

EQUALITY

Equality – and Jante’s Law

Equality is a core concept in the North. So is Jante’s Law about “Do not think you are anything special”. The notion of equality is woven into the social model – and Jante’s Law is integral to the mentality. Both are challenged today. And Jante’s Law does not explain a large Nordic paradox relating to equality i.e. the absence of women in top management in the most equal countries in the world.

In 1933, Danish-Norwegian Aksel Sandemose committed Jante’s Law to paper. The ten commandments of Jante’s Law are:

- Do not think you are anything special.
- Do not think you are as good as us.
- Do not think you are cleverer than us.
- Do not deceive yourself that you are better than us.
- Do not think you know more than us.
- Do not think you are more than us.
- Do not think you are good at anything.
- Do not laugh at us.
- Do not think anyone cares about you.
- Do not think you can teach us anything.

There is some truth in Aksel Sandemose’s law, which takes its name from the fictive village of Jante, where everyone keeps an eye on everyone else and soon thwarts any attempt to stand out from the crowd. Northerners are somewhat cautious of attracting attention, which can perhaps be traced back to the old Nordic notion that happiness is best assured by taking some precautions, and that envy can be avoided through modest conduct.

The Scandinavian saying, “Pride comes before a fall”, could also be viewed as a revised version of Greek hubris. In other words, pride, i.e. thinking you are above everything and everyone, evokes the wrath of the gods and will be punished with nemesis. In the Nordics, there is a certain resistance to blowing your own trumpet, boasting about your own achievements, bragging, beating your own drum, drawing attention to yourself at the expense of others or the group – and generally just being “too much”. Managers who take all the credit for what a team has achieved are not popular in the North, and American bosses who wave their arms about and claim their skills outshine everyone else’s, or French CEOs who fail to tone down their arrogance, are met with skepticism – or even snorts of derision.

Jante's Law reflects a set of social ground rules for how people (should) interact in a village community about 100 years ago. And referring to Jante's Law, especially if other people fail to appreciate your very special genius, is still common. However, Jante is also being criticized and sent packing in a world where competition has become an important parameter. And incidentally, Jante's Law is not exclusive to the North, except perhaps for the fact that someone has been honest enough to write it down. Other societies have similar laws, for example in the form of unwritten social rules and social straitjackets. For instance, the Japanese have the saying "The nail that sticks up will be hammered down".

The most equal society in the world

Without doubt, Jante's Law does not sit well with people from cultures where drawing attention to yourself and your achievements, also at the cost of others, is more common. And with good reason. Not much positive can be said about social norms or written and unwritten rules that keep other people down. On the other hand, it is useful to differentiate between Jante's Law and the notion of equality that pervades Nordic society.

Equality, or at least the pursuit of equality, is a core concept in the Nordics, both politically and not least in personal interaction. Generally speaking, the Nordics are proud to have created the most equal societies in the world measured in social mobility, access to education, equal opportunities for both genders, equal rights to health care, longevity etc. Nordic lovers of the equality mindset tend to worry about the slightly rising inequality in the Nordic countries, and the facts back them up. In the North, the gap is growing between those with a good living standard – those who obtain an education and money, are not subject to crime and live for many years – and those at the bottom of society. In principle, everyone is offered the same opportunities, and the notion of equality is linked to the idea of social cohesion, i.e. the ideal of small social and cultural gaps between the groups in society and good contact between those with high and low status.

In the North, equality between people at work is worth striving for, is applauded and is very confusing. For naturally, Nordic organizations also have hierarchies, ranks, riches and power play. But hierarchies and power are often disguised in an attempt to show that "we are all equal here". Everyone knows that does not entirely ring true – but everyone acts as if it does.

For example, a Japanese stewardess working for the Scandinavian airline SAS had more than her fair share of trouble on her plate the first time she went out to eat with the rest of the crew during an international stop over. Everyone sat at the same table as the captain. You could even risk sitting right beside him. And for a Japanese woman raised to respect hierarchies, that was hard to swallow: "The most difficult aspect for me was ordering a meal before the captain and co-pilot ordered theirs. I simply couldn't bear to think I might order something more impressive than what they ordered. Just think if I ordered a big steak and the captain ordered a smaller one. ... When it was my turn, all my Scandinavian colleagues sat there saying 'Come on, it's your turn to order'. I gradually learned to accept it and now I think being together like that is nice."

The boss is a man

The idea of equality is dominant in Nordic workplaces, where it can be incredibly difficult to figure out who actually makes the decisions. At lunch, everyone sits in the same canteen. There are no set places and, like the SAS stewardess, you can even risk sitting down with your plate overflowing with cake right beside the top boss of the company and his modest plate of salad. The best tip if you want to avoid the CEO is to sit beside a woman. Because the boss is most likely to be a man – representing a Nordic, especially Danish, paradox: the striking lack of women at the top of the management pyramid.

Especially in private companies, men wear the trousers at the top despite the fact that young Nordic women overtook their male colleagues years ago in terms of education levels. Even Norway, which in the 1980s passed a statutory quota for women on the boards of listed companies (with a requirement of at least 40% representation of each gender – meaning 40% representation of women), has failed to utilise the full potential of both genders.

The British magazine *The Economist* calls the phenomenon “a Nordic mystery”. It calls into question, quite rightly, why countries that have done more for equality between men and women than any other countries still score so low in the statistics: “The Nordic countries have done more than anywhere else to provide women with equal opportunities. Maternity leave is generous. State provision of childcare is first-rate. Female university graduates outnumber males by six to four. Half of Finland’s cabinet ministers and 57% of Sweden’s are female. The latest Global Gender Gap Index, compiled by the World Economic Forum (WEF), awards the first five places to the Vikings: Iceland comes top, followed by Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The region has also led the world in introducing quotas for corporate boards. Norway started the trend, and now requires stock-market listed companies to allot at least 40% of board seats to women. Iceland, Finland and some other European countries have introduced similar requirements. But such rules cover only board seats, and only at listed firms. Visit a typical Nordic company headquarters and you will notice something striking among the standing desks and modernist furniture: The senior managers are still mostly men, and most of the women are PAs. The egalitarian flame that burns so brightly at the bottom of society splutters at the top of business.”

Equal opportunities, not equality

The people at the helm are nearly always men, and the magazine, like the equality researchers, is forced to admit that it is hard to find a single explanation for the lack of equality at the top of the business community. One group blames the men in power of nourishing ancient prejudices against women and their lack of leadership skills. Another group points out that women choose their own careers, including having more time with their children. None of this solves the mystery according to *The Economist*, since: “The Nordics can hardly be faulted for spending too little money: as a share of GDP their public spending on child care is between seven and nine times America’s (where the proportion is a measly 0.1%).”

Perhaps the welfare society and notions of equality, which offer Nordic families generous maternity schemes and kindergartens, could help to explain why the idea of equality is not reflected in the equal distribution of male and female leaders? For instance, Danish economics professor Nina Smith from Aarhus University has suggested two obvious explanations: Nordic women earn less than men, precisely because good maternity schemes tempt women to take longer leaves – while their male contemporaries are gaining valuable experience. And women who want careers in the North have more trouble paying for help at home than, for example, their American sisters. Because welfare schemes are financed by higher taxes.

The Economist points out that “when chores cannot be offloaded to domestic staff, working women still get lumbered with the time-inflexible household tasks, such as picking up children from school, whereas men do ‘their’ chores at the weekend.”

And perhaps that is why the egalitarian Nordic society with its well-educated women and the world’s highest female employment rate repeatedly brings up the rear in statistics of female CEOs in the private business community. And despite equal opportunities, seems unlikely to budge.