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The Nordic Model: Scandinavia Since 1945. Mary Hilson. Reviewed by Anupama Jacob.

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Mary Hilson, *The Nordic Model: Scandinavia Since 1945*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008. \$24.95 papercover. (Available From the University of Chicago Press.)

The concept of a Scandinavian or Nordic model first emerged in the 1930s to refer to what was believed to be the distinct political and social systems of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Although the idea of a Nordic model grew in prominence in the twentieth century, scholars and policymakers have since had contrasting views on its usefulness. Those on the political left believe that the equality, prosperity, social solidarity, and quality of life enjoyed by the citizens of these “consensual democracies” reveal utopian qualities worthy of emulation. Conservatives, however, question the sustainability of societies characterized by an extensive state welfare system, high taxes, numerous regulations, and the social engineering of the lives of its members. The strengths and weaknesses of the Nordic model are better appreciated when one understands how the model developed over time.

In this book, Mary Hilson provides a comprehensive review of the historical evolution and significance of the Nordic model. However, the author further examines the similarities and differences in the historical processes of the Nordic countries within the framework of the Nordic model to challenge the common perception of Scandinavia as one coherent region. The book begins by exploring the historical meanings of the term Scandinavia. Rather than confront national identities, Hilson explains that the term came to be viewed as a “second nationhood” by the countries in this region. She then surveys the political histories of the individual Nordic countries to trace the roots of the Nordic model. She finds that despite differences in state-building, these countries shared political cultures that supported collectivism and conformism. Hilson argues that although this image of Scandinavian democracies continues to persist, it may be more a reflection of “collective nostalgia” for a past era than a true picture of reality today. She points to recent events such as the cartoon of the Prophet Muhammed in Denmark in 2006 that cast doubts about Scandinavian democracies being remarkably different from the rest of Europe.

The welfare state, however, continues to be what Hilson calls “the epitome of Scandinavian distinctiveness.” Is there a Scandinavian economic model? Notwithstanding some differences in economic development, Hilson states that the Nordic economies remain highly organized with a strong commitment to preserving their distinct welfare system. Focusing on the Nordic welfare model, Hilson goes on to argue that while there are similarities between the Nordic welfare states, it may be better to refer to the Nordic model as “one model with five exceptions.”

Turning her attention to the role Scandinavia has played in international relations, Hilson describes how the Scandinavian model of social justice and “we-ness” came to be seen as a model worth pursuing in peace-building efforts in other parts of the world. However issues of ethnicity, multiculturalism, and mass immigration have challenged the reputation of humanitarianism in Scandinavian societies. Policymakers in this region debate whether the welfare state should support assimilation, integration, or multiculturalism. Recent political and cultural responses to mass immigration also challenge the Scandinavian “self-conception as the home of tolerance and social justice” and their moral leverage in terms of foreign policy. Hilson’s final discussion focuses on the future of this region in light of current economic and social forces and the potential significance of the Baltic Sea as a regional focal point.

Hilson’s book challenges preconceived ideas of Scandinavia as a homogeneous geo-political region. Her analysis provides a solid background of the historical processes in the evolution of the Nordic model and its significance over time. This book will be helpful to readers interested in Scandinavia, the Nordic welfare state model, and the lessons to be learned from the economic and social forces influencing its development over time.

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