

Black Lives Matter meets Eighteenth-Century Studies: Perspectives from the Nordic countries

Introduction

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In the wake of the death of George Floyd in May 2020, there followed a heated debate about the historical roots of racism in western societies. Under the label Black Lives Matter, emblematic characters from the early modern period received unprecedented attention, also in the Nordic countries. Sweeping rhetorical attacks targeted national icons such as the Dano-Norwegian playwright Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754) and the Swedish botanist Carl Linnæus (1707–1778). The latter was blamed for constructing a hierarchy of races with scientific underpinnings that prepared the ground for Social Darwinism and Racial Studies, the former for having contributed to slavery and the slave economy, albeit rather indirectly. In addition to ideological debates about historical relations and causalities, a more activist-minded approach called for the removal of monuments commemorating various characters from the eighteenth century. Activism proved to be more than a mindset. In early November 2020, a herm of the Danish king Frederick V (1723–1766) was symbolically thrown into the harbour of Copenhagen by protesters.

On the constructive side, statues of some of the first black people to settle in Denmark, Finland and Iceland became a subject of public interest. Calls for a more nuanced historical consciousness were put forward, often accompanied by reflections on anything from specific museum exhibitions to the complex dynamics of identity politics on a transnational level. In this context, both social media platforms and traditional news outlets offered opportunities for eighteenth-cen-

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tury scholars to engage in a public discourse in which their expertise was highly pertinent.

In this section, we have invited one scholar from each of the five Nordic countries to share personal reflections on the “statue debates” of the past year. Focusing on the allegations against Holberg as a slave dealer, Thomas Daltveit Slettebø (historian, University of Bergen) analyses how a slow-paced academic discussion in which only a limited number of experts had engaged, suddenly broke into the limelight of public media. In the transformation from a purely academic discourse into a public discussion of dazzling speed, nuances were both lost and restored. Similarly, Annika Windahl Pontén (historian of ideas, Uppsala University) demonstrates both productive and destructive examples from the development of the debate over Linnæus and his connections to racist ideology. In the end, she expresses a general optimism about the potential of public debate. While both Slettebø and Windahl Pontén had privileged vantage points in the sense that no statue of either Holberg or Linnæus was overthrown, Henrik Holm (art historian, National Gallery of Denmark) as curator at an art museum found himself in a far more dramatic situation as the commemorative herm of Frederick V was thrown into the harbour. The protagonists turned out to be the dean and a group of students from the National Academy of Arts, an institution whose founder had been the very king Frederick himself. In his reflection on the act, Horn emphasizes how the ensuing political debate has left very little room for reflection on what is indeed a highly problematic colonial legacy. Finally, Sofia Aittomaa (art historian, Åbo Akademi University), as well as Arnor Gunnar Gunnarsson and Jón Kristinn Einarsson (historians, Reykjavík) share their reflections on the comparative absence of repercussions of Black Lives Matter in Finland and Iceland respectively. Their contributions show that although Finland and Iceland were not too much affected, the past year created richer opportunities to introduce and nuance lessons of history in mainstream media in ways more familiar to most scholars.

Although we prefer to leave to the reader to trace the variations of this topic in the Nordic countries, we would like to share some general thoughts. To some degree, the different debates appear to reflect the history of the eighteenth century in each country. The Danish and Norwegian debates were primarily centred on economic participation in the slave trade, both by the king of the twin realms as a statesman and by the Bergen-born playwright as a private person. In Sweden, the debate centred instead on the scientific legitimization of Carl Linnæus, indirectly connecting him to the recurring critical discussion about Sweden’s role in the later development of racial biology, which culminated in the State Institute of Racial Biology at Uppsala University (1922–1958). In Finland and Iceland, a notion of collective innocence appears to be more firmly rooted in the historical conscious-

ness of the populace, given the absence of national self-governance during the early modern period.

After these opportunities for scholars to participate in somewhat volatile public debates, the everyday responsibility to treat these questions in traditional scholarly contexts slowly returns. Therefore, we hope that this section will be fruitful for our community of scholars. By learning from the variety of the past debates in the Nordic countries, we may get new ideas both for research and for public dissemination of history. The Nordic researcher who followed the debate in one single country may come to realize the variation of the theme. In the same way, we hope that researchers from beyond the Nordic countries may find something compelling in these five examples of the repercussions of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, when the eighteenth century suddenly turned into an epoch of global interest.