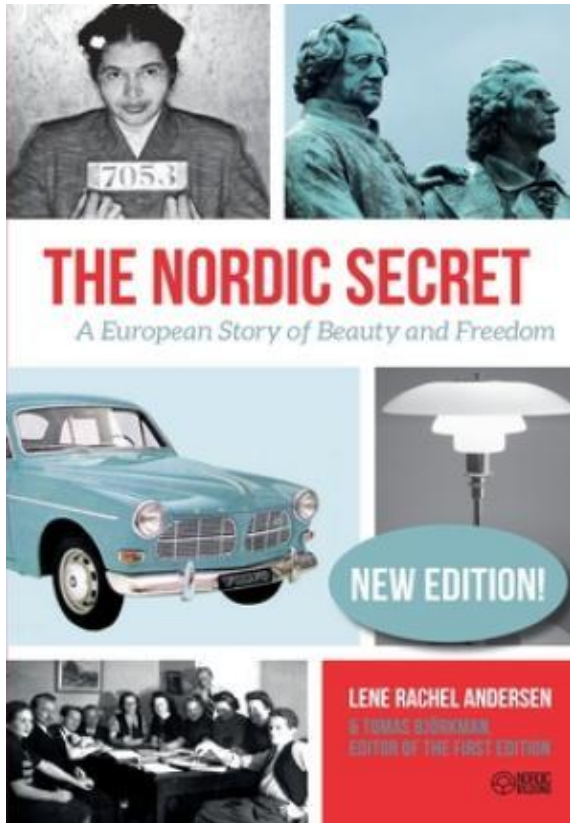


Lilla PETŐ

### Book review: The Nordic Secret



The Nordic Secret: A European Story of Beauty and Freedom, authored by Lene Rachel Andersen and Tomas Björkman, examines the cultural and educational strategies that transformed the Nordic countries during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It highlights how these nations harnessed the power of *Bildung* (a German concept encompassing personal and cultural development) to create thriving, democratic societies. The book situates itself within the ongoing discourse on societal evolution and educational reform, offering a historical perspective on challenges that resonate today, such as social polarization and the need for inclusive progress. Their collaboration draws on their combined expertise to provide a deeply researched and compelling narrative. Andersen and Björkman argue that this approach was instrumental in building egalitarian, resilient, and democratic societies, making the Nordic countries a model of modern success. This book stands as part of their broader efforts to explore societal transformation through cultural and personal growth.



The book revolves around *Bildung*—a German term for education, cultivation, personal formation, and character development, encompassing emotional and moral growth. (Definitions abound, and we may never fully capture its depth.) The authors position *Bildung* as a central pillar for societal evolution,

---

emphasizing that it is more than education in the conventional sense. Instead, it is a holistic process of individual and collective growth, deeply tied to cultural identity, morality, and critical thinking. They explore how this concept was applied to tackle pressing issues of the 19th century, such as economic disparity, lack of education, and social fragmentation.

### **Structure of the Book**

The book is divided into several cohesive chapters, each addressing a critical aspect of the Nordic transformation:

#### ***Historical foundations***

The opening chapters paint a vivid picture of the challenges faced by Nordic countries in the 19th century. The agrarian economies were struggling with modernization, rural poverty, and illiteracy, necessitating systemic change. The origins of Bildung trace back to the German Enlightenment, where thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt emphasized the importance of personal and communal development. This concept was later implemented through institutions like the folk high schools (folk high schools), envisioned by the Danish thinker N.F.S. Grundtvig. These schools provided rural populations with opportunities for education, fostering not only professional but also cultural and moral development.

#### ***Philosophical underpinnings***

Central to this change were thinkers like N.F.S. Grundtvig, whose ideas about folk education and the importance of cultural heritage shaped the Nordic ethos. Grundtvig believed in creating institutions that would not only teach practical skills but also nurture a sense of community, critical reasoning, and self-awareness.

#### ***Folk high schools***

The book dedicates significant attention to the establishment of folk high schools. These institutions were innovative in their approach, offering non-formal education to rural populations, focusing on lifelong learning, and integrating local culture with global awareness. The authors emphasize that folk high schools were not merely educational institutions but also community centers where people could discuss social and political issues. This was particularly important for strengthening democracy and social cohesion. The Danish and Norwegian governments actively supported these institutions to ensure that individuals from lower social classes could access opportunities for development. These schools played a pivotal role in transforming Nordic societies by empowering individuals to become active participants in democracy and societal progress.

#### ***Cultural evolution and democracy***

Later chapters draw connections between Bildung and democratic development. The authors argue that by prioritizing self-cultivation and collective responsibility, the Nordic countries fostered an environment of trust, collaboration, and resilience, which became the foundation of their thriving democracies.

#### ***Modern relevance***

The final chapters examine how these lessons can be applied today. The authors explore contemporary issues such as environmental degradation, inequality, and polarization, proposing Bildung-inspired strategies to address these challenges.

### **Evaluation**

The book provides a detailed account of how intentional cultural and educational strategies can lead to large-scale societal transformation. Andersen and Björkman bridge the gap between theory and practice, showing how Bildung principles can be adapted to contemporary issues. Although focused on Nordic countries, the book's message is universal, advocating for a balance between individual freedom and collective responsibility. The narrative is both scholarly and accessible. Andersen and

Björkman use a mix of historical analysis, philosophical reflection, and real-world examples to keep the reader engaged. The incorporation of case studies, such as the role of folk high schools, adds depth and relatability. The authors highlight how the principles of Bildung addressed key issues of their time—poverty, inequality, and lack of education—and argue that similar approaches could resolve modern challenges. For instance, fostering critical thinking and community engagement could counteract the rise of populism and polarization.

### **Conclusion**

The Nordic Secret is not merely a historical analysis but an inspiring read for those who believe that education and culture have the power to change the world. I recommend it to educators, policymakers, and anyone who seeks to understand how a successful and sustainable society can be built. This book is valuable for anyone interested in history, education, or social innovation. The principles of Bildung remain relevant today and can serve as an example for other parts of the world.