

Commentary

Xenophobic Exclusion and the New Right in Norway

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The article of Phelps and his co-authors, based on data from the newspaper language in Norway since 1984, contains a number of interesting observations and important findings. Notably, it demonstrates the growth of a more nuanced and specific discourse about minority/majority relations, where the term *utlending* (foreigner) might have been sufficient in the 1980s, terms such as *tamilsk* (Tamil) or *av pakistansk opprinnelse* (of Pakistani origin) are now more widespread in designating individuals of non-European origin.

On the other hand, the authors suggest an increased, if implicit, preoccupation with race/phenotype in depictions of non-Europeans, but add that a new terminology emphasising the inclusion of immigrants in ‘a greater We’ (as the Foreign Minister once put it) has emerged during the same period.

There can be no disagreement about the main conclusion, which is well documented, namely that the preoccupation with immigration and the fraught relationship of cultural pluralism to classic Norwegian nationhood has grown perceptibly in importance since the mid-1980s. This is evident in politics, the media and the broader public sphere. However, the view that there is an increased concern with race/phenotype is more debatable. There are few reasons to believe that White immigrants were discriminated against some decades ago and that a racialisation of the boundary has subsequently developed. In the post-war years, East European refugees were generally welcomed into the country, and their children became virtually indistinguishable from other Norwegian. (Think of the famous jazz musician Jan Garbarek; nobody thinks of his Polish origins, and indeed, he is known for bringing the deep traditions of Norwegian folk music into jazz.) Black people were, at the same time, routinely depicted in stereotypical and pejorative ways.

The authors’ emphasis of the ambiguity of symbolic boundaries is important. There is not one narrative about the relationship between ethnic Norwegians and (different categories of) immigrants, but many. Attitudes are not fixed, but shift situationally. Black people who do well in sports virtually become ‘honorary whites’, and Pakistani-Norwegians who criticise their parents’ cultural traditions are warmly embraced by otherwise xenophobic elements in Norwegian society. As the public debate after the terrorist attacks of 22 July 2011 has made clear, many terminologies are available, and many political positions exist concerning the

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future of Norwegian national identity and the place of immigrants in the shared narrative of Norwegianness.

Yet, the authors rightly point out—and this has been confirmed by other research as well—that skin colour tends to function as a symbolic marker of difference. Researchers from Lithuania and Poland, who visited my research programme CULCOM (Cultural Complexity in the New Norway) around 2008, accordingly reported that immigrants from these countries generally feel accepted by Norwegians, even if they do not speak the language, because the colour of their skin is white.

However, there is one main change in the grammar of othering as it is practised in Norway, which is—somewhat surprisingly—overlooked by the authors, namely the slow but very perceptible shift from race to religion as the main marker of difference. I should think that if the authors had chosen, as their keywords, ‘Islam’, ‘Muslims’, or ‘Islamification’ or even ‘Islamification by stealth’ (*snikislamisering*), they would have found a phenomenal rise in the everyday usage of these terms, and contextual analysis would doubtless have revealed that media talk about Muslims is rarely positive. A fresh example is an article in the leading Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* about the current situation in the suburbs of Paris, where the headline was ‘*Islam ulmer i Paris’ forsteder*’ (17 October 2011, ‘Islam smouldering in the suburbs of Paris’). The gist of the article was that Islam, temporarily low-key, would soon raise its ugly head again in these socially deprived parts of Paris.

In the domestic context, not only the right-wing populist Progress Party (which got 22.9% of the votes in the Parliamentary Elections of 2009) speaks of ‘Islamification by stealth’, but there is a broader tendency to see Islam not as a religion but as a social problem and an obstacle to the successful integration of immigrants. About 180 000 residents of Norway (with a total population of five million and a total minority population of 500 000) have their background from a predominantly Muslim country, but less than 100 000 are registered as members of a Muslim congregation. Many are non-practitioners and/or non-believers.

Yet, Muslims are increasingly associated with values and practices that are inimical to Norwegian identity: they subscribe to complementary gender roles (instead of gender equality), they practise arranged and sometimes enforced marriages, they eschew typical Norwegian cultural practices (ranging from leisure activities in the wilderness to getting drunk on weekends) and their main allegiance is to the Qu’ran, not to the laws of Norway. In effect, ‘Muslim culture’, as it is being depicted regularly in various media, is portrayed as the opposite of Norwegian culture.

The concern with ‘The Muslim’ as the main Other for Norwegian self-understanding is relatively new. Unlike continental Europe, Norway had no direct contact with the Ottoman Empire and was not involved, a few centuries earlier, in the Crusades either. It is in fact difficult to construct a genealogy for Norwegian anti-Islamic sentiment that goes much further back than to the Rushdie affair, which began in 1988. Since the conflict over Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* erupted in early 1989, followed in Norway by a murder attempt on William Nygaard, Rushdie’s Norwegian publisher, a few years later, Islam and Muslims have increasingly been perceived as antithetical to ‘Norwegian values’ by a segment of the population. As Phelps et al. point out, there is not just one discourse about otherness and inclusion, but several, and powerful voices have opposed this view, calling for the full inclusion of all citizens and residents of Norway, regardless of their religion.

Be this as it may, the increase in anti-Muslim sentiment has been palpable and highly visible in the Norwegian public sphere since the late 1980s and especially since the terrorist

attack on the USA in 2001. Dedicated anti-Muslim websites and anti-Islamic NGOs masquerading as human rights organisations have emerged, and the Progress Party in particular (but also politicians from other parties) have contributed to creating an image of Islam as a social problem for Europe and of Muslims as a potential threat to democracy. However, it must also be pointed out that these views are always objected to, frequently by mainstream politicians and influential editors. Indeed, although some see a shift toward an anti-Muslim hegemony in the public sphere, others bemoan the 'political correctness' and predominance of 'multiculturalist naïveté'.

Most of the anti-Muslim activists accept, and respect, democratic means, rules and practices. However, a fringe of uncertain size and influence question the legitimacy of the government and accuse the 'elites' of having betrayed the people and the true spirit of Norwegianness.

Most of them, active on websites such as www.document.no, www.honestthinking.org and www.rights.no, merely regard the political elite (which has 'sold out' the country to Muslim invaders) as being spineless, naive and weak, and having succumbed to the unhealthy influence of alleged multiculturalists and relativists in academia such as myself.

Others have taken the critical attitude a step further and allege that there is a secret conspiracy, involving the political elites of Norway (and other European countries) and Arab governments, which entails the European acceptance of *de facto* Muslim dominance of their societies, to be realised through immigration, in exchange for oil. (This analysis does not make much sense in the context of Norway, which is itself a major oil exporter.) They are influenced by the amateur historian Bat Ye'Or's book *Eurabia* (2007), where this alleged conspiracy is described in minute detail, and they draw inspiration from international websites such as www.gatesofvienna.blogspot.com, www.brusselsjournal.com and www.jihadwatch.com. In their view, European countries (including Norway) are ruled by quisling governments who have lost legitimacy. In their view, civil war between patriots and traitors may therefore be inevitable.

It was within this discursive universe that the terrorist Breivik, who killed 79 in two separate terrorist attacks and injured many more, came of age ideologically. His world was a Manichean one, where not only outsiders are separated from insiders but, importantly, where absolute good faces absolute evil. In this kind of situation, the ends inevitably justify the means. By targeting members of Young Labour (AUF) in his main assault on Norwegian society at the Utøya summer camp, he was hoping to deliver a fatal blow to the coming elite of the country, the heirs to the policies of the Labour Party, which had been instrumental in allowing labour migrants and refugees into the country since 1970. The attack on the young social democrats was, in other words, not random.

Interestingly, Breivik stated, at a court meeting in November 2011, that the Norwegian people ought to be grateful to him, and on several occasions, he has insinuated that true Norwegians eventually will be.

This ideology is largely disseminated and developed online. The new right, which is not anti-Jewish (in fact, it tends to be pro-Israeli) but viciously anti-Muslim, is different from neo-Nazi movements not only in that many of its supporters are well-educated members of the middle class but also in that it is loosely organised through cybernetworks, blogs, Facebook groups and websites. Building his worldview from regular perusal of this blogosphere, Breivik could have his hatred of 'spineless multiculturalists', 'effeminate politicians' and Muslims confirmed on a daily basis, without meeting objections or alternative perspectives.

Interestingly, Breivik was an avid online gamer with an especial affinity for WoW (World of Warcraft). His intellectual hero, a blogger named Peder Jensen, known in the

Islamophobic blogosphere as Fjordman, recently compared Muslims with the evil, ugly and primitive Orcs of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (in the liberal *Dagbladet*, 18 November 2011). Of course, such views are always contradicted, and newspaper editors defend their publication by referring to principles of open debate and freedom of expression. Yet, an examination of the limits of the freedom of expression, when it ultimately inspires mass murder, appears to be under way in Norway as elsewhere.

The new anti-Muslim ideology has several interesting features. First, its adherents are otherwise ideologically diverse, ranging from classical Marxists to libertarians and state-centric nationalists. Second, it recruits largely from segments of the middle class where there is a feeling of downward mobility, marginalisation and disenfranchisement. (Breivik himself had a middle-class background but was a failure both educationally and professionally.) Third, taken to its extremes, this ideology relinquishes democratic procedures and declares war on The Other.

Everyday prejudices against Muslims, such as resentment against the hijab (the Muslim headscarf worn by some, but far from all Muslim women), traditional gender roles (which are usually cultural and not religious in their origins) or even their aversion to alcohol (an essential ingredient when most Norwegians party), are not to be confounded with this dark and paranoid vision of contemporary society. Yet—and this needs to be taken into account in every analysis of symbolic boundaries and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary Norwegian society—negative generalisations about Muslims may be moderate or militant, but in so far as the generalisations exist and are being fanned and bolstered by politicians and media outlets, they may be exploited by violent individuals and groups. Negative generalisations are always a first step toward dehumanisation, and in this respect, Muslims find themselves in a far more precarious situation in contemporary Norway than other non-White people who are not Muslims. Tamils, for example, who are often as dark as Africans, have ‘outlandish’ names and practise an ‘exotic’ religion, are a virtually unmarked minority in Norway. The vast majority of the Tamils are employed in the formal sector, and the word ‘Tamil’ does not connote ‘social problems’ in the same way as ‘Muslim’ nowadays connotes ‘terrorism’ and ‘fanaticism’. Yet, as a Tamil friend remarked during a recent public outrage over enforced marriage among Muslims: ‘Enforced marriages exist among Tamils as well, but nobody talks about them.’

The systematic othering of Muslims does not in itself lead to terrorism, but it helps by giving xenophobic nationalists a sustained focus for their anger, which can now be directed toward an identifiable group of despicable subhumans and their accomplices.