

The Alternative Nation

“It is in the wilderness that the line must be drawn; there we must begin to build a wall of silence around those values in nature that die when they are taken by force, and that unfold their deepest wonders only in the still hour of prayer.”¹ The philosopher Petter W. Zapffe’s words, written after having climbed the steep Stetind Mountain in 1937, would ring true to the Deep Ecologists discussed in this book. Indeed, many of them would conduct a yearly pilgrimage to Stetind in the north of Norway to honor Zapffe with an outdoor seminar on how to stop the troubling eco-crisis.

This book has discussed the ways in which nature in the periphery – both the metaphorical and real Stetind – became a moral and political place of resistance to environmental ruin. The Norwegian culture of outdoor life, literally “free-air-life,” in remote areas framed what was considered good and morally superior. To do what is good presupposes knowledge about what is right, and what was deemed right was a life situated remotely, as in the mountains, among rural fishermen-peasants, or in a bucolic village in Nepal. The power of the periphery in these places lay in scholar-activists seeing them as sites of self-sufficient ecological harmony, and thus they were viewed as having a moral quality that could offer emancipation and redemption to the environmental offender who lived in the polluted center. At the local level, the ills took place in the neighboring factory town or city, especially Oslo, while at the global level the remote and pristine Norway became the solution for a world in crisis. It was a bi-polar mode of argumentation typical for the Cold War, which

¹ Petter W. Zapffe, “Stetind” (1937), in *Essays og epistler*, pp. 56–61, quote p. 56. Translated and quoted in Reed and Rothenberg (eds. trs.), *Wisdom in the Open Air*, p. 37.

challenged participants in ecological debates to take a definitive either/or stand, such as either building or not building a hydropower dam or endorsing either a “deep” or “shallow” ecological point of view.

The Stetind Mountain was one of many examples of the power of the periphery. The ocean explorer Thor Heyerdahl found his environmental “paradise” (his word) on the Pacific island of Fatu-Hiva, where he pursued an idealized Stone Age type of living with his wife. Their life on the island became his personal Archimedean point from which he could evaluate the environmental ills of the world. A similar experience occurred with the archeologist and explorer Helge Ingstad, who, in his books and lectures about living with First Nations people in Canada, portrayed a nobler way of existing with nature than that of urbanized Western lifestyles. Such romanticisms were foreign to the anthropologist Fredric Barth, who introduced methodological ecology to Norway in the 1950s for the purpose of studying people living in the periphery. Yet Barth’s students used his methodology to generate studies that idealized Norwegian rural fishermen-peasants while denigrating urban life in the city. The imagined or real fishermen-peasants were ecologically self-sufficient and they were viewed as admirable in comparison to those who faced the ills of industrialization. Being able to grasp both the remote and the near allowed a worldly ecological reasoning, as in the case of Heyerdahl’s promotion of the United Nations or Barth’s universalization of his studies of the people of Swat in North Pakistan.

The simple life in the imagined, physical, or historical remote space evokes a deep-seated Norwegian cultural trope, namely the allure of a life lost. “Soon Norway will not have any farmers and fishermen left,” the biologist Dag Hessen notes, “yet we are still a land of farmers and fishermen.”² The worldwide bestselling fishermen’s tale, *Shark Drunk* (2017), about catching large sharks in the pristine Norwegian arctic archipelago of Vesterålen, captures the allure of remote and pristine places well.³ The Austrian logician Ludwig Wittgenstein’s remote cottage deep in the Norwegian fjords has captivated the nation’s philosophers as the most appropriate site for true thinking, philosophical pilgrimage, and inauguration, culminating with its restoration in 2019. Less highbrow but equally telling is that the quaint art of chopping, stacking, and drying of firewood can capture the imagination of the nation, with a book on the topic selling a

² Dag Hessen, *Landskap i endring* (Oslo: Pax, 2016), p. 7.

³ Morten A. Strøksnes, *Shark Drunk: The Art of Catching a Large Shark from a Tiny Rubber Dinghy in a Big Ocean* (New York: Knopf, 2017).

remarkable half a million copies along with a highly popular six hour “slow TV” show on how to maintain a crackling fireplace.⁴ Another best-selling example is a novel by Roy Jacobsen, *The Invisible* (2013), which tells the story about the lives of self-sufficient fishermen-peasants on a remote coastal island in the 1920s.⁵ It taps into deep-seated ideas of Norwegian heritage and longings for a simpler time that has been lost. Historically, the powers of such peripheries have spurred archconservative imaginations, as in the case of Knut Hamsun’s *Growth of the Soil* (1917), or left-leaning dreams of ecological self-sufficiency, as in the case of the scholar-activists discussed in this book. In both instances, the imagined or real life in the periphery has represented what is good and thus what people living in the center should admire and strive for.

Accordingly, the High Mountain Ecology Research Station at the remote mountains of Finse was where ecology, as a biological field in Norway, was formed. The Station was located in the periphery, at the heart of outdoor mountaineering. Ecological sciences in Norway grew out of a culture in which nature was understood not as a place of work, but as a place for outdoor vacationing and recreation. The ecologists understood the landscape to be in ecological balance, and juxtaposed it with the unbalanced industrialized environments down in the valleys or in the cities. What one should strive for, they argued, was a steady-state nation which the world could admire, inspired specifically by the steady-state ecology of Finse and the nearby Hardangervidda. The Station became one of the largest ecological research stations in Europe and the chief Norwegian contribution to the International Biological Program. The 1962 translation of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* propelled the program forward, which was active between 1964 and 1974 and financially supported over 200 graduate students and scholars.

The philosophers were impressed with the ecologists and they began formulating their own ecophilosophies inspired by the ecologists’ work. At the very peak of the Hallingskarvet Mountain, next to Finse, the philosopher Arne Næss built a cottage and a shed for technical climbing and thinking. Here he and his mountaineering friends formulated a philosophy of respect for nature from which people in the industrial lowlands should hear. At the University of Oslo they created The Ecophilosophy Group, chaired by a charismatic philosopher Sigmund Kvaløy. The Group came to

⁴ NRK/Netflix, *National Firewood Night*, 2013. Lars Mytting, *Norwegian Wood: Chopping, Stacking, and Drying Wood the Scandinavian Way* (New York: Abrams Image, 2015).

⁵ Roy Jacobsen, *The Invisible* (London: MacLehose, 2017).

frame environmental debate in binary terms: either you supported the Life Necessities Society or you supported the Industrial Growth Society. The former was inspired by the traditional Norwegian rural life of fishermen-peasants in the periphery which was viewed as worth striving for, while the latter was the society most people were actually living in but should abandon. His arguments evoked a Lutheran pietist condition of guilt necessary for offering an ecological awakening and redemption for the environmental activist. The ecophilosophers' most formative experience and initiation was their attempt in 1970 to save the Mardøla waterfall from hydro-development through civil disobedience, an experience that led to the formation of the Deep Ecology movement.

The Sherpa community in the remote village of Beding in Nepal became the prime model for the ecophilosophers, who saw their lifestyle as being in true harmony with nature. The Sherpa became the Oriental oracles of ecological wisdom worth admiring, in contrast to the Occidental horror and futility of the Western industrial society. As a consequence, Sherpa life was to be a model for all Norwegians, and, in turn, the Sherpa-informed Norwegians were to be a model for Europe and the world. If Norway could return to the country's traditional fisherman-peasant culture it could eventually become more like the society of the Sherpa and thus serve as an alternative nation from which the rest of world could learn. It was a radical vision of the nation evolving into an ecological self-sufficient lodestar for the world instead of joining the industrial and economic growth-driven European Community. The Deep Ecology movement adopted this vision and progressively evolved into a fairly large organization of hundreds of devoted vocal scholar-activists. They knew right from wrong, and used every opportunity to argue that the ecological steady-state society they envisioned was not an herbal-tea party, but a revolutionary break with industrial growth.

The focus of ecologists, as well as mountain-climbing ecophilosophers, on the periphery of the high altitude may explain why protecting the oceans was not at the forefront of Norwegian nature conservation, despite the country having the world's second longest coastline (with Canada having the longest). The lack of questioning of whaling surely puzzled foreign activists, while the harvesting of seaweed may serve as an example of an issue nearly everyone ignored.⁶ Though there was some serious

⁶ Sophia Efstathiou and Bjørn K. Myskja, "Appreciation through use: How industrial technology articulates an ecology of values around Norwegian seaweed," *Philosophy and Technology* (2018), 1–20.

questioning in the 1970s of the petroleum industry's activities in the North Sea, the environmental health of the ocean, dumping of waste, salmon aquaculture, butchering of harp seal pups, or the interests of whales hardly rose to the forefront of the debate.

Tellingly, the Deep Ecology scholars who established Environmental Studies as a discipline in Norway sent students who needed to develop the right ecological state of mind to the scenic Hardangervidda mountain plateau near Finse for a mandatory course trip. The field of Environmental Studies had an interdisciplinary focus held together by an ecophilosophical vision for students trained and fluent in ecological self-sufficiency. Environmental Studies became an influential hotbed for ecologically informed scholarship advising both Norway and the world on what to do about the ecological crisis and how to fundamentally rethink the human relationship to the natural world. It was perhaps the first academic institution in Europe on the topic, and they attracted scholars and students concerned about the globalization of pollution, the damaging aspects of industrialization, callous technocratic positivist research, human population growth, and the need to ground environmentalism in ecological principles. Their questioning of economic growth, technocracy, and industrialism was informed by the ideas of populist agrarian socialism, which placed greater value on rural communities and traditional lifestyles.

The spiritual life of Norwegians often takes place outdoors in scenic environments rather than inside churches or buildings, and ecologically informed scholars thus came to use religious language and traditions when thinking about the environment. The Deep Ecologists were appealing to deep-seated pietist Christian traditions in Norway, and the all-dominating Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway responded favorably to their call to save nature. Deep Ecology represented to them a new pietism invoking age-old Lutheran values and systems of belief. The result was an overall greening of church life and attempts to drive the Lutheran Church in a more eco-religious direction. In subsequent events, secular Norwegian economic policies of purchasing carbon emissions quota and clean development mechanisms came to reflect Christian codes of paying indulgences.

One of the main targets of the Deep Ecologists was the "shallow" Norwegian co-author of *The Limits to Growth* (1972), Jørgen Randers, who at the time was a graduate student at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His PhD was financed by the ecumenical movement, and he therefore included

religious leaders as advisors for his PhD. Randers coined the phrase “the ecologically sustainable society” to describe an environmental-friendly life within environmental limits, and church leaders began using the phrase in their outreach to non-believers as a secular expression of their longing for a Golden Age. Sustainability as understood by theologians within the World Council of Churches captured the Biblical promise of the second coming of Eden. Randers was sympathetic to this interpretation, and upon returning to Oslo in 1974, advocated for sustainable development as a gradualist (as opposed to revolutionist) path to the ecological self-sufficient society the Deep Ecologists envisioned. He would struggle to find a platform for such thinking in Norway, with the exception of environmentally concerned members within the Labor Party seeking a gradualist approach to ecological debates.

One of them was Gro Harlem Brundtland, who, in her capacity as Minister of the Environment between 1974 and 1979, faced environmental activists and Deep Ecologists in various debates. As a medical doctor, she took a strictly anthropocentric stand against those claiming to speak on behalf of nature, arguing that only human bureaucratic rules should be heeded. Yet she also represented the younger generation of Labor Party members who were eager to rethink the Party’s policies and traditions, especially with respect to environmental issues and the use of natural resources. She resisted the polarization of ecological debate and sought a middle-ground approach to environmental affairs. And, unlike the Deep Ecologists, she insisted on a genuine engagement between Norway and the European Community in order to solve environmental issues. Her test case was international diplomatic and scientific cooperation to address the problem of acid rain.

The discovery of petroleum in the North Sea in 1969 would, in the decades that followed, gradually transform Norway into a nation financially dependent on oil and gas. This sparked debates about how best to manage these natural resources and use the new wealth. The geologists took the lead, and chief among them was Ivan Th. Rosenqvist. In contrast to Randers, he was optimistic with respect to the quantity of natural resources and on the importance of economic growth. As a representative of the radical left, he thought using petroleum would be to the benefit of the workers of the world. Environmental problems, such as acid rain, were to him minor issues in comparison to the importance of lifting people out of poverty. He would hold on to these anti-environmentalist opinions to the very end, even when mounting evidence necessitated revising his stance on acid rain and climate change. He became a thorn in the side of not only

radical Deep Ecologists, but also Brundtland during her attempts to negotiate international solutions to the problem of acid rain.

In 1982, the Deep Ecologists gave up trying to halt the construction of the Alta-Kautokeino River power plant in the midst of Sámi territory, ending the bitterest environmental and civil rights conflict in the nation's history. This also meant an end to Deep Ecology as a political movement in Norway. Paradoxically, they had their international breakthrough during this period, thanks to the US-based radical environmental organization Earth First! The tensions and conflicts between the more fundamentalist Deep Ecologists and the moderate reformers within the Labor Party fizzled out with the moderates having claimed the victory. The activists and the Sámi had failed to save the Alta River, but they forced Brundtland to take Indigenous civil rights and environmental issues more seriously, something that she did as Chair for the World Commission on Environment and Development. In the Commission's report, *Our Common Future* (1987), the sustainable society Randers had imagined became a vision everyone should strive for, while "sustainable development" was the path worth struggling for in order to achieve that distant goal. In effect, the Commission adopted the language that the World Council of Churches had developed back in the 1970s in order to disperse a secular expression of the Christian gospel about preparing for the resurrection of Eden. Sustainable development was, in effect, a gradualist approach to reach the self-sufficient ecological harmony that the Deep Ecologists envisioned and longed for. The periphery – the life at Finse and that of the Sherpa – had become the model and the revelation the entire world should strive for when seeking "sustainable development" that would ultimately lead to the sustainable society.

The *Our Common Future* report also turned the environmental debate in Norway away from ecology toward climate change and climatology. Building on her experience in atmospheric pollution diplomacy with respect to acid rain in Europe, Brundtland mobilized the United Nations to address climatic change at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992, by establishing the Framework Convention on Climate Change. At home, as the country's Prime Minister, she envisioned Norway as "a driving force" and a "pioneer country" for sustainable development in the world. Norway was to show the world the path toward a sustainable society by addressing climate change head-on. In the aftermath of the Cold War, propelled forward by the sentiment that capitalism had won over communism, Brundtland and her delegation to the Earth Summit framed the solution to climate change in cost-benefit terms. Her advisor, the economist Jens

Stoltenberg, sought to implement her vision by advocating for the climate economics of carbon emissions trading at the Kyoto conference in 1997 and later as the United Nations Special Envoy on Climate Change.

Both Brundtland and Stoltenberg had, in effect, adopted the Deep Ecologists' plea from the 1970s for making Norway into an environmentally friendly alternative nation for the world to admire. The concept of being an environmental "pioneer country" was an integral part of the government's general foreign policy of turning Norway into a "humanitarian superpower" and thus mobilizing Norway as a strong player for the good in a troubled world.⁷ Norway's "pioneer" environmental policy would put the country on the diplomatic scene by empowering its politicians to take the lead in international negotiations and portraying the country as the world's environmental leader.

The do-gooding environmental gaze on the world did not necessarily lead to sound environmental policies at home. A leading Norwegian environmental ethicist rightly notes that "there is very little to be proud about" with respect to environmental protection in Norway.⁸ The high ideals of sustainability may, at best, have captured the longings of the nation, though the ideals would not easily transfer into practical politics or behavior of everyday life. The pushback from the powers of the center was also significant, as in the case of Rosenqvist and his followers who argued against environmental protection and thought of climate change as a scientific hoax. This book should not be taken as evidence to gloss over the fact that Norwegian anti-environmentalism has been significant: the hunting of whales, harp seal pups, wolves, bears, wolverines, and lynx, the dumping of toxic mining waste in the fjords, the overfishing, the pollution from salmon aquaculture, the use of snowmobiles, the industrial farming, the hydropower dams, the commercialization of nature reserves, and, more recently, the building of windmills and electric transmission grids in pristine nature. Not to mention the day-to-day politic of pumping as much petroleum as possible up from the ocean floor despite knowing that this would contribute to environmental ills and climatic change. Given the long list of grievances, it is not surprising that the next generation of ecophilosophers is equally as upset about current environmental affairs as those discussed in this book.⁹

⁷ Tvedt, *Det internasjonale gjennombruddet* (Oslo: Dreyer, 2017).

⁸ Arne Johan Vetlesen, *The Denial of Nature: Environmental Philosophy in the Era of Global Capitalism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2015), p. x.

⁹ Trond Gansmo Jacobsen, *Økofilosofi* (Oslo: Fagbokforlaget, 2007).

With respect to international policies, the do-gooding gaze did not necessarily mean that Norway treated the world outside its borders with environmental respect. In the shadow of sustainability diplomacy, the political and financial interests of the nation would take the lead. In Antarctica, Norway has portrayed itself as a champion of good environmental stewardship, yet these conservation efforts reflected the very moral limits to Norwegian territorial claims.¹⁰ The state's petroleum company, Statoil, recently changed its name to Equinor to signal a shift in a greener direction, sold its holdings in the polluting Canadian tar sands, and began investing in offshore wind power. These initiatives have taken the center stage in the company's self-fashioning, while Equinor has, at the same time, increased its petroleum production, thanks to oilfields in Algeria, Angola, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Canada, Nigeria, and more, not to mention the company's drilling in the vulnerable Barents Sea in the Arctic. The investments in sustainability look shallow, for example, to the many foreign environmentalists protesting Equinor's deep-sea drilling plans in the Great Australian Bight. What did generate debate at home was the major pollution disaster in 2018 caused by Norsk Hydro's alumina refinery in Brazil, of which the Norwegian State owns roughly one third. The recent public outcry came despite the fact that the Norwegian aluminum industry has been the cause of dire environmental and social tragedies in the Amazonas reaching back to 1970s.¹¹ The sentiment of Norwegians as being the world's environmental do-gooders has allowed its many companies and ventures abroad to operate largely out of sight.

Indeed, the self-fashioning as the world's green do-gooders has hindered a reality check with respect to discussing the nation's international environmental endeavors. To follow the money of a rich nation on an environmental mission of bettering the world may not lead to the green results imagined, as in the case of the large funds used to purchase Clean Development Mechanism certificates.¹² And it is hard to find critical literature about the international investments of the nation's prime owner of "green" hydroelectric power, Statkraft ("state power"). Their various developments in the pristine wilderness of countries like Nepal, India, Brazil, Chile, and Peru have hardly been questioned in Norway.

¹⁰ Alejandra Mancilla, "The moral limits of territorial claims in Antarctica," *Ethics and International Affairs*, 32, no. 3 (2018), 339–60.

¹¹ Dan Børge Akerø, *Norge i Brasil: Militærdiktatur, folkemord og norsk aluminium* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1979).

¹² Martiniussen, *Drivhuseffekten: Klimapolitikken som forsvant*.

The point is not to insinuate that some dark troubling untold stories are hidden here, but instead to note that the Norwegian self-understanding of being environmentally good to the world hinders critical investigations into what is actually going on. Norway's \$2.6 billion contribution to the International Climate and Forest Initiative to save the world's tropical rainforests may serve as an exception that proves the rule. In a rare move by the Office of the Auditor General, the initiative was evaluated as being largely ineffective and unsatisfactory due to corruption and fraud.¹³ Yet the fact that good intentions don't always lead to good results hardly upset Norwegian environmentalists, as the power of the periphery is a system of belief.

While Norwegians imagined their country as a microcosm setting the environmental standards for the world, it was the high ideals of mountains and the imagined life of self-sufficient fishermen-peasants that would set the standard at home. The power of this periphery was largely a social construction of science-activists living in the urban center. As Kari Marie Norgaard has shown, the actual life of those living in the small-town Norwegian countryside is far from ecologically self-sufficient with people living in denial about climate change.¹⁴ Yet a constant stream of feel-good sentiments in their direction is coming from urban environmentalists with a longing for the periphery. Vacationing in mountain and fjord cottages is still a key component of Norwegian social life, with people, in effect, living a dual life in the nation's periphery and center, which causes tensions with respect to social identity, taxation, and democratic participation.¹⁵ It is this particular tension that this book has investigated, showing the ways in which both imagined and real life in the periphery would shape environmental policies in the center.

Today, activists reminiscent of the scholar-activists discussed in this book make up the small Green Party in Norway. In Oslo they are in a power-broker position and have managed to enforce an environmental regime that is not symbolic, leading up to the city being awarded the European Green Capital of 2019. They aim at turning Oslo, by 2030, into the first carbon-neutral city in the world. By speaking truth to power,

¹³ The Norwegian Parliament allocated during the period 2008–2017 a total of NOK 23.5 billion to the initiative. Riksrevisjonen, *The Office of the Auditor General of Norway's Investigation of Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2019), 7–8.

¹⁴ Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Olav Norheim, "Det gløymde folket," *Syn og segn*, 123:3 (2017), 47–53.

Green Party leaders have made it clear that they “don’t want to support a government that continues to explore new oil. That would be hypocrisy.”¹⁶ Standing up in this way to the nation’s powerful petroleum lobby has led the Parliament to decide that the massive Government Pension Fund of Norway should divest from fossil fuels and invest more in renewable energy. This decision was picked up by major news outlets and environmental NGOs around the world. “Huge huge huge win” for the divest movement, the founder of 350.org, Bill McKibben, tweeted to a largely American audience fed up with President Donald Trump’s environmental policies.¹⁷ As it turns out, the fine print of the Norwegian divestment plan was murky. Yet in the divided climate politics of the USA, which are framed by binaries similar to those of the Cold War, it was a beacon of good news and an example to admire for Green New Deal advocates. Using its position as the European Green Capital and representing an example to follow for fossil fuel divesting, Norwegian politicians tapped into a tradition, described in this book, of seeking to shine as the world’s green do-gooders. The power of the periphery is what allowed Norway to emerge as an environmental pioneer for the world.

¹⁶ Lan Marie Nguyen Berg, Deputy Mayor of Transport and Environment in Oslo, quoted in Jonathan Watts, “Norway’s push for Arctic oil and gas threatens Paris climate goals,” *The Guardian*, Aug. 10, 2017.

¹⁷ Bill McKibben, *Twitter* @billmckibben, Mar. 8, 2019.