

Socialist Realism without Socialism

Norsetalgia and the Scandinavian 1960s

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The Scandinavian 1960s

L 1968 HAS been a hotly debated topic in the field of cultural studies, not least because many of the issues raised during the turbulent decade have been repeatedly confronted since, perhaps even more violently in their manifestations in the public sphere, albeit lacking the same ideological undertone and naïve optimism. The intensely vilified “hegemonic establishment” in its numerous guises, be it the “highbrow” cultural production against which postmodern theoreticians have directed their criticism, the USA’s military imperialism and interventionism, the different faces of combined and uneven development, the banks, institutions, and forces that make up the capitalist system, all of these elements have been duly taken apart time and time again during the 50+ years since the end of the 1960s. The Scandinavian space found itself in the literal midst of the conflict. Neighbored by the Soviet Union to the East and democratic Europe to the West, the Scandinavian states have found themselves in an “in-between peripherality,” whereby “the indigenous center” and the “Marxist/Socialist center” discussed by de Zepetnek overlap: Scandinavia is assimilated by Western capitalist hegemony, nonetheless strongly anchored in the leftist intellectual tradition, hugely prosperous during the 1960s but possessing a sort of communist cosmopolitanism granted by its sympathy for the global left. For the political status quo in the Nordic countries, social democracy was framed as alignment to the Western narrative of integration into the capitalist system, while for the young, rebellious fraction of their civil societies, social democracy was a compromise and a grudgingly accepted phase in the pursuit of communist internationalism. Borrowing and rephrasing the renowned “capitalism without capitalists,” the present contribution puts forward a “socialist realism without socialism.” But how could socialist realism find sympathy in countries universally acknowledged as pinnacles of participative democracy, wherein the voices of all social strata are thought to be listened to, where the general population loves free speech the most in the world,² and wherein state processes are virtually transparent?³ Moreover, how could socialist

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realism find expression in a tradition that gave us Henrik Ibsen, Knut Hamsun, August Strindberg, Hans Christian Andersen, or Sigrid Undset? In short, if the Scandinavian countries are now democratic, how could they have had anything to do with socialism and, if Scandinavian literature escaped the Soviet sphere of influence, how could they have adopted this imitative and presumably poor-quality literary form?

In answering the first question, we must acknowledge that Scandinavian society has been displaying traits that can be considered congruent with socialist ideology for quite some time. A proto-socialist practice, in this sense, precedes the articulation of socialist theory, in the sense that the Protestant ethic spread throughout the current territories of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland emphasizes a great deal of social solidarity and collective progress, despite the idea, so deeply entrenched as to become a sort of axiom of historical sociology, that Protestantism and capitalism “are locked into each other as different sides of the same coin,”⁴ as Thelma McCormack remarks. She then goes on to argue for the opposite, in fact, claiming that Protestant ethic did not expand solely into the realm of entrepreneurial economy, but that its impact was on

*all parties in any relationship: worker and employer, consumer and producer, husband and wife, tenant and landlord, child and parent, pupil and teacher. In other words, the Protestant ethic had more to do with empathy and patterns of reciprocity than with the psychological profile of the entrepreneur; more to do with the development of secular philanthropy and urban family life than with free enterprise; more to do with self-improvement and mobility than with profit calculation and the investment of wealth.*⁵

It seems that in wealthy societies, Protestant ethic acted as a catalyst for capitalist entrepreneurship, while in poor societies, it was a driving force of egalitarian ideals. There are many elements that point towards this state of fact in historical Scandinavia: communitarian goods, solidarity, shared resources, a social organization shaped by a climate and a geography that did not allow for rapid urbanization during the 19th century and, therefore, did not favor the emergence of clear-cut hierarchies in the distribution of labor.⁶ Preponderantly rural, living off of subsistence farming and agriculture, Scandinavian countries lacked that sort of pre-existing wealth that would have put the economy on a path towards industrial capitalism. The precarious living conditions pushed many Norwegians and Swedes, for instance, to emigrate to the United States in the second half of the 19th century: their toils are depicted by the likes of Vilhelm Moberg or Edvard Hoem. In Norway, for instance, the emigration was fueled in part by the disappointment of workers’ movements, which had sought and failed to obtain the workers’ right to vote, as well as universal schooling.⁷ The population was destitute, imbued with Protestant piety and a penchant for hard work, both to the benefit of oneself and for the community, since the modest expanse of the settlements—households strewn loosely across a fjord or at a great distance from one another along a narrow winding road—meant that individual welfare was highly dependent on communitarian welfare and vice versa. Adding to this the “pastoral power”⁸ reinforcing a set of moral dicta in each community, as well as the desire to increase literacy and improve community life,

and we have the perfect conditions for gradual non-turbulent social change, free from the struggles and conflicts of industrial societies and implicitly also from its contradictions. Point in fact, the social mobility of pre-social democratic Sweden was “higher than in other 19th- and 20th-century European countries, closer to those observed in the highly mobile 19th-century United States.”⁹

The manner in which this premodern “Protestant socialism” inscribed itself in Scandinavian political life during the 20th century was through social democracy, a compromise between Soviet communism in the East and capitalist democracy in the West. Many of the social democratic political parties which were to become dominant in post-war Scandinavia were much more radical and revolutionary engaged than their contemporary renditions would make us believe: from 1919 to 1923, the Norwegian Arbeiderpartiet (Labour Party)—the party considered to be behind the modern Norwegian welfare state after World War Two—was enrolled in the Komintern. After its exclusion, a minority grouped together forming the Norges Kommunistiske Parti (Norwegian Communist Party). Arbeidernes Kommunistparti (Workers’ Communist Party), another communist party, was a crypto-Maoist party established in 1973 that survived until 2007 before changing its name to the equally far-left Red Party.¹⁰ Comparatively, the famous revolutionary party Gauche Prolétarienne (The Proletarian Left), described as “the most dynamic movement on the French Far Left,”¹¹ lasted only from 1968 to 1974 before being banned;¹² in addition, there have been numerous longer- or shorter-lived parties, associations, and unions with clear left and far-left views¹³ in these three Scandinavian countries, demonstrations, and protests, yet none of them were met with panicked reprimands, since “being leftist, or even socialist, was perfectly normal in mainstream [Scandinavian] society.”¹⁴ Lastly, the Scandinavian socialist momentum did not develop in reaction to a *de facto* fascist dictatorship, but emerged organically. Slowly, but surely, as Cornel Ban remarks,

*social democracy marked a redefinition of Marxism away from the focus on revolution as a cataclysmic event and toward revolution as a gradual process of consensual but nevertheless socialist transformation of society-market relations within the institutions of the bourgeois state. The basic idea during this period was to transform capitalism so deeply that at some point social democratic reforms would usher the world into socialism through a process so gradual that the shift itself would not be noticed.*¹⁵

Across the different Scandinavian countries, these social democratic reforms became a constant point on the political agenda; Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti (Swedish Social-Democratic Labor Party), the Danish Socialdemokratiet (Social Democracy), and the Norwegian Laborists made it their goal to perform them and through this gained massive popularity. *Folkhemmet* (The people’s home) in Sweden, *Velferdsstaten*, *Velferdsstaten*, *Velferðarríki* (The welfare state) in Norway, Denmark, and Iceland, respectively: different styles, similar approaches, leading to something that was soon to be known under the name of “The Swedish Model.” This process of transforming society, built on consensus and cooperation, entailed a very carefully negotiated compromise be-

tween social needs—met by the state through its institutions: public services, education, health, public transport, protection of labor, and so on—and the needs of the capitalist market—together with those of an ever-expanding middle class.

The 1968 Scandinavian moment was, much like in other European countries, riddled with cultural debates, yet “violent confrontation and repression, on the other hand, were exceptions from the norm of Scandinavian consensus.”¹⁶ Far from being a disruptive phenomenon resulting in violent clashes with the police, the political status quo embraced the reforms and the “countercultural” movements, which enabled the 1960s to emerge not as a space of struggle and conflict, but as a generator of militantism and nostalgia, as I will discuss further.

Literary Production

THE SCANDINAVIAN left wing discovered a contradiction between social democracy and the communist ideals, best expressed in a resistance to moving industrial production in more profitable areas in the south, close to international navigation routes:

*The crypto-Maoist journal Folket i Bild/Kulturkamp, for instance, had the explicit aim of producing a real popular culture built on the true traditions of the Swedish proletariat and published continuous features regarding the true and simple life of the countryside threatened by the unholy alliance of social democrats and capitalists in Stockholm.*¹⁷

In a sense, therefore, the more radical communist branches were opposing social democracy, which they regarded as too weak in addressing the social issues derived from the economic division of the countries—and, moreover, even hypocritical in its ambitions—, while inadvertently emphasizing local specificity and isolationism—quite the contrary of what would be expected from a presumably internationalist movement, but understandable in light of the fact that this sort of ethnocentric approach entailed separation from international patterns of extractivism and dependency, i.e., a separation from capitalism. But what are the prerequisites for Scandinavian literature to host ideological positions of this scale and with the clear aim of redeeming the proletarians, i.e., the underprivileged?

In order to answer this question, we must look at the literary evolution of the latter half of the 19th century in Denmark, as Georg Brandes, the renowned Danish literary critic and literary historian, spoke about “putting things up for debate,” a phrase which has meanwhile become tantamount to expressing the acute necessity of Scandinavian literature to acquire a pronounced social function. Demystified, addressing contemporary topics, stirring up public debate, heedless of bourgeois sensibilities, and pursuing the ultimate goal of emancipation and collective progress, this was the literary production envisioned by Brandes in his *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de aarhundredes litteratur* (Main currents in nineteenth century literature). In Scandinavian literary history, this period is retrospectively known under the name of “The Modern Breakthrough.” The writers

active under this denomination imbued their works with a great deal of social criticism, in the sense of engaging with stringent topics of their time, oftentimes in a quite explicit manner: destitution, women's emancipation, moral dilemmas. A genre trying to paint the tapestry of the middle class and show the cracks in the social institutions enabling their existence, on the one hand, but also to expose the sorry states of the impoverished, sick, and exploited. Social ascension and downfall (Henrik Pontoppidan's 1898 *Lykke Per/Lucky Per*), naturalist depictions of turn-of-the-century Oslo, with famished artists roaming the streets and pawning their few belongings (Knut Hamsun's 1890 *Sult/Hunger*), middleclass women leaving their patronizing husbands in order to pursue their own ideals (Ibsen's 1879 *Et Dukkehjem/A doll's house*), wealthy businessmen getting away with attempted murder (Ibsen's 1877 *Samfundets stotter/Pillars of society*), priests losing their faith over the loss of loved ones (Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's 1883 *Over Ævne/Beyond our power*), and so on.

Of course, there are also other, more politically engaged Scandinavian works during this time, building on the lives of the working class from a clearer ideological perspective. The Norwegian Per Sivle's 1891 novel *Streik* (Strike) and Kristofer Uppdal's *Dansen gjennom skuggeheimen* (Dancing through the Shadow World, 1911–1929), "still one of the greatest and most important works in Norwegian proletarian writing,"¹⁸ the Swede Gustaf Hedenvind-Eriksson's 1910 debut novel about forestry workers, *Ur en fallen skog* (From a fallen forest), and the "Gorki of the North," the Danish Martin Andersen Nexø, with his 1906–1910 tetralogy *Pelle Eroberen* (Pelle the Conqueror). These novels perform the shift from a *social* realist—hence bourgeois—perspective to a *socialist* realist perspective, in the sense of laying the groundwork for the later theoretical backbone—the popular, anti-bureaucratical, Maoist vein—to be absorbed into the narratives dealing with the entire postwar political climate, since

*for young radicals in opposition to the political and intellectual establishment, Mao Zedong's populist version of Marxism-Leninism seemed far more attractive and romantic than the Russian version under ageing leaders like Leonid Brezhnev.*¹⁹

Considering that "one of the purported 'failures' of the global 1960s is its confinement to the sphere of the cultural, and it is commonplace to devalue the achievements of the '60s as 'merely cultural,'"²⁰ as Christopher Connery remarks, we have to ask whether or not this is the case with Scandinavia, namely whether the remnants of the 1968 momentum remained solely cultural or lingered as valid reference point for later intellectuals. In other words, are the 1960s regarded as a historical deception only the later neoliberal developments can cure us from, or are the optimistic promises of that time still kept alive in a form or another?

I attempt to define "socialist realism without socialism" as designating the aesthetic employment of defining traits of socialist realist prose in the absence of any directives imposed on literature by the political establishment. No actual socialism, no state-commandeered literary formulas, yet a free market of literary ideas choosing to express the struggle: the semi-legal underground Maoist movement, the socialist teleology of long spun family sagas, or the dangers of going down the neoliberal path. These positions

converge in configuring two distinct and simultaneously occurring stances in postwar Scandinavian literature: the first one is the militant and politically engaged direction, whereas the second one breeds a tragic nostalgia for the 1960s as utopian hotbed for (failed) progressive opportunities. The former does not necessarily designate literature written *during the 1960s*, but rather literature that is politically active in depicting the 1960s. The latter, however, gives way to a stronger theoretical underpinning, falling in line with a sort of “post-communist nostalgia”²¹ for a communism that never officially came to be, considerably different from Jenny Anderson’s *folkhemsnostalgin*,²² the nostalgia after the Swedish welfare state of the interwar period.

It seems rather hard to conceptualize “socialist realism without socialism” in the absence of a ground-breaking historical rupture such as the 1989 Eastern European regime changes—since that was the prerequisite for capitalism *sans capitalistes*: the postcommunist shift to market economy in the absence of capitalist mechanisms or capitalists themselves, as agents of private business or assets. But if our point of reference is not a revolution, since civil society and the political hegemony were never in aggressive disagreement in Scandinavia, as argued previously, but the introduction of socialist rhetoric in the field of literary production, we can find it useful to borrow the two development patterns presented by Eyal et al. in their book: *the evolutionary theory* and the *path-dependent transformation*. The main assumption of the former is that

*if you create the proper institutions, they will shape the individuals who occupy them so that individual behavior will conform to institutional constraints and imperatives. In the context of the post-communist transformation, this is the idea of capitalism-by-design: you destroy the old state-socialist institutions and replace them with institutions that are known to work in advanced market economies.*²³

In Scandinavia’s case, it would have to be the other way around: cultural socialism-by-design would be a natural consequence of destroying the old democratic cultural patterns and replacing them with a form of literary production that follows the precepts of socialist life. In this case, literature would actually come closer to a form of traditional socialist realism, depicting the struggles of the proletariat against a capitalist hegemony trying to oppress it—while being commandeered by the state. Needless to say, this was not the case, since the Nordic countries are regarded “as pioneers in the historical development of freedom of expression.”²⁴

The second pattern of change “assumed that post-communist institutions are created out of the ruins of state-socialist institutions” and that, “When individuals adjust their social trajectory, they do so in a path-dependent way. They collectively reinterpret the roles they have to play, and in so doing they draw on shared experiences, ways of knowing, and common understandings.”²⁵ For the sake of the argument, I will consider the threshold to be the accommodation to the postwar communist discourse and the changes brought about by global shifts in power. In this sense, the role of the authors in this new configuration relied on the extent to which the rhetoric of class struggle was integrated into the literary production, either at the time it took shape or retrospectively, as the canonical novels dealing with the 1960s were written.

In Roy Jacobsen's *Seierherrene* (The victorious), from 1991, we encounter three generations of a Norwegian family between 1927 and 1990. Starting in Northern Norway, the story follows the fisherman Johan Strand, a destitute communist working to provide for his six children (three of which are from a former marriage) together with The Gypsy Woman. Marta, his youngest "real" daughter, is sent away at the age of 14 to work in Oslo in the household of a rich family; she is shocked to see the difference in quality of life between the northern part of the country and the wealthy south. Growing older, she marries an industrial worker, has three children and a three-room apartment in the outskirts of Oslo. She becomes a typical postwar Norwegian housewife, whose son, Rogern, goes through the entire cultural boom of the '60s in the capital's eastern periphery. He belongs to the working class and he is conscious of his social role. In more or less explicit terms, Jacobsen presents how the difficult living conditions of pre-industrial times and the economic disparities between the relatively prosperous south and the poor north slowly dissolved through social democracy and the social mobility enabled by it. The old fisherman Johan, a skilled and intelligent peasant, who took his weekly papers very seriously,

*never got tired of saying it: the victorious. The working class will eventually become history's victors, my boy, in our country as well, we are God's voice on Earth, the Lord's and Stalin's resounding voice: it's us poor devils who will inherit the production—do you understand?*²⁶

The social mobility enabled by social democracy is depicted in two particular phases and through two generations: from subsistence fishing and various types of handywork in an economically disadvantaged region to working in a factory in the capital and ultimately to establishing a software company in the 1990s. In short, from peasant to self-conscious proletarian, and then from proletarian to capitalist. In this sense, the underlying message is clear: the Norwegian Labor Party, once a seemingly left-wing party focusing on improving the lives of people from the working class through wealth redistribution and positively connoted paternalism, has inadvertently become a bourgeois party, allowing for the emergence of entrepreneurial capitalism and the *nouveau riche*. The stringent issues present at the level of the distant rural North, as well as class differences between the urban center and the—dangerously prone to criminality—periphery of Oslo, incite social ascension. In becoming social democracy, the Left unwillingly undermines itself. In a twisted turn, prosperity for all allows for privilege for a few.

Another aspect concerns counterculture and, as a corollary to this, the aforementioned question whether the achievements of the 1960s are "merely cultural," given "the gap between real politics and that sphere of the everyday whose common denomination—lifestyle—is always encumbered with the taint of commodification, reification, and the marketplace of style,"²⁷ in Christopher Connery's words. Of course, many of the elements at play in evoking the 1960s throughout these works belong to a repertoire of recognizable lifestyle choices. Nowhere is this more visible as in Lars Saabye Christensen's 1984 *Beatles*, the story of four school mates who impersonate the members of the band and take on their names as nicknames. Ola, Gunnar, Sebastian and Kim, the latter of whom also lends the books its narrative voice, explore the city of Oslo be-

tween 1965 and 1973, reflecting the turbulent spirit of the 1960s through their lifestyle choices: they grow their hair long, adopt the traditional attire of hippie movements,²⁸ listen to the newest LPs of their idols, fall in love, move out of the family homes, revolt against the authority of their teachers, and combat the “fascism” of school bullies. The downright ideological inserts are provided by Gunnar’s older brother, Stig, who acts as a sort of political agitator within their enclosed group, brings them LPs, and tells them about the Vietnam War and American imperialism in clear terms, borrowing all the prevalent clichés and slogans of the time. In invoking these lifestyle choices, the narrative quite unsurprisingly builds an overarching nostalgia wherein the memory of childhood and the memory of unfulfilled communist ambitions come together in what I—drawing on Dominic Boyer’s “Ostalgic,”²⁹ designating the East German nostalgia after communism following Germany reunification—will briefly call *Norsetalgia*: the Nordic nostalgia for a communism that never came to be. Similarly *Norsetalgic*, the first chapter of Jan Guillou’s 1968, an instalment in his *Det stora Århundradet* (The long century), bears the suggestive title “When Vietnam was more important than everything and thousands of flowers bloomed in Paris”; its opening phrase is:

*We were told to go in batches of six, one next to each other. For this, as for everything else in existence, there was a political reason. It was to make it easier for the comrades that counted the demonstrators . . . We were three thousand or more, as this early summer day, the police reported to the bourgeois press that we were two thousand, while the journalists rounded off downwards, so that three thousand in the streets became several hundreds in their columns.*³⁰

The novel follows the aristocratic socialist Eric Letang, a young jurist interested in politics and very eager to start his Law career in Stockholm, where the Vietnam crisis spurs huge debates. Everything is either “bourgeois” or “comradely,” both in terms of discursive stance taken towards contemporary political developments and in terms of attire:

*Jeans, Afghan fur coat and knitted hat from Peru, or maybe from Bolivia, he wasn’t quite sure, meant it was a demonstrator, especially when combined with wooden shoes. Gabardine pants, tweed or mohair and brown walking shoes meant bourgeois, like those who used to sit on the balconies on Strandvägen and scream “Bomb Hanoi” when the demonstrators made their way towards the American embassy.*³¹

In the Swedes’ Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö 10-instalment crime series *Roman om ett brott* (Novel about a crime), spanning 1967 to 1977, the personal story slides in the background, as the narratives focus on the different issues starting to infringe on Swedish society during that time, all related to the general dissatisfaction with the looming demise of the welfare state. The authors, who are widely considered to be the founders of what would later become the “Scandinavian Noir,” made use of the conventions of crime fiction to render police officers—whom they generally dismissed as embodiments of arbitrary state violence—as social workers, departing from the hardboiled macho tradition. A very clear sociological perspective underpins their novelistic project: the desire to highlight the weakening of *folkhemmet* under the pressure of economic hardships and

international criminality. In addition to the clearly discernible *saga* pattern—either family saga, like in *Seierherrene* or *1968*, or panoramic social insight, such as in *Novel About a Crime*—, these works entertain either an implicit or an explicit socialist component. Implicit in the sense that they imply a socialist teleology or explicit in making use of downright “propagandistic” rhetoric, such as Dag Solstad’s 1982 *Gymnaslærer Pedersens beretning om den store politiske vekkelse som har hjemsokt vårt land* (Gymnasium teacher Pedersen’s account of the great political awakening which has haunted our country):

*And so I found myself on the platform of Larvik central station on an afternoon in August 1968 with two cumbersome suitcases, on a lookout after a taxi station while trembling with anticipation and at the same time was naively oblivious to the fact that I was to become “Larvik’s Pol Pot,” “Stalin’s mouthpiece in the high school,” “The Red Teacher,” “The Brainwasher of our Youth,” “The Fanatic at the Desk,” “The Extremist and Violent Romantic supported by taxpayers,” and so on and so on and so on, etc.*³²

Knut Pedersen is a naive history teacher who, finding employment in the small town of Larvik, inadvertently finds himself caught in the then underground AKP (m-l) party, where he activates under the name of “Comrade Eivind” and undergoes a process of self-proletarianization. He becomes involved with Nina Skåtøy—Comrade Hilde—, a rigid ideologue who, conscious of the politically problematic nature of their relationship, which is mostly sexual, takes the floor during a party meeting and engages the romance self-critically, asking the party to take measures. Without taking the issue into consideration at first, the comrades gradually disapprove of their bond. Their relationship ends, but so does his marriage. Years later, as he reminisces about his youth and political engagement, he expresses undisguised nostalgia in regard both to his relationship to Nina and his involvement with Maoism, which he regards as a golden age, both for Norway and for himself. Notwithstanding that, “among leftist intellectuals of almost all stripes, it marks the extreme that should not have been reached,”³³ for the Scandinavian novels addressing socialist themes, Maoism instills a sense of belonging and contributes to the overarching communist *Norsetalgia*.

Of course, the romantic(ized) narrative about a peasant boy enacting a cultural revolution in an otherwise underdeveloped nation possessed what Fredric Jameson, talking about Maoism’s appeal in the West, called the “prestige of exotic political models.”³⁴ But notwithstanding later critical reconsiderations of Maoism and its undeniably nefarious consequences in China, Scandinavian countries represent a space where communism, albeit never actually implemented as official doctrine, has traditionally been admired from afar, representing a “virtually existing socialism”:³⁵ building on a culturally encoded “protestant socialism” assimilating the terminology of postwar Marxism and trying to build a programmatic “socialist realism without socialism,” the novels I briefly described in the present paper represent an instance of “Norsetalgia”: a projection of what the Scandinavian ’60s could have become had they not been retrospectively confined to the sphere of the cultural.



Notes

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Abstract

Socialist Realism without Socialism: Norsetalgia and the Scandinavian 1960s

The present article will address a particular phenomenon of postwar Scandinavian literature, which I call "socialist realism without socialism" in paraphrasing the now famous "capitalism without capitalists." Discussing several well-known Scandinavian novels set during the 1960s, I argue for the existence of a "virtually existing socialism" and an imitative socialist realism. However, later neoliberal developments in the Scandinavian countries have led to a "post-communist nostalgia," a nostalgia for the failed prospects of the welfare state, which I call "Norsetalgia," paraphrasing Dominic Boyer's concept of "Ostalgie."

Keywords

Scandinavian literature, post-communist nostalgia, Ostalgie, socialist realism