

Afterword

Gendering the brand?

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What is the role of gender and gender equality in branding the Nordic states? This is a question of obvious political significance and academic interest. In setting out to answer it, the editors of this collection have had high ambitions – ambitions that have been met over the preceding pages, in part by rephrasing the question. As demonstrated in the different chapters of this book, we should probably rather ask, ‘What roles do gender and gender equality play in the relations between the Nordic states and the world?’ The answers provided are far from straightforward, and, as with all good intellectual answers, they bring out additional puzzles. Over the next few pages, I will highlight some of these puzzles. I would nevertheless like to preface my concluding comments by emphasizing that these puzzles arise from a set of tightly argued, conceptually informed and empirically strong chapters. This collection demonstrates in full the benefits of bringing together a diverse team of scholars to study one fairly specified topic from a number of different angles.

To better be able to evaluate the practices discussed in this volume, we need to engage with the basic conceptual frameworks, starting with the notion of place branding, which is a fairly new concept in the social sciences. Its attraction lies in its capacity for increasing our understanding of how cities, regions and states seek to create affective connections between places and people. In its most basic sense, place branding is about creating a bond between a place and consumers willing to pay to experience and/or share in the perceived qualities of said place. It is also a concept based on a market understanding of competition: one place’s gain is most likely some other place’s loss. Typically associated with efforts to attract tourists, entrepreneurs and investments, it has recently also been associated with states’ efforts to increase influence or improve reputation (Dinnie, 2015). At that stage, the concept comes in touch with other ways of conceptualizing state behaviour or capacity directed at other countries and populations, such as public diplomacy and soft power. The boundary between place branding and public diplomacy in particular is blurry (but see Szondi, 2008; Cull, 2019). To be very crude, one could argue that public diplomacy is about winning hearts and minds, while nation-branding is about winning the wallet.

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What is often lost in conceptual discussions like this, however, is the simple question of why? Why, beyond profit or affection, do states want to be seen and recognized?

One potentially productive way of framing the debates about nation-branding and public diplomacy is to consider them both subsumed under the broader motivations of status, prestige and reputation. Going back to Hobbes, it has been assumed that states seek not only power and wealth, but also status. Recent theoretical discussions have led to an appreciation of status as an autotelic goal: it does not have to be explained as subservient to any other goal, it is its own goal.¹ While status has often been associated with great-power aspirations and conflicts, there are many reasons why one would assume status to be even more important to small powers and middle powers (Wohlforth et al., 2018). For those states, moral authority, rather than brute force, is the sought-after source of status. And, to return to the case at hand, gender equality has become one of the many dimensions along which moral authority at the state level is conferred (Towns, 2010).

Reframing the questions about gender and gender equality in the external activities of the Nordic countries in terms of status has at least three immediate advantages. The first advantage is that status expands the scope and reduces the reliance on agency. Analysing processes in the light of public diplomacy and nation-branding requires a strategic outlook, active agency and an underlying premise that states are pursuing specific actions (like promoting gender equality) to achieve something else (like increasing profits). The analytical lenses of status and status-seeking, on the other hand, allow us to make sense of less explicitly goal-oriented activities and mixed motivations.² The second advantage is that status, as currently perceived, is social and relational, where nation-branding and, to some extent, public diplomacy are unidirectional. A status lens highlights complexity at home and abroad. On the one hand, it emphasizes how domestic politics can shape status-seeking and how the domestic resonance of status-seeking matters to its likelihood of success (Beaumont, 2020). On the other hand, it leads our attention to the external recognition of status, how it can be associated with circles of recognition, club membership and relative ranking (Røren, 2020), and also how there is a marked difference between formally equal-status relationships and relationships more in the teacher–pupil mould. The third advantage is reducing anachronism. Public diplomacy and nation-branding are relatively new concepts of both practice and analysis. Applying them to activities from before the middle of the twentieth century can create interesting juxtapositions but can also lead us to misguided analyses. Status and reputation, on the other hand, have been acknowledged motivations of state behaviour for centuries. As was noted in the Norwegian parliament in 1864, for smaller states, ‘honour and prestige are even more important than for the greater powers’ (cited in Leira, 2015: 22).

Turning to the preceding chapters, status does unlock a number of what might seem puzzling insights if the latter are viewed solely through the

lens of nation-branding. To start with a combination of all of the points above, reforms pushing gender equality and other gendered topics were not originally conceptualized for external strategic aims. On the contrary, as Larsen demonstrates in her chapter, it took American activists to make the case for the Nordics as pioneers. Gender equality was not originally conceived as a branding strategy. It was something that these states engaged in, which gradually became part of national identity/self-images and much later seemed to possibly be usable in public diplomacy/nation-branding to increase status/prestige. And it is not as if these states were not status-conscious at the time when gender equality was first put on the agenda. When one of the Norwegian foreign policy intellectuals discussed a future foreign policy in the run-up to Norwegian independence in 1905, he wanted to emphasize international law, not necessarily to stake a claim as a ‘pioneering people’, but to emphasize, ‘it will be our honour to have partaken in creating a new age and an era of peace among men’ (cited in Leira, 2013: 344). As small states, the Nordics wanted to be recognized; gender equality was just not one of the fields that they considered to offer such recognition. In recent years, however, policies such as the Swedish rape legislation have been crafted with at least some consideration for the example to be set, as demonstrated by Skilbrei. But even while the Nordics are eager to promote their high ranking on different gender performance indexes, as discussed by Kirkebø, Langford and Byrkjeflot, it is not obvious that this self-perceived and index-reinforced exceptionalism has any instrumental consequences beyond status affirmation.

Many of the chapters touch upon the domestic side of status-seeking. To be effective, status-seeking must be built around something that the domestic audience acknowledges as salient to the self-image. While gender equality is certainly part of the self-image of the Nordic states, it is expressed in different ways and also ‘usable’ for diplomats in different ways. As Jezierska and Towns demonstrate, the place of gender in the different national narratives is, so to speak, ‘on brand’ (with Norway focusing on nature, Sweden on progress, Finland on function, and so on). Domestic politics also spill over into how the state projects outwards. While it is, for instance, relatively uncontroversial for a centre-left Swedish government to engage in a ‘feminist’ foreign policy, for a similar Norwegian government such a label would not fly domestically. There, ‘gender equality’ is the commonly accepted frame. As explored in different ways in the chapters by Moss and by Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad, similar hesitations influence how diplomats are able to utilize gender issues. To use the Norwegian case as an example, it seems that, in diplomatic practice, the self-identity as a ‘peace nation’ trumps the self-identity as gender-progressive.

Turning to the outside, it becomes even more obvious how gender and gender equality have seldom been about branding at all. As Ginalski demonstrates, the Nordic policies on gender quotas (which have never been pushed hard as examples by the Nordic states) have been used actively in

Swiss debates. This illustrates on one hand the lack of Nordic control over foreign uptake of their policies, on the other the importance of how the Nordics have pursued different policies. The lack of control over uptake is also obvious in how sexual liberation at home has been perceived as promiscuity abroad. In general, the Nordics have been gender-progressive, but in different ways, leading them to be ‘usable’ in debates and as examples in different ways. The lack of control is also obvious in what we could call the ‘boomerang effect’, or the feedback loop of claiming status as a pioneer, as demonstrated by Hellum. Promoting a norm like gender equality globally might come back to challenge you at home when global norms move beyond your position. At that stage, as Erlingsdóttir discusses, internal actors might use outside perceptions to change domestic policy. The perceived foreign association of Iceland with gender equality could be utilized domestically to push for even further equality.

In more indirect ways, the different chapters also demonstrate the importance of a differentiated approach to the analysis of status-seeking. The Nordic countries generally form each other’s most important circle of recognition. This implies that relative ranking within the group, albeit friendly, is paramount (Røren, 2020). With Sweden leading the way with a feminist foreign policy, the other states might just decide to focus elsewhere. The regional dynamics also imply that gender issues might not be seen as ‘usable’ for status purposes by the individual states. Moving beyond the region and approaching the rest of the world, as discussed by Holst and Teigen, there is a distinct teacher–pupil dynamic in play in how the Nordics push the gender agenda. Even though diplomats might want to tone down the notion of ‘moral superiority’, the states have been reluctant to accept that other states have advanced the agenda of gender equality beyond the Nordic example.

Overall, this volume demonstrates in detailed and varied ways how gender issues and gender equality have been interweaved with how the Nordic states present themselves to the world. Being gender-equal is obviously part of the self-image of the Nordic states, and it also matters for how they interact with the world. Self-consciousness of being pioneers matters to regional identity-building and branding, but is on the other hand not necessarily something the individual states can mobilize to increase status. Paradoxically, the Nordic brand has been thoroughly gendered, but, for status-seeking purposes, gender has proved surprisingly unhelpful. Perhaps if everyone knows that you are the most gender-equal countries in the world, there is little to gain by demonstrating that you have become even more equal?

Notes

- 1 Structuring the discussion, we could then start from the assumption that states care about status (or prestige/image/reputation). One of the ways in which states have tried to increase or retain their status over the last decades is through public diplomacy. One specific form of public diplomacy (or possibly an activity that overlaps to some degree with public diplomacy) is place branding.

- 2 Status could, for instance, help to make sense of the promotion of gender equality as a case of a combination of utilitarian norm-diffusion and self-interested status-seeking.

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