

RUTH HEMSTAD AND DAG MICHAELSEN (eds.):

*Frie ord i Norden?*

*Offentlighet, ytringsfrihet og medborgerskap 1814–1914*

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This substantial volume of almost 500 pages represents much of the current scholarly state-of-art on the growth of Scandinavian public spheres during what we might call the Nordic long nineteenth century: the largely peaceful hundred years from the end of the Napoleonic wars up until the beginning of the First World War.

The central theme of the book is the gradual expansion of the fundamental liberal freedoms, the freedom of the press and freedom of speech, in nineteenth-century Scandinavia. Eventually, this the early development of liberal freedoms facilitated the growth of high levels of societal trust and strong traditions of participatory democracy, still today thought to be (and celebrated as) some of the main tenets of Nordic success. In other words, there is a close connection between how well we understand Scandinavia at present and how thoroughly we have studied its modern foundations that were laid in the nineteenth century. This book makes an important contribution to our knowledge of the latter.

The authors of the nineteen chapters present the reader with a multifaceted collection of expertise from a variety of different fields, including not only history, but also legal history, literature, theology and history of ideas. The book is divided thematically into three parts. The first part, 'Nordic perspectives on freedom of speech and the public sphere', is along with the introductory chapter the most broad-gauged portion of the volume and would work well even on its own. It provides a handy point of entry into some of the central topics being studied throughout the book, which (perhaps expectedly) include the various attempts of the state to control the public discourse, and the efforts of its opponents, through many mishaps and backlashes, to push the boundaries of what was allowed. However, almost equally significantly, it focuses on the transnational aspects of the Nordic public spheres. To me, this certainly feels like the most original feature of this project and I will return to it at the end of this review.

The first part also includes two *longue durée* case studies looking at the growth of, respectively, Danish and Finnish public spheres until the mid-decades of the nineteenth century. These provide a link to the second part, 'The state and regulation of the public sphere', which consists of somewhat narrower case studies looking at how the state's

dominance over the public sphere was contested by a variety of actors ranging from newspapers and universities to politicians and state institutions themselves. The third and final part, 'Citizenship and the expansion of the public sphere' casts the net even wider by considering more unexpected or marginalised interactions with the emerging public sphere involving e.g. letters by emigrants to the USA, works of literature by female authors, satire, and new educational initiatives. Just as in the other parts, however, the state is ever-present, whether acting through censorship law or arbitrary royal intervention.

By far the largest proportion of authors (14 out of 19) are affiliated with Norwegian academic institutions, but the editors have also brought in a few scholars from Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Nevertheless, the Norway-centric aspect of this book should not be overstated. While some of the chapters are focused on national case studies, many others bring in useful comparisons with other parts of the region. Some chapters even include an extra-Nordic comparative aspect, such as in Morten Nordhagen Ottosen's study of parliaments in Scandinavia and in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century.

It is particularly in this comparative aspect I can see great potential for further research. Many of the findings here could fruitfully be taken in the direction of more generalisation and inter-Nordic comparison, or the authors could decide to focus on fleshing out some of the intriguing individual case studies by adding studies of parallel – and alternative! – contemporary developments elsewhere. It is made very clear in this volume that the Scandinavian public spheres did not grow in isolation (see p. 15), but I would like to know to what extent they were even properly Scandinavian at all. How much did the occasionally draconian measures employed by the Scandinavian states, and the hopes entertained by their nascent liberal middle classes, reflect the broader Europe-wide battle over the control of the public spheres everywhere? What is the scope here, if any, for claims of Scandinavian exceptionalism? Intriguingly, the editors point at the somewhat 'porous' boundary between the state authorities and the middle classes, as well as at the perhaps more 'popular' character of the Nordic public spheres (pp. 20–21) as potentially significant. Hopefully, these topics can be explored in more detail in the future, and this book certainly takes us further along on the road to getting there.

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