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THE NORDIC SECRET

A European Story of Beauty and Freedom

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PREFACE

A European story of beauty and freedom

We humans generally do not solve the problems we have; we solve the problems we understand—if we have a sense that they are our problems to solve. What sometimes happens, though, is that we face a new problem and see it as our problem to solve, but do not understand the complexity of it and rather than solving one problem, we create a new one.

Short of a meteorite hitting Earth, the problems we face as a species are problems we have created ourselves. Climate change, overpopulation, poverty, pollution, wars, terrorism; you name it, we created it. Ironically, what created many of these problems was once the solution to something else.

The good news is that the knowledge to solve our problems is available; the bad news is that we need to understand more in order to do something about it. We also need a sense of responsibility. We need consciousness and conscience.

The biggest problems we face are very complex and therefore we need to understand our own world at a higher level of complexity.

What is needed is a systems perspective: the ability to see systems within systems. The ability to see the big patterns in the affairs of the world plus the ability to zoom in on the details and out to the full picture of interacting systems. Not many people have this kind of complexity of mind but almost all of us have the potential.

The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) look as if we have it all figured out: stable societies, high levels of individual freedom, low levels of corruption, the world's happiest people, functioning

public institutions, public welfare systems that cover health care for everybody, free education from primary school to master's degree, high standards of living, best climates for business, high levels of trust, and much more.

That cornucopia of good-country qualities came from developing and using everybody's potential. It came from leaders who had a systems perspective on our countries and from voters who were qualified to elect them and did elect them. Our countries were developed by populations among whom a critical number of people could see the nation as a whole, cared about the totality and elected leaders with the same big, yet detailed picture in mind. We know that this is a strong claim but it is part of the Nordic secret, and we have written this book to show what we mean by it.

Having grown up in Denmark and Sweden, respectively, we can confirm that all of the above-mentioned good-country qualities were there for us when we grew up and that coming of age in such a secure, supporting and generous environment is a blessing. Our grandparents were farmers, our parents were suburban middle class and all we had to do was to decide how we wanted to make the most of it. With a bit of personal effort, we could enter our adult lives well-educated, debt-free and confident that the system was working and would help us if something went wrong.

We are writing this book for three reasons:

We are convinced that the way the Nordics allowed everybody to develop their potential can be copied anywhere. After all, once the necessary knowledge about human potential and development was available, the teaching and learning method was invented by a pastor, a teacher and some farmhands. It then went viral by people's own initiative. That could happen again.

The knowledge and method were developed as Europe went through the transition from feudal agricultural absolute monarchies to modern industrialized democracies, and it allowed the peoples of the Nordics to find the transition meaningful and to make it peacefully and prosper from it. Instead of waging wars, our ancestors built institutions and welfare states matching the needs of industrialized societies. As a species, we humans are currently in a new transition from industrialized nation states to a digital global economy—some are even making this transition from a pre-modern, nonindustrialized starting point. Not only do we need new institutions

again, the transition also needs to be meaningful to people and give them hope, or else they will wage wars.

Our third reason for writing this book is deep frustration: the Nordic countries, which made the previous transition so well, are not gearing up for the current challenges. What we see are some Nordic countries that once were extremely poor, that developed the best possible solutions during the industrial age and became rich in every possible way, and that are currently destroying their own success. We see that several institutions do not work properly anymore and that there is no institutional or political will nor skill to develop the next generation of institutions that can handle the challenges of the 21st century. We are facing problems that our political systems do not understand, therefore we are not developing adequate solutions.

Instead, “McKinseyism” is taking over politics; consultants who will never be held accountable by the voters make expensive reports that are turned into legislation by politicians who then claim that they made the wisest decision possible when they implemented what the consultants recommended. Somehow, the reports always recommend privatization and instead of upgrading and reinventing crucial infrastructure, institutions that keep our countries working are sold off to the highest bidder. While ordinary people fear globalization and immigration and long for national identity and security, politicians are selling our family silver. What were once nations with a vision are reduced to corporate landmasses with competing workforces.

Politicians and activists around the globe are looking towards the Nordics because we look like we have it figured out. That used to be true, but not anymore.

The Nordics’ historical experience is worth learning from nevertheless: we Nordics figured out how to develop and use everybody’s potential, and humanity needs that all around the globe more than ever. Our point with this book is not to brag about the Nordics. Our aim is to tell an amazing story about freedom, beauty and successful, meaningful change.

So how did the Nordics become successful in the first place? How did we develop our potential? What is our secret and can other countries learn from it? In the 1800s, the Nordic countries were among the poorest in Europe; Sweden was so poor that orphans were auctioned off as cheap labor.

When we started out researching and writing this book, we thought we had a good idea, that we had found something important, and that we could initiate a different kind of political debate. As we kept researching, we realized that there was a Nordic, European and American story about how and why our democracies and freedoms evolved that had never been told. We also found more historical evidence for our hypothesis than we had ever imagined. What started out as a short debate book soon turned into solid academic research and we decided that we wanted to share the core elements of what we found; partly because it is a fascinating story, and partly because it helps us understand how prosperity and good societies are created. But most of all, because humanity faces complex problems and more people need to be able to understand them so that we can solve them. Understanding the sources of our societal and political development of the past 250 years, causes a cultural fabric to stand out that explains why some countries work so well. The sources hold the key, and they are not entirely Nordic, they are British, French, German, and Swiss with some important input from Greece, Italy, Moravia (in today's Czech Republic), and the United States. Not only did this shape Europe, it shaped the United States too. This is a tale of trans-Atlantic beauty and freedom.

With this book, we hope to reach four main groups of readers who usually do not read the same books—which is exactly one of the problems we face today: echo chambers of insufficient knowledge. The four groups are:

- People in fields related to politics and economics.
- People in fields related to human development.
- People in fields related to literature and the arts.
- Citizens who engage in their society, be it as politicians, volunteers, party members, or voters looking for new perspectives.

Given this diverse target group of readers, some will probably wonder about parts of this book: Why do I need to know this about Rousseau and Herder? Why must I look at GDP per capita? Why so many quotes from Schiller? Is this Danish king really that relevant, I'm not Danish! How can this old stuff be relevant in the 21st century? and so forth...

Others may read with a different kind of wondering: How come I never

knew this connection before? Why were history lessons in school not about this? Is my country's economy actually dependent on philosophy? What would a similar development or institution look like today? Where could my knowledge make a difference? Who would be the best people with whom to discuss this?

Given the diverse target group of readers, we have chosen to prioritize a good reading experience over academic documentation and footnotes in the book itself. Instead, main sources are mentioned in the text, there is a literature list at the end of the book, and all our sources including useful links are online at:

<http://www.nordicsecret.org/sources-alphabetically/>

<http://www.nordicsecret.org/sources-by-chapter/>

On nordicsecret.org, you will also be able to participate in discussions, share comments and help us with extra and/or conflicting documentation.

When we had written the first draft, we sent it to about 100 European and American researchers, policy makers and people in the arts in order to get feedback and suggestions for improvement. We also held three roundtables in Berlin, Leiden and Stockholm in order to start a research-based European conversation about human and societal development in the 21st century.

For feedback, input and big thoughts, we would like to thank: *Michel Alhadef-Jones, Dan H Andersen, Bo Andersson, Lars Andreassen, Richard Bell, Sturla Bjerkaer, Lars Thorkild Bjørn, Mette Hvid Brockmann, Jos van den Broek, Arthur Brühlmeier, Anders Burman, Michael Bøss, Paul Cobben, Lars Dencik, Peter Duetoft, Kristina Elfhag, Tobias Etzold, Merel van Geel, Rasmus Glenthøj, Dick Holmgren, Thomas Jordan, Bent Raymond Jørgensen, Flemming Jørgensen, Arthur Kok, Teddy Hebo Larsen, Jeroen Lutters, Kyra Mensink, Marijn Moerman, Jo Moran-Ellis, Jonathan Reams, Beate Richter, Myrte Rischen, Jonathan Rowson, Ginie Servant, Heinz Sünker, Eugene Sutorius, Michiel Tolman, Ad Verbrugge, Ole Vind, Jan Visser, Christian Welzel, Koen Wessels, Matilda Westerman, Gunnar Wetterberg, Michael Winkler, Oliver Zöllner, and Jens Østergaard.*

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We were personally fortunate to grow up in societies that had the highest hopes for us and provided us with life skills that gave us unique opportunities. We see no reason why not everybody on the planet should have the same opportunities and access to the same kind of meaningful and fulfilling life and freedom. Further, we are convinced that were everybody to enjoy similar opportunities, we would be able to solve our problems, create a sustainable global economy, and not just save the environment but develop a flourishing planet.

We appreciate the cultural diversity and different traditions around the globe. Our Nordic secret might help strengthen this diversity and promote a global appreciation of it as well as make the local roots deeper. We hope that we can inspire structural change and human progress, not cultural imperialism or a global mono-culture. We hope that the Nordic secret can enable people to keep and develop their local cultural heritage and help them find more meaning and purpose in a rapidly changing world.

So, what is this secret all about? What do we mean by mental complexity and developing everybody's potential? What exactly is a systems perspective and how does one get one?

We hope that you will enjoy finding out.

Lene Rachel Andersen & Tomas Björkman