

2022

## Georg Brandes and Fin de Siècle Scandinavia as a Cultural Semiperiphery

Stefan Nygård  
*University of Helsinki*, stefan.nygard@helsinki.fi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nygård, Stefan. "Georg Brandes and Fin de Siècle Scandinavia as a Cultural Semiperiphery." *Artl@s Bulletin* 11, no. 2 (2022): Article 2.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC-BY-NC-SA license](#).

---

## Georg Brandes and Fin de Siècle Scandinavia as a Cultural Semiperiphery

### Cover Page Footnote

Work on this article has been supported by the Kone foundation (grant number 201802162).

# Georg Brandes and Fin de Siècle Scandinavia as a Cultural Semiperiphery

Stefan Nygård

*University of Helsinki*

## Abstract

The article centres on the practice of cultural mediation and core-periphery dynamics in Scandinavian cultural life at the turn of the twentieth century. In this period, Copenhagen functioned as a gateway in the circulation of ideas and cultural goods to and from the region, as did individual actors and cultural institutions in Denmark. Similarly, Scandinavia as a whole occupied a transitional position in global intellectual space. With extensive intellectual networks and a strategic role in the literary traffic to and from Scandinavia, the critic and intellectual Georg Brandes provides a starting point for exploring core-periphery relations.

## Sammanfattning

Uppsatsen utgör en studie i kulturförmedling och växelverkan mellan centrum och periferi i Norden vid sekelskiftet 1900. Såväl staden Köpenhamn som enskilda individer och institutioner i Danmark intog under den här perioden en framskjuten position som förmedlare av idéer och kulturprodukter till och från regionen. På motsvarande sätt spelade Norden som helhet en förmedlande roll i det internationella rummet. Med sina omfattande nätverk och strategiska roll i idéförmedlingen till och från Skandinavien tjänar kritikern och intellektuellen Georg Brandes som utgångspunkt för en diskussion om regionala och globala centrum-periferirelationer.

*Stefan Nygård is an historian and Senior Researcher in the Department of Philosophy, History and Art Studies at the University of Helsinki. His recent publications include Decentering European Intellectual Space (Brill 2018), The Politics of Debt and Europe's Relations with the 'South' (Edinburgh University Press 2020) and Rethinking European Social Democracy and Socialism (Routledge 2022).*

In a letter to the Danish critic and literary kingmaker Georg Brandes in 1897, the Swedish writer and engineer Per Hallström announced his intention to travel South across Europe.<sup>1</sup> Anticipating his meeting with Brandes at the ‘gate’ between Scandinavia and Europe—the city of Copenhagen—, Hallström was looking forward to encounter “the man who gave me the first glimpses of the great wide world”.<sup>2</sup> A decade before, in neighbouring Finland, the writer Minna Canth expressed a similar sentiment of gratitude towards the Danish literary authority. But while translating the first volume of Brandes’ *Main Currents in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (1872–1890) for Canth was a means to advance her career, she was already looking beyond Brandes and Copenhagen: “When I reach higher, to Taine, Renan and Spencer, then I can say ‘so long’ to Brandes”.<sup>3</sup>

Why did Hallström, Canth and their peers among Scandinavian writers and intellectuals attribute such strategic importance to the Danish critic? Did they see themselves as belonging to a spatially and temporally stratified cultural space, as suggested by the references to Brandes’ Copenhagen as a ‘gate’ and the goal of ‘reaching higher’? The following observations aim at shedding light on these questions by highlighting different layers of intermediation in Scandinavian cultural life at the turn of the twentieth century. More often than not, Copenhagen and Denmark functioned as gateways in the circulation of ideas and cultural goods to and from the region, as did individual Danish actors and cultural institutions. Similarly, Scandinavia as a whole occupied a transitional position in international or global intellectual space. With extensive intellectual networks and a strategic role in the literary traffic to and from Scandinavia, Brandes provides a starting point for exploring core-periphery relations on both the regional and the international scale. Brandes and people around him exemplify the constraints and opportunities of geo-culturally

intermediate spaces. We can connect their understanding of in-between positions in the transnational republic of letters to world-systems analysis, which since the 1970s has developed sophisticated proposals for theorising the centre-periphery distinction as well as the predicament and function of go-betweens in global interaction. The term used in world-systems analysis for intermediate regions is the notion of the semiperiphery.

## What is a Semiperiphery?

As developed by the late sociologist and economic historian Immanuel Wallerstein, a disciple of Braudel and head of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations in New York (Binghamton 1976–2020), world-systems analysis postulates a tripartite global hierarchy between the core or nucleus, the intermediate semiperiphery, and the periphery. Such a schematic way of ordering the world has of course received its fair share of often justified criticism. The great merit of the theory, however, is precisely its vast unit of analysis—the world—, which brings systemic interdependencies into view. It sees the world as a totality in which the relations between distinct units—their uneven position within a comprehensive structure—affect the behaviour of individual and collective actors and how they make sense of the world. What especially interests us here is that the world-systems analysis approach is distinguished from the Latin American dependency theory upon which it draws<sup>4</sup> as well as modernisation theory by the *more stable existence* it attributes to an intermediate group of states and locations in the world-system. It highlights, in contrast to the mentioned adjacent theories, the *systemically stabilising functions* performed by the semiperiphery by virtue of its distinct structural position. As Giovanni Arrighi and Jessica Drangel write:

The legitimacy and stability of this highly unequal and polarizing system are buttressed by

<sup>1</sup> Work on this article has been supported by the Kone foundation (grant number 201802162).

<sup>2</sup> Hallström to Brandes, 23.11.1897, *Georg og Edv. Brandes brevveksling med nordiske forfattere og videnskabsmænd*, udg. af M. Borup (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1939), vol VII. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in A. Sarajas, *Viimeiset romantikot: Kirjallisuuden aatteiden vaihtelu 1880-luvun jälkeen* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1962), 8.

<sup>4</sup> M. Fajardo, *The World That Latin America Created. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America in the Development Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2022).

the existence of semiperipheral states defined as those that enclose within their boundaries a more or less even mix of core-peripheral activities. Precisely because of the relatively even mix of core-peripheral activities that fall within their boundaries, semi-peripheral states are assumed to have the power to resist peripheralization, although not sufficient power to overcome it altogether and move into the core.<sup>5</sup>

Deriving from economic history, the organising principle of world-systems analysis is capitalism, seen as a force that reduces the world into a singular, unified and unequal structure. Within this global system governed by the uneven distribution of power and resources between its interdependent parts, the intermediate or go-between<sup>6</sup> zones between the core and the periphery of the system have been analysed with respect to economic and/or political power. While the importance of world-systems analysis for cultural research has been debated and critics have pointed to its insensitivity to agency and subjectivity, we should at least consider the extent to which cultural core-periphery relations align with geopolitical or geoeconomic asymmetries of power, where they contradict the laws of an integrated global politico-economic system and where they follow a relatively autonomous logic.<sup>7</sup> A specific point of discussion concerns the prospects and socio-cultural conditions for the creation of novelty between the core and the periphery. Insofar as every site of cultural production is constrained by a variety of factors, the purpose in this article is to draw attention to the specific limitations and opportunities that characterise Scandinavia as an intermediate cultural space.

Before proceeding, we can recall two ways in which the core-periphery distinction is politically relevant for the region. First, geopolitical decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries forced the regional core countries, Denmark and Sweden, to

reinvent themselves in the post-Napoleonic era. Sweden had lost its Eastern half, Finland, to Russia in 1809 and was compensated by a personal union with Norway in 1814. The latter event marked the end of the Dano-Norwegian Kingdom and the beginning of Danish decline. In 1864, Denmark ceded control over its Southern territories after the Second Schleswig War, which gave momentum to German unification and turned a large segment of the Danish population south of the new border into a Prussian minority. As a result of the new balance of power in northern Europe, the former Scandinavian great powers receded to the category of small states. Denmark sought to reinvent itself by, among other things, exploiting the country's strategic location with respect to the traffic (of goods, people and ideas) to and from the Baltic, which was one source of its subsequent semiperipheral status, along with its relative importance to the surrounding great powers that had an interest in maintaining a neutral power at the entrance to the Baltic.<sup>8</sup>

The political and moral outcome of 1864 as a key *lieu de mémoire* in Danish history is captured by the motto 'External loss, inward gain' ('*Hvad udad tabtes, det skal indad vindes*').<sup>9</sup> These words by the poet H. P. Holst became linked to a new focus on developing Denmark's internal possessions and lands. Despair translated into nationalist proposals for offsetting a gloomy geopolitical outlook by consolidating the popular resources within a decimated and now monocultural (with the loss of the German-speaking South) small state, albeit still in possession of colonial territories such as the Danish West Indies.

In this moment, Georg Brandes emerged as a leading proponent of a cultural opinion that considered internal consolidation an insufficient renewal strategy. Illustrating his understanding of the country's semiperipheral predicament, he addressed the literary symptoms of being located at some distance from the perceived cultural centre, arguing that "our literature resembles a small chapel in

<sup>5</sup> G. Arrighi and J. Drangel, 'The Stratification of the World-Economy: An Exploration of the Semiperipheral Zone', *Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> J. Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 8, No. 2 (1971), 104–105.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion, see the introduction in D. Palumbo-Liu, B. Robbins, and N. Tanoukhi (eds.), *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World. System, Scale, Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1–26.

<sup>8</sup> C. Holbraad, *Danish Neutrality. A Study in the Foreign Policy of a Small State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>9</sup> R. Glenthøj, *1864. Sønnen af de slagte* (København: Gad, 2014).

a big church, it has its altar, but the main altar is not here".<sup>10</sup> Against this backdrop, and critical of an earlier militarist tradition and the more recent isolationist turn in Denmark, Brandes advocated for enhanced cultural interaction with the world beyond as a healthier path towards national renewal than navel gazing. Goethe's idea that national literatures maintain their vitality only when they are constantly exposed to external influences offered valuable guidance. The notion that national specificity was best nurtured when immersed in international intellectual circulation was important also because Denmark in Brandes' estimation (in 1871) found itself on a path towards becoming culturally absorbed into the German sphere. His twofold response to this challenge rested on aligning regional interests (Scandinavianism) and promoting Scandinavian culture beyond the region, especially in the German-speaking Europe from—or within—which Denmark and Scandinavia sought to demarcate itself. Here again Brandes' thinking is reminiscent of Goethe's project for German culture in the 1790s: absorption into a larger cultural whole without sacrificing one's cultural autonomy for universal norms and values; German 'culture' versus French 'civilization'.<sup>11</sup>

Brandes' personal trajectory and Scandinavian cultural development in general were greatly affected by political and geopolitical turbulence in this period. But can the former be seen through the same analytical lens as the latter? While Brandes' whole career testifies to a close interplay between geoeconomic, geopolitical and geocultural reasoning, the extent to which either the political or economic lines of reasoning at the core of world-systems analysis can be applied to culture has in recent decades been the object of theoretical debate. Notable contributions include Pascale Casanova's *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999) as well as books and articles by Franco Moretti.<sup>12</sup> The former

defines the core of the world-system of literature as a 'Greenwich meridian of literature'—the place occupied by Paris for a long time—endowed with the power to define the 'literary now' to which all the others are forced to relate. In globalising literary space, it mattered who came first, and early modern France got off to a head start compared to many others. Moretti in turn makes two important claims: that world-systems analysis allows for literary studies to identify a new genre of literature that tries to represent '*the world as a totality*', and that this genre is marked by a geographical peculiarity insofar as French and English works were nearly absent and were instead replaced by writers belonging to the semiperiphery. Moretti mentions German, American, Irish, Latin American writers, who 'were probably encouraged by their intermediate and dynamic position to grapple with the world as a whole'.<sup>13</sup>

Casanova's and Moretti's application of core-periphery models to the study of literature has been amply contested by literary scholars in a debate that has been going on for two decades.<sup>14</sup> This fact alone testifies to the heuristic value of applying this terminology to the study of cultural production. In considering the nature and role of Scandinavia's intermediate cultural position, we may also want to recall that Moretti's parallel reading of world-systems analysis and evolutionary theory introduces a tension between the *diffusion* of literary trends (from the core to the periphery)—with obvious streamlining effects—and *evolution*, which instead produces 'formal diversification' (speciation). Moretti contends that both "explain important aspects of world literature",<sup>15</sup> but he considers them unevenly applicable to different periods. The evolutionary approach would thus be more useful for understanding how literature developed through diversification until the early modern period, whereas the standardising and amalgamating logic becomes more prevalent

<sup>10</sup> G. Brandes, *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur I* (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendal, 1872), 10.

<sup>11</sup> J. K. Allen, 'Georg Brandes in Berlin. Marketing the Modern Breakthrough in Wilhelmine Germany', *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Winter 2019), 459–481; T. Kontje, *Imperial Fictions. German Literature Before and Beyond the Nation-State* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), ch. 5.

<sup>12</sup> F. Moretti, *Distant Reading* (Brooklyn (NY): Verso, 2013), 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review* 1 (Jan/Feb) 2000, 54–68, and 'More Conjectures', *New Left*

*Review* 20 (Mar/Apr) 2003, 73–81.

<sup>13</sup> F. Moretti, 'World-Systems Analysis, Evolutionary Theory, «Weltliteratur»', *Review*, 2005, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2005), 218.

<sup>14</sup> For a summary, see D. Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures. Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 292–302.

<sup>15</sup> Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 222.

for the post-seventeenth-century world of capitalist modernisation, which concerns us here.

## Political Decline and Cultural Progress

Insofar as limitations and possibilities within an uneven structure of global cultural production are determined by the systemic location of a given field, the constraints and opportunities in semiperipheral zones follow from their twofold relations to the core and the periphery. Furthermore, the predicament of in-between regions or ‘middle powers’,<sup>16</sup> geopolitically speaking, is determined by historical conjunctures in the international system. On the one hand, the space of manoeuvre in semiperipheries is especially constrained during periods of intense great power rivalry, such as the age of imperialism in the late nineteenth century, which was marked by a widespread contempt for ‘small nations’ deemed unworthy of existence, or more recently in the context of the bipolar Cold War international order of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the former era was also a period of flourishing cultural production, literary modernisation and international success for Scandinavian literature.<sup>17</sup> Finding one’s path between rivalling European imperialisms turned out to be a productive challenge for some Scandinavian actors that in the late nineteenth century succeeded in carving out a space for the region as ‘modern’ *precisely by virtue of its intermediate position at a relative distance from the European centres of cultural production.*

As mentioned, internationalist modernisation was a response to the rapid decline of Denmark as a great power since the eighteenth century, culminating in the defeat against Prussia in 1864. Questioning the strong focus on ‘internal consolidation’ in Denmark following the defeat, the Brandesians—a term that became partly synonymous with the literary left or the emerging idea of intellectuals as a social group<sup>18</sup>—devoted themselves to aggressively

marketing Nordic cultural and social achievements outside the region; not only Brandes but notably also his conational Herman Bang and the Norwegian writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Beyond their internal disagreements and differences, the strategic efforts of these ‘Men of the Modern Breakthrough’ to reposition Scandinavia internationally against the backdrop of political demise and Georg Brandes’ reframing of the region’s claims to power are an essential part of this story. Critical of the isolationist stance, Brandes considered internationalist Scandinavianism a more effective geo-cultural approach during the period of globalisation between 1870 and 1914, and claimed a role for Nordic actors as international mediators, arbiters and ‘norm entrepreneurs’.<sup>19</sup> When such roles were depicted as particularly suitable for Scandinavian cultural and political actors, the argument rested on the region’s relative distance to (but not too far from) power struggles in the core. For the cultural modernisers, political decline should be offset by seeking new symbolic forms of power, mobilising the normative resources of the detached outsider and focusing on intermediation as an alternative means of increasing the region’s leverage in world politics.<sup>20</sup>

In the context of late nineteenth-century globalisation, competing factions within Nordic politics advocated different survival strategies ranging from internal consolidation, militarism, and *Realpolitik* to internationalist solidarism and strategic mediation. The period was also marked by intense pan-Scandinavian cultural, educational and civil society coordination,<sup>21</sup> in addition to cooperation within the domains of foreign policy (co-ordinated neutrality in great power conflicts), social policy, professions, and the economy (the Nordic monetary union of 1872). The prevailing view in the age of imperialism that only polities of a certain size were

<sup>16</sup> C. Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> See the introductions to M. S. Bradbury and J. McFarlane, *Modernism: 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976) and H. van den Berg et al., *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1900-1925* (Amsterdam & New York, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> On Brandes as the leader of a movement and the term ‘Brandesians’, coined in the mid-1880s, see J. Knudsen, *Georg Brandes. Symbolet og manden 1883-95, I*

(København: Gyldendal, 1994), 30–34, and H. Hertel & S. Møller Kristensen, *The Activist Critic: A Symposium on the Political Ideas, Literary Methods and International Reception of Georg Brandes* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> C. Ingebritsen uses this term in *Scandinavia in World Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Stefan Nygård & Johan Strang, ‘Facing asymmetry. Nordic intellectuals and center-periphery dynamics’, in M. Jalava, S. Nygård & J. Strang, eds. *Decentering European Intellectual Space*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018), 19–42.

<sup>21</sup> K. Hvidt, ‘Skandinavismens lange linier’, *Nordisk Tidsskrift for videnskap, konst och industri*, vol. 70 (4) 1994; K. H. Ekman, ‘Mitt hems gränser vidgades’. *En studie i den kulturella skandinavismen under 1800-talet* (Stockholm & Göteborg: Makadam, 2010), 9.

considered legitimate<sup>22</sup> had long functioned as a driver of Scandinavianism. But what distinguished the pan-regionalism of Brandes and his collaborators was their belief that much of this work should take place outside the region, not only by means of cultural propaganda but through active engagement on international arenas. They furthermore considered access to cultural markets abroad a condition for a more differentiated literature to develop within the region. In Denmark, the literary progressives fashioned these goals as part of an on-going European reactivation of Enlightenment thinking, as freethought and secularism became increasingly political in the last decades of the century.

Seeing cultural offence as the best defence for Denmark and Scandinavia, Brandes understood the relationship between the national and the international as profoundly interdependent. In a speech delivered in 1894, he reiterated the claim that Denmark's "political and cultural salvation lay in an enhanced Danish presence on the European cultural scene". If this was the case, the governing conservative party (the National Liberals) had damaged Denmark's chances of regaining self-respect "by requiring that patriotic Danes ignore the rest of Europe, with the result that Europe lost interest in Denmark".<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that between the 1870s and the 1890s, Brandes' efforts to balance cultural nationalism with his liberal-progressive internationalist program competed with powerful conflicting images of Denmark and Scandinavia both within and beyond the region, including the Christian idealism of local elites, idyllic projections of pan-Germanic authenticity or the fantasies of a hazy North in symbolist representations of Scandinavia and Russia in the cultural capital of the world, Paris.<sup>24</sup>

There was no single recipe for winning recognition in inter- or transnational cultural space, which was a

condition for carrying out the task that Brandes had defined for his movement. The different paths chosen, and the uneven success enjoyed by Nordic writers and intellectuals testify to the complex interplay between the national, regional and international. Brandes and Strindberg exemplify an integrationist strategy. The attempts by the former to reinvent himself as a German intellectual in Berlin (1877–1883) mirror the latter's efforts to Frenchify his persona in addressing Parisian audiences while working on the play *The Father* (1887). Strindberg's quest for symbolic capital abroad was driven not least by his desire to seek revenge on the conservative cultural establishment in Sweden. But it was Ibsen who more than anyone else put Norway and Scandinavia on the map of world literature. The way he did it differed greatly from both Brandes and Strindberg. Writing his major plays from abroad while living in Germany and Italy for 27 years, Ibsen did not try as hard to assimilate with his host cultures, and it has been argued that he was primarily addressing Scandinavian audiences with his plays, which made him exotic enough for an international audience.<sup>25</sup>

Together with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Ibsen emerged as the international icon of the post-1864 wave of Scandinavian cultural modernity. Georg Brandes was the ideologue of the movement, and as such also the one with the greatest theoretical interest in probing the limitations and possibilities of semiperipheral culture. Let us therefore continue to follow Brandes in turning the spotlight on two aspects of intermediation and core-periphery relations as they manifest themselves in cultural life: the relations between Scandinavia and the dominant cultural centres, languages and individual intellectuals in Europe, and the region's internal core-periphery dynamics.

## Scandinavia in Europe

The expectations of incessant progress through 'stages of development', omnipresent in the

<sup>22</sup> R. Glenthøj relates this concept by Eric Hobsbawm to Scandinavianism in 'Pan-Scandinavism and the threshold principle', *A History of the European Restorations*, M. Broers, A. Caiani (eds) (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> 'Om Nationalfølelse. Foredrag holdt ved Indvielsen af det danske Studentersamfund nye Lokaler den 1. Februar 1894' (<http://www.brandes-selskabet.dk/84030223>) and the discussion by Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity*, 81–85.

<sup>24</sup> B. Wilfert-Portal, 'Cosmopolis et l'homme invisible. Les importateurs de littérature étrangère en France, 1885-1914', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 2002/4 (n° 144), 33-46; S. Briens, *Paris: laboratoire de la littérature scandinave moderne, 1880-1905* (Paris: Harmattan, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> S. Ahlström, *Strindbergs erövring av Paris* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1956); G. D'Amico, 'The Father in Strindberg's French Self-Translation', *Edda* 97 (2010): 125–139; N. Fulsås & T. Rem, *Ibsen, Scandinavia and the Making of a World Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).



nineteenth-century Transatlantic world, provided non-dominant regions in the world-system with the option of fast-forwarding to a more advanced stage by making use of what the economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron in *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (1962) defines as the paradoxical ‘advantages of backwardness’, modern Japan offering the paradigmatic example. For Brandes the comparatist, exploring the literary advantages of backwardness in 1872, a double movement was implied: “The comparative view possesses the double advantage of bringing foreign literature so near to us that we can assimilate it, and of removing our own until we are enabled to see it in its true perspective. We neither see what is too near the eye nor what is too far away from it.”<sup>26</sup> The aim was not merely to assimilate, but to overcome the limitations of overstated self-reliance both in the centres and the peripheries by means of comparison.

If we follow Moretti’s distinction between an evolutionary approach to literary history, tracing the diversification and ‘speciation’ of genres, and the world-systems analytical framework of standardisation and amalgamation, Brandes was initially more concerned with amalgamation, and intent on comparing mainly Danish and French literature.<sup>27</sup> In the 1870s his focus shifted towards differentiation. Acknowledging that novelty was produced through encounters and selective appropriation, he also warned against linguistic and cultural streamlining.

Brandes’ belief in the culturally innovative potential of non-dominant regions was shared by other pioneers in the emerging field of *littérature comparée*, such as the Transylvanian Hugo Meltzl, editor of the first journal devoted to the theme and launched in 1877, or the Irish literary scholar Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett. Writing from borderline positions both culturally and institutionally, as David Damrosch observes, “Posnett and Meltzl understood the ease with which cosmopolitanism could collapse into its seeming opposite, becoming a form of

imperial nationalism”.<sup>28</sup> Semiperipheral actors and regions could intervene in this space by exploiting their comparative insights into mutually ignorant or hostile spheres of culture and politics. Considering Brandes’ writing and his activity as a public intellectual, literary production was hardly a “passive reflection of the forces at work in a global market”.<sup>29</sup> But neither can his trajectory be understood without taking into account the social dynamics that conditioned his work as a mediator, both in the narrow sense of mediating literary texts and broadly as a mediator of Scandinavian culture in the world.

The way Brandes himself describes his discovery of the value of intermediation—from the viewpoint of a third-party mediator or arbiter who can claim a position above mutually ignorant dominant particularisms—is illuminating. “I was very much surprised”, Brandes reminisces, “when [John Stuart] Mill informed me that he had not read a line of Hegel, either in the original or in translation, and regarded the entire Hegelian philosophy as sterile and empty sophistry”.<sup>30</sup> Connecting this observation to the poor knowledge of his own peers among the German-oriented Danish intellectuals, of French or English philosophy, Brandes saw a space opening up for someone who could benefit from familiarity with both parties in a relationship of mutual ignorance. This was one way in which small states and actors within them could “benefit from being weak”.<sup>31</sup> There was a specific reason for emphasising the lack of communication between German and English philosophers: “I came to the conclusion that here was a task for one who understood the thinkers of the two directions, who did not mutually understand one another”.<sup>32</sup>

A pioneer in the study of comparative literature,<sup>33</sup> Brandes distanced himself from the dominant view

<sup>26</sup> G. Brandes, *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, Vol. 1 (New York and London: Boni & Liveright Inc. and William Heinemann, 1923), vii.

<sup>27</sup> H. Fenger, *Georg Brandes et La France*, Publications de la Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines de Paris-Sorbonne, Série Recherches, 8 (Paris 1963).

<sup>28</sup> Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> P. Cheah, *What Is a World? Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 28, quoted in Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 296.

<sup>30</sup> G. Brandes, *Recollections of My Childhood and Youth* (London: Heinemann, 1906), ch. XVIII.

<sup>31</sup> F. Baldacchino and A. Wivel, ‘Small states: concepts and theories’, F. Baldacchino and A. Wivel (eds), *Handbook on the Politics of Small States* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020), 15.

<sup>32</sup> Brandes, *Recollections*, ch. XVIII.

<sup>33</sup> Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 35; M. Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (London; New

of national literature as an expression of the national spirit isolated from the surrounding world, advocating instead for a relational approach to national literatures and for avoiding abstract cosmopolitanism, which all too often served as a disguise for someone's imperialism. With its focus on the development of literary currents through cross-fertilising interaction within an uneven 'global' literary space, comparative literature became a weapon in the hands of critics of both national self-sufficiency and imperialist cosmopolitanism. As someone who frequently mobilised comparison and internationally accumulated symbolic capital<sup>34</sup> in local debates, the Brandes of *Main Currents* highlighted domestic cultural stagnation and the need for Denmark to catch up, but as mentioned he also stressed the value of an outsider's view of developments in the 'core' (French, German and English literature).<sup>35</sup> Making these claims against the backdrop of late nineteenth-century positivism, his position aligned with the scientific ideal of the objective or neutral observer. Brandes' manoeuvring in European intellectual space corresponds to the German sociologist Georg Simmel's reflections at the turn of the century on the relationship between the qualities of the mediator and the "objectivity" of the stranger "who is not committed to the radically unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of the group, and therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of 'objectivity'". Furthermore, the Danish critic exemplifies Simmel's point about objectivity making the stranger the recipient of "the most surprising openness—confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person".<sup>36</sup>

York: Continuum, 2008); M. Rosendahl Thomsen, ed., *Danish Literature as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> On writers and the accumulation of international symbolic capital: P. Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> He based his own relational approach on eighteenth-century predecessors, Mme de Staël especially. G. Brandes, *The Emigrant Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1906 [1901]), 104, 136; Brandes' comparativism and the Enlightenment: J. Bjerring-Hansen, 'Fremmede blikke: Ekkoer fra 1700-tallet hos Georg Brandes', *Danske Studier* 2018, 69–88; On Brandes, *The Emigrant Literature* and de Staël, see T. Jelsbak, 'Emigrant Literature', *Georg Brandes. Digital Currents* ([georgbrandes.dk](http://georgbrandes.dk)).

<sup>36</sup> *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 2, transl. and ed. by K. H. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1950), 404–405. A significant part of the source material for Brandes' magnum opus was indeed acquired through intimate conversations with prominent European writers and intellectuals. For a discussion of Brandes in relation to Simmel's analysis of "the sociological logic of the situation of three", see S. Nygård, "The Geopolitics of the

Other collectives and regions struggled with similar asymmetries of power and cultural standing. It is no coincidence that Brandes' European project of literary modernisation was shaped through his encounter with another semiperipheral region: Italy. The structural location of the Italian literary field at the time, in relation to Paris and France,<sup>37</sup> mirrors the dependence of Danish writers and intellectuals on Germany. Having initially envisioned his project as a Danish-French comparison (against Germany in the aftermath of 1864), an encounter in 1870–71 with Italian intellectuals revealed structurally aligned interests— i.e., both regions were similarly located vis-à-vis the European core—, which encouraged Brandes to take a birds-eye view of both Denmark and the cultural centres, and to broaden his comparative project<sup>38</sup> to an analysis of European literary space as seen from its semi-peripheral margins. From structurally analogous locations in European cultural space, Italian and Scandinavian intellectuals both reinforced and relativised core-periphery relations within this space.

Different aspects of Brandes' detached position— his Jewishness, naturalist and scientific worldview, cosmopolitan radicalism and progressive views on marriage and sexuality—occasionally made him the target of nationalist hatred and anti-Semitic attacks in Denmark, and in Berlin at the time of the anti-Semitism debates in 1879–1881. On the one hand, these attacks made him downplay the Jewish impulses in his thinking about European cultural space; in an early essay on Meir Goldschmidt in 1869 he had depicted "the modern Jew in our European Civilization" as caught between the benefits of standing at an "Archimedean point"—an elevated place with an "unhindered horizon"—beyond the dominant races and the burdens of being the black sheep of the family.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Brandes actively

"Modern breakthrough": Cultural Internationalisation and Geopolitical Decline in Scandinavia 1870–1914', *Geopolitics*, 15–19, 28.7.2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2022.2094774>.

<sup>37</sup> C. Charle, *Les intellectuels en Europe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 346–351.

<sup>38</sup> J. S. Clausen (a cura di), *Georg Brandes, Fra mito e realtà, L'Italia del 1870–71 nelle lettere di un giovane critico danese I–II*, trad. delle lettere Salvatore Brogaard, (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2002), 15, 87.

<sup>39</sup> S. Berthelsen & D. M. Egebjerg, 'Europa i Danmark, Danmark i Europa', 108. On Simmel's and Brandes' critical distance vis-à-vis the national culture, see S. B. Hjortshøj, 'Georg Brandes and the Transnational Vision', in O. Terpitz and M. Windsperger (eds), *Places and Forms of Encounter in Jewish Literatures*, (Leiden: Brill, 2020); On

combated the spread of anti-Semitism in Germany<sup>40</sup> and in Scandinavia, against the evocations of his Jewish background by enemies such as the national-conservative writer-politician Carl Ploug.

## Regional Asymmetries

The former Scandinavian empires Denmark and Sweden continued as the region's political core in the post-Napoleonic period, with Finland and Norway in the role of the periphery of the semiperiphery. But the core of the 'modern breakthrough' was Norwegian and Danish. Originating in Brandes' 1883 essay *Det moderne Gjennembruds Mænd*, "The Men of the Modern Breakthrough" became a collective label for the then modern generation of Scandinavian writers, including the Norwegians Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, the Swede August Strindberg and the Dane J.P. Jacobsen. Brandes himself acknowledges, in a letter from the same year, that he until then (1883) had been comparatively ignorant of modern literature in Sweden. With his Swedish interlocutor Gustaf af Geijerstam he reflects on a certain intellectual sluggishness and half-heartedness of literature in Sweden where, according to Brandes, nothing happens, and everything is painted with bleak colours; to be sure, Denmark suffered from the same problem compared to literatures south of the region, but it was a matter of degree. The problem, Brandes argues, was that it was too easy to become a literary celebrity in Sweden. A couple of volumes and some verse was enough for everyone to know your name and to be appointed to the Academy.<sup>41</sup>

If the cultural predicament was bad in Sweden, it was worse in Finland, and not only because of the censorship imposed by the country's status as an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian empire until 1917. This is what a (Swedish-language) Finnish follower of Brandes had to say:

It does not yet appear as if we in Finland are ready to reach out to the large Scandinavian audience and arouse its interest with our literature. I see several practical obstacles, above all the low standing of Swedish literature, which cannot even guarantee someone like Strindberg a secure existence, despite his immense productivity. But perhaps the problem also lies within us, that is, we may not have anything worthwhile and great to offer this audience.<sup>42</sup>

The Finnish authors, after all, had to compete for Scandinavian audiences with the latter's own talents as well as cheap translations of European literature.

The lack of competition and critical capacity mentioned in this letter by the writer K. A. Tavaststjerna was a recurring concern for Brandes also in relation to Denmark and Scandinavia more broadly. For the devoted supporter of cultural Scandinavianism—advocating closer cultural and ideally also political integration between the Scandinavian countries—, regional cooperation and consolidation provided the answer to what Brandes saw as a problem of small numbers. As things stood, there was a lack of critical mass and an unfortunate confinement of the few existing intellectual institutions and universities within national borders, unnecessarily impeding a potentially fruitful critical dialogue between them. The problem according to Brandes was not so much a scarcity of individual talent in the region, but the weak prospects for these talents to grow in cross-fertilising interaction.<sup>43</sup> In a book summarising a longer period of voluntary exile in Berlin (1877–1883), he compares the great diversity of opinion in the German capital with the tendency of opinions to become monopolistic in narrow spaces such as Copenhagen, where everyone received the same education and read the same books.<sup>44</sup> For this reason, Brandes' was a strong supporter of cultural

<sup>40</sup> 'Brandesianism' and Danish antisemitism, see S. L. Bak, 'Chronicles of a History Foretold. The Historiography of Danish Antisemitism', in J. Adams and C. Heß (eds), *Antisemitism in the North. Religious Minorities in the North: History, Politics, and Culture* vol. 1 (Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 136.

<sup>41</sup> G. Brandes, 'Bevægelsen mod jøderne i Tyskland' (17.1.1881), reprinted in *Samlede Skrifter XIV* (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendal, 1904), 278–285.

<sup>42</sup> Brandes to Geijerstam 22.9.1883, in *Georg og Edv. Brandes brevveksling*.

<sup>43</sup> K. A. Tavaststjerna to Brandes 29.4.1894, in *Georg og Edv. Brandes brevveksling*.

<sup>44</sup> Brandes' letter to parents 20.3.1871, in *Georg Brandes' breve til forældrene 1859–71*, vol. II, udg. Morten Borup (Kjøbenhavn: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, 1978).

<sup>45</sup> G. Brandes, *Berlin som tysk Righovedstad* (Kjøbenhavn: Philipsen 1885), 123, cit. in Berthelsen & Egebjerg, 'Europa i Danmark, Danmark i Europa' (note 10), 112. For an argument on the Nordic societies as 'one-norm' societies, see H. Stenius, 'A Nordic Conceptual Universe', H. Haggrén et al., *Multi-Layered Historicity of the Present* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki 2013), 93–104.

expansion through the regional integration of Scandinavian cultural markets, the theatre and publishing industry etc.<sup>45</sup>

One crucial requirement for such a program to succeed was that artists, writers and intellectuals from the region displayed a unified front outward. Disagreements should be handled locally, enabling ‘Scandinavian literature’ to appear as a bloc outside the region.<sup>46</sup> When internal disagreements nevertheless surfaced, they often stemmed from regional hierarchies, testifying to the relative and constantly evolving nature of core-periphery dynamics—and the fact that intermediate regions constitute peripheries vis-à-vis centres and centres in relation to other peripheries. Brandes and Copenhagen exemplify the observation by Rokkan and Urwin that the longer the distance is between centre and periphery, “the greater the need for relay points of command in the provinces and the greater the risk that they will become the nuclei of independent centre formation”.<sup>47</sup> With respect to ‘independent centre formation’ in the cultural field, the Norwegian Ibsen accused Brandes (in the 1870s) of adopting the same kind of core-like behaviour for which the latter blamed French and English intellectuals. When Brandes claimed to speak for the whole region, including the Norwegian and Finnish peripheries, he was merely articulating the viewpoint of a narrow group of Copenhagen intellectuals. Ibsen was reminding Brandes that while the regionally dominant Copenhagen elite could afford to overlook developments elsewhere in the region, Norwegian and Swedish intellectuals were generally well-informed about developments in Copenhagen.<sup>48</sup> Power was about who could afford to ignore whom.

<sup>45</sup> T. I. Hansen, ‘Bøger og skandinavisk forbrødring. Et forsøk på en bokhistorisk tilnærming til skandinavismen’, in R. Hemstad et. al. (eds), *Skandinavismen. Vision og virkning* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> E.g., N. Götz & H. Haggren (eds), *Regional Cooperation and International Organizations: the Nordic Model in Transnational Alignment* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> S. Rokkan & D. W. Urwin, *Economy, Territory, Identity. Politics of West European Peripheries* (London: Sage, 1983), 18.

<sup>48</sup> The context was a request by Brandes for Ibsen to contribute to a ‘Scandinavian’ cultural journal (*Det nittende Aarhundrede*) that Georg Brandes edited with his brother Edvard. Ibsen to Brandes, 20.4.1874, available at [www.ibsen.uio.no](http://www.ibsen.uio.no). See also Fulsås & Rem, *Ibsen, Scandinavia and the Making of a World Drama*, 32–33. A similar issue arose between Brandes and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson a few years later, see Ekman, ‘Mitt hems gränser vidgades’, 188–190.

## Conclusion

To the extent that cultural modernisers in European semiperipheries advocated closer integration into global cultural space as a strategy for national and regional survival, the process entailed a double movement of integration and resistance. The logic of the market and globalisation pointed in one direction, the logic of national and regional consolidation in another. The literary sphere mirrored and contributed to both trends. Brandes, on the one hand, reinforced the view from the centre by promoting cultural standardisation, spatialising modernity and presenting a synthetic and distinctive overview of the core literatures of France, Germany and England—thus testifying to the stabilising function of the semiperiphery according to world-systems analysis. On the other hand, he played an equally central role in supporting regional identification by creating a space for ‘Scandinavian literature’ internationally, especially in German-speaking Europe. Back home, he predictably portrayed the local cultural field as backward. Given that it was ‘as usual’ forty years behind progressive Europe<sup>49</sup>, as he claimed at the outset of his career, Denmark needed to catch up through integration with culturally advanced Europe. But realising that the Scandinavian literary fields were disadvantaged in international cultural competition (because of language) and legitimately concerned with protecting their cultural markets, he was ambivalent on this issue as well. As a mediator Brandes was thus faced with the contradictory logic of the world-system of literature, in Moretti’s terminology, which produces sameness and standardisation through diffusion at the same time as it introduces diversity through ‘speciation’.

Also in terms of their aims and objectives, the cultural semiperipheries are distinguished from both centres and peripheries. While competing centres may strive for hegemony and dominated peripheries have little room for independent manoeuvring in relation to more dominant linguistic and cultural regions, the semiperipheries are driven by a

<sup>49</sup> G. Brandes, *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur I* (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendal, 1872), 14.

different motive. Idealistically, following Brandes' proposition, they see the struggles over the direction of progress not as a zero-sum game but seek to combine the best ingredients of competing proposals. A more cynical reading of the relationship underscores the opportunism of semiperipheral zones and actors trying to avoid slipping further down to the category of periphery by exploiting their intermediate function.

Seen through the lens of the modern breakthrough, the Scandinavian semiperiphery was defined and characterised by a variety of features: cultural, economic and social. For Brandes, the economic concerns were not the least important: the limited readership in Scandinavia made it close to impossible to live as a writer writing for one's own region. Having control over translations before the adoption of proper protection of intellectual property rights was equally challenging. But he was even more preoccupied with the cultural consequences of belonging to a non-dominant and relatively small cultural space: the absence of competition and breadth impeded the flourishing of individual talents, the mental landscape was constrained as long as everyone read the same books and received the same education, and internationalisation offered only a partial remedy as long as the idea of

a multilingual intercultural European or international space remained a distant dream. Socially, the region was hampered by complacency in cultural life, which produced a navel-gazing attitude and a focus on cultivating local traditions rather than exposing them to energising impetuses from the world beyond.

In the long run, the best way for the former great powers Denmark and Sweden and the Scandinavian region as a whole to thrive was through a combined focus on regional integration (of cultural markets, networks of artists, writers and intellectuals, publications and the public spheres), the pooling of regional strategies on international arenas, cultural internationalisation (aiming at cultural markets beyond the region, contributing actively to the strengthening and creation of international cultural spaces, organisations and journals, forming material or symbolic alliances with other non-dominant regions) and active intermediation between dominant powers. In view of the twentieth-century image of Nordic countries in international affairs as a region that stands out for its policies of intermediation, neutralisation and arbitration,<sup>50</sup> it is worth stressing that such ideas were elaborated in the cultural field in Denmark between the 1870s and 1890s.

<sup>50</sup> Ingebritsen, *Scandinavia in World Politics*; C. S. Browning, 'Branding Nordicity: Models, Identity and the Decline of Exceptionalism', *Cooperation and Conflict* 42: 2007, 27–51.