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Racism, A Norwegian Case Study

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Introduction

Norway is often portrayed as an innocent nation with a well functioning social democracy, little class differences and a strong welfare state. It is also often seen as an advocate for human rights and gender equality. Although these characteristics are rightfully applied in several ways, this paper will attempt to illuminate how racism functions in contemporary Norway. The first part will look at how Norwegian nationalism was formed and how notions of *us* and *them* are grounded in national identity, whiteness and culture. These are necessary points for understanding how racist ideology is formed in an underlying part of Norwegian self-pronunciation. The second section of this paper will focus on the political right wing party FrP (Progress Party) and their rhetoric that influence racism and xenophobia in Norway. This is interesting as they were recently voted into government in alliance with the Conservatives (Høyre), thus their influence in the development of racism and xenophobia could be crucial for forthcoming policies and legislations concerning ethnic minorities. The third part of the paper will examine Norwegian media, with particular focus on minorities' involvement in the media and how these groups are portrayed by the media. Lastly, the phenomena of everyday racism will be studied, looking particularly on stories from ordinary people. This section will also include evidence of denial of racism.

Norway's experience with immigration has a resent starting point dating back to the 1960's and 70's (Eriksen, 1993). Compared to England or France who has a longer experience with multiculturalism and racisms, Norway has for a long time been a very homogenous nation in terms of ethnicity and culture. Hence, studies on racism and nationalism has not been of vast development in academic and intellectual circles (Andersson, 2012).

Unlike English-speaking countries the term *rase* (race) has been removed and delegitimized as a concept in official language – it has also been removed in legislation and constitution, as it was seen as charged with negative history (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Social Security, 2010). The term has been replaced by terms such as “color of skin” and “ethnicity”. However, Gullestad (2002: 59) argues that the term *innvandrere* (immigrant) has become a “stigmatized way of labeling *them*”. And in this way it could be argued to function similarly to the notion of race.

A Construction of “Us” and “Them”

The building up of national identity and ethnicity is a complicated and on going process. As Gellner have said so well:

“Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (1964: 169)

This quote problematizes the notion of national identity as something continuous and absolute. Given Norway's history of being colonized by Denmark and then Sweden, Norwegian nationalism is a fairly resent phenomenon, which started to emerge at the end of the 19th century (Eriksen, 1993). It was constructed as a resistance to the Swedish governance, and was built upon traditions and dialects of rural villages in order to justify that there was a substantial difference between Norwegian, Danish and Swedish culture, traditions, and language, and that Norway was entitled its own state (Eriksen, 1993). In

Norwegian self-imagination, Norway is commonly understood as a nation that has been colonized, a nation that has been an advocate for human rights and the little country up north that hands out peace prizes. Andersson (2012: 419) argues that although Norway's history with contributing to the trans-Atlantic slave trade is well documented, Norway's history as a passive and innocent nation continues to be nurtured.

In order for people to construct an imagined "us", there needs to be a parallel construction of an imagined "other". In today's Norway the construction of nationhood is connected to an imagined community of "worthy" Norwegians and builds upon conceptions of a shared history and tradition (Gullestad, 2002; 2006), and also notions of whiteness, which will be discussed later in this paper. Norway's indigenous people, the Samí, have been and still are victims of racism and exclusion from Norwegian society. A result of this is that a large part of Sami people has assimilated to Norwegian society and disclaimed their Sami heritage. The Sami are now recognized as a minority, and in 1989 *Samethinget* was instated as the Saami parliament (Eriksen, 1993). The paradox is that Saami people continue to face much of the same racism experienced by other ethnic minorities despite being Norway's oldest ethnic group.

Gullestad analyses how people with minority backgrounds never quite fit in and become accepted as "true Norwegians" through the concept of *likhet* (meaning, 'likeness', 'similarity', 'identity', or 'sameness') (2002: 46). Concerning migrants with a non-western heritage, they are expected to assimilate to the status quo and can only come close to being accepted as a Norwegians if they leave their cultural heritage at the door and fully embrace the "Norwegian way of life" (Gullestad, 2002). This could be argued to be part of the wider Scandinavian cultural concept of "Janteloven" meaning "the law of Jante". *Janteloven* is an unwritten rule that argues that no one is "innately superior or has greater moral worth than anyone else", and relates to "intellectual ability, physical appearance and general ambition" (Turausky, 2014: 7). In other words one is not to be different or think one is different than another. This cultural code generates a sense of democracy, but arguably becomes problematic when making space for a multicultural society. This has been, and to a large degree still is, a challenge for the Sami as well as for non-western migrants who have to work hard at being *good* Norwegian citizens, and as Gullestad (2002) argues, is expected to be grateful for being permitted to live and work in Norway (Gullestad, 2002).

Interestingly the Norwegian Statistical Central Bureau (SSB) found that 49% supported the argument that "immigrants should strive towards being as similar to Norwegians as possible" (SSB, 2013). In this question the statistical central bureau specifically refers to immigrants with national backgrounds from: Eastern Europe, Asia (including Turkey), Africa and South and Central America (SSB, 2013). Hence, it is clear that the use of the word "immigrant" most often refer to people with a non-western *look*, and not merely *all* immigrants. According to Gullestad (2004: 189) nine out of ten majority Norwegians refer to people with "dark skin colour" when they use the word "immigrant".

Much like in the Swedish case (Loftsdóttir, 2012) Norwegian identity is connected to notions of whiteness as "natural". Experiences of racism are evident not only for people classified as "immigrants" but also for people who have mixed parentage, are adopted or who have one or two parents who are classified as "immigrants". Thereby the term 'immigrant' is somewhat blurred in the Norwegian context, as mentioned earlier, it is a term that is often used to describe people with 'dark skin color' rather than it's actual meaning (Gullestad, 2004: 189). The use of the terms first and second-generation immigrants further problematizes the notions of what it means to be Norwegian. Studies have shown that young people who are born and grown up in Norway hesitate to call themselves Norwegians (Andersson 2012: 423).

This notion leads us to the question of who is defined as “true” Norwegians within society and what is seen as Norwegian culture.

Debates concerning “Norwegian culture” have been numerous and frequent. The 17th of May celebrations of the Norwegian Constitution Day could be put forward as an interesting phenomenon which illustrates commonly accepted nationalism and conceptions of *real* Norwegian culture and *real* Norwegians. When the Pakistani-Norwegian member of Labour party, Rubina Rana, chaired the 17th of May committee in 1999 she received a number of death threats simply for daring to become so intimately involved in the celebration and having a Pakistani heritage. In an interview about the celebrations the journalist asked: “You speak about colourful community on Norway’s national day, in front of the Royal Palace. Were you not worried that this might be felt to be provocative?” (Gullestad 2002: 56). That the journalist presumed that talking about a “colourful community” on the Norwegian Constitution day could be provocative is interesting as this day is usually perceived as being a celebration of democracy and equality for all. The Twitter trend #norskrasisme (#norwegianracism) exposed other experiences of racism related to the 17th of May celebrations. One girl shared:

“My worst experience with #norskrasisme was when I was 9 years old. I got told off by a man in the 17th of May parade: Why are you chanting `Hurray`, this is not your day!”
(translated by myself)

Never the less, the celebrations of 17th of May are also argued to be structurally inclusive, and a celebration of today’s multicultural Norway (Brottveit, 2014). This has however provoked other debates, such as the “flag debate”. In 2013 school children at a primary school had made their own flags, with the Norwegian flag on one side and the flag of their nation of origin/parents origin on the other side. This incident sparked a national debate about the use of foreign flags in the 17th of May celebrations, and the school was prohibited the use of foreign flags in the celebrations (see Haug, 2013). This is not the first time flags have been an issue of discourse. In 2008 the 17th of May committee proposed to prohibit the use of foreign flags (including the Sami flag) in the celebrations. When the mayor of Oslo stopped the prohibition one of the members of the committee resigned in protest (see Egeberg, 2008). Numerous people supported the committee’s suggestion of prohibition, arguing that the day is a celebration of Norway and Norwegians, not other nations or nationalities. Resistance against such prohibitions were however evident: one of them being the graffiti in the image below showing one of the politicians who argued for flag restrictions crying and pointing at the kids parading with different flags, and kids throwing tomatoes and eggs at her.



(Anonymous artist – cited in Eggesvik, 2013)

Progress Party?

In the summer of 2013 the Progress Party (Fremskrittets Partiet) was voted into government in alliance with The Conservative Party (Høyre), creating history as the most right winged government to be in power in Norway - just two years after a radical right wing attack on the then sitting Norwegian government, Arbeiderpartiet (Labour Party), and multicultural Norway. The offender, Anders Behring Breivik, was also a previous member and leader of FpU (Progress Party Youth Organization). After this tragic incident the Progress Party quickly distanced themselves from the acts of Breivik, and argued that this was an act of one man, and that although he had been a member of their party, his acts could not be connected to their party or politics as he had left the party because their politics were too liberal. Some theorists and critics have however argued that the Progress Party's rhetoric has been influential in creating xenophobia and racism in Norway, and that many of their viewpoints can be argued to have commonalities with Breivik's (Wiggen, 2012: 586. See also Lerø, 2013 and Gullestad, 2002).

Although being the most moderate, the Progress Party has been argued to belong to the family of right wing extremist parties in Europe (Arzheimer, et.al. 2006). As Macmaster (2001) points out, the Progress Party is part of a European trend of right wing populism and neo-liberal racism. It has distanced itself from old-fashioned Nazism and classical race ideologies, and instead builds upon notions of deserving and undeserving groups in society, with the justification of defending national identity and culture (Macmaster, 2001: 199). As self-announced out speakers for the 'common man and woman', their core issues of concern revolve around loss of national pride and identity, immigration (especially from the Muslim and non-western part of the world), high taxation and rising crime rates. The rhetoric of the Progress Party's members and supporters are not always openly racist, but it does not take much to uncover what is written or said between the lines. The following quote is taken from a speech from April 2014 held by one of the most prominent members of the Progress party, Christian Tybring Gjedde.

He states the following:

"Where is Norway in 20-30 years? Is anyone thinking about that at all? Most of us are alive in 20 to 30 years. What does Norway look like then? Do we have any defence

against this we see that is entering our country? No. We don't." (Sørenes et.al, 2014 – translated by myself.)

That Gjedde here asks, "what does Norway *look* like", insinuates that to him it is important that Norway *looks* as "Norwegian" as possible, which can be referred back to Gullestad's (2002) notions of *likhet*, and a strong sense of *us* and *them* ideology. In the sentence "this that is entering our country", *this* is used as a way to take away people's humanity and redefine them as objects, in this case unwanted objects that threaten *our* nation, who are undeserving of being part of *our* Norway, and who are essentially different from *us*. Another central politician in the Progress Party stated on national television "different races, religions and cultures should not be mixed if we want to have a harmonic society" (cited in Raknes, 2013 – translated by myself).

Unlike many other European countries, Norway has not suffered from the recent financial crisis, but has experienced a rapid growth of people seeking asylum and people coming to live and work in the country. This, alongside a growing hostility against Muslims in Europe and the western world, has sparked a growth of racism and Islamophobia also in Norway. The Progress Party has been central in the demonizing of Muslims and are responsible for constructing the term *snikislamisering* (sneak-islamisation). This notion builds upon the skepticism towards Islam and Muslims which has been polarized in Europe over the past decades. Macmaster argues that:

"Xenophobia and racism has not necessarily been an expression of economic hardship but just as much linked to high levels of insecurity about national identity and a sense of impending doom" (Macmaster, 2001: 199-200)

The Progress Party has only been in government for under a year, thus the effect of their hostile immigration policies and ideologies are yet to be seen. However, some of their main ideologies might enlighten how they will influence the future prospects of asylum and immigration policies. Evidently *progress* is not a main concern for the Progress Party when it comes to fighting racism and discriminations in Norway.

Minority Representations in the Media

Media plays a powerful role in influencing social identity and perceptions of the social world (Slader, 2007). Thus it is helpful to investigate how minority groups are portrayed and represented within the media when exploring racism and xenophobia within a nation. Slader (2007) argues that the influence of a given topic in politics and media strengthens the audience demand for that topic, and thereby increases the media selectivity, and so on. Hence he argues, it creates a *spiral* of representation of certain issues within society, which affects people's understanding of society and their own identity.

In an analysis of Norwegian media's coverage of immigration and integration from 2009, it was found that more than 70% of media coverage about immigrants and immigration was negatively loaded (Kadafi, 2010). Yet again the term *innvandrere* (immigrant) is used to describe people from a non-western country not merely *all* "immigrants". The analysis from 2009 judges 71% of the media coverage about immigrants as negative, 18% as positive and 11% as neutral (IMDi, 2010: 10). In the 2012 report the word *immigrant* was found to be used over 9100 times in the sources which were analyzed between July 2010 to October 2011, which is not far from the total of times the Prime Minister at that time, *Jens Stoltenberg*, was mentioned in the same sources (around 11 200 times), and almost double the number of times the most profiled Norwegian business, *DnB Nor*, was mentioned (around 5 600 times) (IMDi, 2012: 6-7). Conversably *Islam* and *Muslim* were mentioned over 15 400 times in the same sources (IMDi, 2012: 6-7). Interestingly the analysis also found that people with immigrant background were only used as sources in 2% of the media coverage (IMDi, 2012:

5). This signals that there is a vast interest and coverage of issues related to “immigrants” but a substantial absence of people with “immigrant” background’s within Norwegian media. Furthermore the analysis from 2012 does not state any percentage of negative or positive portrayal of “immigrants” in the media, as does the report from 2010. It does however argue that negative portrayals of immigrants are far more frequent than positive (IMDi, 2012: 17).

Both Wiggen (2012) and Gullestad (2002; 2004) have criticized Norwegian medias’ choice of “experts” within the racism debate, experts who in turn influences politics and news media. Social anthropologist Unni Wikan and Human Rights Service founder Hege Storhaug have both been particularly visible within Norwegian media in discussing racism, xenophobia and discrimination towards people with minority backgrounds (Wiggen, 2012). Both have neo-liberal views towards immigration and the influence of Islam in Norway, and could be argued to build their arguments upon an individual model of racism – whereas they claim that the main problem with racism today is that minorities do not integrate according to the social structures of Norwegian society. Their main issues of concern revolve around the treatment of Muslim women within Islam, which have contributed to profiling and reinforcing stereotypes about Muslim men particularly. Although the matters which are discussed by Wikan and Storhaug are important, the manner in which it is done criminalizes all Muslims instead of understanding these issues as part of a wider social problem that is not uniform to only Muslims (Gullestad, 2006: 74). In an interview with one of Norway’s biggest newspapers Wikan says:

“It is astonishing how blind and naïve Norwegian women are towards non-western men. Norwegian women need to use common sense.”

“I don’t want to blame the Norwegian women for the rapes. But Norwegian women need to realize that we are living in a multicultural society, and adapt thereto.”

“In most countries it is the women who are blamed for rape. It is common sense that immigrants will bring with them these values when they move here.”
(Berger, 2001 - translated by myself)

Storhaug have also influenced the debate with a high profile in the media, criticizing the government for nurturing unsustainable immigration policies that contribute to *islamification* of Norway. Storhaug have also been a central person to influence parts of the current government (see Storhaug, 2014; 2013). As “experts” within the field of racism studies, Wikan and Storhaug’s arguments have been and continue to be respected and influential, but have not gone uncontested. Other social anthropologists and social scientists, as well as members of the public and politicians, have argued that Wikan and Storhaug’s contributions to the racism debate are doing evil in the name of good (Wiggen, 2012. Gullestad, 2002; 2004).

This may also be applied to another specter of Norwegian media. The television-show “Migrapolis” is said to be for “immigrants” by “immigrants” (Christiansen, 2009). That the Norwegian Broadcasting Centre makes room for a representation of minority groups and minority related issues might at first glance be a good thing. Never the less, making a separate TV- show for people with minority background instead of including journalists with minority background and issues related to minority people into the mainstream media, may result in a segregation of minority groups and ethnic Norwegians, and thus public perceptions of a “division” between *us* and *them*. In a critical article about Migrapolis, Singh argue:

“I remember this sepia version of ‘Around Norway’ as an insult. Was it this that NRK (National Broadcasting) thought my family wanted to watch on television? Brown journalists interviewing brown people about brown things. In Norwegian. With

subtitles. In Norwegian. 'Migrapolis' at its worst was comical and discriminating, and at its best a toothless way to include multicultural heads into TV-statistics" (Singh, 2013 – translated by myself)

Singh's article is one of many public outcries about racism and systematic discrimination in the past years. The twitter trend #norskrasisme which was started in 2013 has provoked numerous people with minority and majority backgrounds to share their experiences of racism in Norway (This will be further discussed in the next section of this paper). The public debate that followed this trend was however more concerned with determining *if* racism is a current issue in Norway, rather than *how* racism is a current issue in Norway, and what could be done to overthrow it. Although there is a recognizable pattern of stigmatizing people in regards to ethnicity, religion, nationality and skin color in Norwegian media, there is a strong sense of denial of the existence of this phenomenon, as will be uncovered in the next section of this paper.

Everyday Racism and Denial

Essed (1991: 3) have argued that the notion of the 'everyday' relates to something familiar and the structures in which we integrate with on a daily basis. Everyday racism is thereby the structures and ideologies that disempower or restrict actors in their day-to-day lives on the basis of "race", religion, culture, ethnicity or national belonging. Essed (1991: 3) also argue that these structures are repetitive and that they thereby are generalizable. Bhavnani et.al (2005) argue that elite racism (media, politics and experts) shape the perceptions of ordinary citizens.

Everyday racism is a phenomenon that is often ridiculed and frowned upon by those who are not affected by it. "To use the racism-card" is often used as an argument for disclaiming and trivializing racism (Krekling, et.al, 2013). This might be one of the problems that allow it to continue to affect people's lives to such a large extent. Bhavnani et.al argue that:

"It becomes 'normal' to the dominant group to see 'others' as different and inferior (...) These prejudice are frequently hidden and are not something added on to peoples thinking and behavior, but remain embedded in how we see the world" (2005: 35)

In Norway's self-image as an *innocent* nation that opposes discrimination and inequality, there is no room for racism and therefore the notions of "immigrants" as lazy criminals and people who are up to no good is seen as *natural* and as established fact rather than racist ideology. For those who believe in this ideology it becomes a rational decision to discriminate or stigmatize certain minorities, as the media image, experts and politicians have argued that so many of the problems in society are related to people of minority ethnicities. In this way Essed's (1991) notions of everyday racism as a structural and repetitive phenomenon may be applied; as forms of elite racism shaped by media, politics and experts become transmitted over to ordinary citizens. When ordinary citizens makes "rational" choices to discriminate or stigmatize minority groups based on prejudice "knowledge" about these groups this is seen as everyday racism. But it is also integrated in the understanding of *us* as different from *them*. In Norway this "hidden" racism can be found in various forms.

A 2012 report shows that ethnic minorities are discriminated against in the housing market, based on notions of minorities as unpredictable tenants. Landlords also fail to offer housing to minorities because they believe that it will hurt their business with the majority (Beatty, et.al, 2012: 121). Non-Norwegians are likely to pay 8% more for rental accommodations than Norwegians (Beatty, et.al, 2012). Interestingly, first generation Norwegians are likely to pay the same rent premium as Non-Norwegians despite being "closer to the reference Norwegian group in terms of socio-demographic characteristics" (Beatty, et.al, 2012: 121). The analysis

also found that the rent premium for people of African origin were the highest, whereas they on average pay 13-14% more for rental accommodations than Norwegians (Beatty, et.al, 2012: 125). The report concluded that their findings show some evidence of landlord based discrimination of ethnic groups.

There have been several cases where individuals with minority backgrounds have shared their stories with the public. One of them is Naffisa Osman who said that she was not invited to house viewings before she changed her name to “Nina-Simone” (Olsen, 2013). After showing up at the viewings she was invited to, she was never successful in getting offered an accommodation. Osman experienced the same rejections in the job market. After sending 25 applications to various jobs signed with her own name, only three responded. After changing her name to “Nina-Simone”, she got response from 7 out of 9 jobs. This form of discrimination has been confirmed by the Norwegian Institute for Social research, who claim that jobseekers with a non-western name are 25% less likely to get called in for interviews (Midtbøen, et.al, 2012).

The Twitter trend #norskrasisme has generated a stream of people’s experience with everyday racism in Norway. Warsan Ismail who started using the hash tag, argued that racism in Norway is always discussed from a majority perspective (Østkanliv, 2013). In an interview with the online newspaper “Østkanliv”, Ismail shared one of her experiences with racism:

“I often experience that drunk people on the bus and on the subway makes monkey noises at me. They say ‘go back to where you came from’ or talk loudly to each other about how immigrants are taking over the country.” (Østkanliv, 2013 – translated by myself)

One of the politicians who got involved in the debate #norskrasisme is Audun Lysbakken from Socialist Left Party (Sosialt Venstreparti). He argued:

“We don’t use the word racism because we are so scared of insulting someone. The Twitter thread shows us that there are many people in Norway who experience racism because of their background. It is happening more than we think and it is about time we call it racism.” (Gustavsen, 2013 – translated by myself).

Although there is recognition of racism in Norway from some parts, others have been dismissive of the phenomena. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has advised Norwegian authorities to take acts against racism and discrimination on the basis of the 2009 report; Norwegian authorities have been classified as unsuccessful on all the recommended points (ECRI, 2011). Noticeably, ECRI’s strong recommendation that the Norwegian authorities should take action against racial profiling in the police force, Norwegian authorities replied; “such practices does not exist in the police’s ‘modus operandi’” (ECRI, 2011). Media has however revealed several cases of racial profiling within the police. On April 8th 2014 the newspaper “Dusken” published a story about Momodou Sanneh who said that he has been stopped groundlessly nine times in the past nine months. On one of the occasions he had asked the police why they had stopped him, the police officer had answered; “that is what we are going to find out”. On another occasion where he had been involved in a car accident, the police officer had told him “it is easy to tell who is the cause of this accident, all you people can do is to climb trees” (Schjefstad, et.al, 2014 – translated by myself). Furthermore, in 2006 Eugene Obiora from Nigeria was strangled to death during an arrest, by a police officer in Trondheim who was known to be openly racist. During investigations it was also revealed racist images in the police station including a caricature of a member of staff in a pot surrounded by “African cannibals.” The police have stated that the incidents of racism within the police force are unfortunate but extreme cases

which are not common, and that racial profiling is done simply because they experience that non-western minorities are most frequently involved in criminal acts (Schjefstad, et.al, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as has been uncovered in this paper, Norway is subject to different forms of racism. Both institutionalised racism such as in the state and in the police and in construction of Norwegian identity. The self-image of Norway being a harmonic social democracy has in some ways been arrested, as this investigation shows that minority groups suffer discrimination and exclusion in media, politics and everyday living. Norwegian politics tend to portray ethnic minorities as separate from the ethnic majority of Norwegians as well as minorities being a problem in society. Muslims in particular are, as in much of the western world, subjects to a stigmatizing neo-liberal racist ideology. The development of racism could be argued to be rooted in the building of national identity. This may be addressed in a redefinition of what it means to be Norwegian.

Further more, the notions of first and second-generation immigrants develop a distancing between ethnic minorities and ethnic majority Norwegians. These notions lead to an understanding for the majority Norwegians as *true* Norwegians and ethnic minorities who have been born and who has grown up in Norway as part of the *other*, and in turn feel reluctant to calling themselves Norwegians (Andersson, 2012).

Although there are several forms of resistance in media, politics and from ordinary minority and majority citizens, there is still a powerful sense of denial of racism in Norway.

In order for Norway to take the first step on the road to a post-racial society, Norway needs to recognize that racism is a contemporary problem in Norway, which is produced on all levels of society. The second step could be to recognize the ways in which racism occurs and take actions (such as given by ECRI) to combat racism and discrimination. Academics and intellectuals alike have a responsibility to investigate how racism function and is articulated within Norway.

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