Business, national narratives and path dependency – the case of dairy business in Denmark and Sweden

Mads Mordhorst
Center for Business History, CBS
Mmo.mpp@cbs.dk

This article analyzes how companies can be seen as cultural actors who are both producers and products of historical consciences.

The case is a comparative analyse of how the Nordic dairy company Arla Foods. Arla Foods is merger between a Swedish and Danish dairy company in year 2000. However after the merger has the perception of the company been very different in the two countries. In Sweden has the company had a positive image while it in Denmark has been on of the most sculled companies.

Through the comparative perspective the article seeks to achieve multiple purposes:

At the level of company does it seek a historical-cultural explanation for the negative attitude to in Denmark can Aral that cannot be explained by the events themselves. Arla has not behaved any differently than other companies. Furthermore, in Sweden has Arla not been exposed to negative criticism; indeed Swedes see Arla as a super brand.

At the broader national and contextual level is the objective to situate companies and business life as both embedded in and simultaneously creators of national identity and culture. It assert that the negative attitude towards Arla derives from the historically constructed Danish national identity; an identity to which the cooperative movement and the dairy industry themselves have actively contributed. This is in contrast to the Sweden where agriculture and cooperative movement do not play a key role in the creation of the modern national identity. Instead industry and entrepreneurship has been key elements in the Swedish narrative. Arla thereby become a subject to gain knowledge about the differences in the construction of the Danish and Swedish national identity.

At the theoretical/methodical level I aim to develop an analytical framework that combine a cultural-historical analyse with institutionalism. Form the cultural-historical angel the article draws on theories linked to the cultural and linguistic turn, and combines the history of memory theorised by Pierre Nora, with a narrative approach. In regard to institutionalism is the argument that historical identity narratives can be seen as informal institutions, which create path dependency.

In the first section I develop my theoretical approach. The second section outlines the case of Arla. The third section analyses how Aral respectively in Denmark and Sweden represent their own history at their webpages.