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COVID, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

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Introduction

Sweden, Denmark, and Norway are all high-trust societies, the language differences are small, and their social and political systems, derived from long, post-WW2 periods of social democratic governance, are highly similar. Sweden and Denmark are members of the European Union, while Norway is integrated in the same system of laws and treaties through the associated European Economic Area.

While their social and political systems are similar, they are not identical. There are, for instance, minor differences in the roles of different actors within crisis management. These differences contributed to how the different countries acted in reaction to the pandemic. In Sweden, the central government has a less formal role and authority than the Danish and Norwegian governments during crises. Swedish authorities rely more on specialized institutions and departments, while the Danish and Norwegian governments use these in a more limited, advisory capacity (Hermansson 2021). In addition, all countries have policies that delegate some decisions to regional and local authorities in accordance with a principle of decision-making at the level closest to the situation. This has created its own challenges.

When Covid-19 was pronounced a public health emergency of international concern in early 2020, the Nordic countries adopted a wait-and-see approach. When a pandemic was declared in March 2020, a range of different restrictions were authorized. Mitigating measures were mainly trust-based and advisory all over the Nordics, but Norway and Denmark implemented stricter emergency actions and empowered the central government more than Sweden did (Saunes et al. 2021). They were quick to close borders and to give guidelines for a general lockdown. Schools closed and measures for social distancing and staying at and working from home when possible were put in place. Sweden opted for a less restrictive approach with fewer travel restrictions and more relaxed guidelines for social distancing (Strang 2020). It kept schools open, and while some restrictions

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applied, regular city life, such as bars and restaurants, was available to a much larger extent. Advice on restricting unnecessary travel and the number of social contacts was similar throughout the region.

These differences reflect not merely pre-existing differences in powers of decision-making, but also the countries' early attitudes toward Covid. Denmark and Norway tried to keep R (basic reproduction number) below one, thus suppressing rather than merely containing transmission; Sweden went for a less ambitious plan of protecting the aged and other vulnerable groups and to "flatten the curve" somewhat (Hermansson 2021, 21–34). However, this still included limits on people's social lives. Those who could worked from home for long periods, and high schools and universities switched to mostly online teaching. While some mitigation strategies got more aligned over time, a degree of difference between the countries has prevailed (Saunes et al. 2021).

Covid restrictions have thus hit the countries differently, and some have opened lines of dissatisfaction both between citizens and government and between governments. The latter largely revolve around business and travel across borders. Although the Nordic countries have a long internal history of open borders, Denmark and Norway implemented fairly strict border controls. Norway not only implemented obligatory quarantine for most who were allowed across the border, even after the central government had loosened restrictions; local and regional authorities at times implemented internal regulations on citizens who tried to travel outside their municipalities. With mixed authority and fluid guidelines that were changed as circumstances did, communication may have been regular and fairly transparent, but rules were not always clear to the public, contributing to a later increase in distrust as pandemic fatigue grew (Petersen et al. 2021).

Both internally and between countries, the mitigation strategies of the early phase of the pandemic have thus had the capacity of laying down lines of possible conflict and distrust, countering the general, early "rally around the flag"-response that strengthened trust in science and authorities (Baekgaard et al. 2020; Evensen 2020). The opposite response was visible in both the international and the Nordic conspiracist milieu or conspiracy culture. Participants in the conspiracy milieu are generally distrustful of establishment authorities, especially government and science, and interpret any event through the lens of conspiracy lore. It was therefore not unexpected that already at a very early stage, a number of conspiracy narratives circulated within this milieu, and older predictions, for example, warnings against a coming dictatorship, were recycled. These are long-standing international tropes of conspiracy culture, featuring in apocalyptic crisis narratives which claim that ultimate values such as "freedom" are currently threatened by evil others. They were also prominent in the conspiracy milieu of the Nordic countries.

Conspiracist Reactions and Their Context

Nordic conspiracy cultures have thrived in previous waves, arising from, for example, international events such as 9/11 or the financial crisis of 2008–09 (Astapova et al. 2021). The pandemic renewed and reactivated interest, and it revitalized

conspiracist sites. In Sweden, the conspiracist site *Vaken.se* currently returns 64 pages of hits on a search for "Covid." They appear almost exclusively to be new articles. The Norwegian conspiracy site *Nyhetsspeilet*, which was almost defunct before the pandemic, returns more than 1,000 page hits on the same search. Many of these are comments to older articles, which is interesting in itself. These websites come in addition to other alternative news sites and social media channels that cater to the same interests (Fjell 2021).[1]

Conspiracist speculations about diseases are common, as people seek to make events meaningful (Douglas 2021). Speculations target everything from origins, vectors, causes, and effects to cures (Önnerfors 2021). *Contagious* diseases, and especially epidemics, have historically been well-suited to such speculations, especially those targeting minorities and enemy outsiders (Malešević 2020). At the early stage of the pandemic, for instance, speculations about the possible origins of Covid-19 included it being a bioweapon that was planted in the West by China. This version often competed with established lines of Western conspiracy lore that targets "the enemy above," such as the CIA or "Big Pharma," "finance capital," and named actors on behalf of "the Elites." At the earliest stage, this role was often filled by George Soros, a convenient figure to include antisemitic tropes. However, due to his prominent, global role as vaccine advocate and entrepreneur, Bill Gates quickly became the main individual target (Peters 2020).

Conspiracy theories that would seem to compete do not necessarily have to. We know, for instance, that many people believe in conspiracy theories that contradict each other directly (Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012; Imhoff and Lamberty 2020), and theories about the enemy outside combine easily with accusations of the enemy above. One variant of the Soros conspiracy theories, for instance, included allegations that he owned the Chinese lab that created the virus. This international version also reached the Nordic countries, as most of the Nordic conspiracy theories circulating during Covid-19 have been glocalized versions from international templates. Conspiracy culture is international in character, and tropes travel quickly in online spaces, but part of the *context* is local. Some speculations regarding Covid relate to relations of trust and distrust in local as well as global authorities, and some relate to even more local relations and conflicts. While they may all reflect tensions, most of these speculations were not directly conspiracist.

The most immediate references to local relations concerned speculations about the *vectors* of the disease. Typically, borders were watched for the flow of the disease from the outside, and the concomitant allegations concerned those either coming from or seen as representatives of the outside. Migrant workers and ethnic minorities were, as usual, among those presented as spreading the disease (Jensen 2021, 66; Jacobsen, Kühle, and Christensen 2021, 153–54). In conspiracist and racist narratives, they were either part of a concerted effort or they spread the disease "because of their culture." However, there were also elements of generational and class conflict involved. Partying youths were shamed for spreading the disease in society when one needed to protect the aged, while international travelers, mostly wealthy, middle-aged tourists, were presented as selfishly going abroad and dragging the

disease back home (Önnerfors 2021). In Norway, one such set of public anger involved skiing tourists going to Austrian resorts during the pandemic's early phase. Later, similar anger was expressed toward "unscrupulous capitalists" and "weak government," relating to claims that migrant workers were imported to work at low salaries and in cramped living conditions, with low levels of disease control.

In regions with low levels of both disease and distrust, these accusations were rarely folded into conspiracy narratives, and, if they were, then typically (and marginally) by those who already maintained conspiracy beliefs about certain groups – like anti-Muslim hate groups. Speculative narratives about who spread the disease thus mostly served as context to the more consistently conspiracist speculations about the origins, purpose, and danger of SARS-CoV-2 and Covid-19. These speculations followed international conspiracy lore in detail: At the earliest stage, allegations that 5G rather than SARS-CoV-2 was the cause of Covid were prominent (Jensen 2021, 40). Rather than a novel virus, the real cause was "radiation," and the stories about the virus were merely a cover-up. The evil intent behind this cover-up included both control over the population and a planned decimation of it. Sometimes, these theories existed in competition and sometimes, they were alleged to be phases in the same evil plan. In similar ways, allegations about 5G as a cause of Covid were not always separate from other causes. From my own observations, 5G theories were even at an early stage combined with anti-vaccine theories in speculations about Covid as a manufactured disease to reduce the world population substantially. However, unlike in other regions (Jolley and Paterson 2020), there were no successful attacks on 5G towers, and while Covid-conspiracy theories drove the membership of open anti-5G groups on Facebook to increase manifold, there was little talk of sabotage or violence. Language suggesting violent action was quickly criticized and mostly stopped.[2]

Another set of early conspiracy theories, the "bioweapon"-speculations, concerned SARS-CoV-2 as a virus constructed by humans. A version attacking the Chinese government was not very prominent in the conspiracy milieu, but it gained traction in mainstream discourse with two Norwegian scientists claiming to have found evidence of the virus being constructed in Wuhan. The paper on which this was founded (Sørensen, Susrud, and Dalgleish 2020) was largely disregarded in the scientific community, but interviews in which the authors were explicit that the virus was man-made sparked public debate. However, there was little attempt at claiming that the virus was *intentionally released*, and so the Nordic debate was limited. When, however, the authors were used in conspiracist discussion, their argument tended to be folded into pre-existing narratives about biological warfare.

The paper received positive but limited interest in central conspiracist circles (Delavante 2021), perhaps because it did not reflect important conflicts. Moreover, while some within the milieu were happy to blame the Chinese government, Nordic conspiracy culture has long displayed a fondness for authoritarian regimes, claiming that Western countries are the *real* dictatorships. Western actors are given more agency than the rest of the world. Combined with the strong tendency to recycle tropes and narratives, this meant that the usual set of suspects was more

likely to be blamed: the CIA, "Israel," "Big Pharma," the "globalist elites," allied with the World Health Organization, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations, and anyone involved in making decisions (Johansen 2021).

This kind of focus is not surprising, since conspiracy theories tend to be distorted representations of real conflicts (Butter 2014). There are few points of contact and conflict between regular actors within the conspiracy milieu and China. There are few immigrants from China, Chinese ownership has not yet become a big issue, and their role in the culture war is limited. Conspiracist quarrels are local, often ideological, and their general concerns are "inwards-looking" toward the direction in which they think their own societies are heading. "Big pharma" was thus a more attractive villain to many. It could combine, for example, ideological and practical adherence to alternative treatments with a generalized suspicion about the corruption of big business and "globalist elites."[3] This could be tied back to local political conflicts through claims of tyrannical behavior (Lehrmann 2020), with "freedom" being a rallying cry against government regulations. These combinations were attractive to multiple actors, causing practical alliances that seemed strange to those new to the scene (Dyrendal 2017).

Actors, Alliances, and Activism

The steps from social media to street protests are many and long. Some conspiracists are veterans at public action, most are not. Who took to the streets at which points in time and where, and what were their central talking points?

Street activism in 2020 and 2021 mostly concerned topics other than the pandemic, and the context matters. The Nordic countries are, to varying degrees, highly oriented toward US politics, and following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, there were multiple Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests all over the Nordic countries. There were also large demonstrations from climate change activists tied to Extinction Rebellion (XR). Both types of protests were often larger than those tied to conspiracy theories about Covid and created more disturbances than the anti-lockdown conspiracists. Moreover, several of the legal disturbances during "anti-lockdown" demonstrations were conducted by counter-protestors attempting violence on known far right-figures taking part in them.[4]

These "left wing" demonstrations played a role in the rhetoric of those who protested against government measures: protestors adopted the role of opposition in the culture war, largely imported from US politics. The Trump presidency and its public communication about the pandemic added more conservative Christians and their specific cultural warfare themes to the mix. Climate change was quickly folded into a larger conspiracist plot, with conspiracy theories about "the great reset" – the topic of a 2020 World Economic Forum meeting that included sustainability as a central theme – being set in motion by a world conspiracy. This conspiracy was sometimes presented as Marxist or a more hidden cabal of ruling elites establishing an autocratic, dystopian "New World Order." Coming mostly from the

populist and far right corner, and out of the context of the American culture wars, the stress was on blaming "the leftists," and the motifs could be combined, not least among those who saw this as apocalyptic signs of the end times. The BLM protests were equally folded into theories about hostile, leftist forces tearing down culture and introducing authoritarianism. The trope of "freedom versus tyranny" was central. Anti-lockdown protests and conspiracy theories about Covid often revolved around the topic of individual freedom. Protestors and conspiracists saw themselves as freedom fighters against an increasingly totalitarian state, with the general public a brainwashed flock of sheep that needed to be awakened.

The American influence also showed in mobilization against face masks and social distancing and in the politicization of vaccination. The various Nordic "freedom"-movements were especially eager in their campaigns against face masks and vaccines. Religiosity generally predicted conspiracy beliefs about Covid (Dyrendal and Hestad 2021; Jacobsen, Kühle, and Christensen 2021), and among participants from different religious groups, opposition to these measures was also made emblematic of religious identity. The early pandemic saw a "conspirituality" (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015) surge as many in the alternative spirituality milieu sought alternative explanations and presented government behavior as tyrannical (Lehrmann 2020).[5] Inspired by international networks, some of them took the unusual step (for them) and started public demonstrations (Færseth 2021; Önnerfors 2021). They were not alone in taking motivation partially from religion: there were also vital contributions from nationalist, charismatic circles. Proudly promoting their "Make America Great Again" credentials with paraphernalia supporting Donald Trump, groups of charismatic, conservative Christians downplayed the pandemic, promoted fake cures, and demonized vaccines. Some also played a part in organizing protests.

The coalition was broad. Having adopted Trump as a hero, some were actively spreading QAnon-related theories (Færseth 2021; Önnerfors 2021). Norwegian fact-checkers analyzed a large number of social media posts and found that nationalist, "anti-globalist" actors became more involved in anti-vaccine conspiracy theories (Dahlback and Skiphamn 2020) and contributed to protests, as the coalition included parts of the counterjihad-scene and the antisemitic alt- and far right. Some of these tenuous alliances had been in place during earlier conspiracy waves (see Dyrendal 2017). They were revitalized by reactions to the pandemic, and new actors were brought into the mix as well. In Norway, protests aligned with the international "World Wide Rally for Freedom," centered around a group calling themselves "Red Hats." This name refers to resistance symbolism during the WW2 German occupation, ironically while including participation from Norway's miniscule neo-Nazi movement and its sympathizers (Færseth 2021). With some protestors adopting yellow vests, there were also direct references to the French *gilets jaunes* protests. A conspiracist milieu coalescing around the person and media site of the former leader of the maoist "Workers' Communist Party," Pål Steigan, brought relative newcomers to the coalition. These, however, like some of the neo-Nazis, included people with considerable experience in conducting disciplined,

well-behaved public demonstrations. The less collective action-oriented conspiracy milieu thus had access to resources more experienced in organizing activities and co-operating with police during street protests. This may partly explain why the often extreme rhetoric and violent language of the protests did not result in actual violence.

The fault lines within the coalition are many. Since demonstrations started late in October 2020, they have manifested several times. The Red Hats began with a fairly clear focus on Covid and restrictions, but demonstrations expanded into general anti-government theories and the various other practical and ideological griefs and conspiracy theories of the participants. Not all protestors were equally happy with the company they saw. The prominence of known neo-Nazis in Trondheim during one of the few times they succeeded in arranging anything outside the capital seems to have made it harder to mobilize for another event. Over time, then, Norwegian activists splintered into several, partially competing factions online but maintained some participation in common protests.

Danish activists started protesting earlier than the Norwegians. Inspired by international demonstrations, multiple organizations, small political parties, and interest groups have taken initiatives to organize or participate in demonstrations. Possibly the first protest against face masks and vaccines took place in August 2020, organized mainly by the miniscule conspiracist party "Jorden, Frihed, Kundskab" ("Earth, Freedom, Knowledge"; JFK21) (Lange 2020). The party, founded in 2016, has a platform that echoes the central conspiracy notions represented in, for example, QAnon-circles: the world is run by a "globalist," satanic, pedophile conspiracy represented by, for example, secret lodges and the ultra-rich. The seemingly liberal democracies are in reality creeping fascism, and while the group prefers a strong state, it sees the current regime as illegitimate and totalitarian (Mencke 2018). As in Norway, these topics and tropes have, at times, also been prominent in their protests. The party's protests were coordinated with those of the "World Freedom Alliance" and were usually smallish (with less than 200 demonstrators) and peaceful. JFK21 was also one of the organizers behind the so-called "klinke-klanke"-demonstrations started in front of the parliament in November 2020, where demonstrators used pot lids to make noise and "wake up the Danish people." The demonstrations were weekly, conducted in daytime, and although demonstrators were told to make less noise because they scared police horses and disturbed parliament, they were peaceful.

With the start of a second wave of activism in December 2020, others came to dominate the public space (Jensen 2021, 28). An organization calling itself "Men in Black," originally a Facebook group, started organized demonstrations against Covid restrictions. Police and several media sources have pointed out that some participants have a background in football "hooliganism," and early demonstrations resulted in multiple arrests for rioting, vandalism, threats, and violence against the police. Later ones have largely been peaceful. While spokespersons have often been people who agree that Covid is real, but express sharp criticism of the government's harsh mitigation measures, participants also include Covid-deniers, anti-vaccine activists, and people with much broader conspiracist leanings, for example, JFK21

(Jacobsen, Kühle, and Christensen 2021, 144; Olsen 2021). While organizers tend to disavow them, the political spectrum also includes participants from the far right. The broad alliance between political activists, those affected by strict measures, and those who desire action more than anything else is also in line with the slogans and appeals to disregard left and right and to focus on "the people," Denmark, and freedom (Marker and Lykketoft 2021).

Appeals to these populist and nationalist slogans are common throughout the Nordic countries. The tropes are also replicated in the central slogans for the Swedish so-called "Thousand Man March" protests: "freedom and truth." These empty signifiers serve as place holders for conspiracist ideas: the notion of freedom constituted the opposition to the alleged state- and "globalist" dictatorship, and the notion of truth represented the pandemic as either fake or a "plandemic" caused by hidden techniques of a conspiracy.

Springing out of the same background as the Danish JFK21 and collaborating through the "World Freedom Alliance," the Swedish protests started only in early March 2021. At the time, Swedish restrictions only allowed for eight people in a demonstration, and so the several hundred activists participating were engaging in illegal activity from the start. The situation devolved into conflict with the police, with five police officers hurt and 50 people arrested. The demonstrations have continued, but at longer intervals than in the other Nordic countries. The language of confrontation has been strong, with very clear anti-government ideas originating from, among other sources, the American sovereign citizen movement and its offshoots (Vergara 2021b; Önnerfors 2021). Indeed, one of the dominant figures in "Freedom Sweden" seems to be a self-declared sovereign citizen (Vergara 2021a). Reportedly, many participants also have ties to the paramilitary neo-Nazi "Nordic Resistance Movement" (Vergara and Leman 2021). The Swedish arm of the latter, arguably the only one that currently matters, has also organized their own protests, including against the Danish government for the introduction of "globalist" vaccine passes (Dalbro 2021).

Swedish street protests have thus been dominated by groups and ideas similar to those in other countries. However, if reports are correct, the Swedish protests have had a stronger presence of the extreme right than the other Nordic countries. This may reflect their relative strength and experience in street activism. However, the reporting about right-wing activism may be skewed by interests and knowledge of the journalists. The same may also hold true for Norway. Just as their Swedish counterparts, Norwegian reporters have a stronger background in investigating far right conspiracism and thus may both show it extra attention and be more able to recognize it than their Danish counterparts.

While the conspiracist protests in Sweden started late, there had been protests before the advent of these "Thousand Man Marches" and the "Freedom Sweden" movement. Some protested because they did not think the government's mitigation measures were strict enough; others protested specific measures that were economically harmful to their profession and business. Conspiracist ideas were circulating online and in relevant circles, and they were similar to those found in

the other Nordic countries, but they were not yet expressed in public demonstrations. This delay may have been a result of the relatively light Swedish government restrictions. The narrative about Sweden as an "open" society during the early pandemic may have been mostly misleading, but it was used to turn Sweden into a counter-example for protestors in other countries. With the gradual tightening of some measures and the advent of violent protests, these narratives seem to have become less popular.

Conclusion

Street activism may have been the loudest, but it was neither the only form of activism nor the one with most effect. Local officials and health authorities have, as was to be expected, received threats. Organized groups have distributed anti-vaccination misinformation, not only through social media, but also in the form of leaflets in mailboxes, doctor's offices, schools, and on street corners. Similar tactics were used to spread anti-masking messages and, to a lesser extent, general messages that Covid was a hoax. This fits well with the general conspiracy culture-attitude that "information shall set you free" (see Dyrendal 2013). The far right Norwegian party "Alliansen" strategy of offering money to adolescents who refused to vaccinate, on the other hand, may be seen as either a further escalation or as taking "shit-posting" to live politics.

Throughout the Nordic countries, the conspiracist alliances seem to have hinged on some elements of conspirituality and other religious conspiracism. The discourse on alternative cures, opposition to 5G, and vaccines, with tropes of globalist tyranny acting against the natural or God-given freedom of individuals, all resonate with the general lore of these conspiracist coalitions. The tropes are flexible enough to appeal broadly. The combination of empty signifiers such as "nation," "people," "freedom," and "truth" in the mobilization rhetoric opens up several types of inclusion. For most, the nationalist and populist readings suffice, in that they evoke national chauvinism and degrees of dissatisfaction with the "elites" in contrast to the goodness of "the people." The concept of the "nation" also stands in contrast to the globalist cabal and is open to ethno-nationalist conspiracism about contagion from dangerous outsiders. "Truth" evokes the conspiracist trope of the suppression of real truth, and the special insight of "truthers" awake to reality, in contrast to "sheeple" falling for the lies of the elites. In Sweden and Norway, sovereign citizens can read "the people" and "nation" as appealing to their particular fetishization of constitutions in their juridical imaginary, and the struggle for "truth" and the people's "freedom" from tyranny as their fight to enlighten others about the right to be "freemen on the land."

While the conspiracist tropes flourish and conspiracy narratives mostly follow global trends, the conspiracists' anger and threats are directed more locally against government representatives, officials, health care workers, and those criticizing them in public (e.g., journalists). This is where the charges of "fascist dictatorship" and "tyranny" are directed, and remedial action, including proposals for radical

measures, is directed. On the other side, public anger at vaccine deniers and related conspiracy theories has become common, public, and sharp enough that media, health officials, and (some) academics have started warning about the possible negative consequences. Public conspiracy theorists are few, and vaccine deniers a small percentage of the population, but they make visible targets and give the opportunity to express frustrations arising from the pandemic while confirming communal solidarity against the perceived selfishness or stupidity of conspiracy believers. With the pandemic entering its third year, and with Omicron the most contagious variant to date, the frustration is growing on either "side," and impatience and anger both among and toward conspiracy believers seem to be growing apace.

Notes

1 For Denmark, these interests seem to mostly thrive on social media (Jacobsen et al. 2021, 144; Peters 2020).
2 When Facebook and Twitter became stricter in their actions against misinformation, some actors moved their content to other social media (e.g., *Telegram*), and other groups (e.g., QAnon- and anti-vaccination groups) started communicating in "code" more frequently.
3 These went together with conspiracy theories about testing methods and vaccines as actually being vectors of the disease and with sales pitches for the usual range of alternative cures from homeopathy and regular supplements to "miracle mineral solution" (bleach). In addition, there were new ones originating with the pandemic, for example, ivermectin and hydroxychloroquin.
4 The BLM and XR protests were also widely criticized for breaking with pandemic advice, and there were widespread speculations about these demonstrations becoming so-called super-spreader events. As with the anti-lockdown protests, these outdoor events seem to never have played an important role as disease vectors.
5 Interestingly, the only quantitative study to follow developments found that support for conspiracy theories stating that the pandemic was planned *fell* among Danish respondents regarding themselves as "spiritual" from May to October 2020. In May 2020, alternative spirituality predicted conspiracy belief; by October 2020, it no longer did so (Jacobsen et al. 2021, 145).

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