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# Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice Embraced By the Welfare State?

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Peter Scharff Smith • Thomas Ugelvik  
Editors

# Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice

Embraced By the Welfare State?

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# Part I

## Introduction

# Introduction: Punishment, Welfare and Prison History in Scandinavia

Peter Scharff Smith and Thomas Ugelvik

Imagine a prison. What does it look like? Who live inside? How are they treated? Ask these questions of children, and they will tend to give you a pretty straightforward answer based on what they have learned from adults and quite often what they have seen in movies, TV series and on the Internet: “The windows are very small and it’s dark,” “you wear a blue uniform—or orange,” “the guards are strict because you are criminal” and so on.<sup>1</sup> Many learn from childhood that if a person does something very wrong the police will come and get you, and if you are a “criminal” you will go to prison. This pretty much sums up

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<sup>1</sup> Danish fifth-graders interviewed by Janne Jakobsen (Smith 2014, p. 68).

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some of the most basic definitions of what a prison is—or at least is supposed to be: a building where people found guilty of committing a crime are forced to live for a time as punishment for what they have done. What actually goes on inside these facilities tend to be much more unclear and the common knowledge about how prisons actually operate is typically rather limited. Prisons have in fact been described as “the last great secretive institutions in our society” (Coyle 2005, p. 6). Indeed, the very basic and common quality of these facilities—the fact that they are designed to lock up people out of sight of the rest of society—has arguably shaped these places in a rather uniform way and made it difficult to escape the historical and architectural origins of these institutions. Certainly, as anyone who has visited prisons in different parts of the Western world will know, prisons often resemble each other across geographical borders. In other words, one could argue, substantial prison reform is apparently not an easy task. In a way, this makes the differences that actually *do* exist much more interesting and relevant to discuss, especially when you sometimes run into institutions or prison practices which seem unique or at least very different from the usual way of doing things:

Denmark doesn't treat its prisoners like prisoners—and it's good for everyone. (Reiter et al. 2016)

The Radical Humaneness of Norway's Halden Prison. The goal of the Norwegian penal system is to get inmates out of it. (Benko 2015)

Why Scandinavian Prisons Are Superior. “Open” prisons, in which detainees are allowed to live like regular citizens, should be a model for the U.S. (Larson 2013)

As these quotes show, it has been claimed that prisons in Scandinavia exhibit significant differences when compared to institutions elsewhere. For this reason alone, study of the penal arrangements in these countries is important. If truly different prisons have been created and if they actually are more humane than other such institutions, should we not try to discover how and why? After all more than 10 million people are locked up in penal institutions throughout the world (Walmsley 2016, p. 2), and

if there are positive lessons to be learned from the Scandinavian experience, we should try to identify them and share them with the world. On the other hand, it is important to ask whether the almost fairy tale-like images conjured by the international headlines really constitute a true representation of prison conditions in this northernmost corner of Europe. Is such a thing as a humane prison even possible? And if it is, is there any particular reason to assume that it is a uniquely Scandinavian phenomenon?

## **Visiting Prisons with Prison Visitors— Experiencing the Foreign Eye on Scandinavia**

We, the editors of this book, have studied prisons for many years and are used to visiting and researching the various types of penal institutions in our home countries of Norway and Denmark.<sup>2</sup> During years of such work we have also on many occasions had the pleasure of entering “our own” local Scandinavian prisons in the company of foreign visitors such as researchers from different countries or participants in criminal justice or human rights courses from different parts of the world. The former (the international research colleagues) have often been directly interested in Scandinavian prisons and the question of their possible exceptional character, while the latter group have typically visited prisons—along with other local institutions such as the Police academy and the Ombudsman’s office—to learn about the allegedly high human rights standards and good practices in Scandinavia. We have both found that these visits can be a very interesting experience in themselves. On such occasions we have often had the benefit not only of gathering empirical evidence—something a prison researcher will inevitably always do when visiting a prison regardless of the purpose—but also of witnessing the reactions of our fellow visitors. In a sense, our role on these occasions has been to observe not only the penal institutions but our international colleagues reacting to them.

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<sup>2</sup> We have even visited several prisons in Sweden and for that matter studied some Swedish prison practices.

Visiting Scandinavian prisons together with foreign prison visitors has shown us that everything is not simply black and white and that differences are sometimes perhaps more a matter of cultural context and background. Even visitors working with penal reform in their home countries may be unaccustomed to restrictions that are normal and seem obvious from a Scandinavian perspective. We have also experienced prison researchers reacting primarily with recognition perhaps especially when visiting old 19th-century panoptical prisons of which there are also several still in operation in Scandinavia—a situation and context which will be familiar to many a prison scholar from most other European countries. Finally, we have observed foreign researchers react with a certain disappointment after visiting progressive, seemingly exceptional and initially very humane-looking Scandinavian institutions, when discovering that, after all, these places are still prisons; places of detention where people are deprived of their liberty and subjected to strict rules and regulations.

Nevertheless, many visitors clearly also react with surprise when visiting Scandinavian prisons. A very specific practice which tends to draw a lot of attention during such visits are the knives in the common kitchen areas which accompany the self-catering regimes that allow prisoners to cook their own meals; a very uncommon and visually striking sight from the perspective of most foreign visitors. Another visually striking practice is that of open prisons where a number of specific institutions are based in old farm buildings, barracks, etc. sometimes lacking a surrounding perimeter fence or wall. Hence these institutions appear *very* open and very different from the archetypical Western prison. The initial experience visiting such places is in some ways not very prison-like at all. These and other practices can cause raised eyebrows during visits and give the sensation that something quite special is going on here. Another example is foreign visitors encountering imprisoned women and men together in Danish penal institutions. Many outsiders perhaps would not give this much thought, but a prison researcher would know that this is rather special and perhaps even unique in a Western context. Finally, many prison visitors from abroad clearly feel that staff welcome them openly and perhaps also get a sense that they treat prisoners with a certain level of respect and kindness.

But do these different examples truly reflect some sort of different (or even exceptional) Scandinavian way of doing things? If yes, then how should we go about explaining it? So far a popular line of thought has been to connect Scandinavian prisons to another seemingly unique Scandinavian arrangement, namely the wider welfare state context. Does it make sense to say that Scandinavian prisons are uniquely welfare oriented? If yes, then how and with what consequences?

## Social Control in a Scandinavian Welfare State

It is often said these days that we are living in a neoliberal age. Taking Bourdieu's (1998) analytical distinction between a left hand and a right hand of the state as a starting point, Wacquant (2008, 2009), for instance, describes how the neoliberal condition is characterized by a development where the left hand—the hand that typically takes care of “social functions” like public education, health, housing, welfare and labour law—withers, while the right hand—the member responsible for enforcing budget cuts, fiscal incentives, economic deregulation, as well as managing the courts, the police and the prisons—is stronger than ever.

In comparative analyses, the Scandinavian countries are often used to exemplify well-functioning welfare states. They are described as among the most egalitarian societies in the world, with a narrow field of class differences (Moene and Barth 2004), factors which help them to consistently do well on the UN Human Development Index.<sup>3</sup> This has allegedly made it possible for the Scandinavian countries to resist the turn from “welfare” to “workfare” (and further on to “prisonfare”) and thereby avoid many of the punitive policies and practices characteristic of the neoliberal era, according to Wacquant (2008).

Other scholars (Lacey 2008; Pratt 2008a, b; Pratt and Eriksson 2011, 2012a, b) also see the Scandinavian countries as exceptions to the

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<sup>3</sup> In the 2015 report, Norway is ranked 1, Denmark 4, and Sweden 14 out of the 188 countries listed. See [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr15\\_standalone\\_overview\\_en.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr15_standalone_overview_en.pdf). Accessed 29 April 2016.

international rule of convergence towards the increasingly punitive neo-liberal model characteristic of the Anglophone countries. In contrast to these countries, where a focus on penal rather than social measures and workfare rather than welfare has been the trend, the Scandinavian countries all combine a high level of equality with government efficiency, a relatively stable employment market and generous welfare schemes in a way unparalleled elsewhere in the world (Witoszek 2011, p. 10). The safety net available to citizens is strong and wide. One will find comparably low levels of unemployment backed up by generous unemployment benefit schemes, liberal social welfare schemes, a universal right to secondary level education, a free public health care system, free and easy access to higher education and so on.

States are more or less ambitious when it comes to welfare policies and their intended impacts. According to Esping-Andersen and Korpi (1987), the Scandinavian model in the 1980s was comprehensive, institutionalized and universal, and this image is still very much alive today in much of the international scholarship. Since the 1980s and 90s it has been customary to talk about a *Nordic Model* of public and social policy and the egalitarian “social democratic welfare state regime” which is often associated with these states (Kautto et al. 1999, p. 1; Brochman and Hagelund 2010). The array of welfare state responsibilities has widened drastically with this *Nordic Model* and in contrast to earlier regimes and those in operation elsewhere. In the words of Esping-Andersen and Korpi: “The welfare state is meant to integrate and include the entire population rather than target its resources toward particular problem groups” (1987, p. 32). In other words, the welfare schemes in such states are (in principle at least) available to all irrespective of social or geographical position. The level of what Rugkåsa (2011) has called “welfare ambitiousness”—the scope of responsibilities that the state assumes for the welfare of its citizens and the extensiveness of the welfare system—is apparently second to none. Compared to almost everywhere else, the Scandinavian countries have high hopes when it comes to their goals of modifying and engineering social conditions in a way as to create a just and healthy society for all citizens, regardless of background.

Understood, following Rugkåsa (2011), as a constellation of (1) political ideals about a well-functioning society, (2) institutional mechanisms and (3) principles for the allocation of resources, the welfare state can be said to constitute a sort of general social frame in these countries. In Denmark, it has been called a secular religion (Brochman and Hagelund 2010); in the current Norwegian context, it can according to some be understood almost like a total social phenomenon in the Maussian (1954) sense: The welfare state is to be found almost everywhere, and very often it is trusted and regarded as benevolent. It is a source of Norwegian pride and identity and, as a national symbol and rhetorical trope, all-important for the legitimacy of many state initiatives. “The state” may be criticized, but “the welfare state” is in a sense beyond reproach.

Nevertheless, there is also general agreement in the literature that times have changed for these Scandinavian welfare states and that crisis and Neoliberal ideology have transformed the original egalitarian social democratic model to a greater or lesser extent. Some Scandinavians talk about not only the rise but also the “fall of the welfare state,” with Nordic model countries suffering from “increased poverty” as well as “greater social and economic inequality” (Wahl 2011, p. 13).

Regardless, it seems safe to argue that the welfare ambitions of Scandinavian states are still very high compared to most other countries. These ambitions are driven by, among other things, strong states with high tax level, which are willing and have the power to initiate schemes to normalize and civilize its citizens. In other words, states with high welfare ambitions will arguably tend to interfere in citizens’ (and non-citizens’) lives more readily and more profoundly than states with lower ambitions. Furthermore, following this logic, ambitious welfare states have also been called Janus-faced (Barker 2012), meaning that generous care and intrusive social control are often two sides of the same coin. This tendency is part of a culture and intimate relationship between the state and its individual citizens which prompted Huntford (1972) to describe Swedish society in the 1960s and its Swedish members as *The New Totalitarians*.

This book is about Scandinavian prisons and their possible relationship with the Scandinavian welfare states and their associated values. One can argue that there exist multiple strong connections between the

welfare and the penal systems in all these countries. It has even been claimed that it makes sense to call Scandinavian prisons welfare state institutions (Ugelvik 2015). On the other hand, one could perhaps say that all public institutions, including schools and hospitals, by nature are closely connected to the welfare state. If that is the case, however, then what is unique or even especially interesting about the relationship between prisons and welfare states in Scandinavian societies? Or to ask in another way, are Scandinavian schools, hospitals, etc. especially humane and well functioning compared to those in other countries, thanks to the Scandinavian welfare state model? It is not a question which will be answered nor researched in this volume but the hypothesis seems somewhat unlikely. But why then have welfare ambitions been found to be relatively high in Scandinavian prisons and how does that possibly reflect the quality, values and presence of the welfare state?

In any case, if such a thing as welfare-oriented prisons does exist, there is no reason to believe that they are exclusively benevolent and constructive places. Rather, it means that the penal systems in these countries (to various degrees perhaps) are shot-through with welfare-oriented social technologies, logics and optics. In other words, one could argue, when made to serve a custodial sentence in these countries, you are grasped by the left and the right hands of the state simultaneously. In this book, we explore the particulars of this powerful penal-welfare embrace and the degree to which it might (or might not) constitute an important element in Scandinavian prisons.

## **Scandinavian Prison History in the Eyes of International Observers**

In 1777 famous philanthropist and prison reformer John Howard published his ground-breaking study *The State of Prisons* after having visited prisons all over Europe and beyond. Howard's travels also brought him to Sweden and Denmark, but unlike many of the internationally oriented penal observers of today he did not particularly like what he found in Scandinavia. After visiting Denmark he went on to Sweden and noted the following:

I observed the houses to be much cleaner than those in Denmark; and this led me to hope I should find the same difference in the prisons (. . .) But I was disappointed, for I found them as dirty and offensive as those in Denmark. (Howard 1929, p. 71)

In Denmark Howard had visited the “Stockade prison” in Copenhagen, a facility for slaves,<sup>4</sup> where he described the treatment of the inmates as “shocking to humanity” (Howard 1929, p. 71). The slaves wore ankle or neck chains and received new clothing only once every two years. “I did not wonder to find many of them the almost naked” wrote Howard, and further remarked that each visit gave him a headache (Howard 1929, p. 77 f.).

Howard was not the only traveller who left Scandinavia with such an impression. Little more than a decade later—in 1788—the Venezuela-born Spanish-American world traveler Francisco de Miranda also visited prisons in Copenhagen and recorded all his impressions carefully in his diary. On the one hand, he was impressed by the short but intensive period of reforms in Denmark under the brief reign of the King’s physician (and the Queen’s paramour) Johann Struensee, who was beheaded in 1772 for the crimes of *lèse-majesté* and high treason. On the other, Miranda visited different Danish prisons and was appalled by what he saw. In the “Blue Tower prison” Miranda was met by putrid air caused by the fact that the barrels used as toilets were only emptied five or six times a year. In the previously mentioned “Stockade prison”, the responsible governor, who clearly misread his visitor’s agenda, proudly displayed all his whips and torture instruments and even demonstrated how to most effectively use the former against the prisoners to force them to confess crimes and misdeeds: “this fool demonstrated with great zeal how to handle the whip (. . .) as if it was a grand and very valuable talent”, Miranda lamented (Smith 2003, p. 110).

Regular prison visits by philanthropists and prison reformers continued well into the 19th century and during this time Scandinavia was on the receiving end of harsh criticism. It was frankly not a place travellers

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<sup>4</sup> Slavery was made illegal in Denmark in 1848.



went for penal reform inspiration. In 1818, for example, Akershus fortress and Christiania prison in Oslo, which both held sentenced slaves, were visited by the Quakers Stephen Grellet and William Allen, en route from London to Sweden and later to Russia. Allen and Grellet were very interested in prison reforms and clearly critical of the conditions in the Norwegian institutions (Schaanning 2007, p. 67). Both Grellet and Allen knew another Quaker, Elisabeth Fry, who went on to become one of the most influential philanthropist prison reformers of her time. Fry also showed an interest in Scandinavian prisons and as late as 1841 she came to Denmark, together with her brother John Gurney, in order to visit prisons. Once again, severe criticism was the result (Smith 2003, p. 144 ff.). In general, foreign visitors were rarely impressed by the standards of the early Scandinavian prisons.

## Early Scandinavian Prison Reform

There was however a certain willingness among Scandinavian royalty to listen to the critique from the travelling philanthropists. There are even examples of specific and very sincere early interest in the issue of prison reform (Nilsson 1999; Smith 2003). Public interest in prisons was apparently also on the rise and in the early decades of the 19th century, extensive prison reform seemed to move closer in Scandinavia as was the case in several other European countries at the time. But the days of international interest in progressive Scandinavian practices were still far away and it was the Norwegians, Swedes and Danes who directed their attention outwards to other European countries for inspiration. In 1819, the Norwegian doctor Fredrik Holst visited prisons in Germany and France. He did not find the model prisons he was looking for until he came to England the year later, however (Larsen 2001; Schaanning 2007, p. 67). A few years later the momentum of prison reform had moved from England to the USA, where the Auburn and Pennsylvania prison models were created during the 1820s. These two models came to set the agenda for international prison reform to quite a remarkable degree. In 1840, the Swedish crown prince anonymously published a book on prisons, known as “the yellow book”, in which he advocated for

extensive prison reform based on the Pennsylvania model (Nilsson 1999). In fact the Pennsylvania model and thereby the more strict form of solitary confinement won increasing support all over Scandinavia. In 1840, a Danish prison commission was formed which sent a delegation to the USA, in the footsteps of Tocqueville and other influential thinkers and penal reformers of the time (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1979; Crawford 1834), to study the two famous American prison models. The majority of the Danish prison commission favoured the Pennsylvania model although a minority preferred the Auburn model. After the commission delivered a report in 1842 it was decided to reform the Danish prison system according to both models (Smith 2003). In Norway a prison commission was also formed during the same years and like in Denmark it approached the matter of reform as a choice between the two American models. In 1841, the Norwegian commission decided in favour of the Pennsylvania model (Schaanning 2007, p. 101). Finally, in Sweden reforms also began during the 1840s mainly along the lines of the Pennsylvania model and to some extent the Auburn model (Nilsson 1999).

## **From Import to Export—Modern Scandinavian Prisons in International Context**

To cut a long story short, the result of the Scandinavian interest in the US models was importation especially of the Pennsylvania (or Philadelphia) and (to a lesser extent) the Auburn prison models. As a result, a system of large-scale solitary confinement was created. In fact, the entire prison systems in Scandinavian were to a greater or lesser extent reformed after the American models. Furthermore, these isolation regimes proved long lived in Scandinavia and were resilient to substantial change well into the 20th century. The single-cell system and strict solitary confinement even spilled over into remand practice in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. This meant that the vast majority of prisoners—remand and sentenced—were subjected to intense solitary confinement throughout much of the latter half of the 19th century and way into the 20th century. For sentenced prisoners a progressive system was introduced already during the 1860s

which allowed prisoners who behaved well to progress through a number of stages and thereby gain privileges, which could include being allowed to read more books, write more letters and even get more out of cell time (Schaanning 2007, p. 181 ff.; Smith 2003). Nevertheless, this still amounted to very limited contact with other people, and the basic prison experience was still solitary confinement (Berggrav 1928; Smith 2003). In other words, large-scale isolation of prisoners continued often for several years in a row, and although serious health problems and cases of insanity quickly arose the systems were not abandoned as such (Nilsson 1999; Smith 2003). In all of Scandinavia sentenced prisoners were subjected to variants of Pennsylvania model solitary confinement during much of the first half of the 20th century, and while this principle was abandoned in Denmark during the 1930s, decisive change in Sweden had to wait until 1945 and legally the principle of isolation for sentenced prisoners was not abandoned in Norway until 1958 (Nilsson 1999; Smith 2003; Hjelm 2011; Horn 2015).

In all three countries large-scale solitary confinement of remand prisoners, however, continued unabated for many years. Today there are, however, large differences between the Scandinavian countries when it comes to the use of court ordered pre-trial solitary confinement. Reforms have all but ended this particular use of remand isolation in Denmark and less than one percent of all remand prisoners were placed in court-ordered solitary confinement in 2014. In Norway, similar reforms have significantly (albeit to a lesser degree than in Denmark) decreased the use of isolation. About 12.2 % of remand prisoners in Norway spent any time in solitary confinement at all in 2014. In 92 % of these cases, isolation ended within a month (Kriminalomsorgen 2015). In Sweden, however, the vast majority of remand prisoners are still kept in strict solitary confinement (Åklagarmyndigheten 2014).

The fact that serious reforms of the regimes for sentenced prisoners had to wait until the 1930s and 40s (and came decades later for remand prisoners) is a likely reason that these countries apparently did not attract much attention as places of progressive prison reform earlier in history. In any case, the international picture of Scandinavian prison practice certainly appeared to change around that time. When American

criminologist Negley K. Teeters published his study on “World Penal Systems” in 1944 he claimed that in Scandinavia one found “one of the most enlightened penal philosophies in Europe” (Teeters 1944). This was in fact one year before the Swedes finally chose to abandon solitary confinement for sentenced prisoners (“Ensamhetsstraffet”) although reform of the Pennsylvania system of strict isolation had been gradually introduced since 1906 (Hjelm 2011, p. 238). Teeters himself made a point of the significant changes Scandinavian penal practice had experienced since the time of John Howard and even offered an explanation for the earlier brutal and punitive behaviour:

As we survey these countries today, noting their progressive concepts in every realm dealing with the welfare of humanity, we can scarcely understand that these same people, during the time of John Howard, were meting out the most barbaric forms of corporal and capital punishments to the wayward. True, this was prevalent all over Europe, but the Scandinavian countries were doubtless even more bloodthirsty and severe. This may be accounted for by the fact that the old Norse traditions of blood vengeance merely reflected the harsh climate they had to withstand. (Teeters 1944)

As far-fetched as that particular interpretation sounds, there is little doubt that Teeters’ positive view of Scandinavian penal practice was gaining ground. Although the history of how outsiders have perceived Scandinavian prisons and justice systems has not been written, a reasonable hypothesis seems to be that important changes took place especially after the Second World War, and not least during the 1960–70s, which caught the international eye. One such thing was the opening of Ringe State prison in Denmark in 1976, apparently the first prison in Europe (and perhaps the world) where women and men were allowed to mix and serve time together and also the prison which introduced a self-cooking regime for prisoners with a prison grocery and communal kitchens placed in each wing in a college-dormitory like fashion. In 1977 a Californian newspaper reported about Ringe: “Denmark’s newest prison already has a few unusual firsts: two of its inmates recently married, contraceptives are on sale at the prison supermarket, inmates must buy their own food and do their own cooking, and wardens and

prisoners alike wear blue jeans and shirts” (*Lodi News Sentinel*, 17 March 1977). While the idea of mixed gender prisons never really spread to the other Scandinavian countries, Scandinavian correctional systems continued to exhibit many common elements, including a significant amount of open prison spaces and the strong focus on the principle of normalisation.

The latter, the principle of normalisation, is often highlighted as a Scandinavian ideal although it is actually a European and international principle, which to varying degrees is reflected in international and regional human rights standards. This principle is for example clearly stated in the European prison rules and hence part of the regional European human rights framework where it consists of two related key elements: (1) Prisoners retain all their rights when imprisoned except those which are taken away by necessary implication of the deprivation of liberty; and (2) conditions in prison should resemble conditions in the free community as much as possible (European Prison Rules, Basic principles 2, 3 and 5). But the principle of normalisation can also be a matter of national law, and is, for example, part of prison law and prison service rules in Norway and Denmark. There is indeed little doubt that the principle of normalisation has enjoyed a very strong standing in Scandinavian law and related policy documents. Scandinavian prisoners may, for example, vote in elections and they have the same right to secondary education as other citizens. When it comes to legal status, prisoners are in fact not in a fundamentally different situation from other people (see Engbo, this volume).

The mounting international attention towards Scandinavian prison practice was not, perhaps, just a matter of outsiders being drawn to some of these qualities and practices. Scandinavians had also started to actively market their correctional services and principles internationally. Nilsson (2012), for instance, describes how the international image of Swedish prisons and penal polices as humane and modern was at least partly the result of a successful marketing campaign. Still, Scandinavian practice in the 1960s and 70s did not impress all outsiders. We find a colorful example of a more critical stance in the writings of Roland Huntford who in 1972 described the Swedish

welfare state (including its penal practices) as a real-life example of Huxley's terrifying *Brave New World*. According to Huntford, the Swedes had created a powerful omnipresent state and were "the first of the new totalitarians" (Huntford 1972, p. 11). In this welfare state Huntford found that the "Swedish totalitarians" had created a system of law and punishment where the ultimate crime was to deviate from the norm: "That norm is innocent of ethics and morality, and decided on grounds of expediency alone. The situation is already a doctrine of Swedish law. Gone is the idea of right or wrong, or the moral content of an action. Crime is now defined as social deviation" (Huntford 1972, p. 12).

## Scandinavian Penal Exceptionalism?

Whether one agrees with Teeters or Huntford, there is little doubt that Scandinavian penal practice has continued to evoke widespread international interest. In recent decades the debate over Scandinavian penal practice has by no means been only a matter for media and casual observers. International criminological interest in Scandinavian punishment and prisons has been on the rise and resulted in several research projects, debates and publications. There is in particular a growing Anglo-American literature arguing that the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, often along with the two other Nordic countries Finland and Iceland, exhibit egalitarian welfare policies, low rates of poverty, humane social and penal policies, and human rights oriented agendas. Similarly, the Nordic countries are frequently used in the field of comparative penology as an exception to the general rule. Within this tradition the Nordic countries are described as exhibiting a specifically Nordic penal culture, resulting in what has sometimes been termed a Scandinavian or Nordic penal exceptionalism (Pratt 2008a, b; Pratt and Eriksson 2012b). Especially, two factors have been central in these discussions: the low rate of imprisonment in the Scandinavian and Nordic countries and the allegedly humane prison conditions—but other factors such as, for example, trust in the police and the criminal justice system have also been highlighted and analysed (Lappi-Seppälä 2007, 2012; Pratt 2008a, b; Pratt and Eriksson 2012b; Cavadino and Dignan