Mickwitz research project (outline); Working title: Colonial Connections and their Political Connotations in a North European Periphery – Danish and Swedish colonial trade, over seas networks and their symbolic values 1718-1803

The subject for this research project is to compare the Danish and Swedish Colonial politics during the 18th century. How did the governments, the different political parties, the trading companies and other economical actors build up and use their colonial contacts in the 18th century. How did the colonies, the colonial trade and the international contacts effect the domestic political and economical life? Did the cooperation efforts and the competition between Denmark and Sweden have just symbolic or a concrete meaning? The 18th century was a period when the modern diplomatic institutions were established as well as new institutional trade forms. New forums were under construction and on an individual level; the line between the private and the official sphere became unclear or undefined. The institutional development was dynamic, and the power relations including the way the politics was constructed differs over time, during this period. The institutional development, the political situation and the military, economical and other realities influenced on the political praxis. In a time when the communications were slow and the international politics were changing, the diplomats, the traders and other contact persons in countries far away, were of great importance.

During the rule of king Christian IV in the 17th century Denmark tried to increase its power by founding colonies or marketplaces all over the world. Colonies from this century are Trankebar in India, Fort Osu in the Gold coast, and the West Indian islands Saint Thomas and Saint John. In 1733 Saint Croix was bought from the French. The Danes allowed immigrants of other nations to move into their colonies, the colonies were not national symbols but symbols for the empire and the king ruled over many nationalities. In West India a rapid development took place and the sugar plantations flourished until the sugar beet became common in Europe. The slaves were freed in 1848.

In 1771 Gustav III became king of Sweden and he named Johan Liljencrantz secretary of state for the finances (statssekreterare för handels- och finansexpeditionen). The king had problems with the finances and with his position after his coup d'état supported by the French. Liljencrantz tried to make Sweden an important trading partner. He hoped for transit trade between Russia and Western Europe trough Sweden; that Sweden would get a part of the West Indian trade and supported a reform mercantilist philosophy. Liljecrantz pleaded for a better consular network. He suggested free harbours on Gotland and the west coast, colonies and active trade politics. His most important protectors were Ulrik and Carl Fredric Scheffer, the brothers had been among the architects for the Swedish foreign politics since the 1730s.

Colonies were a power symbol and Gustav III wanted to show his power by having an empire. The king bought Saint Barthélémy in the Caribbean from the French, probably not knowing what a poor island he had bought. The specific relation Sweden had to France and the domestic political climate at the time were the significant factors behind the acquisition of Saint Barthélémy. Formally Saint Barthélémy became Swedish when the first governor, Salomon von Rajalin, on the 7 of March 1785 put in at the island with the frigate Sprengtporten, some civil servants and a garrison. The harbour was immediately declared a porto franco, a free town in the spirit of Liljencrantz’s ideas. The city on the island – named Gustavia after the king in 1787 – grew on behalf of the sugar
trade in a couple of decades to be the sixth biggest town in the Swedish kingdom (as big as Uppsala and Gävle). The harbour lost its importance during the steamship’s era and the island was returned to France in 1878.

The growing British fleet and the British-French wars lead to different kinds of military problems during the century for Denmark and Sweden. During the Seven Years War Danish ships tried to profit on the war-embargos but were seized by the Englishmen. Thereafter the Swedish and the Danish fleets tried to patrol together with less success. France tried during the 1760s and 1770s to improve the collaboration between the states, to balance both the British and the Russian power.

In the 1790ies both Sweden and Denmark got into wars with the North African cities, several plans for convoying together in the Mediterranean were made to protect the trade. Tripoli was attacked by the Danes 1797 and by the Swedes 1803.

In my study I will include both economical and political networking. My focus is on the semi-public arenas, on the meeting practise among traders, politicians and diplomats, on the transmission of information and knowledge, and how the “modern” institutions over time consolidate into established forms. The symbolic level, how the contacts with Asia, Africa and America were used on the domestic political arena will also be of interest. The strictly economical level is quite well analyzed in former research; this will be of great interest for this study, but not a subject for a new analyze. There is a religious level that might be of some interest; Lutheran priests were sent to foreign places during the whole century trying to spread Lutheran Christianity and culture. The clerical contacts and the scientific journeys will be included as a part of the political and economical debate and where their networks had consequences on this arena – but the history of science or religion per se will be excluded. E.g. Christian VI expeditions to Egypt and Ethiopia will be seen in their political context, not as scientific expeditions to the ancient Egyptian world.

My purpose is to write a political study on the contacts Sweden and Denmark were using as the countries were declining into a peripheral existence. I will analyze the political and economical field in partly cultural terms, to expose the culture of the international arena from the view of a small state and on the other hand the part the international networks played on the domestic scene. Earlier research has essentially focused on national issues and put their emphasis on the national interests. I will focus on the contacts and the tension which developed between the various interested parties. The old idea of the state as an organic unit with one single will shall be doubted; instead I will focus on the various opinions and the interactive development within the administration and use the comparison to get into a more general discussion.

The sources for this investigation are tractates, protocols of the council, concepts, registrations, memorials and other official or para-official writings. The protocols from the diet and the secret committee, where the colonial policy was formed, are essential. The Danish foreign policy was officially ruled by the German chancily until 1770, practically the king and his council held the policy under straight supervision; the chancily’s archives in the National Archive in Copenhagen will be of central interest.

The fleet was a key to the over sea contacts. In the Archive of War in Sweden (Krigsarkivet; Sjöexpeditioner and Generaladjutanten för flottan) and in the National archive (Riksarkivet; Konvojkommissariet) rapports and administrative
material can be found. In Gothenburg the archive of the Swedish East India company is situated (Göteborgs universitetsbibliotek: Svenska ostindiska kompaniets arkiv). Private documents of importance are held in the National archive in Stockholm and in some cases in the library at the Uppsala University (Uppsala universitetsbibliotek). The archives of Carl Gustav Tessin, Arvid Horn, Claes Ekeblad, Ulrik Scheffer (Riksarkivet: Rydholmsamlingen), Anders Johan von Höpken, Joachim von Düben (senior and junior), N.P Gedda, Carl Rudenschöld, and Johan Mauritz Klinckowström are among others of importance. Some letters concerning the queen Lovisa Ulrikas ideas, contacts and influence could have relevance for this field of research, e.g. letters from crown prince Gustav and his stab in Paris 1771. In the National Archive in Stockholm is a collection of diplomatic data, as correspondence from Copenhagen, copied into microfilm from other archives.