Negotiating Pasts in the Nordic Countries
Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Memory

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About the Authors
This book presents a number of case studies, all investigating how the past – or selected parts of it – has been made meaningful and relevant to people living in later periods. It is this process of selecting, interpreting and giving meaning that we call negotiating the past. Frequently, as we shall see, this process is fraught with tension, even conflict, in part stemming from the past itself, but very frequently due to the various agents involved in the process, representing different interests, understandings and points of view. On the other hand, it is also marked by a willingness to come to terms, to develop some consensus, again not only with the past, but also with one’s contemporaries. It is our interest in these dynamic and dialogical processes that has made us choose the term – and perspective – of negotiation rather than, say, ‘memory’, ‘commemoration’ or mere ‘use’ of the past. Furthermore, our investigations into this field have helped us to realise that what is being negotiated is not only the past, as one consubstantial and objectified unity, but rather a number of pasts: conflicting, at other times harmonising with each other. Hence the title of the book: *Negotiating pasts.*

Our study of how the past is negotiated in the present fits into the international and interdisciplinary field of collective memory, which has grown large during the last decades. Today, studies of commemorations and festivals, monuments, exhibitions and museums, historical films and narratives are numerous, while terms such as ‘social memory’, ‘collective or collected memory’, ‘kulturelles Gedächtnis’, ‘lieux de mémoire’, ‘the presence of the past’ and ‘the use of history’ demonstrate the scholarly interest in how the past – or images of it – is constructed, composed and built up, but also demolished, dismantled and rejected. This constructional work
has been investigated on the individual level, concerning personal memories and private history, but studies in this field have focused just as frequently on processes of nation building, construction of ethnic or other group identity, and heritage care and preservation. Theoretically, the field of study still refers back to Maurice Halbwachs’s treatises on social memory, but has more recently also been supplemented by the works of Aleida and Jan Assmann. Works by Pierre Nora, David Lowenthal and James Young stand out as the modern classics in this field of study.¹

Thematically, studies of the present or the comparatively close past, i.e. the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have dominated the field. This implies that many of the studies are in some way tied up with theories of modernity. This is most obviously the case with works concerning the construction of national, political cultures and collective identities, as in the now classic studies by Hobsbawm and Ranger and Pierre Nora². In part, the focus is due to the function of historiography itself in processes of nation building, as in the writing of the grand, national histories in Europe during the eighteenth century, in the tradition of Michelet. But just as important, modern historiography, defining itself through its methodology and its ‘source criticism’, often is presented as a contrast to other forms of historical consciousness dominated by memory, orality and tradition. These other forms have just as frequently been seen as typical of a pre-modern and/or popular way of relating to the past. These ways of thinking about the past have been described using terms such as ‘organic memory’, ‘memory-communities’, ‘true memory’³ or have been described as ‘functional’, ‘flexible’, ‘informal’ and ‘largely unconscious’,⁴ and clearly opposed to the reflexivity, analytical perspectives and intellectual constructions characteristic of modernity, eminently expressed in modern scholarly historiography.

This supposed opposition between ways of relating to the past can be seen as an echo of the more general contrast between tradition and modernity that is a crucial structural element in theories of modernity and modernisation, from Weber and Tönnies to Giddens and Bauman. However, a closer look reveals that the supposedly pre-modern or traditional condition first and foremost works as a
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typological and structural contrast to the real object of the theories: the nature of modernity. It is not really a historical description of the pre-modern, but rather a romantic figure, modernity’s ‘noble savage’: the very image of everything – positive or negative – that modernity is not.5

This book aims to show that negotiations over the past have a history of their own, not tied up with simple contrasts between tradition and modernity. With cases reaching from the Middle Ages to the present, it presents a historical variety of constructions and images of the past, in the shape of historiography, memory, tradition, narratives, practices, symbols and artefacts. Our investigations clearly demonstrate that neither political uses of the past, nor the musings over more existential issues, are unique to any epoch. Rather, in any historical period the past will serve a number of functions, individual and collective, private and public, experienced and intellectual, reflexive and impulsive.

Reinhardt Koselleck has argued that when the modern German term Geschichte (singular form) substituted the traditional Historie (frequently used in its plural form) during the nineteenth century, the magistra vitae-topos which had dominated Western historiography from Antiquity also lost its position. History was no longer a pedagogical collection of exempla with historiography as an evaluative practice, but was rather seen as a coherent presentation of past events, developments and temporal processes.6 His argument makes it clear that ‘history’ has not been the same thing in all epochs, and – what is most important here – that the relationship between history and the past is not constant. For this reason, we define our field of study as a history of ideas about the past, not simply of the idea of history. We want to cover more than merely historiography, and to underscore the potential discrepancies between the past and the history – or histories – that might be made from it. The aim is to study negotiations that have transformed the past into history and histories.

As an introduction to the case-studies, the concept of negotiation is discussed in the first chapter. Here, Helge Jordheim examines the structural aspect of this term and continues to explore its historical and semantic layers of meaning, creating a platform of understanding. The following case-studies, exemplifying a great variety of
negotiations of the past in the region of Scandinavia and Iceland, are presented chronologically. This part of the book starts with Anders Berge’s study on how written and oral knowledge about the past is employed in legal disputes about rights and privileges in medieval Norway. The last chapter, by Erling Sandmo, not only concerns the present, but also the future, as he discusses how a family tradition is passed on to the next generation. A long time span separates these two cases, but they still have more than the negotiations in common: they both in some way centre on the use of a mythological Norse past, found in saga literature and not least in the heroic figure of Fridthjof the Bold.

Apart from chronology, the book is also structured by the fact that negotiations over the past are undertaken in different arenas and in different media, and that all sorts of issues are at stake. The first three case-studies, by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Anders Berge and Karen Skovgaard-Petersen all concern questions of a legal and political nature. The disputes investigated by Berge are performed in the highly formalised context of the law court, while Skovgaard-Petersen argues that texts from the literary feud between Denmark and Sweden during the conflicts of the sixteenth century were shaped by negotiations in the very highest governmental circles.

Following this section on political and legal negotiations, the next four chapters discuss cases where epistemological concerns are at stake. Anna Wallette explores the erudite practices and the channels of communication available to the eighteenth-century Swedish historian Lagerbring, demonstrating how fundamental negotiations over such concrete matters as the availability of books and access to archives were to scholarly work. Brita Brenna and Anne Eriksen both investigate texts from the eighteenth century, written by authors who try to come to terms with the consequences of the new natural science and philosophy. How could new theories about the history of the earth be reconciled with the literal truth of the Bible and the authority of ancient texts? Also in this section, Bernard E. Jensen discusses the theory, suggested by Koselleck and others, that the old notion of history as *magistra vitae* crumbled and disappeared in the nineteenth century. Taking Danish historiography as his case, Jensen pleads for a more nuanced understanding of the process.
The final section explores cases of negotiation over emotions and experiences. Sandmo’s final chapter about family traditions is preceded by Anne Birgitte Rønning’s investigation of P. O. Enquist’s novel *The Visit of the Royal Physician*. Rather than evaluating the historical accuracy of the novel, she argues that it owes its success to the way it ostensibly negotiates events and emotions and openly invites readers into the process. Kyrre Kverndokk and Leiv Sem both explore Norwegian memory related to the Second World War. Kverndokk investigates texts written by teenagers before and after a school trip to Auschwitz, while Sem analyses two museum exhibitions in a former SS-camp in Norway. While the museum exhibitions are a matter of coming to terms with traumatic experiences, both individually and nationally, the teenagers are supposed to internalise and become new witnesses to the experiences of the past.

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Notes

2 Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983.
3 Nora 1984, introduction.
6 Koselleck 1985, see also Jensen this volume.

References

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Young, James E. 1993: The Texture of Memory. Holocaust memorials and meaning, New Haven.
The introduction of this book discussed the main aspects of the concept of negotiation. Structural, semantic and pragmatic dimensions were investigated. The following chapters have applied the perspective of negotiation to a number of empirical cases. These chapters are more than exemplifications of a theory, however. In addition to presenting a great variety of periods, genres and situations, they add one important dimension: that of the past and of negotiating the past. The past is, by definition, not of the present. It cannot be changed, and it is not directly available for development, partition or redistribution. In this way it is fundamentally different from other resources that may be contested and negotiated. Still, the past frequently becomes the object of negotiations. This is hardly a novel observation. What the case studies in this book do is investigate how these negotiations are done and what strategies are employed. What is actually at stake? What are the potentialities of loss and gain when the past is negotiated? Such questions are not merely of empirical interest. They also hold relevance for the understanding of negotiations as such, and they therefore can throw light on the more general dimensions of negotiating as a process of communication and as a distributor of meaning and resources.

The cases have shown that negotiating the past very often can be done without two active parties. In this book, for example, only some of the court cases studied by Anders Berge have the structure of two opponents directly confronting each other with different versions of the same past events. Somewhat more indirectly, these kind of negotiations between two active parties can also be discerned.
in Anna Wallette’s study of eighteenth century historians trading favours, recommendations and knowledge for access to books and source material, as well as Karen Skovgaard-Petersen’s investigation of the writing of history in seventeenth-century Denmark and Sweden. Far more dominant, however, is the impression of just one active part, negotiating against a commonly accepted version of the past which works as a script and in some cases is authorised through heavy institutionalisation. Perhaps the most explicit example of this is Kyrre Kverndokk’s study of school trips to former Nazi concentration-camps, and the work carried out to turn the youngsters into new ‘time-witnesses’. This work incorporated the teenagers’ own personal experiences into the script presented to them and made the values of this version of the past part of their own social and political identity. Another example is Brita Brenna’s investigation of Erik Pontoppidan’s book about the ‘novelty of the world’, situating itself into a contemporary field of erudite and theological discussion about the age of the world and the literal truth of the Bible. Here the script is being contested by new theories.

Structuring negotiations in this way, with one or more protagonists and a script, rather than two opponents, does of course carry some consequences. Above all, the structure can easily indicate that negotiations are not merely about the past, but also with it. In the guise of a script, the past itself, or a generally accepted and thus naturalised version of it, becomes in some way the partner or opponent. What gives the past this seemingly active part is, above all, the message or set of values held to be embodied in it. This, in turn, engenders a deep commitment to this version of the past from those in the present. It is with these values and the norms implied by them that negotiations are carried out. The values and norms are not being presented as expressions of individual standpoints (which would make the individuals holding them one party in a negotiation), but rather are embedded in institutions: in schools or museums, or in authoritative texts.

However, initially one-sided negotiations may also serve other and more strategic ends. By definition, starting a process of negotiation means entering into a certain kind of communication, whereby one is situated in a specific position and another is the opponent. In
this manner, an object of negotiation is defined: that is, set up as important, attractive and worthy of struggle. Establishing negotiations thus means imposing a certain structure of interaction and evaluation on a social field. The success of such an attempt will of course depend on the outcome of the negotiations: either party might lose or win. But apart from the outcome itself, something else might be gained from a manoeuvre of this kind: a relationship is established, an interaction defined, an opponent named. The writing of Icelandic history investigated by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson can be read as an example of such a strategy. The sagas and books of the late Middle Ages present a portrait of the past aimed at securing the old Icelandic elite a favourable position within the new social and political structures of the north Atlantic region. What made the strategy fail was not that the new elite, based in Norway, contested this version of the past, but simply their lack of response to it. The Norwegians did not take up the invitation – or challenge – and did not enter into any negotiations about the past. Hence, the position as one of two opponents negotiating the past in the political present was denied to the Icelanders. The literary feud between Denmark and Sweden supplies a contrary example. In this case, the writing of history by one country did provoke a response from the other, even to such a degree that history-writing deemed to be defamatory was forbidden in periods of peace. In this case the challenges launched by one party were taken up and aggressively returned by the other. The same past events were presented in different versions, each favouring the author’s country and defaming the opponent’s.

What is at stake in negotiations over the past is truth. Above all, this means a quest for realism. The representation of past events, persons, etc. should correspond to how things really were. At the most basic level, negotiations about the past are about establishing such truths, whether they concern the rightful ownership of buildings, as in Anders Berge’s chapter; the question of how the bones of a large whale could have ended up in a river valley miles away from the sea, as in Anne Eriksen’s text; or the matter of the age of the world, as in Brita Brenna’s. Still, realism is merely a starting point. What makes the past important – and contested – is the impact it is thought to have on the present. This is of course obvious in cases
such as historically founded rights of ownership, privileges or political positions; but in the majority of our cases, other kind of values are at stake. The truth of the past has ethical, emotional and even existential aspects. These aspects do not merely concern the past from which they (are thought to) stem. What makes them worthy of struggle and negotiation is rather their supposed relevance to the present. The past – truthfully represented – contains values and messages of the utmost importance to the present, even to the future.

The ethical dimensions ring out loudly in Kyrre Kverndokk’s and Leiv Sem’s texts. The absolute demand to keep alive the memory of World War II and the Holocaust is partly based on the respect for the suffering and victims of that period, but just as much on the idea that memory has an ethical impact. Knowledge about what happened then will serve as a defence and give an active tool in the struggle against future repetition. That is the reason why the events must be remembered correctly and truthfully, and also why it is so important that the knowledge of them should be passed on to the young. In some ways, these truths are non-negotiable, or rather, attempts at negotiating them are regarded with strong suspicion. In these cases, then, negotiations are about making sure that the values are understood rightly in the present, and that later generations assimilate them in the appropriate way.

In Anne Birgitte Rønning’s text, the truth at stake concerns what happened between the persons involved in the Struensee drama, or rather which human motives and emotions could make these things happen. The narrative negotiations analysed through a close reading of Enquist’s novel, show the author’s attempts not merely at depicting a complex – and by necessity largely unknown – emotional relationship, but also of making explicit the negotiations implied in his own work. These negotiations include musings over the nature of history itself, and questions about what its most profound driving forces might be.

The impact of the past as a resource for constructions of identity, individual or collective, is also significant. Icelandic saga-writing has already been interpreted as the attempt of an elite group to establish their identity and position in a situation of political change and restructuring. The development of the magistra vitae topos analysed
by Bernard E. Jensen in his Danish case study demonstrates how the writing of history has served the purpose of nation-building and the construction of national identity. In this case, the message of history – the great teacher of life – is about Danishness. The text by Erling Sandmo, on the other hand, shows how the same past, the history of Balestrand, can serve a number of different identity-constructions, ranging from the formation of individual identity through the creation of the identity of a family or kin group to ideas about ‘German-Nordic greatness’. While the real, factual truth of the past is at the basis of all these cases – its existence being as a prerequisite for negotiations to take place at all – it is also apparent that the negotiations themselves are just as much about other aspects. ‘What really happened’ is important, but the question ‘what does it mean to us’ is even more so. As magistra vitae, the past can teach us to feel, think and act in the present.

This adds one further element to the structure of negotiations: that of time. Obviously, all negotiations unfold in time, as all other communication in some way does. However, when negotiating the past, the temporal dimension also acquires other dimensions. It enters into the negotiations as its object. Negotiations will centre on what happened, as well as its implications for the present. This means that such negotiations will establish structural bonds between past and present, between living individuals and past events, persons or objects. This relationship is at the same time one of authority: it is the authority of the past that makes it both an object of struggle and – at least seemingly – an active part in the struggle or negotiation. The authority is partly anchored in the aspect of truth, as already discussed. But in some ways it also stems from the pastness of the past, the fact that it is closed, untouchable and unchangeable. The authority is absolute and hierarchical; we can learn from the past, but it can not learn from us. That cannot be negotiated.

Negotiations are an integrated part of most individuals lives. We engage in negotiations all the time with our friends, relatives and colleagues about almost anything. The outcome of these negotiations creates new situations that have to be dealt with, not only by the individuals involved in the negotiations, but also by people who, directly or indirectly, are affected by the results of these negotiations.
Negotiations are, in short, an important part of the social dynamic. Therefore, they are an important key to understanding why and how societies and communities change and evolve. It is not always easy to see the purpose of these negotiations, especially in cases where an individual is trying to answer a new question. However, these negotiations force individuals to re-evaluate their views and positions, and that is the key element in the negotiation process.