A recurring mantra in French political debate:

Reference to the Nordic Model.

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Having studied Nordic societies for several decades, I've always been fascinated by the strength of the image of the Nordic model in France. Virtually each time a major social or economic reform is considered, or when a failure in the State machinery is deplored, there is always someone, among politicians or journalists, to evoke the Nordic model – or one Nordic country as a particular model¹. Thus the Nordic model appears as a mythical place where a cornucopia of virtuous and innovative solutions is to be discovered. This lasting phenomenon is all the more puzzling in that, backstage in international instances, the French themselves tend to have an image of “*donneurs de leçons*”, featuring as the ones who can teach the world... And it is also all the more intriguing that very few French people have an accurate idea of Nordic societies. Actually, Nordic countries are seldom in the focus of French social sciences. If these countries seem to be becoming a bit more well-known nowadays, it is due to the conjunction of a growing interest among journalists and politicians plus the general development of tourism – linked with the growing integration of Nordic countries in Europe... Reference to the Nordic model, with its strong positive connotation, stands for social and economic success, innovation and global positivity, and seems to be incessantly repeated as a mantra for political inspiration.

This mantra is not only used in the general political debate, but it is also a source of inspiration for law-making in countless areas, such as parental leave, care for the elderly, social benefits, gender equality, fighting against prostitution, education systems, retirement pensions, and even jihadist rehabilitation programmes, a subject some French MPs studied on a trip to Denmark in February 2015 (RMC-BFM, 2015). There are many cases of French laws passed thanks to Nordic inspiration. For instance, the 23 July 2014 law on parity in executive boards, an idea inspired by Norway, or the 12 June 2015 law on the prevention of

prostitution, based on the Swedish law that Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, then Minister for Women's Rights, had studied on her visits to this country. Indeed, French politicians often travel to Nordic countries in order to observe exotic and inspiring innovations. My investigation of French embassies' records concerning diplomatic visits to Norden² (unfortunately unevenly kept³) shows that Sweden is the country most visited by French officials, being generally considered as the epitome of the Nordic model. Then come Finland and Denmark. When the purpose of visits is mentioned, for instance to Sweden⁴, it is particularly indicative of a solution-seeking interest in the Nordic model. For example: *"28-29 August 2006: Minister of National Education, Gilles de Robien went to Stockholm and Uppsala to learn from the Swedish education model in preparation for reforms to be adopted in France"*. *"7-10 September 2005: P. Mehaignerie, President of the Finance Commission at the National Assembly observed the Swedish fiscal system, the Swedish budgetary policy, the rise in public sector productivity..."* etc. The press very often relates such diplomatic visits, for instance: *"Manuel Valls in Denmark, the country of flexicurity"* (in the popular paper *"20 minutes"*). One can read headlines explicitly referring to Nordic countries as models, for instance in *Le Monde*: *"The Nordic countries model is a real alternative to supply-side economics"* (Peicuti, 2014) or in the economics magazine *"Les Echos"*: *"Nordic countries: present time teachings for France"* (Richez-Baum, 2014)".

Referring to the Nordic Model is very popular in France. A survey made in 2007 by LH2 Institute for *Le manifeste/RMC* (LH2, 207) showed that 42 % of French people thought that France should follow the Nordic model, which ranked first before other models (Germany was the model to be followed for 30 % of respondents, Canada for 13 %, Great Britain for 15 % and the United States for 9 %). The survey also showed that reference to the Nordic model was as popular on the left as on the right. The main achievements of the Nordic model quoted by respondents were: low unemployment rates, healthy economies, social policies offering good public services and real gender equality. However, Nordic countries are far from being well-known in France, despite the fact they are so often labelled as "models". Their popular image, as positive as it is, remains so blurred that the Nordic countries are often mistaken for each other. This poor knowledge is not only geographical; very few French people, for instance, can tell the difference between "Nordic" and "Scandinavian". The picture of these countries mainly relies on a few scattered elements.

Even the flourishing success that Nordic novels have encountered in France for more than a decade -especially thrillers such as *Millenium* (Larsson) or fun-novels such as *The 100-year-old man who climbed out of the window and disappeared* (Jonasson, 2012) - has not changed this situation. As a matter of fact, French-speaking readers hardly realise that these novels, especially thrillers, only give a biased picture of Nordic societies, often a very critical one. As Sylvain Briens has put it, Nordic thrillers have something in common with the “mobilisation literature” in the 1930’s and 1940’s: *“they denounce the dangers of certain evolutions of society and share the goal of protecting readers from what menaces them in a collective way. dysfunctions in justice/the law, social-democracy failures, tensions about immigration, dismantling of psychiatric services, gender and social inequality, xenophobia and progress of the far-right, and even terrorism are all recurring themes in Nordic thrillers”* (Briens, 2013). So in this literature, Nordic societies are shown through the distorting lens of criticism. As Briens notes, it is all the more pertinent and shocking to criticise Sweden as this country is considered a model for social, political and economic organisation (Briens, 2013). This kind of “internal use” discourse, which can be found in thrillers and has been translated onto cinema screens (*Millenium*, the *Wallander* series, etc) can eventually give a distorted and negative picture of Nordic countries, full of perverts, extremists, and depressed policemen... A picture very contradictory to the idea of the Nordic model, as it is the reverse side of these countries’ image... On the other hand, this literature, as distorting as it may be, can also arouse an interest in the Nordic countries, as was the case for one of my students, who attended my lecture on Nordic political systems because she was fond of Arto Paasilina’s books (a very popular writer in France, but who describes utopian societies rather than Finland and whose sense of humour is very personal)...

So we are faced with a strange paradox: if French people generally admire the Nordic model, and often get some inspiration from it to imitate its institutions, what does such an attitude mean in respect to the general ignorance about these countries? And what are the political uses of the Nordic model mantra?

I. Academic knowledge about Nordic countries in France.

Of course, it would be utterly unfair to pretend that ignorance about Nordic countries is total in France. On the contrary, this country has an ancient tradition of studying Nordic languages and civilisations, as shown by the conference organised at the Sorbonne University in Paris to celebrate the centenary of the *Chair of Nordic languages and civilisations* created in 1909 (Briens, Gadelli, Lehmans, and Maillefer, 2012). Contrary to literary disciplines however, social sciences, that can be considered as most appropriate for studying the “Nordic model” (in the sense of a political, social and economic model of organisation), only very seldom take an interest in this subject. So the general picture French people have of the Nordic model largely results from the spread of literary works and travel literature, that may be extremely old.

In his book *Travel to Scandinavia, Anthology of Travellers 1627-1914*, Vincent Fournier presented 41 books⁵ which constitute the source of the French representation of the Nordic world. But there is also a more ancient one, linked to the Hyperboreans legend, a mythological people of giants who lived in a northern land, in a “*legendary area of felicity*” (Maurie, 1983). The Hyperboreans’ world represented an ideal society, a social myth that has been used many times in various ways, and has been of a considerable importance regarding the idea of a social “model”. For Jean-François Battail (2012), the myth of the North, as an idyllic, self-sufficient society, also depicted as a source of wealth, freedom and energy, is very ancient. It has taken many forms and has had varying content throughout history, but its basic structure has remained relatively unchanged. All these elements make it a very important myth in the history of mentalities. In his *Germania*, Tacitus also evoked the idea of a democratic, temperate society, where civic virtues were well developed... Another text, *De gentibus septentrionalibus*, published in 1555 in Rome by Olus Magnus (a Swedish cleric in exile) was translated into many languages and, “*for two centuries, was the major source from which European scholars mainly derived their knowledge about Nordic countries*”⁶ (Battail, 2012). Magnus himself was inspired by a book written by Jordanes, bishop of Ravenna, *De origine actibus gentis Gothorum*, published around 550. It depicted Scandinavia as the Skandza Island, the land of the ancient Goths who menaced the Roman Empire. Another famous writer, Montesquieu, participated in reinforcing the Nordic myth in the 18th century: in his book *L’Esprit des lois (The Spirit of the Laws)*, Montesquieu (1772),

inspired by his predecessors, writes that Scandinavian nations have been *"the source of liberty in Europe"* because *"when conquering the Roman Empire, the Goths brought monarchy and liberty everywhere"*. Voltaire (1829) developed a similar political vision of the North in his *Essai sur les mœurs (An Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations)*, writing that the Swedish constitutional monarchy was the freest kingdom on the Earth. Another writer, Jean-Jacques Ampère, nowadays less well-known, was a professor of foreign literature at the Sorbonne University and at the Collège de France, and a liberal activist. He introduced the Nordic countries to his fellow countrymen in his travel stories. He observed Nordic political practices and particularly praised the Norwegian democracy, which he called a *"republican monarchy"* because Norway had *"no aristocracy"* and *"a perfect equality between citizens. Laws are voted by a single assembly open to the most modest proprietor: it is the great Storting, a true sovereign that has... full legislative power"* (Ampère, 2001). Later on, count Gobineau, who was the ambassador of France in Stockholm between 1872 and 1877, tried to discern the ancient Northern people's social virtues still present in the Swedish-Norwegian society of his time, in a perfectly national-romantic manner. According to Jean-François Battail (2012), *"patient reformism, tolerance, absence of class-hatred have profoundly impressed this aristocrat who noted that employers raised salaries without making a fuss and who paid tribute to the Swedish people – instructed, patient and extremely gentle"*. As we can see, a long series of ancient and utopian representations of Nordic societies, described as ideal societies capable of being violent (Viking and Goth warriors), but highly civilised, democratic, egalitarian, cultivated and temperate have anticipated and maybe conditioned modern representations of the Nordic model. But there was also a darker and more mysterious aspect in this image which Vincent Fournier (1989) has called *"an ambiguous utopia"*: that of a virgin nature, wild and ominous. Already in the ancient Greek's descriptions, the North was a mysterious place where nature was obscure – a hint at the polar night. The Romantics particularly developed images of a wistful and ominous nature along with themes like the revolt of the individual against a constraining society: among them, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Germaine de Staël, George Sand and Jules Verne (Andersson, 2004, de Faramond, 2007). This succession of ancient, mythical, idealised, and distorted images of Nordic societies - always approximate images of a distant and seldom visited world, has left a good deal of stubborn misconceptions in our modern representations. That is what made Régis Boyer, the well-known Sorbonne professor and

translator of sagas – write that “*Scandinavia specialists always have a double effort to make: on one hand they have to initiate, popularise and teach, but on the other one, they also have to demythologise and demystify*” (Boyer, 2003).

From the 19th century on, academic knowledge about Nordic societies developed in France. The Parisian Sorbonne University started offering some lectures in Nordic languages and civilisations in the 1830’s. The *Bibliothèque Nordique* (Nordic library) was founded in its vicinity in 1903 and two chairs in Nordic literature were created: one in 1909, the second in 1971 (Briens *et al*, 2012). In the 1970’s, a complete Scandinavian languages curriculum was established in Paris, and a few lectures were given in other French universities (Briens *et al*, 2012). These developments gave way to the production of literary works as well as to a tradition of literary translation in France. Nevertheless, an overview of the number of PhD dissertations dealing with Nordic countries shows that this object of studies has always been marginal in France, in literary studies and especially in social sciences. As concerns literary studies, François Emion (Briens *et al*, 2012), who did research on this subject, notes that the first PhD dissertation was defended in 1830 (its topic was the Christianisation of Scandinavian peoples). During the 19th Century, seven PhD dissertations with a Nordic topic were defended, and a dozen between 1900 and 1930. The number of PhDs only rose in the 1970’s (along with the number of Scandinavian novels published in French): they dealt with various topics, and were mostly confined to literary studies. However, François Emion explains that this rising trend does not necessarily correspond to a French craze for the Nordic world; it must be replaced in the context of the democratisation of the French university system (29,000 students in 1900, 600,000 students in 1970, and 1,200,000 in 1990). In all, Emion has counted 163 PhD dissertations defended between 1970 and 2010. He also notes a rise in PhD dissertations numbers during the 1990’s (35 dissertations) and between 2000 and 2010 (35 dissertations again): more than half the number of dissertations defended from the 1970’s were defended in the 1990’s. Out of a total of 163 dissertations, 80 dealt with literary subjects, 18 with linguistics, and there were 114 topics on civilisation and history (for instance on mythology, contemporary cinema, political history, law and economics). Emion notes that there were also a few PhDs on topics outside the field of his study, such as medicine, dentistry, physical geography, etc.

For my part, I have investigated the number of defended PhD dissertations in social sciences with the Nordic model as a central topic -this being defined as a specific political, economic and social model of societal organisation. I explored the online catalogue of the *Agence française de l'enseignement supérieur*, the French agency of higher education, on www.theses.fr, and I checked the number of defended PhD dissertations between 1985 and 2015. I have checked the following disciplines: contemporary history, sociology, Germanic studies, Nordic studies, anthropology and political science (including foreign policy and international relations)⁷. The results were 12 PhD dissertations concerning Sweden, 8 concerning Norway, 3 on Finland and 2 on Denmark (however Denmark appears in other, comparative PhD dissertations as a case study among others). The total amount for a 30 year period is 25 PhD dissertations concerning the Nordic model with a very wide understanding of this concept, and in a broad array of academic disciplines. However, interest in the Nordic model seems to have been growing since the 1990's (3 dissertations during this decade) and especially during the 2000's (the 22 others). In as much as this test is valid (the catalogue is very tricky to go through, and it is difficult to select disciplines⁸), the outcome shows that only a very tiny number of French PhD dissertations dealt with the Nordic model during the 20th century... Moreover, a small number of PhD authors never obtained academic positions or else they quit this area, which gives a clue to the number of French specialists of the Nordic model... However, my study is focused on *PhDs* with the Nordic model as a central object and – in the following section – on *books* dealing with it. Since their authors are easily traceable, they are most liable to influence the general public debate. Nonetheless, a few researchers who do not match these criteria are also working on the Nordic model, producing papers in academic journals or book chapters. This reflects a trend in social science (especially in political science), which requires that researchers are specialised in an abstract subject (for instance public policies implementation, or a tiny sector of public policies such as childhood policies) and who happen to get involved in Nordic research according to their needs (for instance comparison). The question about whether this kind of perspective makes them “specialists” of the Nordic model or not remains open... While their vision of small parts of the picture is particularly accurate, they may lack appraisal of the general frame, such as the historical and cultural conditions in which institutions are set up and function. Moreover, they are less liable to influence the general public's representation of the Nordic model, which this paper is about.

However, the trend of a growing scientific interest in the Nordic model in the 2000's has given rise to the creation of three French academic journals offering new publication possibilities to researchers: *Nordiques*, launched in 2003 is a multidisciplinary peer-review journal dealing with contemporary Nordic societies. It publishes mainly in French (a few papers are in English). The *Revue d'histoire nordique* was created in 2005: its area is mainly history (with a good deal of contemporary history papers). Lastly, *Deshima* was created in 2007; it is labelled as a global history journal, and is more literary than the two others. As the number of would-be authors is very small, these journals have to publish researchers from different countries⁹. Authors from literary disciplines still largely outnumber authors from social sciences.

In all, French representations of the Nordic model are less derived from scientific works, which remain rather confidential, than from literary works and a rather developed journalistic production. The latter has been very important in the building up of the French version of the Nordic myth as we are going to see.

II. The arrival of the Nordic model mantra on the French political scene.

During the 1930's, Nordic countries began to be referred to as "models", and a special interest in them developed around the world. Among the Nordic countries, Sweden appeared as the most developed and the most virtuous. The Social-Democrats came to power in 1932 and kept it (alone or in coalitions) until 1976, a period corresponding to the building up of a very developed and comprehensive welfare state and of a truly democratic and efficient political system (Blanc-Noël, 2010). However, as Kasimierz Musial (2004) has put it, at that time interest in the Nordic countries did not only rely on their remarkable performances. It was also due to the turmoil other areas of the world were experiencing: following the great depression, Europe was faced with the rise of totalitarian regimes and the US faced a deep economic crisis, while the Nordic countries, exemplarily, remained committed to democratic values. They were a living example of the fact that authoritarian

regimes do not manage the economy better than democracies: they were on the path of the remarkable economic and social development process that brought them, from the 1960's on¹⁰, to the top ranks of virtually all international indexes (Blanc-Noël, 2017).

In France, interest in the Nordic model followed these developments, however at that time this was still in a very marginal way, essentially focused for historical reasons on the Swedish case (The links between the two countries are very ancient, from Descartes to Bernadotte). Historian Gilles Vergnon (2015) notes that between 1932 (when the Social-Democrats came to power) and 1986 (the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme who he calls "*the last living embodiment of an original model*"), more than 30 books were published that gave French readers "*a cultural, economic, social or political analysis of this country*". At the same period, the press, papers and TV shows echoed this newly aroused interest (Penot, 2011). Vergnon (2015) explains that before 1932, "*publications on Sweden were exclusively made by a few "bridge-builders", a small number of individuals who shared knowledge of the Swedish language they had acquired after a long stay in this country and/or a marriage, and who had a special passion for Scandinavian literature and landscapes*". From 1935-35 on, Nordic countries aroused a new interest in their social-economic accomplishments. In 1935, Serge de Chessin published *Les clefs de la Suède (Keys to Sweden)*, and in 1936 *Heureux Scandinaves (Happy Scandinavians)*. In 1938, Paul Planus published *Patrons et ouvriers en Suède (Employers and workers in Sweden)*. However, the author who gave Sweden its worldwide reputation for excellence is Marquis Childs, an American journalist who wrote the very famous book *Sweden, the Middle Way on Trial* in 1936.

During the following decade, interest in the Nordic model declined until the 1950s; then new books were published on the topic, mostly by literary authors like Lucien Maury, François-Régis Bastide, Henri Queffelec or Jean-Clarence Lambert. There was one book on a political subject, by Raymond Fusillier (1954): *Le parti socialiste suédois, son organisation (the Swedish socialist party, its organisation)*. As Vergnon (2015) puts it, authors of that time were less interested in the Nordic model than in "*an exploration of human character*" and the "*people's psychology*". Moreover, a few important papers were published, such as

Emmanuel Mounier's (1950) paper in *Esprit* journal, entitled "*Notes scandinaves, ou du bonheur*" (*Scandinavian notes -on happiness*"). In 1967, the first person to use the words "Swedish model" was the famous journalist Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber in his book "*Le défi américain*" (*the American Challenge*) (Servan-Schreiber, 1967, Stråth, 1993). It contained a "*Note about the Swedish experiment*", where he listed the basic characteristics of the Swedish model: "*a committed State, both liberal and socialist, a demand for equality, a social compromise between employers and unions and very progressive taxes* (Servan-Schreiber, 1967)". President Pompidou himself took part in the French craze for the Swedish model: during the 1969 presidential campaign, when a journalist asked him if there was any model country as regards social questions, he answered: "*Let's say Sweden, with more sun*¹¹". Another famous French politician¹², Jacques Chaban-Delmas (1969) also found some inspiration in the Swedish model, in his project for a "New society" (*Nouvelle société*).

During the 1970's, publishing houses' interest in the Nordic model continued to rise. Out of about thirty books written on this subject between 1932 and 1986, 17 were published between 1970 and 1976 (Arnaut, 1971, de Faramond, 1972, Ardant, 1976, De Faramond and Glayman, 1977, Parent, 1970). This period can be considered as a kind of golden age for the Nordic model myth. In France and some other countries, for instance Germany or England, Sweden in particular was admired for her economic and social success, and also for more anecdotal cultural traits: peace culture, blonde with blue eyes people, free love, disco music... as part of a more "*general interest in Sweden*" (Vergnon, 2015). Nevertheless, from 1976 on, interest in Sweden tended to diminish in France. Olof Palme lost the parliamentary elections and this put an end to 44 years of social-democratic government. At the same time, social democrat parties also lost elections in other Northern European countries.

Interest in the topic almost disappeared from the end of the 70's to the beginning of the 90's. Then there were a few French books on the Nordic model: one can mention a book by a journalist, Jacques Arnault, *Le modèle suédois revisité* (*The Swedish Model Revisited*) in 1991. Then a few academic books: *Les sociétés scandinaves de la Réforme à nos jours* (*Scandinavian societies from the Reformation to present day*), written by three major

professors of Scandinavian languages, Jean-François Battail, Régis Boyer and Vincent Fournier (1992), *La fin du modèle suédois* (The End of the Swedish Model), by a sociologist, Jean-Pierre Durand, in 1994, *La politique suédoise de neutralité active* (Swedish Active Neutrality Policy) by Nathalie Blanc-Noël in 1997, *La coopération nordique* (Nordic Cooperation) by Vincent Simoulin in 1999. During the same period, there were also books aimed at a larger audience, by Jacques Mer, a former French ambassador to Iceland: *L'Islande, une ouverture obligée mais prudente* (Iceland, a Constrained but Cautious Opening) (1994), and *La Norvège, entre tradition et ouverture* (Norway, Between Tradition and Opening) (1996). Both were published by *La Documentation française*, a state-owned publisher devoted to providing information for the general public, students and civil servants.

In the 2000's, the number of books grew slightly, which follows the trend I measured concerning PhD numbers. There were scholarly works such as: *Luthéranisme et politique en Norvège: le parti chrétien du people* (Lutheranism and Politics in Norway – the Christian People's party) in 2003, and the same year *La flexisécurité danoise: quels enseignements pour la France? Flexisecurity: what teachings for France?* by Professor Robert Boyer. There was also a book by Professor Jean-François Battail on the cultural and political history of Norway: *Les destinées de la Norvège moderne* (the Destiny of Modern Norway) in 2005. Moreover, there were books written by journalists such as Magnus Falkehed (2003) (a Swedish journalist) *"Le modèle suédois, santé, services publics, environnement, ce qui attend les Français"* (Swedish Model, Health, Public Services, Environment... What the French can expect, and Marie-Laure Le Foulon (2006) *"Le rebond du modèle scandinave"* The Scandinavian Model's Revival. There was also a book by Mogens Lykketoft, a Danish politician, in 2006, *Le modèle danois* (The Danish Model). The tone of books published in the 2000's is very different from that of the previous periods, except for academic books on history: it is more critical with Magnus Falkehed, who paints a rather gloomy portrait of Sweden after reforms had transformed the Swedish model with public sector cuts and new management methods. On a more optimistic register, Mogens Lykketoft, a former Danish finance minister, shows that the Model can find a new start in another form, called flexisecurity. The book by Marie-Laure Le Foulon, a journalist, is less controversial and more informative. One can add to this rather short list of publications two books derived from

students' dissertations for the Ecole des Mines diploma (a prestigious engineering school), both exploring changes and successes of the Nordic model: *Le modèle suédois, un malentendu* (The Swedish Model, a Misunderstanding) by Benjamin Huteau and Jean-Yves Larraufie (2009), and *Les transformations du modèle suédois* (The Swedish Model Transformation), by Emilie Bourdu in 2013. Lastly, Yohann Aucante (2013), an assistant Professor in political science published "*Les démocraties scandinaves. Des systèmes politiques exceptionnels ? (Scandinavian Democracies. Exceptional Systems?)*", a book mostly aimed at students –which is very unique; the same year, Michel Sallé (2013) published *L'Islande (Iceland)*, giving a general picture of modern Icelandic society and political life. In all, fewer than twenty books with the Nordic model as a central topic were published in France over a period of 36 years (1977-2013).

To be exhaustive, a number of other types of academic publications must be mentioned. As we noted earlier, some scholars include the Nordic model in the frame of their general research or happened to include it in comparative works. Among the most notable of these publications there were for instance, a 2003 special issue of the *Revue française des affaires sociales* on The Nordic welfare state and its transformations and a 2006 special issue of the *Revue internationale de politique comparée* on the Nordic model. From time to time, some economics journals have also focussed on the Nordic model, especially those published by the *Documentation française*¹³: for instance there was a special issue of *Problèmes économiques et sociaux* journal, on "The Nordic model paradoxes" in 2011. But such cases are not so frequent; again, the Nordic model is most often referred to in comparative works, not much as a central topic. The exceptions are the three journals created in the 2000's which we have already mentioned. *Nordiques* journal has published numerous issues on the question, for instance number 23 on "The Nordic model in crisis" (2010), as well as the *Revue d'histoire nordique* (number 9 in 2009 on "The past and the future of the Nordic welfare state" and *Deshima* had a 2012 issue on "Nordic model and sustainable development". But these three journals are mostly aimed at a restricted readership, particularly academic circles. The conclusion of this enquiry is that, after the 1970's, there were only a very small number of publications on the Nordic model in France, their number rising again in the 2000's, albeit in a less visible way (academic journals rather than books). This may explain why the French conception of the Nordic model is still marked

by what it was in the 1970's, a model built up by triumphant social-democracy and vanguard modernity, whereas its current reality is largely ignored, except in small academic circles. In all, the Nordic countries are generally not well-known in France, although they are very positively considered. So it would be interesting to think about the significance of recurring references to the Nordic model in the press and in the political arena of this country. If these references are only based on a very shallow knowledge of Nordic countries, what is the significance of the repeated "Nordic mantra" in the political arena, and what are its political uses?

III. Significance and political uses of the Nordic model mantra.

It would be impossible to give an account of the huge number of newspapers, , TV and radio shows discussing the Nordic model in France: as a matter of fact, this topic is covered through a very wide range of aspects: economic (Soubrouillard, 2014), social and political (Meunier, 2012) affairs, welfare-state (Mougel, 2013) (for instance subjects such as: social benefits, retirement pensions (Frémeaux, 2009), taxes, employment questions (Dusseaulx, 2014), health care (Gröndahl and Chevallier, 2012), societal issues such as: education (L'Express, 2013), the fight against prostitution (Goldschmith and Salmona, 2013), the spanking prohibition (Arte, 2011), gender equality (Téca, 2012), ending of life-long employment for civil servants (France 2, 2017), etc. However, it can take various forms, and evolve as time goes on and according to the political uses that are sought. Moreover, the debate can focus on one or other of the Nordic countries. The French representation of the Nordic model is generally based on Sweden, but Denmark has also been debated since the 2000's –especially about flexisecurity (Truc, 2014), and Finland was an object of interest in the 2000's about education (Brizard, 2013). Norway is less often mentioned, but when this happens, it generally concerns oil production, the environment or its sovereign fund¹⁴.

During the 1930's, Sweden was labelled a model with respect to its capacity to remain democratic while totalitarian regimes developed in her vicinity; interest in this

country was also due to the social experiments she developed. But fascination for Sweden also had a political meaning. For socialists, the Swedish example meant that socialism (albeit in its social-democratic form) could be “real” without sinking into totalitarianism. As Louis Clerc (2007-2008) has put it, *“reference to the Nordic model is largely politicised, and it seems to have been more common among radical centre-left during the inter-war period (...) Nordic societies seemed to ideally combine what was ancient and what was new, socialism and capitalism, a reasonable conservatism and a liberal way of life, pacifism, rural society and modern towns, nationalism and democracy. (They) were often described as (...) an ideal alternative to fascism and socialism”*. In his book *“Happy Scandinavians, inquiry into socialist accomplishments in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland”*, Emile Schreiber gives an account of his travel to the Nordic countries and underlines their practice of “reformist socialism”, which is radically opposed to revolutionary Marxism: *“Their winning political and social formula is not that of a permanent revolution giving way to disorder and massacres, such as Trotsky advocates, but that of constant reform preceding the needs and aspirations of masses and ensuring their peaceful and steady accomplishment (Schreiber, 1936¹⁵)”*. During the inter-war period however, radical centre-left parties had a positive conception of the Nordic model, whereas it was less attractive to the right, except for Finland, because this country appeared as a bastion against Soviet Communism (Clerc, 2007-2008). At that time, other observers praised Swedish social innovations. In 1938, after a trip he made on behalf of the International Labour Organisation, Emile Planus (1938), a specialist in business management, published a book entitled *“Employers and Workers in Sweden”*. He wrote that whereas in France *“everybody is used to considering the State as their arbitrator”*, in Sweden *“labour organisation (...) prevents risky State interventions”*. For his part Gilles Vergnon (2015) observes that during the inter-war period, those who were most interested in the Nordic model were opponents to the Popular Front (the socialist-communist-radical government from 1936 to 1938). On the left, the Swedish and Danish models were seldom discussed, because they were countries where the left had abandoned the idea of revolution and where employers and labour had found a structural common ground (Vergnon, 2015).

After the Second World War, French socialists became interested in Nordic countries and especially in Sweden, because of the durability of the Swedish social-democratic government. But at the International Socialist Conference Committee (1947-1951), Sweden

declared democracy the ultimate goal and appeared resolutely reformist. The Swedes did not aim to abolish capitalism but to offer workers the best possible position within it. This did not appeal to French socialists: the French delegation wrote in its report that *“the ultimate goal of French socialism does not match Swedish socialism’s goal, which is situated at the extreme end of socialist opinion (Comisco, 1950)”*. Actually, in the 1950’s, French socialism found inspiration in other models such as the Israeli kibbutz, Tito’s Yugoslavia, and during the 1960’s, in more radical models such as Cuba.

The Nordic model craze, that can be called “the Scandinavian moment”, happened in the 1970’s and it was an international phenomenon (Auchet, 1995). We have already mentioned that 17 books on Sweden were published between 1970 and 1977, that is to say until the end of the Swedish social-democratic reign. Gilles Vergnon (2015) underlines that the majority of books on Sweden published in France at that time were written by “leftist figures”, in a very broad sense, *“From the French Communist party to reformists”*. For instance, Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber evoked the Nordic model in his *“Radical Manifesto”* (Albert and Servan-Schreiber, 1970). At that time, authors endeavoured to understand the keys to the Swedish model's success and they also found inspiration in it for French politics. Nevertheless, reformist Gaullists and centrist politicians were more interested in this approach than the left, which at that time was in a state of radical change and was not very interested in social-democracy: the 1969 Socialist Party congress declaration of principles states that *“Socialist party is a revolutionary party”* and *“its goal is the common good and not private profit by progressive socialisation of the means of investment, production and exchange (Vergnon, 2015)”*. This position was completely antithetical to the Swedish social-democrats’ choice of relying on a liberal economy and using the profits to finance social security benefits. As Gilles Vergnon (2015) puts it, *“in such a context, Scandinavian social-democracy, even if it was embodied by a new and young Prime Minister, did not interest (French) socialists much, especially as it had already been “appropriated” by President Georges Pompidou (a liberal) and Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber (a radical)”*... and he notes a *“massive disinterest”* in the Nordic model in successive 1970’s Socialist Party congresses. On the communists’ side, Swedish social-democrats were considered as *“class traitors”*, for they

had instituted collective bargaining and cooperation between labour and employers' unions (Arnault, 1970).

At the same time, some books were published, dedicated to criticising the model, such as the *New Totalitarians* by a British journalist, Roland Huntford (1975), which was translated into French. This book portrayed socialist Sweden as a new kind of totalitarianism hiding behind the cover of modernity and social progress. The book, with a framework visibly inspired by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, contained harsh and gross criticism; the French edition cover explicitly pictured a pink human captured in a grey vice. So in the 1970's, Sweden, as the epitome of the Nordic model, was admired by some political circles such as reformist Gaullists and centrists, but despised by other rightist currents which considered the Nordic welfare-state, with its cornucopia of social benefits and the highest taxes in the world, as a monstrosity. That explains why Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber entitled one of his TV shows – with Olof Palme as a guest: "*Sweden, a disturbing success*" (TF1, 1976). In this show, he explained how Sweden's success contradicted French political parties' electoral narratives: it disturbed the governing right, as Swedish socialism was unexpectedly peaceful and prosperous, and it equally disturbed the left, as Swedish socialism had abandoned references to Marxism or nationalisation... When Olof Palme gave his definition of socialism ("*to make it possible for the individual to develop his personality. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to create equality, to create a society with a sense of solidarity and of community*"), Servan-Schreiber judged it more Protestantism-inspired than socialist... From the 1970's on, be it admired or despised, the Nordic model was established in the French political debate as a major reference model, on a par with the German or the Anglo-Saxon models.

But in the 1980's, references to the Nordic model became more critical: the welfare-state, confronted with globalisation, was then experiencing crisis and it was severely questioned, neoliberalism being the new winning narrative. Moreover, after the Social-Democrats were beaten in the 1976 election, the Swedish model was no longer equivalent to "socialism". The French media became more critical, with articles about the end of the

model its difficulties and failures. For instance, in 1983, *Le Point* (a rightist weekly magazine) published an article entitled “Sweden: the counter-model”; its author, Cornelia Sfar, seemingly remembering Roland Huntford’s new totalitarians and described grim elements of a *Brave new world* “à la suédoise”: citizens surveillance, children taken away from their parents by social services, “swedishisation” of immigrant children, and so on... Such papers echoed controversial debates that were going on in the Nordic countries at that time, especially in Sweden after 1976 (Aucante, 2013), as well as in Norway (Sejersted, 2011). In the 1990’s, the Nordic model underwent deep changes: it was drastically reformed, there were cuts in public services and in social benefits, privatisations and the establishment of new management methods. The model adapted itself to globalisation, and overcame the crisis. In the 1990’s and 2000’s, a trend developed: Denmark became a new specific model, because of the ‘flexicurity’ or ‘flexisecurity’ she developed: a flexible labour market along with an active labour policy and rights for the unemployed. A tremendous number of articles developed this topic, and French politicians were inspired by it according to their ideological preferences (Stellinger, 2004, Barbier, 2013) (For instance, the Danish model was quoted in the debate when the *Républicains* party elected its presidential candidate in November 2016 (Youtube 2016) and after his election President Macron referred to it). In the 2000’s too, some French socialists showed a – late – interest in Social-Democracy: Stéphane Boujnah (2002), one of Dominique Strauss-Kahn’s relatives, published *The Stainless Swedish Model*, a paper in which he proposed to build up a French social-democratic party. During the 2007 electoral campaign for the presidential election, both candidates referred to the Swedish model: Ségolène Royal had travelled to Sweden in 2006 and her programme contained a strong “Nordic” inspiration, even if it was somewhat modified (Segaumes, 2006). As a matter of fact, in 2006, two of Royal’s researchers and supporters Dominique Meda and Alain Lefebvre, published a book entitled “Do we have to burn down the French social model?” in which they suggested copying the Nordic one, especially Nordic decentralisation. The other candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, went to Sweden only after he was elected, but he also found some interest in the Nordic model, especially in flexisecurity and pensions reform.

Being positive or negative, reference to the Nordic model is most often destined for internal political use, with two different objectives: one is to find solutions to improve the

performance of the French welfare State, the other is to use the Nordic model as a scare tactic, by underlining its failures and some unwanted elements such as high tax rates... Sometimes, reference to the same element of the model can be used in opposite ways: when French socialists are interested in flexisecurity for its “security” dimension, French conservatives prefer its “flexible” aspect... Moreover, in the media, referring to the Nordic model can be used as a pretext to criticise government or to address a message to the general public such as *“look at what present government politics can end up as ”....* As we have already shown, reference to the Nordic model is made in a context where an accurate knowledge of the model is rather poor, which can lead to mistakes or misunderstandings. But the model’s profile has itself been blurred: whereas in the 1970’s it was a symbol for successful social-democracy, after the 1980’s welfare-state crisis and the 1990’s reforms (Simoulin, 2005), the image is less clear. The idea of a “model” is still vivid, but nowadays it is that of a custom-model, where everyone can pick particular ideas of reform, on various subjects: pension reform, family social benefits, prostitution ban, etc. The Nordic model has become a vast tool box containing items, but nobody seems to care if they form part of an integrated system or how and why they combine. Sometimes references to the model are anachronistic or false. For instance, the Swedish researcher Anna Stellingner (2007) noted that during the 2007 presidential election campaign, Ségolène Royal showed a deep misunderstanding of the “professional social security” concept and of the role of the state in Scandinavia. She wrote that *“the Scandinavian model, which frequently inspires conception and discussion of French social policy, too often looks like what it was at François Mitterrand’s time, that is to say that it does not have much more in common with modern Nordic policies”*. A few years later, such an anachronism was present in a press conference given by President François Hollande, who seemed to refer to the 1970’s social-democrat variant of the model (a fact the rightist magazine *Le Point* underlined). President Hollande declared: *“I think it is possible to spare much while preserving our social model. Other countries have done it, countries that have this social tradition. I think of the Nordic countries in particular”* (Hollande, 2014)¹⁶.

Actually, referring to a model is always misleading, as it is never possible to fully understand institutions nor to reproduce them outside their original context. In France,

reference to the Nordic model, especially to the Swedish case, is especially tempting, for the historical reasons we have already mentioned. But it is all the more the case as Sweden has made many efforts to promote herself: promotion of the Swedish model has its specific institution, the Swedish Institute (with a branch located in Paris) (Svenska institutet); it promotes, measures and analyses Sweden's image abroad (Svenska institutet, 2014). Finland for her part has created a similar institution, *Team Finland*, and has sixteen cultural institutes abroad (one in Paris); Denmark owns a *Maison du Danemark* in Paris, while Norway has a Norwegian club in Paris. But Sweden's commitment in this activity is older, and more systematic (Glover, 2011). Reference to a foreign "model" is versatile enough to serve diverse and sometimes opposite political uses, especially if the model is that of distant and only vaguely known countries, as is the more or less the case for the Nordic countries in France. But a country's image, especially when it attracts an international sympathy capital and is strong enough to become a "model", can also be a very efficient diplomatic tool. So the Nordic "mantra" may have a bright future ahead in the French political debate.

NOTES

¹ With the exception of Iceland, a country hardly ever referred to as a model in France.

² *Norden* is the name of the group formed by the five Nordic countries plus three autonomous territories.

³ Websites: “La France en Suède”, “La France en Norvège”, « la France au Danemark », « La France en Finlande », « La France en Islande » : the Swedish site lists visits since 1998, The Finnish site since 1999, The Danish site since 2014. The Norwegian and Icelandic sites only mention the latest visits.

⁴ It is not mentioned for other countries.

⁵ Among with Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. Although Verne did not personally go to Iceland, he gave a very precise description of Reykjavik.

⁶ Translations are made by the author.

⁷ PhD topics in economics generally deal with very specific, technical devices, so I only retained topics that could match the « Nordic model » definition, for instance topics on political economics.

⁸ François Emion had the same difficulties when using other French catalogues of PhD dissertations.

⁹ I have been the editor of *Nordiques* for 10 years, and I have happened to work with *Revue d’histoire nordique* as well.

¹⁰ This is true especially for Sweden and Denmark, but Finland developed later.

¹¹ This famous sentence was not uttered by chance: President Pompidou was carefully studying Nordic countries developments. (Le Béguet, 2004).

¹² He was Prime Minister (and at that time candidate for presidential election).

¹³ A state-owned publisher.

¹⁴ Of course, the Utøya massacre was largely debated in 2011.

¹⁵ Emile Schreiber was a liberal journalist and Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber’s father.

¹⁶ For a criticism of the speech, see (Le point, 2014) This paper says : *In Sweden, many citizen would answer to François Hollande that solidarity has been eroded and they would mention extension of waiting time in hospitals, labour inequalities exacerbating tensions in some suburban areas, and decay of the railway network... “Generosity of the system has diminished” underlines Jonas Hinfors, a Political science professor at Göteborg University”*.

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ABSTRACT

Reference to the Nordic model is very common in French political debate. The Nordic model has also inspired many French laws and reforms. However, actual knowledge about Nordic countries is rather poor in France. On the academic side, there is an ancient but tiny literary interest for these countries, whereas for social sciences they are an object still rarely studied. On the journalistic and political side, interest for the Nordic model has varied along with broader political context and tends to serve various political uses. The result is that trendy references to the Nordic model may lead to misunderstandings in the French political debate.

Keywords

Nordic model – French political debate – Finnish model – Swedish model – Danish model