On the occasion of the centenary of the British naturalist Charles Darwin’s birth in 1909, the Danish popularizer of science Jens Orten Bøving-Petersen (1864–1937) informed the readers of the radical-liberal newspaper *Politiken* that, “With Darwin and Spencer human thought finally reached the mountain peaks – the open spaces where the air is clean and clear, free from the mist of obscurantism down in the valley.” According to Bøving-Petersen and many other Scandinavian freethinkers in the decades around 1900, Darwin and Herbert Spencer were closely linked and seen as scientific heroes and liberators of humankind. From the 1870s, Spencer had been embraced by a new generation of Scandinavian radical-liberal university students who met under the banner of the so-called ‘Modern Breakthrough’ introduced by the Danish radical-liberal literary critic Georg Brandes in 1871. The radical students challenged idealistic philosophy, conservative values and established faith, and even though Darwin was no doubt more famous than Spencer in 1909, Spencer was still counted among the household gods in radical-liberal circles. In this chapter, I will discuss how Spencer’s ideas were appropriated in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. I will demonstrate that in spite of similarities, such as Spencer’s appeal to radical students and intellectuals in all three countries, the appropriation of Spencer’s ideas in Scandinavia was characterized by a remarkable heterogeneity due to the different national contexts.\(^1\)

The Scandinavian countries are closely linked historically, linguistically and culturally. Norway was under Danish control until 1814 when the country became a relatively independent part of the Swedish kingdom. Only in 1905 did Norway gain full autonomy. During the nineteenth century the Scandinavian countries witnessed a gradual modernization. Democracy and freedom of speech were introduced and school reforms and adult education initiatives resulted in relatively high literary rates. Moreover, economic growth combined

with technological developments within communication and publishing paved the way for a revolution in print culture. In the last quarter of the century newspapers, periodicals and popular book series were widely circulated in all segments of the Scandinavian societies. Among the most popular publications were inexpensive science book series such as *Frem* (Forward), which was issued in all the Scandinavian countries and reached the astonishing number of 156,000 subscribers in 1898, and the Norwegian *Bibliothek for de tusin hjem* (Library for a Thousand Homes), which published a translation of Spencer’s *Education* in 1887.²

The Scandinavian languages are quite similar, and in the nineteenth century publications and ideas frequently crossed the Scandinavian borders. This was certainly the case in the period from 1870 to 1920, when Scandinavian intellectuals shared their thoughts on science, society and literature in letters, lectures and periodicals. In spite of these Scandinavian networks of communication, however, the appropriation of foreign ideas such as Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary philosophy were to a large extent determined by national and even more local contexts. Thus, different aspects of their work were emphasized and a variety of interpretations were constructed in order to serve specific purposes.

In the case of Spencer, the decisive contexts were indeed very local. The most important arenas were the national universities in Sweden, Denmark and Norway since the vast majority of interpreters of Spencer’s ideas were university students, alumni and teachers. In the period under study there existed only one university in Denmark, University of Copenhagen from 1479, one in Norway, the Royal Frederik’s University in Kristiania (now Oslo) from 1811 and four in Sweden: the traditional universities in Uppsala from 1477 and in Lund from 1666 and the new university colleges in Stockholm and Gothenburg established in 1878 and 1891 respectively. Most of the commentators on Spencer’s ideas were connected to philosophy departments. These departments were important, since all university students in Scandinavia at this time were enrolled at the departments of philosophy for compulsory philosophy classes. Philosophy professors were thus influential in disseminating

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