



Scandinavia Equality as a Glimpse in the Mirror

A think piece for British Council's Equality Exchange project

By Niels Righolt

CEO at the Danish Centre for Culture and Interculture

The issue of equality and public services in terms of Scandinavia should be understood in the light of shifting perspectives, the present crises and the complexities of how globalization influences societies in terms of migration, cultural encounters, economic growth, crises management etc. In this think paper, I will particularly weight experiences and perspectives which relate to the democratization of the cultural sector, not least in terms of greater cohesion and anchorage through e.g., the establishment of a stronger 'ownership' to the mostly publicly funded cultural offerings in Scandinavia.

However similar the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) seem to be for an outsider - and there are many structural and cultural commonalities between the three countries - there still are a number of interesting and significant differences. Not least in relation to how to relate to issues such as inclusion, gender equality and job security. In all three countries these issues are at the heart of everyday life, either as a norm or as a subject of political attention.

In Scandinavia gender equality is a structural issue, where equal rights between men and women in all aspects of life is reflected as a political and structural objective, about which there is broad consensus in large parts of the populations. In a global perspective the three countries occupy a leading position in the field of gender equality. However, in a strict Scandinavian context there are quite substantial differences in how gender equality is manifested in society. As a common characteristic there is a relatively visible gender debate in the public sphere and all three countries have made use of legislative tools and regulations to ensure that a gender perspective is articulated also on the political agenda.

CHALLENGES OF MIGRATION

The picture is somewhat different when it comes to the question of everyone's right to cultural participation and ditto exercise. In principle, this is not a field which overall is very different from the gender issue, but within the traditionally relatively homogenous Scandinavian countries, the challenges of migration have led to both considerable friction between different ethnic groups and to quite different ways of creating or promoting a tolerant and inclusive society.

In the aftermath of World War II and throughout the 1960s and 70s immigration to Scandinavia took on entirely new proportions and the traditionally tolerant and liberal Scandinavian societies had to develop ways of relating to the consequences of cultural encounters and the emergence of nationalist, populist and xenophobic movements and trends. In the troubled 1980s and the increasing prosperity of the 1990s the response was the system's insistence on the community's democratic rights and entitlements as an expression of the Scandinavian welfare models' tolerance and ability to embrace new citizens, despite major social and cultural differences. But as it turned out after the millennium, this was also a relatively naive approach. Large groups of society were already then 'locked' in ghettoized suburbs of the major conurbations, with consequent segregation and social friction, and after 9/11 the gap grew as a consequence of the subsequent polarization between the western world and the Islamic world, a conflict which is very real in all three Scandinavian countries with their relatively large Muslim minorities.

CENTRE AND PERIPHERY

Class, education, mobility, social interaction, work and residence are factors which today define the individual's ability to participate in and contribute to society even more than it did twenty years ago. A situation has arisen where the differences in development between different regions of countries has increased substantially. In Denmark and Norway the capitals are experiencing a dramatic growth in population as well as in economic importance. Oslo is at present the fastest growing city in Europe. In Sweden the four largest cities are experiencing a similar development. The consequence is that the intercultural and diverse society is an urban phenomenon. The nuanced heterogeneous society exists in Copenhagen, Stockholm and Oslo, with a growing critical mass of citizens with different cultural

references and opportunities. In contrast, especially the rural countryside finds itself outside of these development patterns.

In Denmark, they even talk of the 'outskirts of Denmark' as a picture of a Denmark outside of development. It is often described as mono-cultural, economically stagnated, picturesque with an average age of 45+. Young people leave the villages, the rural areas and the many small islands, where people now talk openly about a future locked in retirement communities and recreation areas for large urban populations in the summertime. In elongated Norway the image is roughly the same, with the important difference being that the state puts large sums of money into rural development to ensure that the periphery is not left completely behind. In Sweden it is somewhat different, since it created a proactive policy to ensure a balanced population development earlier than the other Nordic countries. The ten largest cities all have a relatively large growth and have been able to exploit themselves as regional urban centres in the relative development of the surrounding areas.

CULTURE FOR WHOM

Recent years have been marked by an increased focus on and commitment to outreach and inclusive initiatives and cross-sectorial projects within the cultural sector in Nordic countries, where cultural institutions are increasingly working on new ways to reach out to new audiences. Not least in relation to the local perspective a more profound audience approach plays a role.

In the autumn of 2012 a report on Danish cultural habits and leisure activities was released. The comprehensive study presents some very thoughtful reading about Danish cultural consumption and it shows that more Danes than ever before take an active part in cultural offerings. The study showed that the percentages of Danes who do not avail themselves of the more highbrow and classical culture are lower than ever before. Since the last survey in 2004, the percentage of Danes who do not take advantage of the cultural offerings dropped to at present 36 percent from 47 percent.¹ But although cultural participation is increasing, there is still a good third of the population that does not make use of publicly funded cultural activities.

The Minister of Culture welcomed the study as an example of how performance contracts can be seen as a way to ensure that the institutions receiving public support are aware of the audience perspective and are focused to ensure that as many people as possible view the institutions as a real opportunity.

COHESIVE CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

There is nothing new in articulating the need for an audience strategy. To a greater or lesser extent audience development as a concept has been operating in Scandinavia for the last 20 years. What is new is that the term has taken on a whole different meaning. Now it's not about targeting and audience segmentation alone, it is largely about how to open cultural institutions and how to create the basis for a more dynamic and cohesive cultural democracy, in which different social groups can be covered and included within the cultural offerings.

During the first decade of this millennium the cultural focal point in Denmark was on the issue of the genuinely Danish, the '*Danishness*' as it was formulated by the then neo-liberal and populist right wing backed government. The focus was on the establishment of a cultural canon and a strong grounding in the story of Denmark as a cultural nation through huge investments in new and spectacular buildings and a significant support for normative mainstream productions that could support the story about the Danes' Denmark. When the liberal government came to power in the autumn of 2001 a veritable ideological crusade began against what they saw as a predominantly centre-left cultural sector. The result was a divided culture sector, an increased financial management of cultural resources and significant support for the large state institutions. Cultural democracy was not on the agenda. It was - and partly still is - legitimate in Danish politics to ignore the minority.

IMMIGRANTS: 'NO, THANKS' TO HIGH CULTURE BUT 'YES, PLEASE', TO LIBRARIES

In this sense, the report about Danish cultural habits is particularly interesting because for the first time it also mapped the cultural habits of the new residents, and the picture is quite clear. New Danes are clearly behind when it comes to the use of culture such as theatre, museums and concerts. A third have never been to a museum, one in five has never been in a theatre and one in ten has never visited a concert hall. Several of the interviewed expressed that they do not feel invited to participate, they do not experience the cultural offerings as relevant and they indicated that lack of interest and an expensive price level play a role in their non-participation. However, the study also shows that the new Danes participate much more in volunteering and make more use of the libraries than the rest of the population. Particularly young new Danes stand out as frequent users of the libraries.

Since there are no comparable earlier studies of new Danes' cultural habits, it is difficult to assess why the new Danes compared to the rest of the population make as little use of public cultural facilities. But experience from other countries shows that the picture often is much more nuanced. New Danes so-called 'lack of interest' might have to do with the fact that this group does not experience the existing services as appropriate. The cultural institutions still have a long way to go in terms of establishing long-term and sustainable relations with the new Danes too. And there is a need for a nuanced picture of who the new Danes are. It is far from a homogenous group, but rather a heterogeneous mass that reflects the global reality as it is present especially in Copenhagen, where an estimated 80 percent of all newcomers live.

LESSONS FROM THE NORTH

In Norway and Sweden, the picture is different. Since the Norwegian year of diversity in 2008, which coincided with the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, there has been both a political and structural focus to translate the fine words about increased public involvement and inclusion into concrete and manageable policies. Shortly before the turn of the year 2012 - 2013 the Norwegian Ministry of Culture met with key players from the cultural sector to discuss the next steps in the implementation of the Norwegian Government's cultural policies - which largely aim to 'force' cultural institutions to be aware of their democratic responsibility through general legislation as well as through individual performance contracts.

Since its year of cultural diversity in 2006 Sweden has launched several strategies towards a more inclusive culture sector, and though not going as far as Norway in terms of incorporating audience and inclusion prospects into legislative work, a varied audience perspective and cultural institutions democratic responsibilities are widely articulated in the public sphere and supported by the presence of a strong critical mass of artists and thinkers with multicultural backgrounds.

A MYRIAD OF INITIATIVES

The increased awareness of the need for more nuanced and inclusive audience work in order to reach out to, for example, the third of Danes who do not regard themselves as subject to the cultural offerings, and not least in terms of creating a more coherent cultural landscape, has now led to a veritable plethora of initiatives, projects and cultural priorities, which help to re-draw the Nordic cultural landscape.

In Denmark - particularly in Copenhagen – the development of various inclusive and outreach initiatives for a growing critical mass of citizens with different cultural references has accelerated. Thus, a number of the largest art museums and art galleries in the city have launched a major learning project on citizenship and the institutions' responsibilities in relation to changes in the city's demographic composition. Six of the capital's administrative units have launched a coherent cross structural cultural

project where 21 different arts institutions aim directly at non-users of the cultural offerings; in order to develop together with them new ways of working, create new narratives and new common interfaces, to name just a few examples.

But hardly any place in the Nordic countries has come further in this direction than the city of Malmö, Sweden. Malmö Municipality is the first Scandinavian city to put culture on the agenda as an operating and development parameter on an equal footing with sustainability, social security and innovation. The city has exalted cultural policy to be one of the four main areas of city development in a matrix across existing management areas - and *that* has had an enormous impact on how Malmö's cultural life has evolved and on the emergence of a multi-faceted and jaunty cultural scene, where the city, despite having a population of only 300,000, boasts a cultural and institutional diversity that most other northern cities are not even close to. They have successfully created a number of interfaces between the city's different stakeholders and through e.g., living labs, they have invited all interested parties to take part in the local development of their community or neighbourhood in a deliberate cross-sectorial and inclusive urban development model.

A common trend and driver in the major Scandinavian cities is that a steadily growing group of cultural practitioners and decision makers allow concepts of identity and cultural diversity to permeate their programme and choice of repertoire, to influence audience initiatives and work, the organizational structure, recruitment policies etc., in order to reflect and meet citizens' different experience, knowledge and perspectives. And efforts are now more focused on increasing opportunities for people to participate in the publicly funded cultural life.

DRIVERS OF DEVELOPMENT

Demographic composition; the presence of a rapidly growing critical and well-educated mass of citizens with different cultural references; the need to rethink the Nordic welfare state in the face of globalization on the one hand and the development of adequate inclusive structures locally on the other; the digitization of society; the Nordic capitals' international position in relation to the development of design, infrastructure and new media; the desire to realize the creative, artistic and cultural potential of the multicultural Nordic population are just some of the key drivers that have boosted the development over the last few years.

There seems to be a clear correlation between the compositions of the urban environments and the politicians' and institutions willingness to innovate and support audience engagement initiatives. Common for the Nordic countries, there is a tremendous difference in the degree of cultural differentiation between urban and rural areas. The vast majority of inclusive initiatives that see the light of day take place in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants or in cities with a high proportion of young people in education. This frames one of the challenges Nordic cultural politicians are faced with these days: How to create a multi-faceted and inclusive cultural environment also outside the culturally diverse cities.

Compared to the UK, it is obvious that cultural diversity as a norm is not fully reflected in the socio-bearing structures within Nordic countries, quite the opposite to the experience of gender equality, where the Nordic countries traditionally occupy a leading position. Looking at how gender equality work has taken place in the North, it is thoughtful to consider to what extent legislation, quotas and an ever-present political discourse have defined the level of development up until now. Many commentators in Sweden and Norway argue that inclusion work in relation to immigrant citizens should be understood in the light of the process of gender equality between the sexes and that similar 'tools' or incentives must be introduced before one can really talk about real equality and inclusion in society.

APPROACH MATTERS

There is no doubt that the development of sustainable long-term relationships for successful integration, how to ensure that these relationships are built with the right people is all about creating a democratic discourse, which is about variables, individual skills, diversity and an integrated understanding of society as the sum of all of its components and not just some of them. One of the secrets behind the Swedish model to incorporate new citizens into Swedish society is very much about introducing people into a primarily local level without letting factors such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, ideological beliefs play a role. They are integrated into a model rather than into a specific culture. The discussion from Denmark where new citizens must understand, accept and relate to Danish culture, history and self-understanding is completely absent in Sweden as in Norway, where the focus since the events at Utøya and in Oslo 22/7 has been on citizens rather than on Norwegians. In this sense both the language we use and the overall discourse is crucial.

QUALITY OF LIFE THROUGH ART AND CULTURE

In that light cultural participation plays a central role. The opportunities to articulate and gestalt through cultural participation strengthens and improves the individual's ability to manifest him- or herself in other areas too. Lessons learned from some of the many outreach projects and cross-cutting initiatives, which have focused on enhancing the cohesiveness and reducing polarization is all about cultural participation through relevant experiences and promotions: i.e., programmes, repertoires and exhibitions with narratives and content that are considered relevant without professional and qualitative criteria being set out by the process. And it is about the recruitment of new cultural workers and artists from communities outside the mainstream and from new groups of citizens.

In Rosengård in Malmö sector crossing collaborations between housing associations, local authorities, cultural institutions, businesses and the university have boosted development and have strengthened residents' sense of well-being in the community, of being respected and included in processes that affect their life situation and not least have strengthened their commitment to democratic processes within the community. Dialogue and relevance are concepts which are repeated in similar experiences from Botkyrka and Tensta outside Stockholm and from Grønland and Grønnerløkke in Oslo.

In Copenhagen there is a focus on supporting the vision of the city as a place for everyone. Under slogans such as 'Your City' and 'We Copenhagens' conditions have been set as an overall acceptance of globalization and its influence on local opportunities and this puts the citizens cultural and diverse background in relief in an effort to stimulate social and creative entrepreneurship.

THE CHALLENGE

Such actions have revealed a growing need to develop new and modern facilities for supporting small entrepreneurs, cultural and socio-cultural projects. The young generation and new citizens organize themselves differently than previous generations. The focus is on content and skills rather than on traditional forms of organization in associations and similar structures. The challenge is to create support structures that can meet new needs and organizational forms.

In relation to the cultural sector as such, the challenges for all three countries is about how to create a dynamic cultural landscape that includes diversity, nuances and opportunities within Scandinavian culture, which relates in an open and welcoming way to the changes and new paths which occur independently of policy objectives and directives. It is very much about being able to incorporate the continuous paradigm shifts for the individual artist, institutions and the audience - and the relations between them.

The challenge for the politicians will be to formulate policies that go all the way. Policies that can both support current processes and stimulate new initiatives, expressions and forms of production. A

differentiated, complementary and progressive cultural policy for example, which is anchored within the framework of the overall state and regional goals, and able to contribute positively to local growth and to expand and strengthen local self-understanding. Policymakers must, in other words, navigate and relate to the new experiences, knowledge, relationships and resources in order to meet and exploit the potential that cultural diversity holds. It is no easy task, as this will intervene in all aspects of the cultural system in Scandinavian countries.

IN SUPPORT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The importance of being able to embrace and encourage a greater cultural diversity in modern Scandinavian society is multifaceted, when placed in a global perspective. It affects not only the arts and culture sector nationally, but even the concept of culture, as we know it and the community itself. It's about identities, production environments, the innovative growth layer, creative and highly skilled workers, business start-ups, investment, etc.. In order to meet this challenge politically, many of the major municipalities reflect on cultural diversity as a focal point for new approaches, new investments and new projects, free from the more traditional cultural distribution practice which relates to the individual arts in a sector divided power and organizational structure. Action is very much on the local and regional level, whereas the national discourse is not to the same degree able to adapt the new strategies into political action.

ⁱ (Surveys were conducted on a regular basis in 1975, 1987, 1993, 1998 and 2004) .