POLITICS AND BUREAUCRACY IN THE NORWEGIAN WELFARE STATE

An Anthropological Approach

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Approaches to Social Inequality and Difference

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Setting the Stage: In and Out of Institutions

Introduction: The Problem and the Perspective

The present book explores how political mobilization from "below" may influence the distribution and dynamics of power in the context of a thoroughly bureaucratized, democratic state. The main case is Norway, but the larger Scandinavian context is also analyzed in some detail. My main objective is to try to understand the potential of horizontally organized social relations for cutting across and challenging hierarchical chains of command and centralization of political and bureaucratic power. This potential, I argue, is closely related to how motivations, identities, and social relations formed in contexts where social agents control largely informal resources that can be used to influence formal institutions, and to some extent shape them. The "institutional ecology" of the Norwegian welfare state, and the Scandinavian model more generally, seems to be characterized by a relative openness—or perhaps "institutional vulnerability" is a more apt expression—that to some extent has made it possible to prevent elite seizure of political and bureaucratic power. It seems to me that this phenomenon must play an important role in any attempt to explain how and why the welfare state emerged in the first place (Vike 2012, 2013; Stenius 2010).

In my perspective, two aspects stand out. First, political activity in local politics in Norway is heavily influenced by the morality and practice of membership commitment in formal organizations. As I show in this book, this seems to inspire an egalitarian social dynamic that imposes

limits on the autonomy of political and managerial elites, whose interests are very often driven by the felt need to seek to establish more and better control over what they tend to see as inefficient and/or unruly institutions. Second, the welfare state's universalist orientation, the idea that rights to entitlements and services are founded on citizenship rather than on some highly specific criteria implying extensive means testing (Kildal and Kuhnle 2005), seems to make it natural and easy to make strong and legitimate claims on "the state," and to challenge the autonomy and rationality of elites. Universalism contributes heavily to make public services "the heart of the state" (Fassin et al. 2013), and because so much of both political legitimacy and trust in public institutions depends on responsiveness to needs, the actual responsibility of public institutions is very hard to define and delimit. And, because public institutions, the municipalities in particular, "lack" clear-cut boundaries, they are relatively open and, consequently, accessible to many interests other than those of institutional elites that are supposed to control them from the top. At the same time, this logic seems to provide the local, democratically controlled institutions of the state—municipalities—with much more agenda-setting leverage than one would expect.

In sum, I call the unintended effects of these dynamics and conditions "the low center of gravity state," and argue that it is not some form of "Scandinavian" cultural disposition that generates such effects, but rather political mobilization and struggle of a particular type. By exploring such processes ethnographically within their proper social, cultural, and historical contexts, I seek to contribute to explaining why the Norwegian/Scandinavian version of the welfare state experiment has not (yet) collapsed. This endeavor has some analytical worth, as I see it, in the light of the fact that welfare states of the type that defined the utopian post-World War II horizon, and the vision of egalitarianism that formed part of it, today seems to be deemed unattractive, unrealistic, or impossible. The "low center of gravity state" metaphor seems appropriate insofar as it denotes both public institutions as centers of political gravity (Iversen and Soskice 2006), and the relatively decentralized and "messy" distribution of power within the institutional system. When the center of gravity is relatively low, maneuverability increases.

My perspective is anthropological, and does not focus primarily on how institutions ought to work according to some imaginary normative standard of rationality, but on how they are socially organized and work in ways that tend to differ distinctly from such standards. In order

to map the social organization of the state, I have pursued an ethnographic strategy that I call "in and out of institutions," that is, collecting data across contextual and formal boundaries, following actors and the social relations they form across institutional contexts, moving up and down hierarchies, and exploring processes of decision making over time (Thelen et al. 2014). Another important element in this strategy is to explore institutional feedback, that is, the ways in which interpretations of the diverse and largely unintended effects of institutional action are conventionalized, authorized, and contested. Viewing institutions as emergent, contingent phenomena, I agree with Mary Douglas' statement in her influential book, *How Institutions Think* (1986):

> …[It] is highly improbable that institutions could emerge smoothly from a gathering momentum of converging interests and an unspecified mixture of coercion and convention. We have too much experience of how easily they come apart and collapse. The thing to be explained is how institutions ever start to stabilize. (Douglas 1986: 111)

On the other hand, I am sceptical about other aspects of her sweeping, almost determinist generalizations, some of which seem to have had a significant influence in social science beyond anthropology:

> Institutions systematically direct individual memory and channel our perceptions into forms compatible with the relations they authorize.… Any problems we try to think about are automatically transformed into their own organizational problems. The solutions they proffer only come from the limited range of their experience. If the institution is one that depends on participation, it will reply to our frantic question: "More participation!" If it is one that depends on authority, it will only reply "More authority!" Institutions have the pathetic megalomania the computer whose whole vision of the world is its own program. (Ibid., 92)

I hope that in this book I am able to show why this perspective is unsatisfying. It portrays institutions as though they are formed by one single interest.

My perspective is also historical. Inasmuch as the institutional dynamics and properties I wish to uncover and describe emerge from forms of power struggles that over time generate specific sociocultural and political forms of contention, opposition, and identification, the analytical task of mapping continuities and discontinuities in institutional dynamics

seems interesting and important. Many of the ethnographic descriptions in this book date back to the 1990s and 2000s, when I carried out several extensive fieldwork projects in Norwegian municipalities. These descriptions, and my analytical framing of them, can be seen as parts of an ongoing process of historical transformation in which the struggle to oppose the centralization of power meets new and more profound challenges. Finnish historian Henrik Stenius, in a comparative study of the role of associational life in political modernization on Norden, formulates a very fruitful question with regard to this transformation.

> To what extent did associational life – formally and semi-formally arranged horizontal deliberation among equals – substitute old vertical patriarchalism? And to what extent has a culture of everyday deliberation, fostered in the modern associational life, succeeded to defend democratic structures against the primitive forms of neo-liberalism and managerial authoritarianism? (Stenius 2010: 78)

ENTER ULEFOSS

In 1989/1990, I carried out fieldwork in Ulefoss, an industrial community of about 3500 people in southeast Norway (Vike 1991). Ulefoss has long industrial traditions, and economically it still relies heavily on the ironworks factory established in the first half of the seventeenth century. Until the 1970s, the community also included a vibrant lumber industry, illustrating Ulefoss' ideal location along the waterway, the Telemark Canal, running from the foot of the Hardanger Mountain plain down to the sea by the town of Skien (some 120 km southwest of the capital Oslo), on which timber from the interior of Telemark passed in huge quantities. Due to the influx of a large number of migrant workers and artisans taking part in the construction of the canal during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the community expanded considerably. This gave rise to intense political activity at a time vital for the constitution of modern Norway. Around the turn of the century, the labor movement grew very strong, comprising both a social democratic and a sizeable communist element. The main challenge for the movement was the nature of local industrial ownership, which was modeled on a highly paternalistic orientation and anchored in personal dependency.

During my fieldwork, aging members of the Labour Party in Ulefoss offered narratives of their lives and biographies that represented

compressed versions of dramatic changes in modern Norwegian history. In interviews, I was presented with numerous illustrations of how people thought of the early twentieth century as a struggle against the form of power enforced by the owners of local industry: personal dependency. Until workers got organized and won the right to unionize, factory owners had more or less complete control over employees, and indirect control over the rest of the community. They could fire people by fiat. At the ironworks factory, the struggle for unionization was carried out very late—in the 1920s—but with remarkable success. The local struggle in Ulefoss was a part of a national mobilization that had already led the Labour movement into a leading position nationally, and thus people in Ulefoss had quite powerful outside allies, both in terms of labor market power and parliamentary influence.

The Norwegian Labour Party first rose to governmental power in 1928 (based on a revolutionary declaration, which made the experiment a short-lived one) and it established itself as the hegemonic political force from 1935 onward. The unionization struggle in Ulefoss ran parallel to a major change in housing standards and the local geography of power. Workers and their families had become able to buy their own land, build houses, move away from the factory owners' residential areas, and thus symbolically break away from their status as dependent labor. We may add to this, also, that the Second World War established a strong sense of national unity that in Ulefoss contributed heavily to transcending the fundamental experience of class as an imperative identity. This same experience of unity was further accentuated by the unparalleled increase in living standards taking place after the war.

A characteristic feature of the personal narratives I was presented with in interviews with older Labour Party members in Ulefoss was the strong working class identity, and support for the Labour movement and the Labour Party in particular. Being a member of the party was "natural," they emphasized; something that was both a precondition for a better society and a matter of belonging. Few of them spoke about ideology; they were much more concerned with how to act in unity. For Albert, a former ironworks worker who was 72 years old at the time I interviewed him, some basic experiences had shaped his sense of belonging in profound ways. The hardship imposed upon people in Ulefoss in the twenties and thirties constituted his primary point of reference. Many of his coworkers were unemployed, and he witnessed a deep anxiety growing in the community. In light of this experience, two significant political

changes came to play an important part of his life ever since: the unioni-zation of local industrial workers, and the rise to parliamentary power by the Labour Party.

According to Albert, unionization was important because it gave the workers the possibility to negotiate with the local employer "on the basis of law," as he put it. In this way, their powerlessness and per-sonal dependence could be radically reduced and give way to a greater degree of autonomy and freedom. The success of the Labour Party in the national arena also created many new possibilities. For Albert, as a young worker, the Party's message, most importantly the slogan, "Jobs for Everyone," was extremely persuasive. He felt that it was directed to him and his kind. Being an active member of the Labour Party involved taking part in the collective struggle to provide "better conditions" for all, he emphasized. The leaders of the Labour movement were easy to identify with, because one knew that "they were to be trusted." Albert lost his mother when he was quite young, and the rest of the family depended heavily upon the support provided by fellow workers and their families. Most people experienced similar hardships, and had very similar notions of how things could be improved. For Albert, it was only natu-ral that almost everyone he knew turned enthusiastically to the Labour Party.

Albert joined the union of industrial workers in 1935. In the inter-view, he thought back on this period as a particularly tough one. In light of the local employer's measures aiming to divide and rule and prevent unionization, the union leaders' radical attitude impressed him greatly, but made him somewhat anxious, too. He recalled several "wild and illegal strikes." He also recalled that things actually calmed down fairly soon. Not only were the factory owners made subject to law, the union radicals soon turned more moderate: their need to "show off" became less urgent. Albert identified with this moderation.

When commenting on the situation after the Second World War, Albert stressed that he happily observed that "things were levelled out." At the time of my fieldwork, he followed local politics very closely, and although he didn't attend meetings very often, he was active in infor-mal networks of Labour Party members. He was deeply sceptical towards the leaders of the Party because, like many others, he felt that they were not sufficiently sensitive to "people's opinion." "They hardly deserve the trust that has been given to them", he emphasized.

When interviewing representatives of this pioneer generation in Ulefoss, I was left with the impression that they attributed the extreme improvement in their own and their children's lives to the struggle they had been through. The moral backbone of their lives was the idea of *standing together*. On almost all occasions when political interests were at stake, even in seemingly trivial discussions on local matters, breaks in the norm of standing together in Party votes were considered deeply immoral. The Party was to have but *one opinion* on all-important issues, most of my informants among the old guard emphasized. In the Municipal Assembly, all Labour Party representatives were exposed to a heavy pressure, formal and moral, to stand by the majority decisions made by the Party meeting that was always held prior to the meeting in the Assembly. Labour Party members had little respect for the political outlook of the local educated elite (which, during my fieldwork, were largely associated with the Socialist Party), who put a premium on personal opinion at the cost of the collective.

In recurring narratives, interpreting their own biographies within the larger frame of the remarkable socioeconomic changes that took place in Norwegian society in the twentieth century, the old Labour Party members in Ulefoss associated societal progress with the Party, its program, and their own influence upon it. For people in Ulefoss, as in many other parts of Norway, the emergence of the Social Democratic state was experienced as vital to the success of the local political struggle. The relationship between the local struggle, party membership, national identity, progress, and improved life conditions was perceived as very direct. And in many cases it appeared that in times of local conflicts, much of this cluster of historical experience was reminiscent of, and used as a moral metanarrative for current political discourse. Historical experience had confirmed that standing together constituted the basic prerequisite for political influence and desirable outcomes. Moreover, in order to stand together, the collective control of those representing the party in decision-making fora was considered absolutely necessary. In Ulefoss, this control was of a formal kind—for example, as noted above, through binding representatives to specific decisions made in the Party meeting—but also social and moral. Party members and their local networks would actively monitor the behavior of those representing them in a variety of arenas, and use the information gathered in this way to discuss the trustworthiness of political leaders, that is, whether they, too, would be

willing to sacrifice their self-interest for the common good and respect the morality of standing together.

As political ideals, categories such as *standing together*, *common sense*, and *equality* were seen not only, and perhaps not even primarily, as the preferred outcome of policy, but rather as preferred properties of the decision-making process itself, the way in which the Party collective was supposed to reach consensus. In Ulefoss, *common sense* denoted a moral obligation to listen to and respect "the silent majority," those who did not possess expert knowledge but who often used informal arenas to deliberate and reach a shared view in political issues. In formal meetings in the Labour Party, they had a much more important role to play in Party votes than their role in debates would indicate. *Equality* referred to what I choose to call the morality of membership, which most often expressed itself as a critique of any kind of social distinction based on formal education, sophisticated speech, and the like. The informal procedures through which trust networks between equals were constituted and upheld, were articulated by the idea of *the majority*. This informally recognized idea of majority was mobilized as a means to control the formal power of political leaders whenever the latter was considered at odds with the general attitude among members. In Party meetings, it very often became a question of how to deal with the mayor (representing the Labour Party), when he time and again failed to understand what it meant when Party members tried to tell him that what he did was against the opinion of the *people*. In such contexts, *people* served as a rhetorical denotation of *the majority*. For them (those who portrayed themselves as the *people* and *the majority*) it was clear that the mayor's power was attributable to his tendency to dominate formal meetings and thus misuse the loyalty of members by overrunning their sense of solidarity with *the majority*. The effect was that he generated the sense among many that he did not "really listen." Interestingly, over time the mayor and his allies had to pay a price; he was not nominated for a third term in office.

During my fieldwork, an intense political controversy developed around a new plan for the reorganization of elder care (Vike 1991, 1997). The mayor and other leading politicians had led a planning process that concluded there was a need for a reform that would channel resources from elder care institutions to more "open solutions," providing greater care in the home. The basic idea was that this would improve the quality of care and enable the frail elderly to live longer in their own homes, thereby lessening the financial burden of the

municipality involved in maintaining costly institutions. In the beginning, there seemed a broad consensus that this was a good strategy, and the leading politicians understood this as a "go" signal. However, after a while, the opposition gained ground and became serious. The mayor, who took the lead in fronting the plan, argued that his own party, as well as the municipal health and welfare committee, had already committed to the plan and could not reverse the process. The opposition, which consisted of several backbenchers in his own party and a considerable number of party members, as well as parts of their networks in local voluntary associations, was provoked by the mayor's conclusion that no further discussion was necessary and stirred to angry protest. Probably as an attempt to bypass the growing opposition in the Labour Party, the mayor and the municipal administrative leaders decided to arrange public meetings to enlighten people. They largely ended up as failures. The one meeting I attended got completely out of hand, and both the leading politicians and the attending bureaucrats were almost literally thrown out of the building and accused of being arrogant. The conflict kept escalating further for a while, but after a couple of months, a compromise was achieved. Most elements in the plan were kept, but the transition from institutional to home-based care was to be slower and less radical. At a later stage in the process, when local political leadership was on the Party agenda, the local informal party network had effectively disqualified the mayor.

RECIPROCITY IN POLITICS

Marcel Mauss, in his legendary work, *The Gift* (1954), defines gift giving as the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate. Through this simple formula, Mauss investigated how social relationships and complex systems emerge from reciprocal acts and commitments. For Mauss, and a large number of scholars after him, the gift serves as a highly useful analytical metaphor. It refers to a phenomenon that may be directly observed; it depicts a specific motivation (or set of motivations) for human beings involved in social relationships, and it points at easily detectable aspects of the dynamics and interdependencies of commitments and the social relations emerging from them. Also, we may add, thinking metaphorically of social processes as sequences of gift giving may help us understand how individuals get caught up in larger institutional contexts in which social relations are organized by specific

combinations of formal and informal types of exchange. What strikes me as interesting in the Ulefoss case is the great emphasis people tend to put on social relations mediated by formal rules, and on moral conventions related to and made possible by such rules. Albert's possibility for exerting influence, as he saw it, rested on his membership in the Party and the union, and on the way he could take part in forging a robust majority that local political leaders had to respect unless they were ready to face moral sanctions (in the form of a bad reputation in the wider community). As representatives, these elites were subject to forms of control that regulated what kinds of "gifts" could be presented to whom, when, and how. Above all, the mayor seemed to fail to realize that in his position, his access to the formal, municipal administrative hierarchy was not of the same moral order as the mutual commitments among party members. They belonged to separate moral spheres, and party members guarded the boundary between them. Each member's autonomy was paramount, and in order to protect it moral pressure was directed at political representatives who worked closely with administrative elites and who could be tempted to believe that they could demand loyalty according to the logics of the administrative chain of command.

Equally important was the protection of individual autonomy from the influence of differences in status, wealth, and prestige. Within these moral boundaries, gifts exchanged between members tended to conform to an overarching, general moral principle: gift giving was mostly about coalition building, which took the form of an emergent process of supporting chains of arguments in the making. The recognition of a good argument and the expression of support thus served as prototypical gifts. Over time, the identification of good arguments tends to become associated with members with high credibility. In practice this credibility involves the ability to guard one's autonomy vis-à-vis leaders, a record for sacrificing self-interest for the common good (taking responsibility, showing up at meetings, standing a fight, etc.), and respecting the autonomy of others (involving, most importantly, refraining from assuming that the building of new coalitions may draw on solidarity established in previous ones). However, respecting autonomy meant that mutual support in coalition building was specific to each individual issue, so the expression of this respect involved acknowledging that the support of others could never be expected to build on previous exchanges. In moral terms, membership status introduced an element of equality that partly undermined the relevance of social status. Credibility and trust were

seen as depending on the strength of one's commitment rather than education, talent, personal status, and so on. However, the relationship between the formal and the informal was clearly asymmetrical. Formal rules and procedures served as a medium through which informal aspects of the relationship between members had to pass and be sanctioned. At the same time, formal status (membership) and decision-making procedures always served as decisive reference points for the activation of informal resources.

Mike Savage, in *The Popularity of Bureaucracy: Involvement in Voluntary Associations* (2005), makes the point that social relationships of the kind we call "bureaucratic" are not only developed and cultivated by the apparatuses of the state. In England,

> All manner of people have enthusiastically supported and nurtured bureaucracies, such as trade unions, charities, sports, or hobby clubs. Bureaucracy has historically had strong roots in popular culture. (Savage 2005: 310)

> Indeed, it can be argued that the (no doubt partial) democratization of British social relationships from the early nineteenth century rested on popular bureaucratization as a means of resisting and countering elite patronage. (ibid., 313)

This perspective resonates with some of Max Weber's insights into the nature of modern bureaucratic forms. It carries a democratic potential in that it allows for the separation of social status from bureaucratic function, and bases itself on educational merit and professional ethos. The office is not supposed to be an extension of social position, and may in principle become independent from social class. Mike Savage's point resonates well with the ambition of most of my working-class Ulefoss informants. They clearly saw that the formal system of roles and procedures in unions and municipal politics provided them with tools with which their sense of collective morality could be channeled into political influence and break with the tradition of personal dependency that had dominated them. Not only that: Albert, for instance, clearly realized that the power of the collective morality as he saw it was important to nurture for political means resting on his own personal autonomy. Working-class members of the Ulefoss Labour Party hated the idea of becoming dependent on the formal power of the mayor and his allies, or other party members imbued with representative functions. The bureaucratic

formalities characterizing the Labour Party and the municipal political arenas in Ulefoss became a set of (more or less) transparent rules for negotiating political interest. They provided a social infrastructure for a specific form of reciprocity. In order to be accepted as a legitimate member of the collectivity, individuals had to conform to the moral code of "standing together," which most often involved symbolic confirmations of being equal qua members, respecting the majority view, and actively taking part in creating consensus. "The politics of recognition" thus consisted in granting respect to those who held the overall aim of "standing together" in esteem, particularly those serving representative functions and offices. It also consisted in a symbolism of voluntary commitment, sharply contrasted with loyalty and social debt. On this basis, trust could be accumulated. The morality of membership was thus not mainly about denying inequality, but preventing it from being converted to individual political capital beyond the control of the collective of members. Everyone seemed to agree, in principle, which elected representatives should not be allowed to achieve any kind of autonomy in the sense of becoming able to maneuver independently of the continuous control of the membership collective.

In Ulefoss I observed many people who in political terms accumulated much "extra" respect and prestige by making an extraordinary effort; most of them did so by holding key positions in local voluntary associations. Their success relied on their ability to display a will to invest time and skills in building common goods, and, perhaps most notably, in never indicating that they were aware of the fact that the respect thus gained could be converted to forms of capital relevant in the political realm. In local politics in Ulefoss, no gift seems more valuable than receiving recognition for making an extra effort for the common good, and for not claiming status and weight beyond one's status as an "ordinary member." One of my Ulefoss informants, a well-educated man in his early forties working as a director of a regional housing cooperative organization, invested much time in participating in the Labour Party. At one point, he let some of his fellow members know that he would be happy to take up a leadership position, as he figured that seeking power is the very essence of politics. This explicitly expressed ambition effectively disqualified him for any such position.

The very simple logic of the gift gives rise to complex social systems far beyond the intentions and consciousness of those involved in single acts of gift giving. This seems to be what Mary Douglas has in mind