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Foreword

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Foreword

We were sitting around the table after dinner, the red wine bottles not yet quite empty. The light-hearted banter turned to national stereotypes and the jokes people in each country told about each other. There were, I think, about six of us sharing the comfortable house, three train stations outside downtown Oslo. Most around the table were from Nordic countries. As a visiting researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), I was one of the two non-Nordics that evening. The other was a recent household arrival, a Turkish activist asylum-seeker, who now occupied the sofa in the front room. The laughter grew boisterous as people chimed in with examples from Finnish and Norwegian television shows and with witty, though not mean, regional jokes learned in schoolyards.

I was fascinated. Until then, I had lumped the countries of the Nordic region together. I probably even mistakenly labelled all five ‘Scandinavian’.

This would have been October 1978.

Now, here we are in 2020. Over these last four decades, I have learned to say ‘Nordic’ when referring to the five northern countries. Over the same decades, Icelandic voters have chosen the world’s first woman elected head of state; Norway’s members of parliament have voted to conscript young women as well as young men in the country’s military; a Swedish foreign minister has declared her commitment to a feminist foreign policy; the governments of Denmark and Finland, each headed by women prime ministers, have received high marks for their public responses to the coronavirus pandemic – and, we learn from this fascinating book, ‘Nordic’ has been turned into a brand.

As I’ve been reading these engaging chapters, I’ve been pushed (I like being intellectually pushed!) to think carefully about the interplay of four central themes that take centre stage here. First, there are the politics of branding. I’ve wondered about gendered branding ever since I started exploring Chiquita’s corporate campaign to brand a generic fruit, the banana. But taking deliberate steps to brand an entire geographic region – that is new to me. Second, there is the centrality of gender equality – as a reality and a civic commitment – to this deliberately constructed Nordic brand. Third, the contributors to this volume remind us, we have to grapple with this messy

reality: despite Nordic branding efforts, the five countries have remained quite distinct, even in their allegedly shared gender-equality successes (for example, only Sweden uses ‘feminist’ in its official self-description). The five aren’t quite the stereotypes that made my Oslo friends laugh out loud all those years ago, but they certainly are not carbon copies of each other. And, fourth, the authors reveal, there are both advantages and disadvantages to positive regional branding. A downside, it turns out, is that presenting oneself as ahead of everyone else can be quite off-putting for one’s potential allies and partners.

These attentive contributors reveal, moreover, that the four dynamics are neither stable over time nor simply moving along on parallel tracks.

There is a good reason why this book is more valuable analytically for being written by gender specialists. Since the 1970s, each of the five Nordic countries has been pushed by its local women’s movements to face up to, and address politically, the masculinizing processes that shaped each of their structures and cultures of business, family, politics and culture. Those five women’s movements have not moved in lock step; their activists, I’ve learned, don’t share a common regional language, and thus often can only talk to each other in English. Iceland’s 1975 historic Women’s Strike has not been repeated in the other four countries. The pressures to absorb new immigrants and address local racism and ethnocentrism have not been uniformly felt by feminists in all five societies. Notwithstanding these differences among women’s movements, there have been shared activist experiences and conscious collaborations, as well as, as we see here, joint research enterprises. The contributors to this volume show us how those myriad sharings have worked their ways into a notable regional branding effort, an effort enacted not just by women activists, but by people who have come to see gender equality – or at least the veneer of gender equality – as useful for pursuing their own ends.

And all this has made me realize how much gender investigating we all still need to do. Thanks to the focused and rigorous investigations offered here, the editors and scholars involved in this work have made me more curious about the micro-workings of masculinities and femininities – and thus of patriarchy in all its guises. I’m greedy. Having now finished these eye-opening chapters, I want full gender analyses of every one of the Nordic ministries of foreign affairs. Furthermore, the gender workings of the full process of designing, approving and revising national websites have now caught my attention. I am also looking forward to someone conducting a feminist gender analysis of the Norwegian Tourism Board – maybe a team to compare the genderings of all five countries’ tourism boards. I’ve become more curious, too, to see the findings of researchers who dig into the gender dynamics shaping the day-to-day relationships between business lobbyists and the Danish and Finnish ministries of foreign affairs.

Yes, I know. It does seem ungrateful of me to write a foreword that asks for more. But, really, that is the sign of an analytically valuable book, isn't it? These authors have left me wanting more.

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