

## KATRÍN JAKOBSDÓTTIR

### *On Shaping the Basis for the Aims and Actions of Nordic-Baltic Cooperation and the Nordic-Baltic Identity*

#### I. ON ICELANDIC IDENTITY

The first Icelandic crime story was a short story written west of the Atlantic ocean, in Canada in 1905, by Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason, about the investigative talents of a young Western-Icelander, Hallur Þorsteinsson. This short story is also remarkable for marking the entry of national identity into the world of Icelandic crime fiction right at its tentative beginning. This is evident by the title, *An Icelandic Sherlock Holmes*, which indicates that the Icelanders now possess their own Sherlock Holmes, apparently necessary to be a nation among nations. Of course, it also suggests that such a sharp minded and attentive fellow as Mr. Holmes would belong in Iceland. The fact that the cunning first detective in Icelandic literature lived in another country and used his skills in a foreign society, very different from the Iceland of 1905, may have challenged the national feeling of some readers in Iceland and yet this first Icelandic crime novel added a new dimension to Icelandic identity; the crime novel became a part of the Icelandic literary tradition through Icelandic settlements in Canada.

The concept of nationality has been highly prominent theoretical topic at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. It is very important to people's ideas about themselves and is thus crucial in defining identity.

The British scholar Benedict Anderson proposed that all communities are imagined and so there is no point differentiating between "genuine" and "false" communities, but only between the ways communities are imagined. He sees nationality as a myth that unites a specific group of people who will try to nourish it and maintain its viability through media and capitalism. He talks specifically about the way that print media has enabled people to consider themselves in relation to others in a new way and it may be envisaged that more complex notions of nationality would subsequently arise from within each identity.

Another British scholar, Stuart Hall, has reflected on the need for ego and identity and believes that although ego no longer commands the centre of the debate it is still needed for defining and identifying phenomena. Hall shows that identity has become ever more fragmented in the 20th

century and names several influencing factors including globalisation, modernity and the mass migration of people.

Identity is constructed by specific factors, which have been addressed a great deal in academia in recent years and decades. Identity was by no means simple before the days of post modernism, but it seems that the signifying system has become even more complex than before, rendering identity disorganised and marginalised, fragmented, variable and vague. Consequently, the term 'identity' can no longer be used in its traditional sense and yet no new concept has replaced it even though it is scarcely possible to do without in theoretical discussion.

Although it may be inferred that identity has its roots firmly planted in history, Hall argues that it originates largely from aspirations and dreams for the future and the way we present ourselves to the outside. In other words, Hall believes that identity comes to exist primarily in our external representation. Identity entails us to reconcile with our roots rather than return to our roots and exists within the discourse but not outside it.

Hall's theory of identity may perhaps be compared to a prism that gathers and concentrates rays from the distant glow of the past as well as the bright flames of the present to produce a beam with which we seek to illuminate our surroundings. The colour of the light refracted by the prism varies according to the wavelengths of light and so do the shades and tones of our self-images – our identity – interwoven from our past, our present situation and our future prospects. Let me clarify my point with an example from the recent history of my own country that illustrates how identity – at least in turbulent times – sometimes changes rapidly just like the colour of the chameleon changes according to the surroundings of the lizard and yet the animal remains a chameleon, the same chameleon regardless of its changing colours.

As you are probably already acquainted with, my country experienced a great economic upheaval in the first decade of the 21st Century. Sadly, the enormous economic growth our society experienced for a few years proved untenable. A classic capitalistic bubble was created, filled with the usual volatile mixture of foolishness, boasting and bragging, lies and deceit. Of course the bubble burst in due time with an adverse impact on the economy of Iceland and Icelandic society as a whole. But while the going was good, when the party was raging with huge overseas investments and investment bankers were semi gods at least a part of the nation embraced a new identity, namely that of modern capitalist Vikings. This was indeed remarkable since vikings have never been a prominent feature of Icelandic culture. It is true of course, that Iceland was discovered and populated in the Viking era, and the participation of Icelanders in Viking raids is described in Icelandic medieval literature, but the modern Vikings emerged only after the

economic developments had taken flight. Primarily the modern Icelandic Vikings of capitalism were young or middle aged men who were investing overseas on borrowed money. Riding in private jets with bonds, stocks, promissory notes and collateralised debt obligations as their weapons the capitalist Vikings raided in Europe, USA and the Far East. Even the president used this metaphor, legitimized the Viking identity, built on masculine and even archaic values. During the collapse in the autumn of 2008, the capitalist Vikings rapidly vanished into thin air and have not returned since.

You might ask where these figures went after the fall. The cynical answer might be that Vikings are supposed to be mobile and always on the lookout for new opportunities, so they went 'back east' to Norway where quite a lot of Icelanders found jobs and livelihood in the post-crash years.

In spite of the attractiveness of these metaphors, my point is that economic and political turmoil often quickly eliminates a certain identity which then is replaced with a new one, better adapted to the contemporary premises for an external representation. This notion stipulates that identity is a flux, prone to rapid changes just as the colour of light changes according to the angle of the prism, and just like the chameleon changes colours according to its environment. In the Icelandic case, the identity of a part of the nation underwent a mutation in the crash of 2008 when the supposedly strong and aggressive Viking raiders all of a sudden became feeble victims of their own creation. So now, after the crisis, a new identity emerged, built on different values but still very traditional, female values that appeared in the fact that everybody started knitting their own sweaters and making traditional food etc.

## II NATIONALISM AND THE IDEA AND IDENTITY OF NORDIC COOPERATION

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on om each other's presence. 'Identity' is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty. (Zygmunt Bauman)

The Nordic and the Baltic states of today are founded and governed on the political principle of nationalism, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent. As we know the modern nation state is a fairly recent phenomenon in political history and the Nordic and the Baltic states are no exception. The state, in the well known definition coined by Max Weber as an agency within society which possesses the monopoly of legitimate violence, extends its roof

over the populations of Iceland, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia and other Baltic and Nordic states as the “home” of people – nations – who share the same political system and – ideally at least or not so ideally? – the same culture, traditions and sets of belief with only certain limited variations and deviations allowed.

Bearing in mind the strong position of the state in the Nordic and Baltic countries it must be assumed that the affiliation to a nation state is a thoroughly integrated part of both Nordic and Baltic identity. Is there then a room for another kind of affiliation, another kind of identity in the mind of the Nordic and Baltic citizens? Let us contemplate this for a moment.

In Nordic cooperation we have tended to take a specific Nordic identity for granted. We assume that as citizens of the Nordic countries we share a common cultural heritage that entitles us to a common identity separate from the one which our affiliation to the nation state has created and moulded.

There are indeed valid historical arguments for a Nordic region as a particular European region with a common past and some common features as well as a high degree of integration in the present. As close geographical neighbours with long standing relationships, the history of the Nordic countries is characterised by patterns of action and interaction and cultural and economic coexistence so close that I will maintain that it is not possible to understand and appreciate the history of one Nordic country without at least a rudimentary knowledge of Nordic history, i.e. the history of the region as a whole.

The interaction between the Nordic people goes back beyond the creation of the modern national state and hence the part of a Nordic identity that derives from a common history is not necessarily connected to modernity but to a common past and common cultural features.

Language of course is a powerful media, a tool for communication and a carrier of culture. The ability of the Scandinavian people to communicate in their respective languages is sometimes emphasized as a core feature of Nordic cooperation and considered a token of the close cultural relations of the Nordic people. This of course is only true for those of us who speak the three Scandinavian languages used by the most speakers. Finnish belongs to another language family and is very different from the Scandinavian languages. The same can be said about the languages of Greenland and of the Sami people. And, though Icelandic is a Nordic language, native speakers of the other Nordic languages are not used enough to it to comprehend it without extensive study on their behalf and indeed Icelanders are getting less and less used to the other Scandinavian languages.

With regard to language you might then say that the notion of a common Nordic identity is illusory, but when it comes to history, trade and political and socio- economic development and other social trends that may generate a common identity, the Nordic societies do share certain common features.

The Nordic identity is, however, not altogether a myth. It has come to exist through a common history, sometimes characterised by war, oppression, exploitation, mutual distrust and even hatred, but more often by peaceful coexistence and fruitful cultural contacts. Thus the Nordic Identity has been made and shaped by the vortex of history during centuries but that is not its only source of origin, it has also been deliberately created and shaped by volunteers and politicians.

The Norden Association (Foreningen Norden) was founded in 1919, in the aftermath of World War I, with the main objective to promote mutual understanding, cultural encounters and peaceful coexistence among the Nordic peoples. The Norden Association has since operated in the Nordic countries and — especially in the inter war years — it could celebrate valuable accomplishments in the reconciliation of the Nordic people with each other and with their common history. Among these accomplishments was rewriting Nordic textbooks in history for elementary and secondary schools in the late 1930s, an effort that was supported by the respective ministries of education.

The period right after the end of World War II was characterised by the formation of confederations, pacts and alliances. The bipolarization of the post war era became evident in the Warsaw Pact, the NATO-alliance, the Comecon-economic organization of the socialist eastern block and the OECD in the west. The Nordic countries all had to cultivate their own independent but delicate relationships to the west and the east – all depending on geopolitical situation.

Even though ideas about the unification of the Nordic Countries were turned down in the immediate post war years, the Nordic Council of Ministers, a cooperation organisation between the Nordic governments, was established in 1952 in spite of opposition from right wing parties and politicians. Finland did not become a member until 1955 due to political circumstances. Even though the Nordic Council of Ministers sometimes has been described as an organisation lacking teeth due to its limited mandate and power it has brought about a remarkable integration of the rights and duties of the Nordic people and mutual recognition of social rights in the Nordic countries. Taking into consideration that the Nordic Council of Ministers is not a supranational organisation and has no legislative power its accomplishments makes this even more notable.

We in the North have grown so used to being able to travel from one Nordic country to another without a passport, to have the right to seek work in another Nordic country with less bureaucracy and in general to enjoy a mutual acceptance of rights and freedoms between the Nordic countries that we may not realize how important this is, and we may not be aware of how easy the implementation was compared to, for example, the strenuous efforts of the countries making up the European Union to achieve the same level of integration.

Could the integration of the Nordic countries have been achieved without a common identity? Hardly, I think, but of course we have to acknowledge that the Nordic project has had self-perpetuating effects in the decades it has lasted. We may assume that the Nordic identity is stronger today, 63 years ago from the founding of the Nordic Council of Ministers, than it was in 1952. We have, to at least some extent, acquired the identity of a Nordic citizen as well as citizens each of one of the Nordic countries.

### III THE BALTIC AND THE NORDIC IDENTITY

We know that the trade routes of the Baltic Sea have connected the Baltic region, Finland and Scandinavia for centuries. The contact between the peoples living on the shores of the Baltic and the Nordic peoples has sometimes been characterised by hostilities and oppression but more often by peaceful interaction.

At first sight we could call the Nordic countries and the Baltic states two cultural entities. However these entities have a long history of relations which revolve around the Baltic Sea. Öresund, which we television viewers in the North and perhaps the whole western world, know so well from the television series *Broen*, connects the Baltic Sea and Northern Sea. Important cities form the cultural centres around the Baltic Sea; Malmö, Copenhagen, Gdansk, Kaliningrad, Kiel, Rostock, Tallin, Turku. The sea is what connects our nations, and not only our nations but also other nations, most importantly Germany and Poland, but also Russia and in the old days Prussia and the Sorbs, a Slavic nation from Vindland.

These relations have been varied; first I could mention economic and trade relations of which we have a long history, one example are Hansa merchants are known all around the Nordic countries through their trade in this area. We also have a history of cultural relations. I will mention just a few examples; Estonian and Finnish are closely related languages. Denmark and Estonia have a common history but at one time Denmark held power over Estonia and according to folklore the Danish flag fell to Earth from the Estonian sky. The history of the Scandinavian countries,

Finland, Sweden and Norway is closely interwoven. And even my country has some relations with the Baltic states; Iceland and Lithuania share the fact that their languages are considered to be archaic, and Estonian pirates appear in Icelandic king's sagas.

When we enter modern times, the existence and fate of the three states that we usually call Baltic, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, in the modern era has attracted the attention of the Nordic countries in particular. These three Baltic states emerged as nation states in the aftermath of World War I, went to a turbulent period in the inter war years, were annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II but regained their status as independent states after the Soviet Union was dissolved.

The past experience of the people of the Baltic countries and the history of state and society in the Baltic region is quite different from that of the Nordic countries. The part of a personal identity that stems from the history of state and nation — from past experience — therefore must take on another form in the Baltic than in the Nordic countries. When it comes to modern issues on the other hand the views might not be all that different. After all the people of the Baltic and the Nordic must have similar hopes and aspirations and the co-operation last 25 years must have had its' effect in the eventual creation of a new, common identity.

Conflicts and struggles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have probably influenced the Nordic identity. You could say that people in the Nordic countries learned the hard way to build their identity on democracy and mutual recognition of rights and duties. It could only be established after a reconciliation process and a long-standing development of democratic conduct and recognition of human rights, admitting that in many of the Nordic countries there are minorities, different dialects and languages. And eventhough we have journeyed this far people still do not necessarily agree on these issues – for example about whether everybody should learn Swedish in Finland or everybody should learn Danish in Iceland.

#### IV AIMS AND ACTIONS OF NORDIC-BALTIC CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

The Nordic model has always had a large appeal to many. The Nordic economic and social welfare model which was born in the 1930s through co-operation of socialists and traditional farmer's parties has been widely recognized and has proved resistant to globalization and the recent international economic crisis. The Nordic countries have often been seen to using their "soft powers" in international co-operation.

In recent years, other aspects of the Nordic model have also received increasing attention. This includes many aspects of the Nordic culture including literature (including crime novels), architecture and design, TV series and films, cuisine, music and sports have received worldwide recognition. The Nordic area has become increasingly “cool”. As branding has come higher up the agenda, the Nordic countries have had ambitions to reach out more globally using the Nordic brand, where darkness, rain and wind have all become a part of the brand.

Ever since early nineties Nordic and Baltic co-operation in different sectors has become stronger and closer. I was in my first month as a minister when the Nordic-Baltic mobility programme for Culture was launched in February 2009.

The future of the Nordic-Baltic co-operation could be to expand it, involve Poland and Germany and other neighbouring states. It is my belief that the common Baltic history might prove to be an important motivation for this cooperation and make it more viable and dynamic.

## V CONCLUSION

The biggest benefits of thinking about identity and trying to analyze identity are maybe that then you need to explore yourself and your relations to others. Aristotle said that the most important knowledge was the knowledge of yourself. In a more modern way Zygmunt Bauman said:

The real problem is not to build identity but how to preserve it. (Zygmunt Bauman)

It is important to think about history, know the common threads of history, language and culture. But identity cannot be built on the past. It cannot just revolve around the roots. If we want to preserve identity we must think about the tree as a whole. And we need to be ready to take risks and experiment with our identity if we want to preserve it.

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