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Reproducing the Norwegian Myth: Egalitarianism and the Normal

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Abstract

English-language accounts of the Norwegian state describe a welfare state marked by national egalitarianism. This article argues that such an impression is both analytically unsound and misleading, and that its sponsors are in fact doing the work of nationalism rather than doing the political science under whose auspices they publish. The article contrasts such accounts with critiques of the notion of the 'egalitarian Norwegian' in the Norwegian language and with writings on the nationalism of Norway by Norwegian anthropologists. In doing so, it demonstrates how easily social scientists may misinterpret the politics and sociology of other countries when they are represented in international debate by a few centrally placed authors who reproduce the myths of nationhood.

Reproducing the Norwegian myth: egalitarianism and the normal.

Introduction

Most non-specialist scholars know only of Norway that it is an egalitarian country with a strong welfare state, buoyed up by income from its generous oil-economy. This general picture is often called into service either to dismiss the reality of the welfare state as a viable political structure without excessive income, or to idealise the Norwegians as environmentalist egalitarians with, perhaps, naïve expectations of human nature. However, the image of the egalitarian north does not spring from innocent observation, but is, like most national myths, carefully and continually reproduced by key actors in both academic and political contexts. In this paper, my aim is to show how internal debate – particularly among Norwegian Anthropologists – is poorly represented in literature that is published in the English language, which, instead, over-represents the notion of an egalitarian nation for an international audience.

Comparative research between countries is barely a field of study, more a widespread research practice. For many researchers, comparison involves a survey of relevant literature, and occasionally some field research, while for others it involves in-depth long-term study in one of two locations (temporal, virtual or geographical) to be compared. It is often when conducting the latter kind of research that one begins to question the assumptions that may be widely circulating in the former type of research about, say, a nation, as they begin to appear more and more like unexamined stereotypes. A key barrier to comparative research is where language is not shared. Where languages are limited to relatively small population groups, the potential for the literature published in more international languages, like English, to be restricted is clearly greater. For the scholar with a long term interest in a particular country, the requirement to learn the language is imperative. However, for the researcher wishing to paint with a broad brush and to take in varied examples from a wide range of contexts, this may not be practicable. Even more so, then, the policy researcher on the lookout for policy lessons from abroad, for example, is likely to resort to general summaries of national conditions, or at the most, to a range of English-language literature available about a country. McDonald has pointed out the way that national stereotypes serve as shorthand way-markers, and the way that they rely on a kernel of truth in order to be convincing. National stereotypes serve a particular purpose in the maintenance of nation-states, also, in reinforcing images of one's own nation in comparison to others. Yet such stereotypes can easily find their way into policy analysis, especially when the literature is limited. The reference to policy analysis is important, perhaps more important than in other areas, since its consequences can be profound in terms of new policy introductions in other countries, and the material impact this may have on very many people's lives.

The ideal egalitarians

The widely held belief that Norwegians are egalitarian, and that Norwegian politics is generally participative, is often used to suggest that Norwegian political processes might hold out a model of participatory government and planning that should have lessons for other countries. It is not surprising that Norway has this reputation, since it has been carefully nurtured, both locally and internationally, by a relatively small group of influential intellectuals writing in both domestic and international contexts. Central among such intellectuals are academics such as Stein Rokan and Øyvind Østerud, perhaps two of the most influential Norwegian political scientists. Østerud's striking narrative of the political history of Norway exemplifies the promotion of the Norwegian egalitarian in English language publications. Østerud served as the chair of a three year long research

programme funded by the Norwegian Research Council into domestic notions and practices of power, and was responsible for the authoritative summary of the project's findings (2005). The author presents an authoritative and exclusive narrative of the Norwegian State, providing an easy reference point for international comparison, and one which has already been taken up by international scholars. Although the article is quite clearly a summary which lacks the nuance of an internal debate, most of the more nuanced literature is not available outside Scandinavia, nor in the English language. The article is thus an important gatekeeper to academic representations of the Norwegian state.

In 'The Peculiarities of Norway', Østerud, professor of Political Science, sets out a basic definition of what makes Norway different from other countries (2005). In doing so, he draws on a long tradition of characterising both the Norwegian state and nation in terms which are deeply lodged in popular and political consciousness within Norway. Østerud sets out three key features which make Norway an interesting political case for international comparative studies:

> '1. Norway is a stable democracy … a society with striking egalitarianism, a strong public sector, and a culture of cooperative institutions which merges private with public interests.
> 2. Norway's peculiar international position as a rich country on the north-western Atlantic fringe of Europe, struggling to retain a faltering security guarantee from the United States, and having twice turned down in national referendums government proposals to join the European Union.
> 3. Norway's posture in international affairs, strong in its defence of national resource protection and its assertion of sovereignty, but equally strong in its moral policy of engagement as a champion of foreign aid and the global environment, and as an eager peace negotiator in the Middle East, Sri Lanka, Columbia and elsewhere.' (Østerud 2005: 705)

Of these three factors, it is the idea of a rich yet egalitarian nation which has positioned Norway as a most exotic land on the European periphery, often invoked as a kind of welfare paradise, courtesy of oil-income, high taxation and egalitarian culture, and, as such, as a kind of exemption to the normal rules of European economics and politics. On the basis of its egalitarian culture, Norway can be seen as both a source of inspiration for other countries and as an impossible model, an anomaly requiring explanation (Graubard 1986). The vision of Norway as an egalitarian, if unsophisticated land can be traced much further back, though, appearing for example in Mary Wollestonecraft's 1794 letters, where she declares that Norway has 'a degree of equality which I have seldom seen elsewhere', and the Norwegians to be 'the most free community I have ever observed.' (letter VII, 1794). Even then, Norwegians and Danes appeared to her to be 'the least oppressed people of Europe', with a free press and local autonomy, eulogised with a generous dose of happiness. Sadly on her arrival at Christiania she encountered 'the cloven foot of despotism', political monsters in the form of the grand bailiffs, mostly noblemen from Copenhagen with a degree of power over the country judges from their connections at the Danish court (letter XIII).

The theme of egalitarianism is a leitmotif of Norwegian political and social science, reflecting as it does a political trope which has been dominant for much of the twentieth century and continues to hold a central position in public debate. However, the notion of egalitarianism can easily drift from being used to describe a political project to suggest a

homogenous state of affairs. This process is assisted by a particular interpretation of Norwegian history which is called into service to support what I will call the 'Egalitarian view' of Norway. Østerud's description serves well here to illustrate the selection of key historical moments. It is not my intention to claim that the history so promoted is wrong in any factual sense, but to suggest that the sheer dominance of this particular version of history ignores a line of critique which lies within the Norwegian language literature, out of sight of the interested non-Norwegian-speaking observer. Østerud begins his description of 'the Norwegian System' by describing 'a stable democratic tradition going back to the early nineteenth century', characterised by a smooth transition from a weak nobility, to a strong constitution asserted in 1814 as Norwegian sovereignty emerged from the Danish empire into a union with Sweden. The assertion of Norway shortly after independence as 'one of the most democratic systems in Europe' (that Østerud takes directly from Rokkan 1966:75) is based on the establishment of broad then universal suffrage early in relation to other European nation-states. Norway was one of the first European states to offer all adults the vote, both in relation to land-ownership and to gender. Secession from the union with Sweden (in 1905) is thus allied to a fundamental democratisation through universal suffrage. According to Øysterud (again in line with Rokkan 1966), a form of 'democratic nationalism' thus emerged , which was to be recognisable through much of the twentieth century. The emergence of the Labour Party as a hegemonic force after 1945 consolidated the autonomy of the local state, in a nation-state 'tied to centre-left forces for more than 100 years' (707). Popular mobilisation was expressed through the activities of a number of social movements (including language, religious and philanthropic movements), in contrast to the weak elitist centre in a capital perceived as the '"least national" place in Norway' (707).

In comparison, Rokkan's account of 'Numerical democracy and corporate pluralism' (1966), does not present Norway as an egalitarian culture of ethnic homogeneity. Instead, he emphasises the conflicting political mobilisations that swept the country through independence, and he outlines both the weaknesses and the fragile coalitions wrought even within the dominant Labour party. His point, rather, is that cleavages in early 20th century Norwegian politics did not coalesce on any one axis, and therefore allowed a multi-party system to flourish. Even with a dominant Labour party post-war, conflicting pressures led to electoral strategies that ploughed a centralist course, bargaining between alliances of associations and corporations (1966: 106). In contrast, Østerud seems to be formulating an argument relating some kind of national force or tradition for equality to the development of a particular kind of welfare state. In stating that 'egalitarianism has been a strong force in the normative fabric of Norwegian society' (707), he adopts a dominant discourse in the idea of the Norwegian nation-state, and immediately reinforces this position with reference to the strength of the farmer and peasant freeholder movements and the weakness of elites leading to a unique form of cooperation between capital and labour. Further, he asserts that 'the character of Norwegian capitalism partly explains Norway's egalitarian and popular state policies and its universalistic welfare system', hence arguing that both a tradition for egalitarianism accounts for the particularly shared capitalism in Norway, and that the Norwegian democratic capitalism accounts for the popularity of egalitarian politics. This neat symmetrical argument is now well-established in accounts of the Norwegian welfare state and forms a canon of political literature internationally. It is odd, even so, to find it resonating in the English language work of an author who has written in Norwegian of the construction of idealised farming culture as authentically Norwegian by 19th century

elites[1]. Neumann reiterates this critique in his discourse analysis of the idea of 'Norway' (2001), pointing out that of the national heroes who formulated the independent constitution of 1814, most were Danish or Danish-educated civil servants who formed an elite core which basically ran the then-colony, an issue usefully skipped over in popular heroic stories of the founding of the nation-state. The vision of an independent yeomanry is a seductive symbol for national identification and serves well to legitimise the notion of an inclusive egalitarian state.

Two further comments on accounts of national history are relevant here. Firstly, national histories rely on a narrative structure which remains causal, drawing links between conditions and actions, and between social organisation and political organisation. These may remain implicit – indeed implicit links are those which have become successful enough not to require comment – yet are essential for political historical narrative to function as a legitimising rhetoric. We must believe that there is a logical continuity between the relative autonomy of land-owning farmers and fishermen, individualism, the anti-authoritarian tradition and stable social-democracy for the narrative to have its convincing effect, yet the idea that anti-authoritarianism sits comfortably alongside low levels of tax evasion will strike most English readers as anti-intuitive (since tax evasion is often understood there as the concretisation of anti-authoritarianism, the individual good more generally accepted as irreconcilable with the public good). Secondly, the taken-for-granted use of national terms serves consistently to reinforce the idea of nation-hood in itself in the kind of everyday reinforcement of the nation that Billig calls 'banal' (1995). This is visible in Lafferty's 1981 challenge to Martinussen's 1973/77 claim that the majority of Norwegians were apolitical and apathetic, not participating in democracy or political life. For Martinussen, this suggested that the health of Norwegian political engagement was not so rude as many politicians and political scientists preferred to believe, thus proffering a critique of the idealised egalitarian Norwegian polity. In response, Lafferty examines a different set of criteria to ascertain what level of participation exists, and by widening the criteria for political participation, shows that in his definition, political participation was in fact higher in Norway than in most other countries (1981). What such arguments take for granted is that a country is a relevant unit of comparison for political activities, and this itself is central to the performance of nationhood. By assuming a correlation between nation-state and political tradition, practice or pattern, the nation-state itself is implicitly supported as a unit of cultural analysis. In the search for discernable regularities, differentiation is negated and an unreflective nationalism reinforced.

The vision of Norway as egalitarian is paradoxically strengthened by accounts of current changes in governing structures. Even while arguing that the vision of Norway put forward in the Norwegian tradition of comparative political research - that of a 'corporatist mode of government, the strength of the rural districts and the periphery, the egalitarianism and the deep structure of social democratic norms across the political spectrum' - is now an outdated stereotype, Østerud implies that it was formerly a fair representation (Ibid. 705). Indeed, he and Selle argue that '[r]ule by popular consent is weaker than it was just a few decades ago, even if citizens do have a stronger position in terms of formalised rights, consumer options, welfare and education' (Østerud and Selle 2006: 25). The implication of statements that Norway had 'a stable democratic tradition going back to the early nineteenth century' (Ibid: 27) is to normalise the idea of stability and to reinforce it by seeing recent changes as radical and contrary. Implicitly,

[1] Østerud 1984, cited in Hylland Eriksen 1993 p.49

(by tacitly assuming state welfare) it suggests that a strong state has supported welfare politics throughout the 20th century. This argument appears unaffected by the argument of another of the Maktutrednings publications that the vision of the monolithic state as solitary provider of welfare is a myth ignoring the history both of cooperation between government and voluntary organisations from at least the 19th century, and the existence of market-actors who have always delivered services in Norway (Eikås and Selle 2000).

Nevertheless, there are changes in the form and practices of welfare delivery, and Østerud indicates the kinds of changes in political stability which have occurred in recent years, with the move towards a more neo-liberal politico-economic system which, although much less radical than changes experienced in the UK, for example, has led to increased decentralisation and privatisation of public services, and to what he terms the emergence of a 'new working class' of 'immigrants… working in low-paid jobs or unemployed and receiving welfare benefits' (716). This 'immigrant population', described as split 'along ethnic lines', and being 'in constant demographic flux', is according to Østerud structurally unable to form popular movements along the lines of Norwegian class history. Østerud briefly mentions 'a kind of minority hierarchy in Norway', with Sami at the top having their own representative institution, the Sami parliament. Rhetorically, this set of statements performs a number of functions. It reduces ethnicity to a set of segregated unities, none of which can rise to the political organisation of the social movements which formed the unified Norway that he refers to. Who is it, for example, that hierarchises these minorities, and what is the relationship between population size and political activism? How many of the working class are 'immigrant', and why is it suggested that they enjoy no forms of solidarity with other working class persons? Such statements are, in my view, lazy state-like summarisations of poorly researched processes combined with populist opinions, which do little to account for the political realities in different localities across the Norwegian territory or across generations or other social spectra. Nor are they uncriticised within Norway, where a lively controversy surrounded the publication of a critique of implicit Norwegian racism by the anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, since reworked and published in English (2002, 2006). Gullestad's work is not difficult to access, and she had a high media profile, hence it is only by wilful neglect that authors such as Østerud can engage in the kind of colonial stereotyping that is described above.

By referring to these factors as recent changes, Østerud further reinforces an impression that prior to these, the Norwegian state was thoroughly egalitarian and homogenous with no ethnic differentiation. Here, Østerud mistakes the existence of ethnic difference for its acknowledgement by the state or the dominant polity. Sami ethnic difference did not suddenly appear during the Alta crisis which led to the founding of the Sami parliament, but as a result of the crisis and the organised Sami demonstrations, Sami nationalism was consolidated and the Sami presence made unavoidable in the Norwegian state. Sami were by no means the only ethnic minority in Norway (we need only acknowledge the Tatars, Kven and Jews – before and after exclusion - before even drawing attention to the presence nationals of other European countries) even if they became the largest identifiable group. Even so, this large population has been achieved only by grouping together diverse social groups into southern, Sea and inland, and then all Sami, after many years of state-sponsored denial of their 'authenticity' (see Ween 2005, Ween *et al* 2007). That Østerud dismisses such differences as insignificant demonstrates the extent to which he is central in the nation-building activities which he himself describes. His tone of concern that recent changes break down an egalitarian ideal lends credence to this suggestion.

It can be argued that the national consensus which Østerud describes (as being in the process of disappearing) is one which confuses a fictive kinship for political unity. If the imagined Norway is one of ethnic unity (the 'nation' of the essentialised nation-state), it is one in which only certain foreigners are considered ethnically different. The immigrant working classes he identifies are not fellow Scandinavians, Finns or Danes, for example, but are those considered ethnically separate. That is to say, Scandinavians who for generations have crossed borders and intermarried are not considered significantly ethnically different to be worth recording as one or more social groups. In other words, other white Scandinavians are easily incorporated into the Norwegian family. Those who maintain an element of ethnic difference, be they Sami or Pakistani, struggle to be accepted as Norwegian. This has been much clearer since the emphatic rise in international adoption into Norway. A generation of adult Norwegians who 'look different' are accepted as Norwegian through their adoption into Norwegian ways of being, or as Signe Howell puts it, they are tied into familial relations and transformed into 'typical Norwegian' children through processes of 'kinning' which creates the 'Norwegian family' (2001:84). This is not a pseudo-biological discussion about race, but an argument about nationality. If Norwegian-ness is achievable through incorporation into a family, yet not through civic participation or language aquisition, then it is clear that nation is an effect of kinship, either biological or social. Just as Bowie demonstrates for Welsh nationality (1993), belonging is tied to kinship at the core, and not citizenship or other forms of participation even if, as Strathern showed (1981), the core of that kinship can be remarkably slippery to identify. We ought not to be surprised at this, as some definition of kinship has been central to all European national movements in one way or another. I identify kinship rather than biological relatedness in order to highlight that kinship is a selective form of relationship, albeit one with strongly normative social rules. Hence, Scandinavian nationality is thus significant for Norwegian nationality much more strongly than a broader European nationalism.

Norway is also seen as a specific case in a broader Nordic political tradition exemplified in a collection of essays from 1986 entitled 'Norden, the passion for equality', first published as articles of the Journal of American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Dædalus* (Graubard 1986). In his introduction, Graubard argues that the Nordic states fulfil the dream of de Tocqueville of a 'true passion for equality' where comprehensive welfare produced nations free of poverty or racial tension. Indeed, he goes as far as to argue that, in the Nordic countries, 'the dreams of nineteenth century utopians have been fully realized' (Ibid. 11). And yet, even in these utopian lands, where criticism of the state is not only tolerated but welcomed, the populations appear unsatisfied and the model of the egalitarian welfare state has somehow not broken through as a global model of ideal statehood. Hans Fredrik Dahl accuses 'those equal folk' of not only being so much more 'leftish' than other Europeans in their egalitarian demands for the dismantling of privileges, but of simultaneously being 'slightly conceited, perhaps even a little provincially moralistic, in their pride of the equity in their national systems of distribution' (Dahl, 1986: 99). What Nordic nations share, he argues, is a profound commitment to the notion of *rettferd* (or justice), and an unrelenting social-democratic propaganda of equality. 'There is little pathos in the style of Nordic man, less mythos in his conceptions of the world. Pragmatism is what filters out when Nordic value preferences, be they laborite in orientation or bourgeois, are probed', he states (Ibid. 100). These somewhat pathetic claims and statements serve as all stereotypes serve, to gather around them an aura of unity and solidity. They lend credence to the idea of national and pluri-national characters and beliefs, and support the idea that the Nordic

countries are an assembly of peoples, each with distinctive characters and social structures, equitable and egalitarian though they may be. As such, these statements must be read as nationalist rather than analytical arguments.

Sørensen and Stråth later set out a more intellectual case for Scandinavia as a whole having a unique experience of the Enlightenment based on a particular political culture (1997) with a Nordic protestant ethic incorporating 'the principle of unconditional personal freedom and the supreme value of the individual' (p.4). They seem torn, however, between the desire to outline a set of rational causes for the development of particular national welfare state politics within the wider Scandinavian North ('*Norden*'), and the recognition that the idea of '*Norden'* served as a political construct to support nation-states. That is, while they suggest that '*Norden* exists as a construct based on history' (p.19), the notion that the nations were also constructs based on history is underplayed. In his contribution to this debate, Trägårdh picks up on the three key notions on which such arguments are based. Firstly, he notes the idea of a specific political culture, one with which Østerud is also concerned. However, Trägårdh's analysis is on the 'social contract', the idea of an alliance between the individual and the state (as opposed to welfare delivered via other organisations, such as church, charity or family)[2]. In order to explain the strength of a welfare state based on this individualist social contract, Trägårdh turns to suggestions that 'the "individualism" of the Nordic welfare state has cultural roots that antedate by far the family policies that were instituted mostly after 1970' (p.255). This is probably the clearest example of the analytical slippage which involves an approach to explaining political constellations through recourse to national ideology, the idea of a shared 'folk' culture and the fellowship of equal individuals based on shared smallholding economies.

A partial critique of these approaches from within the political economy literature is found in Barth, Moene and Wallerstein's (2003) account of the Scandinavian model of fiscal redistribution. Here, with a clear focus on the economic mechanics of the state, the authors question why the Scandinavian lands have such an egalitarian distribution of incomes (8), in order to challenge the notion of egalitarianism being based on some kind of social zeitgeist. Yet in order to ask this question, they start with a view of Scandinavia according to the UN's Human Development Report, which suggests that 'the Scandinavian lands are among the most egalitarian in the world' (8, my translation), defined via the lowest pay gap before tax (c.f. Østerud's definition related to suffrage). That is, Scandinavian *salaries* are the most egalitarian in the world. This sliding of economic details into generalisations occurs again and again throughout the literature on the Scandinavian welfare states even where it is the focus of critique. Barth, Moene and Wallerstein present, in fact, a cogent critique of the conventional explanations of this income-evenness. They begin by identifying classic explanations of the limited transferability of the Scandinavian model of economic redistribution which they set up as 'strawmen' for their preferred explanation, yet these strawmen are interesting in the extent to which they reflect popular perceptions outside the narrow economic expert debates of much of the rest of their exposition. They consist of conventions which are applied more widely than the economic, but are often used to characterise the Scandinavian states as a whole. These include reference to the strength of the labour movement which has pressed capital interests into political and economic concessions, the notion that Scandinavian states rely on small homogeneous societies with strongly

[2] Although his characterisation of 'Anglo-American' welfare being distributed not directly to individuals is hard to recognise from a British perspective.

egalitarian preferences. Classic criticisms include the Conservative suggestion that Scandinavian capitalism lacks entrepreneurs, since excessive social security reduces the risk-taking qualities of capitalists, and the critique from the Left that union leaders fail their members' interests by agreeing to binding arbitrations which give consistent pay moderation in the public sector. On the contrary, Barth and his colleagues argue that centralised national wage bargaining could not survive without the support of both workers and capitalist interests, and the authors demonstrate how the state's representative, as arbitrator, effectively completes the triad of negotiations, since wage moderation helps to stabilise economic conditions to the benefit of the government of the day. In brief, their argument suggests that the more centralised and coordinated wage settlements are, the smaller the pay gap, the smaller the pay gap, the greater the political support for welfare state social security and the greater the generosity of social security and the smaller the section of population living under the poverty line. In their view, this virtuous circle of stabilising pressure between centralised organisations has been the cause of financial stability, and they point to both the fact of Sweden and Norway's disastrous history of employment conflict and strikes (with the world's highest number of work days lost in the 1920s and 30s), and to their poverty and inequality prior to the establishment of the particular constellation of powerful interests in the post-war period to emphasise that the Scandinavian countries were not magically endowed with personal or collective qualities of egalitarianism. On the contrary, they seem to be suggesting that a happy coincidence enabled the Scandinavians to discover that centralised wage bargaining and generous welfare reinforced each other in the interests of generalised economic stability. What characterises the Scandinavian welfare state (and in particular the Norwegian), in their view, is the particular constellations of power which see national wage negotiations, and a welfare state which offers social security to a wide sector of the population through democratic institutions.

This attempt to break down some orthodoxies used to describe the Scandinavian welfare states, and Norway in particular, offers a direct challenge to dominant explanations of the conditions for successful welfare states, not least through the reference to far from egalitarian conditions pre-dating the welfare state. The harsh capitalist and hierarchical conditions described by classic authors such as Hamsun (1890/2001) and Kielland (1882/2006), or indeed by Ibsen are otherwise absent from the characterisations of the 'egalitarian Norwegian'. Hence, they show that it is not possible to explain the strong welfare state through an invocation of equality-loving people. However, their economic analysis does little to address wider perceptions of generalised egalitarianism. Part of the difficulty here also lies in the ambiguity of Østerud's term 'political culture', as it is unclear whether this always refers to a way of doing Politics and statecraft, or a general perception of acceptable political behaviour, or even the general trend of postwar political activity. Rather than describing an economic situation, the notion of an egalitarian political culture is widely taken both internally and internationally to describe a sort of collective personality trait (an approach most crudely expressed in, for example, Jonassen 1983) and, indeed, it is hard to judge whether there exist any causal relations between the widespread importance of notions of egalitarianism, economic conditions, and national or patriotic constructions. Given the post-war economic success of the Scandinavian countries and their predominant discourse of equalities, it is hardly surprising that strenuous efforts have been made to link one with the other in an effort to explain the peculiar characteristics of the Scandinavian social economies, and certainly the principle of social and economic equality was the driving ideological force of the Labour party itself. Yet universal welfare was advocated in other European countries in the post-war period without equality being a noticeable shared

national characteristic. Perhaps one might argue that the widespread belief in equality helped to sustain the political consensus in favour of welfare, since there was no popular body of interest to undermine it in the style of British aristocracy and a large merchant class? Yet Sweden and Denmark retained a significant upper class with their welfare state alongside a dominant Lutheran religion and a public ethic of equality. If one needs to go into detail to explain the reasons why these differences were significant, then the superficial notion of the Nordic welfare state being reliant on a culture of egalitarianism starts to look rather weak.

In their discussion of the social construction of 'Norden' (the extra-Scandinavian North), Sørensen and Stråth are also at pains to demonstrate that Scandinavian as a category has little substance, other than to bolster the national projects of the constituent nations, and, indeed, throughout the collection there is a noticeable national slant to the contributions from the perspectives of their authors' locations. Yet even in doing so, their ambition is to trace a particular development trajectory common to the Nordic countries, a 'Nordic Enlightenment' with the peasant as its guiding light. In Norway, they argue, the peasants were carriers of freedom and equality, 'the core of the folk, not as a passive crowd but as the incarnation and manifestation of the general will' (8). The figure of the heroic yeoman farmer as a pillar of democratic participation thus takes on an iconic form, which goes beyond the historical significance of the agricultural economy[3]. The continued maintenance of this portrayal of the Norwegian society and state offers little insight into the reality of the variable status of egalitarianism or its meaning in local social contexts. Although more nuanced pictures of Norwegian social and political economy can be found, particularly in the Nordic languages, much of the English language literature, being concerned with drawing comparative descriptions of Norwegian development, refers to core concepts in Norwegian political life of equality and sameness, political engagement, and high levels of state legitimacy. By drawing such concepts at the scale of the Norwegian, these descriptions both level out the differentiation within Norway and contribute to a nation-building discourse which then contributes, in a self-reinforcing way, to the notion of the homogeneous Norwegian nation-state.

One is left with a vision of the Norwegian state having been a benign consensus between capital and social movements, peopled by strongly egalitarian individuals supported by a generous welfare state. This, in my experience is a popular view of Norway from abroad, as well as being of importance within the country. That this view prevails is not surprising, as it not only reinforces an image which is necessary to support idealised political models, but it also represents the views of a dominant, central Norwegian political class. Similar views can be found in public documents which emphasise democratic local government with broad redistributive functions (e.g. Birch and Christoffersen et al 1981). There has been, indeed, a fairly consistent interpretation of Scandinavian political cultures as egalitarian, democratic and socially liberal, which seems to have withstood the emergence of contradictory evidence, such as the forced sterilisation of disabled or mentally ill people in Sweden, the mistreatment of the children of German officers and Norwegian women (the so-called '*tyskebarn*'), and the strength – if in small numbers - of violent neo-Nazi and Hell's Angels organisations. While these

[3] There are further parallels to be drawn here with other romantic movements of the 19th century. The role of the peasant as proto or arch-French, embodying the heart of the nation, for example, a romanticism reinvigorated in the 1960s with the back-to-the-land movements, deserves more comparative analysis in this context.

examples might be explained away as exceptions to prove a general rule, it is also possible that they are systematically avoided in the general narrative of Norwegian politics and history. On the other hand, there are other arguments which cast doubt on the impeccable image of egalitarianism.

Challenging orthodoxies

Among the English language texts which interrogate Norwegian egalitarianism, Marianne Gullestad's detailed ethnographic research into everyday life in various Norwegian contexts is the most detailed, and several of her books have been translated into English, as well as various English-language articles (1992, 1996). She herself summarises her work in a collection of essays devoted to empirical interrogation of the notion of '*likhet*', which encompasses both sameness, egalitarianism and equality (Lien et al 2001). Gullestad argues, first of all, that egalitarian individualism is often said to be a characteristic of the whole of the Western world (i.e., of Western Modernism), though academics and others have asserted a particular Norwegian variety (Gullestad 2001). Its key form is a specially strong link between a need for people to feel similar in order to feel equal which, she suggests, forms a culturally-specific means to resolve the ideological conflict between the individual and society that is a central feature of Modernity. Gullestad's empirical research on family life, neighbourliness, friendship and personal narrative leads her to a particular perspective on being alike, based on the idea that in informal contexts Norwegian people need to feel alike in order to feel equal, leading to a tendency to reinforce similarity (or sameness, as Gullestad refers to it) and avoid situations where difference is emphasised. Once likeness has been established, differences can then be explored and individuality again becomes a positive quality. The positive emphasis on similarity contributes to established narratives about the Norwegian welfare state, which Gullestad describes in the context of Østerud's third face of Norway, the role of international peace broker and aid-giver, where Norway is presented as a 'particularly homogeneous, with equal opportunities, tolerant, antiracist and peace-making people' (Ibid.: 63). The presence of immigrants, for example, who do not seek to make their difference invisible, threatens the imagined community of Norwegianness, and immigrants are systematically trained to play down their difference through obligatory 'integration' training. Gullestad thus demonstrates the centrality of 'likhet' to domestic notions of nationhood, and indicates why this is put forward on the international stage as a characteristic of Norwegianism, also through political commentary.

Yet there is a tension, even here, between abstract theorising about the notion of egalitarianism and the recognition that narratives of nationhood are, indeed, narratives, which seldom have secure or consistent content, as Hylland Eriksen stresses (1993). Lien, for example, points out that Gullestad's empirical work on *likhet* is very much based in southern Norway, and has less applicability in the far northern coastal town where she conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork both in the 1980s and more recently. There, she explains, difference is much more taken for granted, and newcomers are incorporated in quite different ways, through stages of partial incorporation into local social exchanges, where the closest form of social relation is established through exchange of goods, particularly foods (2001). These different ways of managing difference reflect the problem with national discourse, which should be recognised as sets of discourses rather than accurate direct reflections of practice.

The egalitarian image is further undermined in relation to the Norwegian regions in particular, to the political and social situation of the Sami, and to the politics of ethnicity.

The position of the Sami in relation to the Norwegian state is complex, and I do not intend to try to expand upon a theme which is not within my research field, but it should at the very least be noted that the very existence of the Sami parliament is a result of enduring political resistance. Whether this resistance could be described as a civil war or as a revolution is the focus of some debate, but it can be related to a form of nationalism which, in common with many other European nationalisms, tended towards the colonial. Attempts to transform Sami people into Norwegian nationals bear much in common with attempts to wipe out minority languages and identities in Britain (e.g. nineteenth century attempts to eradicate the Welsh language through enforced use of English) and in France (the enforcement of a common language, French, was experienced across the regions as a violent imposition, reinforced through the importation of French-speaking teachers who forbade the use of dialects in schools). Certainly in the French case, there is some tension between the notion that sharing a common language is a condition for sharing citizenship in a nation and being in a direct relationship to the state, and the practice of attempted eradication of dialects and other languages that is a core process of colonisation, whereby resistance to conforming to the ideals of a envisaged national model leads to exclusion from the 'fellowship' of the nation. By simply setting aside the 'Sami question' as a recent disruption to general Norwegian state history, one can suppose that all other Norwegians share a nationality through common language and allegiance to one state and one monarchy. Nowadays, a genuflection in the direction of Sami as a relatively harmless (read 'domesticated' and/or 'peripheral') ethnic minority with noble ancestry is common, yet the existence of other minorities, such as Tatars and other travellers, is still effectively silenced. Whereas now one might debate the place of immigrants from outside Scandinavia or Europe, minorities from within are largely invisible, even despite Hylland Eriksen's witty and devastating critique of the notion of the homogeneity of the Norwegian nation (1993).

Yet even aside from the question of ethnic groups, the question of economic equality deserves some closer inspection. Equality in Norway has been practiced differently in relation to the regions, and a key text in this regard must be Brox's 'What's happening in Northern Norway' ('*Hva skjer i nord-Norge?*') , an ethnographic investigation into the impact of the centrally developed post-war economic development plan for the northern region of the country (1972). Brox set out to examine the effects of implementation of a plan whose ambitions were based on rational-choice economic theory developed in the capital from the perspective of a state-view of national cohesiveness. The plan was able to be conceptualised as progressive because of the categories and measures used to define the regions. In a classic policy process of defining a problem into existence (see Mitchell), a research consultancy set up in 1948 to study the economics of northern Norway began with a summary of conditions. For example, they observed that despite having around 12% of the population, the region produced only 6% of the national product, in other words, production in the north was only half the national average per head of population. This was put down to the fact that economic activity was mostly in areas with low profits, and that production levels were too low. With this starting point, Brox details how it was impossible for central state policy actors to appreciate the value of subsistence activities which lay outside the economic realm, and which, in turn, contributed significantly to the quality of life of people living in the North. A traditional pattern of combining seasonal salaried labour with non-monetary exchange practices and mixed subsistence farming and fishing was effectively undermined by a set of economic and infrastructure plans which aimed to resettle the population in more concentrated settlements. Although this was more convenient for factory-style labour, it made subsistence activities almost impossible, and hence reduced much of the

population to a form of economic dependency, and depopulated the villages of the coast in a scale hitherto unknown in the region. [lien exchange non-monetary economies?]

In effect, what Brox shows is that throughout the post-war period (most of the second half of the twentieth century), quite apart from any 'cultural' differences within the country, there were quite different economic systems operating in the different regions. Furthermore, these systems were held in a colonial relationship with the urban governing centre (Oslo) – often described, as noted above, as the least 'Norwegian' part of the country – which not only failed to realise the significance of its actions, but believed that its form of economic rationalising was superior to those in the rest of the country. As Brox comments, there is no doubt that the Plan for Northern Norway emerged from a real desire to help fellow Norwegians, with absolutely no intention of harming those to be helped, but that the unintended unfortunate consequences can be blamed on a lack of understanding of the situation of subsistence farmers/fishermen, and a fundamental lack of respect for others' ability to recognise their own best interests (p.125). Ironically, Brox notes that at the time of the implementation of the Plan, which was to all intents and purposes a plan for industrialisation of an agrarian economy, Northern Norwegian society was experiencing a period of heightened local egalitarianism, and was therefore able to resist unwelcome parts of the Plan (Ibid.), but not without a decrease in what we now call 'quality of life' for many fishing and farming communities as described by Brox. The grand vision of an egalitarian country where all citizens should be equal thus reveals itself, even in its early days, as an ambition to impose a centrally-envisaged economy on all regions, in spite of local differences, and as such constitute the kind of state-centric development planning which Scott criticises for creating economic dependency in peripheral regions even within the nation-state (1998).

Following Brox, the greatest chorus of critique of national generalisations is based on detailed ethnographic studies of concepts included in the Norwegian term '*likhet*' which refers to both sameness, equality, and being alike. Hylland Eriksen's coruscating demolition of Norwegian nationalism begins with a head-on dissection of the 'myth of the homogeneous Norway', and proceeds to elaborate on the differentiation over both time and space that is found in contemporary Norway (1993). He analyses a wave of introspected examination of what it means to be Norwegian, and finds that many of the classic national symbols of popular culture are far from shared across generations or regions, but also that many of the traits considered national are shared by neighbouring countries. Even the 'Jante' laws endlessly quoted from Sandemose's nihilistic novel to characterise puritanical Norwegians were actually written about a village in Denmark and, as Hylland Eriksen remarks 'Jante-like moral rules are characteristic of peasant societies across the world' (26, my translation). But even in his criticism of nationalism, Hylland Eriksen is demonstrating the myriad ways in which national sentiment is espoused and practiced and the range of symbols which are called into its service.

Given the difficulty of cementing national unity among a population dispersed across difficult terrain, and in a territory which has had an independent state for only a century, it might not be surprising to see that performances of national unity are supported by the state and indulged in by citizens. Certainly, in Norway, one is often met with the sight of national flags on houses, monuments and boats. It would be easy to assume that this suggested a universal national sentiment of belonging with constant positive reinforcement. However, nationalism only stretches so far, and may be met with different forms of ambivalence in different locations. We have seen above that regional difference has been problematic throughout most of the period, and that strenuous attempts to

incorporate difference has been made to nationalise the population. The nation is invoked in a wide variety of circumstances, and as Hylland Eriksen notes, the word 'Norwegian' is one of the most widely used adjectives in the Norwegian language (1993)

It is, then, well established that there is geographical variation across Norway, and that the idea of Norway as a nation is discursively rather than empirically grounded. If a nation-state is to be maintained, however, the idea of a nation must be maintained, and the Norwegian state makes ample provision for the rehearsal of nationhood through various symbolic means. Even so, evidence of ambivalence may be found at the heart of the assertion of nation-hood which is the commemoration of the founding constitution, held on 17th of May each year[4]. As with many national celebrations, 17th May is inscribed with a wide range of rituals of different character appealing to different degrees, and forms, of national fervour and political allegiance. In the capital, the day is celebrated in interesting ways, which demonstrates the range of fervour and ambivalence with which national consciousness is approached. Formal events include an early morning ritual of remembrance held in the 'Cemetery of Our Saviour' in the city, where wreaths are laid at the graves of resistance heroes shot during the Second World War and of the national 'founding fathers', particularly the national-romantic writers. The ritual includes speeches, songs, poems and prayers, and is attended noticeably by families, the majority dressed in national costumes. National costumes, or '*bunad'* become a feature of the day's events, and therein hangs a tale. As with many European forms of 'national' dress, the *bunad* is based on 19th century Sunday-best clothing whose fashions were captured by the romantic folkloric artists of the late 19th century, idealising the noble peasants and their local customs. As fashions varied primarily from valley to valley (where valleys were separated by significant geographical barriers prior to modern communications), *bunad* are typically identified by their valley of origin. *Bunad* are now governed by a formal committee which approves authentic styles, formalised and modernised well beyond the vagueries of 19th century fashion, and the (customary) right to wear a particular *bunad*is related to the wearer's geographical ancestry. In Oslo, this provides for a curious display of what Lidén describes as limited difference (2001). Among the crowds who flock to the palace grounds and the city centre parks for the customary procession of children's marching bands, the different *bunad* form a general impression of embroidered heavy woollen skirts and short jackets in a limited range of colours, white shirts and shimmering silver jewellery for women, and, increasingly, for men heavy woollen knickerbockers and long patterened woollen socks and short fitted jackets. These costumes are a simultaneous assertion of regional difference and national belonging, since the latter is a qualification for the former. National costume thus successfully exemplifies a nation of peoples, a fellowship of limited difference.

As the population of the city is increasingly cosmopolitan and urban, the choice of *bunad* can become an embarrassment of riches for those with, say, grandparents from different regions. In addition, a newly invented Oslo *bunad* can increasingly be seen at these events, even on the palace balcony where the royal family wave to the passing children, dressed in their own 'folk' regional costumes. This is the Norway of national unity represented in tourist postcards and in the national and international press, where national day is a 'day for children' and not a military parade. Also appearing in this public arena are the school-leavers dressed, also, in costumes of limited difference. School-leaver rituals include dressing in coloured overalls, whose colour once indicated the type

[4] This description is based on my own participant observations of 17th of May in Oslo between 2000 and 2006, and on informal interviews with Norwegians both in and outside Norway.

of school being attended, and now refers to the choice of studies. Generally these are red (for grammar schools/intellectual) and blue (for technical schools/vocational), with black overalls also occasionally worn (for example, for those studying bakery or in other apprenticeships). School leavers provide a kind of formal antidote to well behaved marching bands, in displaying formal bad behaviour: being generally drunk, lying around on the grass, decorating their clothes with graffiti, making noise, being unruly, etc. This is generally accepted as a transitional phase into adulthood, and one might well anticipate that many of those presenting themselves in their school-leaver costumes will be found in *bunad* in later years, guiding their children to wave at the royalty on the palace balcony.

Three further kinds of alternative presentation are significant enough to be mentioned. Gullestad has documented and analysed some of the violent reactions met by a Pakistani-Norwegian Labour politician who led the 17th of May parade in Oslo (2001). It is noticeable that there are people who see the 17th May parade as an opportunity to display national costumes generally, not only Norwegian ones, and increasingly one sees not only families in flowing saris but also, say, Swedish national costumes, or Scottish kilts, around the city. This raises a rather interesting conundrum in questioning whether 17th May is a day for marking origins (in the valleys, in other countries), whether it is a day for marking national romanticism, or a day to celebrate nationalism itself. The inclusion of non-Norwegian national costumes in the celebrations can be seen as a subtle undermining of the Norwegian nationalism of the day, through substituting other nationalisms for the Norwegian variety, suggesting that these are equally valid, and giving the immigrant origins from other countries an equivalence to the immigrant from other regions. This subversion of a day celebrating the founding of the Norwegian nation, with its narrative of nation-building by the Norwegian ancestors across the regions, into one celebrating the fellowship of man on an international scale forms one of the central themes for debate about 17th May, and provides a focal point for ambivalence about the tolerance of the Norwegian nation. Ironically, a theme rarely discussed in detail is the fossilisation of a 19th century approach to nationhood based on the European imagination of 'folk' being tied to land. In Norway, in contrast to other Euorpean nations, intellectuals may also present themselves in national costume. This reinforces the notion of egalitarianism and the absence of an elite, and although the Oslo *bunad* is often derided as less authentic than others, it offers urban elites an opportunity to participate in the presentation of Norway as a nation of different equals on an apparently equivalent footing with others. However, the tie to the land remains significant, and the presence of national costumes from other nations inevitably provokes ambivalence about the definition of nationhood.

The second alternative presentation addresses the problem of xenophobic nationalism head on. In response to racist reaction to the inclusions of 'other' ethnic representations within the 17th May parade (that the parade had become 'too colourful' – or multiethnic), an alternative anti-racist rally has been organised by the local SOS-Racisme since 1983, and since 1993 it has become a staple 17th May arrangement held in a park (called 'Cuba') on the opposite side of the city centre to the royal palace. This rally operates as a counter-rally to the main children's parade, with rock music, everyday or party clothing, drinking and a generally rock-festival atmosphere where the emphasis is on diversity and inclusion. As it generally gets going in the afternoon, it is possible to go to both the early morning prayers, the children's parade and the anti-racist rally, for those with sufficient stamina. The rally is itself a form of solidarity which emphasises an inclusive multiculturalism, in praise of free speech, inclusion and solidarity in the Western

Democratic tradition. This rally offers an institutionalised response to the more exclusive nationalism of the royal parade, which through the inclusion of musicians from other countries, asserts the legitimacy of internationalism.

The third response which is notable as an institutionalised response to national day celebrations is one of ambivalent withdrawal. For a significant number of Norwegians, 17th May is a day to be alone walking in the woods, itself at once a Norwegian trope of unity with nature and a rejection of the celebratory activities of the city. In the extensive woodlands which stretch away from the capital city, one can not-participate in the festivities by indulging in a –typically Norwegian – form of communing with nature, the anti-thesis of sporting national costume in the city centre. It is neither a public display of resistance nor necessarily a rejection of the values of the constitution, which is why I refer to it as an ambivalent response, a removal of the person from the reach of national display. Several non-participators have explained their actions to me as a discomfort with the establishment bourgeois sentiments of 17th May celebrations, the honouring of the royal family and the dressing up in *bunad*, often tied in with a sense of fatigue – having celebrated 17th May throughout their childhood, these adults without children of their own claim boredom with the whole event. The sense that 'it's not for me' expresses an ambivalence which does not wish to denigrate the nation, but to distance themselves from the overbearing assertion of the nation on constitution day.

However, non-participators being unseen, it is possible for an observer only to see the flag-waving nationalism of the city, where almost all businesses are closed for the national holiday and an appearance of total involvement in nation-ness is formed. The national press carry reports of 17th May celebrations from around the country and around the world, usually including some photographs of northern Norwegians braving snow or ice to attend a marching band parade, contributing to a view from the south of 17th May as a truly national day. This reinforces a sense of national unity viewed from the south which is persuasive and pervasive, re-emerging in political discourses of nationalism which focus on Norwegians in relation to 'other' nationalities or ethnicities, a debate which conveniently obscures the differences within the nation in line with Gullestad's theory of systematic underplaying of difference and a withdrawal from situations where difference is apparent (Gullestad 2001).

Conclusions

What, then, is the intent of this critique? Is it to suggest that egalitarianism does not 'really' exist in Norway? Given the detailed ethnographic accounts on the different nuances and materialisations of 'likhet', it would be foolish to suggest that the concept of similarity, at least, is not of significance as a social category within Norway, yet it is of significance far more widely than in Norway, as discussions of its debate across 'the North', or wider Scandinavia more generally. It has certainly been a concept through which ideas of Norwegian nationhood have been debated in recent years, as Hylland Eriksen outlines in his reaction against the inward focus of the Norwegian nationalism of the1980s (1993). More recently, Norwegianness has been discussed not in terms of a nationality, but as an ethnicity, with the term 'ethnic Norwegian' increasingly used in bureaucratic circles to denote not explicitly some kind of ethnic nationalism, rather, in my view, as a way to denote 'foreigners' in all but name, in other words to permit a continuation of race-thinking in more acceptable terms. In effect, however, the term is a nostalgic one, suggesting that being Norwegian is more than citizenship, implying kin-connections (whether biological or social). If being Norwegian must be inherited or attributed through kinship and cannot be achieved, this presents a rather impermeable

barrier to equality between citizens in the egalitarian state that is imagined in Norway's reputation.

Is the intention, then, to suggest that the Norwegian welfare state failed in its stated aims of bringing people to a universally good standard of living? Folk memory and economic surveys suggest that this would be to do a great disfavour to the welfare state, which, to a great degree brought about a generation who could take universal welfare for granted, so much so that the majority were unable to conceive that, for example, the national health service could go the way of the British NHS and collapse into a dysfunctional economic quagmire only months after its 'privatisation'. And yet, in contrast to the UK, health services were never wholly free on demand, nursery care had to be paid for until the child reached the age of 7 – more recently 6 – and higher education was financed through student loans, hardly the socialist paradise that outsiders might imagine. Norway has had a much stronger politics of the regions in favour of regional maintenance than its neighbours, often accredited for the continued inhabitation of its difficult terrain in contrast to Sweden's largely unoccupied countryside, yet regional difference of some degree cannot be denied. As Lien points out, for example, cross-border trade in the Arctic North made the region economically different to other areas, and certainly more socially diverse. And the treatment of the Sami showed, at the least, the 'dark side' of equality, with the suppression of Sami cultural and economic life right through most of the welfare state's self-proclaimed heyday. It may be argued that, in these details, Norway has certainly been no worse than other nations, and in many cases has remained much more egalitarian than other countries, but this is a long way from suggesting that it straightforwardly *is* egalitarian.

The intent, in fact, is to alert comparative researchers and policy-makers to treat with caution the representation of whole nations with characteristics otherwise used to describe individuals, that is, to resist the attribution of personhood to the nation. Norwegian politicians have traded for many years on the notion of egalitarianism to promote their particular political projects, both at home and abroad. Detaching egalitarianism from the actors who state it allows a political rhetoric to be idealised into a kind of reified national character, a stereotype which may mislead with potentially disastrous consequences. That this is done by a few individuals in the English language, when much of the critique of their work is published only in Norwegian allows those individuals to dominate the representation of Norway in the wider world. When Norwegian policies are adopted as ideal models by other governments (think of the Oslo model adopted in the UK as cabinet-formats for local government, or the Norwegian model of comprehensive planning adopted as 'community planning'), these adoptions both underestimate the local difference of the Norwegian context (its political, economic and social history, the development and powers of local government and the allegiances of the actors in whom those powers are vested), and overestimate the apparent 'egalitarianism' of the imagined nation.

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