual history the point here is that ‘empire’, in the core period of this process (the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century), refers to ‘sovereign state’. When the state system was established, it was the term ‘state’ which became the common name for this phenomenon, whereas ‘empire’ continued to be the designation of the Holy Roman Empire, which continued to exist in the shadows of the state system. We still have a remainder of this meaning of the term ‘empire’ in the juridical description of state sovereignty, where the king is said to be emperor: *rex in regno suo est imperator* (‘the king is emperor in his realm’).

Parallel to this, ‘empire’ acquired a new meaning and use as an appellation for asymmetrical political units where the leading part lay in Europe (Spain, Portugal), and the dependent parts were located overseas. This development is described by Pagden:

The European empires have two distinct, but interdependent histories. The first [...] is the history of the European discovery and colonization of America. It begins with Columbus’s first voyage in 1492 and ends somewhat less precisely in the 1830s with the final defeat of the royalist armies in South America. The second is the history of the

³ For a fuller exposition, see Jordheim and Neumann, 2011.

European occupation of Asia, of Africa and of the Pacific. It begins in the 1730s, but only takes hold in the 1780s as European hegemony in the Atlantic is coming to an end (Pagden, 1995: 1–2).

In the 17th and first half of the 18th century there is little debate about the form and moral status of the empire. Instead the debate focuses on the status of the forms of intelligent life (fully human?) that inhabit the other continents, particularly the one most recently discovered. ‘Empire’ is increasingly understood as a natural way of politically organising a project of progress, in which the more civilised parts are ensuring the historical progression of the less civilised (Bowden, 2009: 77–158). This is in accordance with Koselleck’s overarching point that what he calls *Die Sattelzeit* (the ‘saddle-time’ bridging early modern Europe and modernity, ca. 1750–1850) was a period in which concepts become temporalised. Accordingly, the differences between Western civilisation and colonial barbarism were understood in temporal terms, constituting more or less progressed stages in the unfolding of history. Hence, even the defenders of democracy were long of the opinion that empire, which was viewed as non-democratic, was befitting for the barbarians. For instance, John Stuart Mill wrote in his *On Liberty* that ‘Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, providing the end be their improvement’ (Mill, 1989: 13). In accordance with this Pagden operates with three main meanings of the concept ‘empire’ that were still in use at the end of the 18th century: a form of rule which is limited by no other foreign entity (i.e. which is sovereign), a territory consisting of more than one political community, and a ruler invested with absolute sovereignty (Pagden, 1995: 17).

In the second half of the 18th century philosophers such as Diderot, Herder and Kant launched criticisms where the point was that empire entailed foreign rule, and that this was an evil

(compare Muthu, 2003: note the line from the Enlightenment to the late 19th-century European left in this regard). The concept of ‘empire’ was contrasted with ‘cosmopolitanism’ (Bartelson 2009). This debate anticipates an important topic of the 19th century, namely how the new political concept of ‘nation’ was to be connected to various concepts of universalistic human communities. To the French, the concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘empire’ merged already in the wake of the French revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. When Napoleon had himself crowned as *empereur* in 1804 it was for the French Empire – a political unit which was to be led by the French nation.

18th century Denmark was an empire on a par with other contemporary European empires

Denmark partook in all the events that mark polities as empires. As was the case in Britain, the Netherlands and other states, the spearhead of Danish imperialism was what we would today analytically call a quasi-non-governmental organization (*quango*), namely the East Indian Company. It was established in 1616, at the same time as their eponymous counterparts in the other burgeoning European empires. We have a remnant and a reminder of the intimate ties between imperial overseas trade and Danish state administration in the fact that the address, and hence the moniker, of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to this day remains Asian Square (*Asiatisk Plads*), the quay from which the East Indian Company’s ships left Copenhagen for the Danish colonies. As did the Portuguese and the Dutch, the Danes and the Norwegians established colonies in places that served both as trading post and as strategic ports for the fleet. The Danes established a settlement (a ‘factory’) in Tranquebar on the south-east coast (Coromandel coast, in today’s Tamil Nadu) of India in 1620, at the same time as the other European empires (the first English factory was established in Surat on the northwest coast in 1612) (Smith, 1970). A fort

was built, in the Scandinavian style. Copenhagen followed up by establishing a larger settlement in Serampore near Calcutta in 1755. The factories were sold to the British government in 1845, but there was Danish activity in the area for another century and more.⁴ There was also Imperial activity in the Nicobar Islands, and there was a short-lived attempt at creating a trading post in Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka) in 1801.

Danish imperial activity was not limited to trading on Asia, but also included being involved in the slave trade and establishing a colony in the Caribbean. The Danish West Indies, consisting of the islands St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix, were established in 1671 (Gøbel, 2002). The islands were sold to the United States in 1919. As the United States Virgin Islands, they maintain their administrative unity. Danish place names (Christiansted, Frederiksted) have been retained, as have street names and surnames.

All this is well known amongst scholars. However, and this is the crux of the matter for a special issue on the present state of post-colonialism in Norden, this core part of Danish imperial activity is largely absent from contemporary debates in the other parts of the former empire. As Gad points out in his discussion of Greenland, even this case, which is another classic kind of overseas imperialism, is not all that much discussed, and when discussed, it is rarely treated as the typical post-imperial issue that it definitely is. Perhaps because Greenland is still part of Denmark, the observation is rarely made that Greenland resembles the Latin American states in being run by Europeans who are presiding over an ethnically mixed population. Contrary to Latin American states, however, Greenland remains a settler colony. Again, one notes the broad

⁴ See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/15635014/Friends-of-Gandhi-Correspondence-of-Mahatma-Gandhi-with-Esther-Faering-Menon-Anne-Marie-Petersen-and-Ellen-Horup>, accessed 26 April 2011. In light of the discussion below, a Norwegian perspective may also be apposite; see Lasson, 1931.

temporary parallel between post-imperial developments in other post-imperial European states like Great Britain – Zimbabwe’s unilateral declaration of independence hails from 1965 – and Portugal – the Portuguese empire collapsed only in 1975, concurrently with the beginnings of home rule in Greenland.

Nordic resentment

To return to Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ulrik Pram Gad’s statement in the introduction to this special issue, the most important experience which the world has had with European imperialism is not related to its European territories, but has rather concerned overseas areas in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Given Greenland’s predicament, we may add the Arctic. As detailed in the articles on Iceland and the Faroese, however, in the case of Denmark, it is these two areas which today sport the most intense examples of post-imperial rhetoric. While clearly overseas in the physical sense, Iceland and the Faroese are not politically overseas; as islands like Ireland, Ibiza and Madeira, they are *European* islands. Historical analyses tell us that Iceland and the Faroese are classic settler colonies, settled from areas of the empire which were not parts thereof when settlement took place, but which were firmly ensconced there when European imperialism had become a general European phenomenon (17th and 18th centuries). It is as if the US, Australia and New Zealand had been settled first by Scots, and had followed Scotland into the Union in 1603 and 1707. Even a quick look at the structure of Icelandic and Faroese nationalisms, as they appear, for example, in the articles in this special issue, show that they are direct inverted copies of Danish nationalism, with *ressentiment* of Denmark playing a key role. In a post-colonial perspective, the main point here is that the Faroes and Iceland place themselves, with Greenland, as the main victims of Danish imperial policies. This is unwarranted, for the simple reason that

there was no indigenous population on these islands at the time of settlement, which therefore started their social and political life as part of the cultural area that we now call Europe. In the North, Greenland is alone in being a settler colony in the classical European mould that also includes places like the United States, Australia and South Africa, where a group of Europeans challenged and submerged an indigenous population. The fact of the unpopulated past means that the Faroese and Iceland should not be talked about in the same breath as Greenland. Doing so would be a denigration of the challenges that faced and still face Greenland. It would be analogous to grouping the Isle of Man and St. Pierre and Micquelon together with the major victims of British and French imperialism, such as India and Indochina, respectively.

There is one more polity which fits this mould, but which is not mentioned here. That would be Norway. Norway had to leave the Danish empire in 1814 against the will of an almost unanimous politically active stratum, to be presented by the great power victors in the Napoleonic wars to Sweden, as compensation for the loss of the areas taken from that state by Russia. This happened at the time when the phenomenon of nationalism was beginning to spread around Europe. Like Icelandic and Faroese nationalisms later, Norwegian nationalism had the student milieu at Copenhagen University as its major fount, and like those two, Norwegian nationalism was an inverted copy of Danish nationalism, with *ressentiment* of Denmark playing a key role (Neumann, 2002; Glenthøj 2012). Already in 1815, Nicolai Wergeland, a minister, was the author of a philippic against Denmark, and his central idea was that the 400 years of Danish rule had suppressed and usurped Norway and the Norwegians.⁵ Wergeland took up a theme which is a

⁵ *En sandfærdig Beretning om Danmarks politiske Forbrydelser imod Kongeriget Norge fra Aar 955 indtil 1814, eller fra Hakon Adelsteens Krig med Harald Blaatand, indtil Fredsslutningen i Kiel: en historisk Skisse*, available as http://www.nb.no/utlevering/contentview.jsf?urn=URN:NBN:no-nb_digibok_2008010810001#, accessed 8 August 2011.

perennial in politics – whether the balance of contributions and gains made by a particular part of a political entity to its distributional centre comes out in its favour. What made his contribution pivotal for us is, first, that Norway was no longer a member of the political entity in question, namely Denmark. Therefore, his representation of Norwegian history did not have as its goal to change the immediate political set-up (that had already changed), but to brand Danish culture as foreign to Norway. While not immediately successful, this figure of thought grew in political importance throughout the 19th century. By 1883, it had become engrained enough for Arne Garborg, an author, to be able to banish the civil servant stratum from the Norwegian nation with relative ease. He marked them as a separate nation with close ties to the Danish one, and branded them as the enemy of the Norwegian nation. They were ‘failing their duty’ to the Norwegian nation, and so they became enemies: ‘the enemy is within the country now’ (quoted in Dalhaug, 1995: 79). With this entire train of thought went the idea that Norway had been central in bankrolling the Danish composite state.

After Norwegian independence in 1905, the idea that Denmark had usurped Norway and drained it of resources for four centuries became a stock in trade of history writing. The idea featured prominently in history books for schools as well as in history writing, and still lingers. Here we have a representation of Danish-Norwegian relations which is clearly imperial in nature, with Denmark being the imperial centre and Norway being the colony. Research into exactly when the concepts of ‘colony’, ‘colonialism’ and ‘imperialism’ began to be used, how, and by whom, is still needed, but by the 1960s the representation was firmly in place that Norway had been Denmark’s colony.

This representation was, and remains, a key ingredient in Norwegian nationalism, just like Nicolai Wergeland suggested two centuries ago. Most Norwegians still maintain a national identity not as *perpetrators* of imperialism, which they were in historical and analytical terms, but as imperialism's victims. For example, in 1972, while campaigning against Norwegian membership of the EEC, Norwegian leftists set themselves apart from other Europeans and from European imperialism by arguing that Norway did not 'find itself in a conflicting relationship with developing countries through colonial or post-colonial investments' (*Innst.S. no. 277, 1971-1972. p. 523*). Again, in 1994, similar arguments were made (Neumann, 2002). From a post-colonial perspective, Norway is performing historical wounds that they are not really entitled to perform, since they were not amongst those most heavily wounded.

The idea that Norway was amongst the key victims of Danish, and hence European, imperialism, is simply not borne out by the historical record. Before Norway was taken away from the Danish empire in 1814, Norwegians played a major role in its seafaring activities generally, and in its colonial activities specifically. Colonial personnel in the colonies at Tranquebar and the Danish West Indies as well as in Greenland included Norwegians. The missionary wing of Danish colonialism in Greenland was spearheaded by Hans Egede, 'Greenland's Apostle', who was a Norwegian. Norwegians benefited economically from imperialism. Furthermore, Norwegians continued to be implicated in slavery-related activities after 1814. As late as in the 1920s, Norway launched a campaign to re-gain Greenland as a colony (Norway even took the case to the International Court in the Hague, where it was settled in Denmark's favour in 1933). In European terms, Norway was roughly to Denmark and Danish imperial policies what Catalunya was to Castilla, Scotland to England, the Ukraine to Russians, or the Occidentales to the French and

Frisians to the Dutch for that matter.⁶ From a post-colonial viewpoint, Norway cannot wash its hands of its imperial European past by appealing to an alleged subaltern position within the Danish empire before 1814.

Conclusion

The Danish polity is similar to other major European polities in having been an empire for centuries. An analysis of Sweden would, I hypothesise, yield the result that the same goes for that polity, but for a shorter time (cf. Joenniemi, 2002 and this issue). They were not even the smallest European empire. That would have been Courland, while itself nominally a part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, ran Tobago from 1654 and kept on doing so for more than a century (Sweden actually being one of its successors in the position of imperial centre). Today's situation in Greenland has post-colonial parallels in Latin American post-colonies. The situation of The Faroes and Iceland are parallel to the situation of settler colonies elsewhere. Norway, which, with Schleswig-Holstein, was one of the two main parts of the Danish empire, close to but not of its centre, is in a situation which parallels that of other major constitutive parts of former European empires, such as Ukraine. All these parallels are of course imperfect. The point is that, qualitatively, the case of Denmark has all the necessary family resemblances to other European empires for us to categorize it as such analytically. Quantitatively, Denmark operated on a somewhat more modest scale than most, but not all, other empires. At some point, quantity becomes quality. Further historical sociological discussion of what kind of polity Denmark was should, therefore, focus on the degree in which Denmark's classification as an empire makes a

⁶ Throughout the 20th century, furthermore, individual Norwegians were partaking in running plantations and assisting other kinds of economic activity associated with colonialism, see Kjerland and Rio, 2009.

difference where specific social effects are concerned. The contemporary Greenlandic case is of crucial importance here, but new post-colonially informed readings of historical sequences are also called for (for a pointer, see Jensen 2012). This special issue should therefore be read as a challenge. It is time for IR scholars to apply post-colonial insights in their studies of the Nordic area.

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