

## No Direction Home? Doing Anthropology in Norway

### ON “HOME BLINDNESS”

When watching Martin Scorsese’s documentary about Bob Dylan, *No Direction Home*, one inevitably gets the impression that Dylan wants to tell us that he actually came from nowhere. Hibbing, Minnesota, where Dylan grew up, is referred to only as a bleak general place in the shadow of Dylan’s fame, and according to commentator Roger Ebert (2005) he “mentions his father only because he bought the house where Dylan found a guitar.” It is very hard to grasp where the point of view from which Dylan sees the world comes from, and what influenced him prior to his arrival in New York City. I want to suggest that anthropologists, perhaps somewhat like Dylan, often tend to appear as people from nowhere studying others as locals, those who are socially embedded in worlds more or less radically different from that of the anthropologist. It is illustrative, therefore, that anthropologists tend to talk about doing anthropology in the country where they are born and socialized as “doing anthropology at home” (Jackson 1987; Gullestad 2011). Perhaps because they perceive of themselves as possessing an abstraction of identity, they tend to see any local spot in the country in which they grew up as a version of their “home,” or “their own” place. In my understanding, this positioning is not well suited for understanding what she or he really shares with those studied or learns by studying them, nor what it is that may be different. The position disposes anthropologists to claim familiarity on false premises. Claiming familiarity in this way echoes

Ernest Gellner's portrait of the European enlightened elites in the era of revolutionary nationalism: these elites insisted that every peasant was a natural emblem of the nation, and gave the peasants a slot in the greater narrative of the elite's burden to represent the whole and classify them (Gellner 1983).

Surely, the metaphor of "doing anthropology at home" is a bad one. That is why, I argue, anthropologists' discussions of the special pitfalls they may sink into and the challenges this represents for the discipline tend to miss the point. How is it possible that people so well trained in contextualizing other people actually consider a whole territory called a country or a nation their "home"?

If we try to move beyond the metaphor of "home" and look more closely at the anthropological discourse of problematic familiarity, that is, familiarity of the kind that supposedly makes anthropologists "home blind," clearly the main problem is epistemological rather than a property of the object of study. Very few anthropologists have reported that they, as "natives," automatically blended so well with their informants that they failed to deal with them anthropologically. On the other hand, the claim that it is unattractive, uninteresting, and/or not fascinating enough to do fieldwork "at home" is indeed quite commonly made, at least in anthropological seminars. The debate about the construction of otherness in anthropology is clearly linked to a certain distaste for what we construct as familiar, ordinary, and perhaps socially awkward on a more personal plane. Ideas of what "home" is, where it is located, is reflected in specific anthropological constructions of culture, that is, culture as somehow linked to a nation; as difference of the kind that produces culture shock and/or visible boundaries; or as an aspect of clearly delineated and homogeneous social groups, "little traditions," and communities. This may in part explain why anthropologists have largely left the study of the major institutions of Western society to sociologists, economists, and political scientists. Also, it brings to light what appears as what Frederic Jameson has called a "strategy of containment": fieldwork in contexts that mobilize the familiarity syndrome in the anthropologist brings her into situations where informants tend to make claims directly related to the anthropologist's social status and taste, and most probably her political interests, too (Jørgensen 2017).

Marilyn Strathern, in her discussion of "auto-anthropology" in Anthony Jackson's edited book, *Anthropology at Home* (1987), insists, if I have understood her correctly, that the salient feature of doing

anthropology “at home” is that anthropologists and those under study are somehow in the same business of creating accounts of culture and society. Her concern is not so much the social relationship between these actors and the way it influences anthropological epistemology, but one of overlapping genres. Anthropological accounts are “continuous with indigenous form,” and the anthropological endeavor is no longer one of translating one culture into the terms of another. Clearly, this perspective is fruitful and helps us reformulate problems of familiarity, but as far as I can understand, there is a problem. Strictly speaking the continuity is not between anthropological accounts of “indigenous form” as such, because “indigenous form” is a concept we use to describe a certain general pattern, a pattern generated by differentiated social realities consisting of many different and often conflicting voices and interests, as well as shifting contexts. In the following, partly inspired by Strathern’s discussion, I look more closely at how this specific form of continuity has developed in anthropological studies of Norwegian society, arguing that there may be no such thing as a supposedly unitary indigenous form.

### ASPECTS OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF NORWAY

In Norway, anthropology “at home” started in the classical manner as a study of the primitives within. The great ancestor in Norwegian sociology, Eilert Sundt (1817–1875), conducted fieldwork among the lower classes around the mid-1800s. His work began as a search for why civilization failed to take root among the lower classes, but later it became a source for serious reflection on the relationship between social inequality and ways of life (see Sundt 2006). For a number of reasons, including perhaps the tradition Sundt initiated, modern social anthropology in Norway never developed a clear hegemonic idea of the prototypical object of study, and thus it created a space for students with very different motivations. In fact, doing fieldwork in Norway became accepted and commonplace and Norwegian ethnography came to be seen as a natural part of the total repertoire. When I entered the master’s program in social anthropology in Oslo in 1990, I got the impression that two things were paramount: doing good fieldwork, which meant mapping social interaction ethnographically, and analyzing data in terms of a processual and comparative perspective. The discipline was expanding rapidly, and student numbers exploded. There was little discussion about the boundaries of the discipline; rather, there was a strong sense of

identity and even a certain eagerness to explore the territories of neighboring disciplines. To the public, anthropology came to be seen not as the study of the Other per se, or of the little society, but as a different and largely refreshing, comparative perspective on politically relevant issues. Nevertheless, a certain scepticism towards carrying out fieldwork in Norway was cultivated among a few Norwegian anthropologists. Part of the reason was that some of my teachers tended to think this represented an epistemological challenge of a particular kind. The argument was that it is hard to learn anything genuinely new when there is no real culture shock involved.

Nevertheless, the anthropological study of Norway includes a relatively extensive fascination with the nonexotic and the mainstream. A main contributor to this effect is Marianne Gullestad. In the context of this book, her identification of “sameness” as a powerful mechanism of making equality real in social interaction is particularly significant. In Norway, she argues, it is very common to insist that meaningful interaction can only take place as long as those involved de-emphasize differences between them, particularly differences pertaining to rank (Gullestad 1989: 109–123). Gullestad’s first major work was a study of an old working-class neighborhood in Norway’s second largest town, Bergen (Gullestad 1984). In this and later works on related themes, she found that class was only peripherally relevant to how people with different class backgrounds identified themselves. Working-class people tended to see themselves as having the same set of values as anyone else except snobbish people and deviant individuals. The insight echoes Jan Petter Blom’s classic study of mountain farmers and valley farmers of inland South Norway, published in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). Although mountain farmers saw themselves as different from their more affluent valley neighbors, they largely embraced the values of these significant others and tried, if ambivalently, to adopt these values. Blom demonstrated that his case was one of inverted ethnicity. Although mountain farmers fulfilled all the basic criteria of an ethnic group vis-à-vis their valley neighbors, as anthropologists had identified these in the study of symbiotic relations between the various groups of SouthEast Asia in particular, they still, at the same time, embraced the “modern,” bourgeoisie, or middle-class oriented values of the valley farmers in part because to them these values represented a vehicle for social mobility. Gullestad’s and Blom’s observations would indicate that in Norway, there may be rather strong cultural currents working against cultural segmentation,

despite the fact that cultural differences which could turn into ethnicities and categorical boundaries based on social class can be found all over the place. How are we to understand this in broader analytical terms?

In several later works by Norwegian anthropologists looking at aspects of Norwegian culture, a key assumption is that the peasant heritage is still strong, and that the normal life of a modern class-based, capitalist society—influenced primarily by life in the metropolis—has somehow not yet found its way into the patterns of national culture. In *Totemism, the Norwegian Way—Reflections on the Nature of the Norwegian Social Democracy*, Tian Sørhaug touches on the problem of morality (Sørhaug 1986). Public morality in Norwegian society, he argues, is a product of the metaphorical power of the close-knit community where everyone knows everyone else. This inclines the population to see the national polity as consisting of people essentially of the same kind. The other side of the coin is that Norwegians, so immersed in this not yet fully modernized cultural system, have a hard time developing a critical distrustful attitude to their leaders and the institutions they run, as long as they seem to follow the rules and look OK. In small communities, everyone tends to think that all have identical interests, he adds. In several publications, Marianne Gullestad argues in a somewhat similar vein, emphasizing that “egalitarian individualism” has a lot to do with Norwegians’ love for their home (see Gullestad 2002). Two closely related observations made by Gullestad are worth mentioning: that the home serves as an important metaphorical inspiration for the idea of a nation of equals, and that people’s love for their home somehow makes them able to resist the pressure from markets and bureaucracies dominating the public domain (Gullestad 1989: 175).

In contemporary folk theory, the home, the family and the intimate sphere represent a sharp contrast to big society, particularly bureaucratic organization. The intimate sphere constitutes a space where people feel a sense of control, and where bureaucracy, according to most people, should not be allowed to expand. In a very special way the home represents intimacy, privacy, wholeness and the personal, in contrast to the bureaucratic, instrumental, efficient, and specialized. (Gullestad 1989: 175. My translation)

In order to establish a critical angle on the assumptions put forth by Sørhaug and Gullestad we may turn to John Barnes’ work in Western Norway in the 1950s (Barnes 1954). He demonstrated that the

egalitarian ethos and the organization of trust in close-knit informal networks were intimately related to community politics (as opposed to the home and “traditional” arenas). Barnes (1954) identified “committees and class” as salient features of the local world he observed. According to Barnes, Bremnes and other peripheral areas of Norway were characterized by the void of a conventional state apparatus due to the Norwegian separation from Denmark (in 1814, and later from Sweden in 1905); the local politics he observed were gradually filling this political void. The committees represented “a common pattern of organization which occurs in every instance of formal social life” (p. 50), that is, a committee for each association, elected by an annual meeting, and an executive council, a chairman, treasurer, and a secretary: all based on the simple majority vote. Barnes further speculated what type of social class system Bremnes would turn out to be in the future. He saw the social process he described—a “gradual emergence of part-time peasants in key positions of government”—as necessarily transitional. He expected increasing class differences to undermine both the role of part-time peasants and that of the committees. In Bremnes, at the time of Barnes’ fieldwork, social inequality was clearly present, but the strongly egalitarian code of behavior seemed to make it largely irrelevant. Barnes assumed that this situation would change as inequality grew stronger. He observed that Bremnes “part-time peasants” involved themselves in commercial trading with fish from very early on; in much the same way as “peasants” in other parts of the country did, mainly in the timber trade. At the time of his fieldwork, the fishing industry was expanding, establishing what Barnes saw as a more “modern” system of hierarchical relations than the ones he observed in politics and social networks in the community. Although Barnes’ perspective clearly differs from that of Gullestad and Sørhaug in that he acknowledges the significance of “public culture” and the power of politics in forming identities and social organization, he seemed to share their assumption that the reality he observed was somehow not fully modernized. In other words, they were “traditional” and on the margins of something else, more modern.

Nevertheless, Barnes’ pioneering interest in political activity among “part-time peasants” demonstrated that his informants were members of formally organized committees that overlapped with informal networks of kin, neighbors, friends, and workmates. In Bremnes, the idea of egalitarianism emerged as a combination of a worldview, certain universal citizen rights, a style of interaction, and, perhaps above all, an institutional

mechanism for dealing with political conflict. Barnes emphasized that political conflict, when channeled through discussions in the committees and the Municipal Assembly, mostly ended up in unanimous votes. Although in his account the description of how this was actually done, who the actors were, who they represented, what their aims were, how they thought about what they were doing, and so on, is quite thin, it is also fascinating. First of all, Barnes indicates that the formal roles and relationships assumed by local actors in political activity were of primary importance. These roles and relationships did not constitute a layer on top of other identities related to kinship, neighborhood, and the like, but, at least to a large extent, substituted them. Second, the matters they dealt with in these formal capacities were not private or quasi-private, but genuinely public ones. Finally, it seems that these roles and relationships contributed strongly to shape the local people's social ontology, that is, their idea of what kinds of people lived in the Bremnes community. As they saw it, Bremnes people were overwhelmingly common folks. They knew that in the wider region, there were some "fine people," but they were found almost exclusively in Bergen, the regional center. In addition, there existed a few families and individuals with special problems and who needed some public (municipal) assistance. Local folks all seemed to be aware of the fact that people were not equal, literally speaking, but in politics and associational life at large, they treated each other as though they were: one man, one vote.

As is the case in the other Nordic countries and Germany, modern anthropology in Norway relates to ethnology and folklore studies, leaving the discipline with some potentially problematic ties. However, Fredrik Barth's great influence from the early 1950s onwards gave anthropology a much more distinct identity as a social science of the new kind. Clearly, in order to reinforce that identity, Barth defined anthropology as something that stood in opposition to neighboring disciplines, the human sciences in particular. Anthropology became a field-work-based, comparative, and cross-cultural study of social process in a synchronic perspective as opposed to a study of the cultural past of "a people." This had some great advantages, some of which Barth himself may have never intended. As a social science proper, anthropology was able to tap into the great prestige and influence that sociology and political science had already acquired with the Norwegian public, partly as a result of the great breakthrough of economic science in political planning in the 1930s onwards. In Norway in the fifties and sixties, social

science was institutionalized in highly autonomous academic institutions, and most social scientists seemed to share a strong motivation to use their autonomy to influence government policy and involve themselves in public debate. The first anthropological manifestation of this tendency was Fredrik Barth's initiative to take a closer look at entrepreneurship in northern Norway, which brought anthropologists in close contact with the large-scale state governmental attempt to engineer social change. In his introduction to the anthology, *The Role of the Entrepreneur in Social Change in Norway* (1962), Barth stated that "[V]ery frequently entrepreneurship involves the relationship between persons and institutions of one society with those of another, economically more advanced one, and the entrepreneur becomes an essential 'broker' in this situation of culture contact" (Barth 1962: 5).

Shortly after, one of Barth's students and a contributor to the anthology, Ottar Brox, wrote the book, *What's Happening in Northern Norway?* (1966), that was aimed at the general public and had a very clear political message. Brox was inspired by dependency theory and brought it to bear directly on the issue of "culture contact." Arguing that the traditional adaptation along the coast of northern Norway, that of fishermen/farmers, or "part-time peasants," as Barnes called them, was highly rational and efficient, and both economically and ecologically highly viable, Brox demonstrated that the government's plan to modernize the region by means of massive industrialization would have far-reaching, unintended consequences. Brox hit a nerve in Norwegian society. The book became a key reference for the growing antiurban, antiauthoritarian, environmentalist-leftist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, which culminated in the first "No to the EU" vote in 1972. The electoral landslide that followed immediately after brought Brox himself a seat in the Parliament. Through this book, and many other later works, Brox demonstrated anthropology's relevance for understanding contemporary politics in a novel way. He showed how ethnography could strengthen our understanding of political institutions, how institutions generate worldviews (or political ideology), and how the analysis of people's lives in contemporary Norwegian society could be understood in the context of political economy. In my own work, including the present book, Brox is a major inspiration.

As were most other students attracted by Barth's intellectual depth and charisma, Ottar Brox cared little for cultural history. The emphasis was on the here and now. The confidence in the synchronic perspective

was so great that anthropologists could use it to write the history of the future, as in Brox's case, and reconstruct the past in terms of the present, as Barth had tried to do in his work on Swat Pathans (Barth 1959). Perhaps more important, Ottar Brox did not seem to care much about the fact that northern Norway was "home" to him. Although his work in part was inspired by Barth's idea of the entrepreneurial domain as an interface between cultures, he, like his teacher, was mostly concerned with political economy, institutions and microcontexts, not cultures.

In fact, the same can be said of many other Norwegian anthropologists of Brox's generation, especially those who included a feminist inspiration in their approach (Rudie 1984; Holtedahl 1986). The study of households as a prism for social change caught the attention of many, and had far-reaching implications for the anthropology of Norway and beyond. What these anthropologists did, among other things, was to develop models for understanding the institutionalization of the social democratic state at the local level. A key figure here was Marianne Gullestad (1984, 1989, 1992, 2001, 2002, 2011). As indicated above, through a long series of contributions Gullestad took the household orientation many steps further and opened several new analytical paths that have ever since been extremely influential among colleagues and students. Gullestad's originality lies in part in her ability to analyze these phenomena as a part of the everyday life of members of the majority culture, without ever making culture into some bounded whole. Her theory of the Nordic version of "egalitarian individualism" is a relevant case in point. According to Gullestad, "egalitarian individualism" is to be seen as an interactional style, or code of behavior, and is about the pragmatic agreement between social actors that in order to relate meaningfully to each other, the relations must rest on the mutual acknowledgment of "sameness."

It should be pointed out here that unlike Barth, Brox, and their followers, Barnes did in fact care about history. In an attempt to contextualize his analysis of Bremnes as a highly egalitarian community, he noted that Norway didn't really have a state until quite recently. The end of Danish colonial rule created a vacuum in rural areas which brought "part-time peasants into key positions in the structure of government and organized social life." Barnes' underlying assumption that, as a result of the postcolonial vacuum, modernization had taken place at a relatively late stage, has, as shown above, surfaced in many later anthropological versions of Norway. Surely it has stimulated the idea that after all there is something exotic to be found here. Yet Barnes' most important

contribution (in addition to inventing network as an analytical concept) has never seemed to have been systematically followed up in anthropological studies of Scandinavia: his fascinating ethnographic mapping of how patterns of interaction and power were intimately linked with the way in which people moved in and out of institutions. Gullestad became mainly concerned with everyday life in private and informal contexts, and later with public discourse, and Barth's and Brox's early interest in such matters was seemingly never linked to Barnes nor followed up by others in any systematic manner.

As far as I can see, the most important question in Barnes' study with a direct relevance to cultural history is what it meant for people in Bremnes to be members of what he called "committees." In order to understand this, it is important to bear in mind that the committees he studied constituted the backbone of institutionalized municipal politics. At the same time they were part of a wider system of overlapping memberships in a variety of formally organized institutions that served collective interests. In comparative terms this is significant mainly because the political and economic interests that gave rise to such institutions, voluntary organizations, as they are called in the civil society genre, were of fundamental interest to most people in Bremnes and were definitely not simply created in a power vacuum nor introduced by the modernizing Norwegian state. In fact, the coastal regions of Norway, as well as inland areas from which timber could be transported along waterways, were among the most expansive preindustrial economies in Europe. Even more important, there were few possibilities for monopolizing fish, timber, and the channels of value they opened (Dyrvik 1979). And because the labor necessary to extract these sources of value was scarce, labor was organized in much the same way as were traditional work parties among peasants and organized resistance against representatives of the Danish state. It is not a wild generalization to state that in economic and political terms, Scandinavia was "modernized" very early and in somewhat different terms than in many other areas of Europe (Ibid.). Capitalist expansion was indeed thorough, but it took a much more local form than in most of the rest of Europe, and was much less monopolist. And because the old elites were never really capable of crushing or pacifying popular movements as these became politicized, only curbing them, these movements may represent a deeper continuity in Scandinavia than in most other parts of Europe, where the state has been much more successful in reproducing preindustrial forms of authority and hierarchy.

As indicated in Chap. 1, being a member of a voluntary organization seems to be strongly associated with a specific form of morality. Finnish historian Henrik Stenius has grasped this phenomenon well in his chapter, “The Good Life Is a Life in Conformity,” in Sørensen and Stråth’s important edited volume, *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (1997). In his terms, a key emergent property of voluntary associations that manage collective interests is conformity. According to Stenius, this particular way of managing collective goods (i.e., through the horizontal solidarity of membership rather than hierarchical command and personal dependency) stimulates informal control of a kind that often tends to be reinforced by formal membership. This is Gullestad’s egalitarian individualism revisited, but with a different source than informal everyday life. In voluntary organizations of this type, politics is everywhere at all times. Mutual social control often seems to include most aspects of life because the management of the common good depends on trust, and trust in turn tends to rest on rich information concerning people’s behavior. This may be why the preference for formally organizing social relations of all kinds has been so strong in the Nordic region; it allows for control over collectively controlled resources, and provides people with the possibility to keep a distance from each other, a formula that in part sums up a Nordic version of individual autonomy. Stenius’ main point, however, is that in the Nordic countries this morality was generalized, heavily influencing not only social relations in local communities but also the public sphere and to some extent even the state.

A very good illustration here is the temperance movement in the early nineteenth century (Stenius 2010). The temperance movement grew out of local concerns, but very soon, it gained significant national influence. Simply speaking, its goal was to make the way from work to home as short as possible for working-class men, thereby inspiring a certain distaste for places where they could congregate without some useful common purpose. Its agenda, a very restrictive, and partly aggressive (or perhaps we should say generous) preventive alcohol policy, was translated to national policy quickly and without much hesitation. It is quite remarkable that it has not, as of yet, stimulated a general opposition against the state’s right to invade civil society and private lives.

## BALANCING INSTITUTIONAL POWER

In my own research on local politics and bureaucracy, I have been inspired by the possibility of following people as they move in and out of institutions. By studying local politics in Norway ethnographically, I have attempted to explore the ways in which public institutions are socially embedded, and how people use them to make claims and attempt to keep them under some control. Public services are largely provided by municipalities, and because there is little doubt that people's confidence in the state in this region of Europe is largely about access to attractive public services, the social organization of municipal politics is of great anthropological interest. However, a general analytical problem is that studies of the state tend to be split into two unfruitful extremes. In political science, it is largely influenced by images and models drawn from the state itself. In anthropology, a general ignorance seems to exist concerning the study of the institutional apparatus of the state based on ethnographic data. For this reason, it may be relevant to turn our attention to classical studies of "stateless" societies. These studies were often guided by an ambition to grasp institutional dynamics on a large scale, and to explain the reproduction of power without reference to the visible hand of a sovereign agent with a unitary form and function. Naturally, they did not take the versions provided by powerful agents at face value, but needed to focus on what they did and the patterns implicated by their actions. Fredrik Barth, in his analysis of leadership among Swat Pathans (1959), looked at the phenomenon of crosscutting ties and its implications for political power and conflict, the same problem that concerned Max Gluckman in *The Peace in the Feud* (1955). Their message, simply put, was that crosscutting ties may turn political conflict into institutional order at a higher level. Shifting alliances may prevent the monopolization of power and balance it in the long run. Power is shared, but no one is in a position to control the dynamics of sharing.

In my research on local politics in Norway, I have observed that overlapping membership gives rise to what we may call a culture of negotiation, one that often effectively penetrates and challenges the boundaries between bureaucracy, politics, and civil society. Well-organized resistance against municipal policies may indeed succeed, and because the alliances that make such moves possible tend to be context specific, they rarely give rise to fundamental cleavages. The pattern emerging from this dynamic seems to have two key elements: the application of bureaucratic

rules easily becomes politicized and requires negotiations, depending on the degree and nature of political mobilization; and political leaders have to be very careful about stretching their mandate, and administrative leaders often need to check out what their employees think, as the latter sometimes ally themselves with politicians and voluntary organizations that have a stake in a given policy. Formal and informal types of control operate simultaneously, and to some extent prevent the municipal hierarchy from becoming pyramidal and powerful actors from demanding personal loyalty from others. Consequently, when using their rights as members as leverage, actors both within and outside the institution have the power to make claims that go beyond formal specifications of rights and duties. At the same time, perhaps precisely for that reason, they all tend to agree, at a general level, that the respect for rules, procedures, and other formalities is paramount. Bureaucratic formalities mediate interests, facilitate negotiation, and are influenced by the power effects of political mobilization, not simply followed.

### TRUSTING AND CONTROLLING INSTITUTIONS

In Scandinavia, people are more involved with the state than in most other areas of the world. In comparative terms, it is striking that this involvement is not generally seen as deeply problematic. The state is not perceived primarily as something they need to avoid and seek protection from, but rather as an essential part of everyone's environment (Trägårdh 2007). The historical roots of this experience go way back, and one of my aims in this book is to trace these roots. The Scandinavian states appear to many observers as somewhat peculiar, and often as quite interesting, apparently due to the mysterious combination of humanism and bureaucratic standardization (Zetterberg 1986). Normally understood as particularly "mature" welfare states (although some rather think of them as overblown), these states are seen as "generous" in the sense that they involve themselves heavily in redistribution (Esping-Andersen 1990, 2002, 2005, 2009). The other side of the coin is the fact that they penetrate deep into most people's lives, and thus undermine their freedom. Yet there is not much evidence to support the expectation that the trust in the state, or the popular support for extending its welfare policies further, is strongly declining (Barth and Moene 2015). Nor is it reasonable to believe that the power of the state, and the heavy responsibility on the parts of people's lives they have taken on, makes people passive,

irresponsible, or alienated by bureaucratic invasion, as the inspiration from liberal theory has led many social scientists and others to believe (Sivesing and Selle 2010). In short, the Scandinavian welfare states are still very popular. In light of the financial crisis in 2007, which led to drastic downscaling of welfare spending in many European countries, entrenched deep inequalities, and even a major blow to the hope that the state will actually invest in reducing inequality, this seems remarkable. In Scandinavia, both the belief that the state can be used to solve major collective problems and that its bureaucracy can be freedom generating rather than humiliating, are still quite robust. In comparative terms, this is surprising. How do we explain it?

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who made a journalistic tour of Sweden and Norway in the 1980s and wrote a book on each country, was at great pains to find out more about this. His attempt seems illustrative of a general trend: he suggested that people's acceptance of the intervening state in all aspects of life is somehow a product of lack of experience (or modernization). In *Swedish Autumn* (1986) he writes:

Swedish citizens are always willing to comply with their authorities with such naïveté and trust as if the benevolence of the authorities were beyond question.... No doubt this blissful credulity has many causes. The most important of these is probably a lack of experience, for which one can only envy the Swedes. Political powers in this country have since time immemorial refrained from a pastime that has been daily fare in other parts of the world: armed persecution of citizens. (Enzensberger in Zetterberg 1986: 92)

As a result, Enzensberger adds, the institutions of the welfare state can be characterized by a “kind of moral immunity,” and are thus able to penetrate “all crevices of daily life, and is regulating the affairs of individuals to an extent that is without comparison in free societies” (Ibid., p. 93). It may not appear as strange or surprising that many commentators, including journalists, anthropologists, and sociologists share Enzensberger's fascination, but the fact that very few of them have tried seriously to understand the phenomenon by actually studying it and trying to explain it, for example, in line with the approach developed by John Barnes, does demand attention.

The political and scholarly discourse on civil society may serve as a point of departure. Since Hegel, via Habermas, American

communitarianism, to liberal theories of democratic sustainability, as illustrated by Putnam, Bellah et al., Alexander, and many others, it has been assumed that any liberal democratic regime is in need of some sort of “civil society” that somehow stands apart from “the state” and is able to sustain itself in the form of genuine autonomous “lifeworlds” in the Habermasian sense (Habermas 1987; Trägårdh 2007). The autonomy of civil society is fundamental, the story goes, for cultivating a political culture that reproduces egalitarian social bonds, the motivation to get involved in caring for the common good, and a sense of individual responsibility. Logically this calls for some relatively clearly bounded state that refrains from absorbing and transforming such essential qualities. The perspective may be fruitful for some analytical purposes, but it largely fails to account for some “Scandinavian facts,” such as the quite unique growth and viability of voluntary activity, which seems to have been stimulated by state expansion (Sivesind and Selle 2010). Hans Zetterberg, in his contribution to one of the early scholarly explorations of equality in this Northern periphery of Europe, *Norden: The Passion for Equality* (1986), formulates the pessimistic perspective drawn from communitarianism and civil society theory rather bluntly:

The expansion of social welfare since World War II has largely segregated the consumers of social welfare from normal everyday life. Children are sent to day-nurseries; the unemployed, to retraining centers; the sick, to hospitals; the aged; to old peoples’ homes or facilities for the chronically ill. As a rule, wherever welfare policy intervenes, normal social contracts are broken up. (Zetterberg 1986: 95)

However, as Swedish historian Lars Trägårdh has made clear in a series of publications (1997, 2007, 2008), in Scandinavia the idea of “civil society” in their Anglo-American and continental versions appears to some degree at odds with local perceptions. Voluntary activity was never seen as separate from the state, but an integral part of it, and because ideas of freedom became so strongly attached to individual autonomy, public policy and services became essential as a means for realizing both. The classical liberal notion that individual freedom depends on a limited state has been very weak indeed. Trägårdh points out that, paradoxically, extensive public entitlements and services have contributed to generating a radically individualist ethos. Although the population’s dependence on the state is a characteristic feature of the Scandinavian welfare states, this

dependency has not generally been viewed as deeply problematic. The right to receive state support in the form of economic benefits and public services (which has largely been experienced as conducive to freedom and individual autonomy) seems more highly valued than the freedom from state interference in one's private life, as well as the right to choose not to pay relatively high taxes. One important aspect of this, as the book discusses extensively, and broadly inspired by the work of Trägårdh, is the fact that the institutional arrangements of the Scandinavian welfare states are both *individualizing* and at the same time conducive to the institutionalization of highly collectivist, one-size-fits-all policy solutions. Welfare policies have contributed heavily to reducing individual dependency, not only in the markets, but also in the family, neighborhood, and other social structures.

### SUMMING UP

All stories are told from the vantage point of the social position of those telling them. When I, in this context, try to tell an anthropological story about Norway, and in part Scandinavia at large, it seems to me that I face a double challenge. Anthropology, as the comparative study of society and culture, is the study of the Other par excellence. I am Norwegian, and thus I may not be considered enough of a curious outsider whose references are mainly drawn from another cultural horizon. Moreover, anthropology's subject matter, culture, is not really my main interest in this book. Rather I want to seek a deeper understanding of power, politics, and institutional dynamics as constitutive of social organization, and consequently the main ingredients in what most people seem to think distinguishes Norway and Scandinavia from other European countries, or "the West" for that matter. Why then not stay away from anthropology altogether? My reasons are simple. Anthropology's devotion to difference is, of course, not about the exotic Other, but about taking cultural variation seriously and thinking comparatively. And its analytical tradition and vocabulary are well suited for approaching conventional understandings drawn from within the cultural horizon of the society one describes through a critical lens. Both reasons may have their flaws, but in this book I want to argue that we all may benefit from bringing anthropology closer to the social and institutional context within which anthropologists construct their stories about the Other. By this I mean something very simple: a comparative, or better, relativizing gaze is useful when we try to

understand not only how rituals, family life, subjectivity, or informal social relations are enacted, take shape, and produce meaning; it is perhaps even better suited to serve the aim of understanding how people form their lives as they take part in the formal institutions of the modern state.

Although in fact most of their lives are deeply influenced by such institutions, particularly so in a welfare state of the Scandinavian type, anthropologists have mostly either ignored this or described such relationships at arm's length. As a result, to the extent that we actually have "theories" of Scandinavian culture based on solid ethnography, they are based on empirical material drawn from other sources, mainly from informal contexts. Although this certainly is not a problem in itself, I think it may be fruitful to expand the perspective. Such an endeavor of course rests heavily on the valuable perspectives developed by Barth, Barnes, Gullestad, Brox, and others. Let me here briefly emphasize the anthropology of the latter among these, Ottar Brox, and one particular inspiration emerging from it that I think is worth highlighting. In my introduction to this chapter, I discussed the phenomenon of "home blindness," and argued that Norwegian anthropology and the anthropology of Norway have never primarily been about identifying the exotics within. Some of Fredrik Barth's students realized that Barth's analytical emphasis on social process and on the need to identify generating mechanisms that could explain emerging phenomena (his book title, *Cosmologies in the Making*, from 1987 is perhaps the best illustration of this) could be useful for analyzing political change.

One of them, Brox, was himself politically very active, and saw that Barth's analytical framework could be used both academically and practically. When he, while working with his book, *What Is Happening in Northern Norway?* (Hva skjer i Nord-Norge? [1966]), realized that bureaucrats and policy makers were hesitant to embrace his message, he went on to explore anthropologically why that was the case. This was part of a much larger project: to try to understand why state authorities failed (or were simply unwilling) to grasp that their grandiose plans to transform northern Norway into a series of industrial centers did not at all appeal to the coastal population, who utilized the resources available to them in ways that seemed both meaningful, efficient, and sustainable: largely by combining fishing, small-scale agriculture, and seasonal wage labor. One important aspect of his research agenda emerging from this was the ambition to explain how political and bureaucratic institutions conceptualize, represent, and act on the interests of those they are

supposed to represent. He developed an acute sensibility to unintended consequences, and his analytical program became largely one of explaining how the mechanisms generating undesirable policy outcomes actually worked, as well as how ideological ideas and programs (and more mundane things, such as self-interest) prevented them from being acknowledged and dealt with (Brox 2016). As noted above, Brox's work constitutes a major influence in this book, and is distinctly "Barthian." However, even though Brox has had a profound influence on political mobilization in Norway, most clearly expressed in the EU membership referendums in 1972 and 1994, his anthropological impact outside Scandinavia has been limited.

Trying to understand how relationships, experiences, and imaginaries are formed as people move "in and out of institutions" seems to me to be an interesting angle to understand life in Scandinavia. I have two main reasons for thinking in such terms: as I have indicated, Scandinavian societies are formalized to an extent that is perhaps never experienced in other parts of the world outside the former Soviet domain; and perhaps more important, as people move in and out of institutions they are not only formed by these institutions; they influence and form them, too. As an anthropologist who has always been mainly inspired by the subject matter of political science and sociology—politics, power, institutions, and social systems—I am somewhat frustrated by the fact that in these disciplines, formal institutions tend largely to be analyzed as though they were either rational unitary agents, or sometimes the opposite: irrational. In both cases, analytical models incorporate imaginary standards to which institutions under study are supposed to conform. My own analytical fascination is rather with institutions as emergent systems of social relations.

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