Multiculturalism in Norway

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ABSTRACT

What kind of society do we want to have? Is it one in which immigrants are included – or excluded? In this article, the author explains the situation in Norway and what has become a very prominent political issue in recent years. He describes what is meant by the terms "cultural disqualification" and "culturally remote" citizen.

Recently, the Minister responsible for immigration, Erna Solberg, upbraided the Trondeim municipality for being too generous with benefits to persons who had had their applications for refugee status rejected. The responsible Trondheim politician responded that it was Solberg's job to handle refugee issues, and that it was his job to ensure that no one starved or slept on the wintry streets. The Minister's retort was that if Trondheim wanted to turn itself into the second largest city in Somalia, there was nothing she could do about it. This little exchange – brutally shortened – illustrates several prominent features of the present debate about immigration and refugees in Norway. It also, of course, illustrates how globally generated issues of inequality, violence, and despair manifest themselves as local issues. In Norway, as in most or all European nation-states, immigration issues are caught in a number of contradictions. With regard to refugees, there is the tension between those wishing to protect the national (whatever that is) and those arguing a wider solidarity with people in distress. Non-western immigrants are frequently claimed to be threat against the extensive welfare apparatus, and a common notion is that people illicitly claim refugeeship. Norway and its welfare state, it is claimed, also has to counter 'social dumping' as a result of an unregulated influx of immigrants from the EU countries (especially, of course, those in recently added eastern Europe).

All in all, there is a very strong sense of making a distinction between those who belong in Norway, and those who do not. Norway has a history and a culture which bestows a particular sense of being. Norway, thus, is understood as a singularity, uniquely characterized by cultural, social, political and economic distinctions. Its uniqueness, however, is seen not just as the inter-weaving of these distinctions, but as a totality which can not be adequately reduced to language, analysis or scholarship.

This is one of the frames against which the discussion about immigration and multiculturalism displays itself. Is it different from what we recognize as a classical European nation-state self-presentation? Of course it isn't. Of course it is. Both answers are right. Its features are surely close to what could or can be found elsewhere in Europe. However, one may also suggest that the Norwegian situation in this respect is a more 'classical' nationalism than what is found in most European states today.[1] Therefore, one must also point to whatever special circumstances provide the dynamics in the present generation of this notion of Norwegian society and Norwegianness. Its tempestuous influence may perhaps be best illustrated by the fact that immigration, multiculturalism, and refugees are among the most prominent and contentious political issues in Norway – somewhat surprising to the outside observer when looking at the numbers and facts.

Norway and immigration history

For many centuries, Norway was part of the Danish kingdom, but became in the early 1800s a part of a union with Sweden under the Swedish king. This union was dissolved in 1905, and Norway became a sovereign kingdom. It was a country with considerable poverty, and it is one of the European countries which lost a larger segment of its population than most to trans-Atlantic migration. The Second World War meant occupation by the Germans. In the 1970s, the 'oil adventure' started, as the result of massive oil finds in the Atlantic. Today, Norway is counted as one of the richest countries in the world on a per capita basis, and with regard to income and wealth it may well be the most egalitarian country in the world.

There are in fact two official languages in Norway, *bokmål* and *nynorsk*. On paper, *bokmål* is close to Danish (and used by a vast majority of Norwegians), but in an assertion of nationalist, class and regional distinctions, *nynorsk* was created as a written language for dialects that were considered genuinely Norwegian.

It would be misleading to believe that Norway historically was contained within itself. Comprised largely of a coast and high mountains, it was in large measure a part of a North Atlantic culture. The Hansa presence was strong in the Middle

Ages, and later (including today) Norway has an amazing presence on the high seas. Talking to Norwegians, it is easy to believe that every man in his forties and older have spent years of their youth at sea in fishing boats or in commercial fleets. And, to speculate, it is easy to imagine that the strong Norwegian feminism in general as well as in both scholarship and family arrangements, has at least some root in a traditionally strong position of women in Norwegian history.

But there is no doubt that immigration-related debates in Norway are founded on the strong belief in a shared history and the uniqueness of the Norwegian. This translates to a strong belief in the state as a guarantor for the good life. In terms of ethos, it has been said that Norway is also a mix of social democracy and Christianity. To many, this seems like a pretty good description. In social science terms, Norwegians see their country both as a corporation (an entity in which each member has a stake) and as a nation (a unique ideological community).

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Immigrants and Sami

Immigrants are not the only ones representing ethno-cultural distinction in Norway. There is a Sami population, traditionally in the more northern parts of Norway, and interesting comparisons between the policies towards them and the immigrants. The total number of Sami is impossible to estimate, but there are 11,000 registered voters for the Sami Parliament, an important vehicle for over twenty years in the development of a measure of self-determination. The traditionally emblematic economic pursuit for the Sami is reindeer herding, but in fact only some of the Sami population has a close relation to it. The official policy here is "to protect and develop the Sami way of life, language, culture and values; as an aboriginal people, the Sami will receive particular attention" (Solberg on the LRD home page). Here, then is a clear multi-cultural orientation in Norwegian policy.

Immigration to Norway is recent. The impact of the free labour movement agreement between the Nordic countries in 1954 led Norwegians to work in Sweden. It was not until the 1970s that Norway started to get a notable immigration. But here we immediately have to be careful with the words. In Norwegian debates about immigrants, what is referred to are basically non-European immigrants, perhaps with the addition of some specific issues related to other immigrants (or foreigners) from other countries (Russian prostitutes, the fear that Polish workers will undercut Norwegian wage levels).

Let us start with a comprehensive view. Norway today has some 4.6 million inhabitants. Of these, some 350,000 are counted as belonging to the 'immigrant population'.[2] This category contains the subcategories born abroad without Norwegian citizenship and persons born in Norway with two foreign-born parents. The ten largest nationality groups and their memberships are presented in Table 1. The 'western countries' immigration to Norway rose from some 65,000 in 1980 to some 99,300 in 2004, while the 'non-western' stock of immigrants rose from 29,500 in 1980 to 249,600 in 2004.

We also find, as is to be expected, that Oslo has attracted a large number of immigrants. The 114,000 persons in Oslo who belong to the total 'immigrant population' make up some 22% of Oslo's population, the 'non-western' immigrants 18%. The largest nationality categories are Pakistanis, 19,000, Somalis 7,000, and Sri Lankans, 6,700. Oslo thus joins many other large cities in Europe as one which has been profoundly affected by international migration. It is also noteworthy, that both the Norwegian and the Oslo immigrant populations are very diverse as to national origins, with fairly small numbers from many countries.

Why do immigrants come to Norway? The answers are 'the usual' for small European countries. About 100,000, and with an addition of some 5,000 per year, have a refugee-related background. Three-quarters of these are themselves refugees, the rest family members of refugees. Of the refugees, some two thirds came as asylum seekers, and most of the others within 'transfer systems'. The rest, more than two thirds of the total, are largely labour migrants and their family members, and people who have married into Norway. One should of course remember that 'labour migrants' is a label which denotes the official reason for being in Norway, rather than necessarily actually depicting the migrants' motivations.

There are a number of migratory movements that we know little about. There is little doubt that we have a 'seasonal' system where, for example, people from Eastern Europe come to work for three month periods (the tourist visa limit) without being entered into any statistics. The only aspect of this which has received any significant attention is the possible trafficking in prostitution.

The figures for in- and out-migration fluctuate. In 2003, there were a total of 40,000 immigrants, and some 25,000 emigrants. The largest number of immigrants came from Russia (1,600), Somalia (1,500), Afghanistan (1,300), Thailand (770), Iran (400). In most Norwegians' minds, emigration is probably seen as comprised of Norwegians going abroad for work, not by foreigners, especially from non-European countries, who have managed to get residence in Norway. However, somewhat less than 4,000 non-Norwegians left for countries in Eastern Europe, non-European, non-North American countries of destination (the number of naturalized Norwegians returning to their country of birth is not readily known). Of *all* immigrants now living in Norway, some 100,000 have been there less than five years.

Looking at the refugee figures over time, we find the usual pattern: that these come from war zones, often with a quick climax as to numbers, and then with a dramatic drop-off. Pulling it all together, but then also 'comparing apples and pears' (immigration and emigration are mostly best dealt with separately), there was a net immigration to Norway in 2003 of 11,285 persons, representing slightly more than 0.2% of the total population.

How to deal with the migrant fact?

Oslo has changed due to migration. A stroll through its central parts demonstrates this, just as it does in many European cities. Other parts of the country are much less affected. However, immigration has been at the top of the political agenda for several years. How and why?

European and North American immigrants are not included in the Norwegian immigrant discourse. The key concept here is the Norwegian term 'culturally remote', meaning immigrants from the rest of the world. The Pakistanis were the first, in the 1970s, to have a significant presence, but it also appears that for the first couple of decades after this, the debates and political interest was fairly low. 'Integration' was a key concept in whatever debates there were, as was inter-EU labour movements if Norway became a member of the EU. (Norway is still not a member, but has an agreement with the EU that basically makes Norway a part of the open EU labour market. It is also a participant in the other EU activities regulating passports, police cooperation, parts of refugee management, etc.)

Earlier issues included helping individual migrants to get work, deal with the health care system, get migrant kids a better situation in the educational system. One of the features of these efforts was to create integration policies which meant to also build on the immigrants' own networks and communities. The goals included a freedom to choose one's identity, to become Norwegian or to be something else. Once an immigrant, all of Norwegian society was to be open to you, irregardless of how you defined yourself.

In much of this, one finds parallels to Swedish immigration policies as these were developed from the 1970s onwards. It would perhaps be misleading to call these first policy stances multicultural in the strict sense. The multicultural dimension can well be argued was seen as a vehicle for personal integration into Norwegian society, not any explicit recognition of immigrant 'cultures' or contexts as in any way having the same legitimacy or value as compared to Norwegian society. Another aspect of this orientation was also a pronounced (but perhaps not very effective) stance against racism. Here, racism was primarily seen in terms of individuals behaving inappropriately, rather than more fundamental discussions about whether Norway contained institutional racism at a more fundamental level.

In the 1990s, however, and with increasing intensity since, the situation of the 'culturally remote' has become a major topic. The attacks on 'Norwegian immigration policy' have been formulated most strongly by a right-wing party, Fremskrittspartiet, whose approximate 20% support of the electorate is insufficient to explain why its positions on this issue have been gradually more or less absorbed by other main parties.

In the contentious situation which now exists, one's impression of what goes on will to some extent depend on where one looks. The *Stortingsmelding* of 2004, the report by the Minister to Parliament, a 200-page document entitled *Diversity through inclusion and participation* certainly contains strong orientations in a diversity direction, such as (p18): "The Government wishes that diversity, and not conformity, is the common and desirable. Who is to be regarded as Norwegian must also include inhabitants who look different from the majority, people with different family histories, everyday life, religion, traditions, habits, value orientations, and language use at home."

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This *Melding* is different from earlier approaches in that it now discounts multiculturalism as a goal, which was a feature of much earlier policy-making. It should be known, though, that this multiculturalism defined a norm, Norway, and then latitude for group-wise organization. The new orientations should be seen as a reflection of a wider entrenchment of the Norwegian policy process in a wider European context. The EU and the Council of Europe's activities to create convergence in Europe are explicitly mentioned. So how is immigrant life in Norway?

How do immigrants fare in Norway?

It is quite clear that there are two conceptually different approaches to how to answer this question. One answer has a focus on social indicators, the other on a more general discussion of what kind of context Norway represents to immigrants.

Educationally, there is a gap between immigrant children (incl. the second generation) and majority students, roughly of the same size as for many of the OECD countries. This is in stark contrast to e.g. the Canadian situation, but similar to what is found in Sweden and Denmark. The gap is more pronounced for children of non-European parents, especially for those from Africa.

In terms of employment, there is no real difference between 'Norwegians' and immigrants from Europe. However, for non-European immigrants, unemployment is three to five times as high, and the participation rate in

the labour market is also lower, but increases over time for each cohort. Nine per cent of the recipients of social assistance (in 2002) had an immigrant background, compared with 3% of the population in general.

After three years of residence, immigrants get the right to participate in municipal elections, and after seven years they can get Norwegian citizenship. Voting rates are much lower among immigrants than for those born in Norway.

There are, as indicated above, no massive problems for immigrants to have access to the fundamentals of this kind for having a decent life in Norway. At least, many would argue that the major problem immigrants face is related to a culturally argued disqualification in Norwegian life. And this brings us to the issues of what kind of context Norway provides to immigrants. It is then only fair to make the distinction made repeatedly in Norwegian society: that between European immigrants and the 'culturally remote'.

Discussions about the culturally remote immigrants deal with a variety of issues, such as patriarchical families, forced marriages, honour cultures (with honour killings), youth criminality, female subjugation, etc. In terms of refugees, the public perception is very much that they are basically out to become spongers on the Norwegian welfare system, and with a large number of potential criminals among them. Since 9/11, being Muslim has become emblematic for what is not wanted in Norwegian society, and we have had representatives from the Parliament quoting the Quran in TV debates to illustrate what a terrible religion Islam is. The (culturally remote) immigrants, by and large doing their jobs or dealing with schools as best they can, have become the very symbol of what Norway as seen by many Norwegians is not to be. There is a 'cultural racism' here, energized by a-typical and bizarre anecdotes, recently including, of course, the van Gogh murder in the Netherlands.

The Double Bind

Immigrants, and especially the culturally remote, are in large measure seen as defined by their culture. The Norwegian response to this has been various measures which generally can be seen as falling under a multiculturalism orientation. The diversity perspective now advanced certainly contains a valuable departure from a reified notion of present-day societies as containing a set of fixed cultures. At the same time, however, it creates a kind of double bind. Many immigrants, not least those with Muslim backgrounds, see this as a present-day onslaught on their existence in cultural terms (e.g. 'Muslim culture'). If the response to this is to argue on cultural grounds (yes, we have a Muslim culture, etc.), there is in the multicultural society an opening for that argument to be treated as legitimate. If the response is to fit the diversity perspective (as outlined in the *Melding*), it has to be something like "yes, but that Muslim thing is just a part of me and of no relevance to me being a good member of Norway, otherwise I'm all right in terms of my rights and obligations." But this doesn't respond to the core of the attack – which is that as a *cultural* being, the immigrant is implicitly unable to be what the diversity perspective requests.

To counter the cultural disqualification, the 'cultural' discussion, as expressed in multiculturalism, would have to be legitimate. To the extent that the *Melding* represents diversity as a negation of the cultural argument (and it does not quite do that), diversity policies will not be an extension of the idea of pluralism. Instead, it would launch the Norwegian (or, rather, what ideologically is seen as Norwegian) as the norm – and just somewhat widen the boundaries of the Norwegian.

Norway and the future

Norway, as all other nation-states in Europe, has significant problems related to immigration and migrants, but not of the kinds usually formulated. The basic question is, what kind of societies do we want to have? Do we want to maintain the attempts at cultural and social insularity created through the hard work of 19th and 20th centuries in the creation of the nation-states as moral universes? That capital and people in large measure now moves is at least part of the dismantling of the nation-state project. However, it is still intact in much of its political institutions. Probably one of the most crucial issues is to try to create an adherence to a 'civic' citizenship, à la Canada, or if we maintain a 'cultural' nationalism à la the European nation-states. If the civic citizenship can be created, where the inhabitants solidarize themselves with the way society actually works and not as a moral order, then we can probably make a much better place for immigrants. If we continue on the cultural nationalism/citizenship trek, and we see massive attempts at a restoration of this, in Norway and other countries (such as the huge debate on Leitkultur in Germany) we will continue the exclusion of immigrants – at a cost.

Table 1 – Ten largest immigrant groups in Norway

First generation immigrants		Born in Norway with two foreign-born parents	
Sweden	21,890	Pakistan	11,412
Denmark	17,922	Vietnam	5,552
Pakistan	14,874	Turkey	4,251
Iraq	14,856	Sri Lanka	3,969
Bosnia-Herzeg.	13,271	Somalia	3,420
Somalia	12,166	Iraq	2,439
Vietnam	11,862	Morocco	2,291
Iran	11,364	India	2,289
Germany	10,515	Serbia & Montenegro	2,230
Great Britain	10,325	Bosina-Herzeg.	1,945

Notes

[1] This statement is not easily verified, but reflects the author's impression. This in spite of the rage of articles about 'Leitkultur' in Germany, and similar nationalistic manifestations in other European countries.

[2] The statistical information is basically taken from web pages of the Norwegian Bureau of Statistics, www.ssb.no; much of the material here is also in part available with table headings in English.