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On the Constitution of Order in Norway. Equality and Leadership: Strength in a Weak State?

By order in this headline is meant something opposite of chaos or anarchy. The Norwegian society is not in anarchy or chaos. A person can go about his or her business expecting other persons to follow the same rules. And if someone does break the rules there are established procedures for sanctioning. And moreover, the order in Norway is seen as a democratic rule-of-law.

For the discussion here I will by democracy understand a society where collective action problems ultimately are solved be the consent of the people, either directly or indirectly (through negotiations by representatives). This does not necessarily mean a parliamentary democracy, but it means that there is some orderly way of making the difficult collective decisions, implement them, monitor them and sanction their breach. In short it means there is some kind of central government. And further, it means there has to be some orderly way of replacing this government if «the people» thinks some of the available alternatives for governor will take better care of their common interest.

Most Norwegians expect our democratic order to continue into the next millennium. Nothing would surprise us more than finding ourselves ruled by a tyrant. At most we can entertain the possibility of being ruled by another Quisling. We know that Norway may be conquered by a superior military force. But barring that we do not really expect a military coup d'etat. Why don't we? Why are Norwegians so confident of their social and political order? Why is it that even the idea of a breakdown seems rather preposterous?

To tell the truth, I do not know. But if social institutions begin to seem «natural», to the point of being almost invisible, we are, according to Mary Douglas (1987), getting close to the most fundamental institutions of a society. Thus, perhaps the feeling of being rather «far off» in trying to

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discuss the idea of a fundamental breakdown of our democratic rule-of-law, should suggest that I am entering something rather fundamental in Norwegian society.

Since Norwegians never contemplate the roads leading away from our basic democratic form of government, these roads become unthinkable. The concepts necessary to discuss fundamentally different forms of government are not part of the language any more. Then, as the existing institutions become «taken for granted» also they will disappear from public attention. So is it possible to say anything about these basic «invisible» institutions of Norwegian society?

At the outset I do not expect to come far. And what little I can offer will at most be speculations. Researching something without evidence, or investigating something by the residues left of it, is closer to archaeology than to the sociology I have been trained to do. So if you are in a charitable mood, let us consider the present paper an exercise in the generation of ideas. Maybe some of them may be of value for a real investigation of the issue.

Tocqueville on a new form of democratic despotism

Vincent Ostrom, in reflecting on Tocqueville's study of American democracy, observes that his (Tocqueville's) «conclusion was that if people act on the basis of natural inclinations, democratic societies will yield a new form of «democratic despotism» quite different than the «tyranny of the majority.» A culture of inquiry grounded in reflection and choice will give way to «simple and general notions» presuming «a great nation» in which «a single and central power ... governs the whole community by its direct influence» and that is «composed of citizens all formed upon one pattern and all governed by a single power.» Since each citizen sees others as like oneself, «he cannot understand why a rule that is applicable to one man should not be equally applicable to all others,» and «uniformity of legislation appears to him to be the first condition of good government» (ibid., 2:289) Under these circumstances «the notion they all form of government is that of a sole, simple, providential, and creative power» (ibid., 2:291). This is the antithesis of the principles articulated by James Madison about the problem of «framing a government which is to be administered by men over men.» It is as though men could choose to be governed by angels. Such circumstances are especially vulnerable to the art of manipulation.» (Ostrom 1997: 15-16, his quotes are from Tocqueville [1835-49] 1945)

As a point of departure for this essay one may wonder to what degree these observations apply to Norway. Is Norway on a road towards Tocqueville's new form of «democratic despotism»? Our belief in the benevolence of our government and our striving for uniformity of legislation would be fairly straightforward to document. But are we therefore vulnerable to the art of manipulation? We may not know the answer to this question before somebody actually tries to manipulate us. But maybe «manipulation» is the wrong way of thinking about our current development. In the long duree ways of thinking (thought-styles or worldviews) about our governance may trick us into doing things we would not want the result of if we could choose up front.

In my opinion Norway seems to have experienced a slow «drift» in reactions to problems from something like «our responsibility & we can do» to «it is the government's responsibility: why didn't the government do something about it?»

In other words there is a quantitative shift in our primary «political» reactions from self reliance and individual responsibility to «dependence thinking» and collective responsibility.

It is not unreasonable to presume that this slow shift (if there indeed is one) is politically driven, or rather fed by the welfare approach to policy. It can also be seen as co-developing with the administrative regulations approach to law increasingly being used, implementing increasingly powerful bureaucracies full of do-good welfare policies, promising improvement for everyone everywhere. Increasing expectations lead to broken promises, accusations of overbidding policies and decreasing confidence in the political process. The low opinion of politicians and policy is at least a topic of public discussion.

The slow shift in thinking about government involves several interlinked but not necessarily related processes:

- a taxation making government «rich» in relation to most people
- a do-good policy making it legitimate and easy to turn to the government
- an ideology of equality fostering more and more detailed legislation
- the pursuit of equality by law is fostering an increasing use of bureaucratic rules mandated by general legislation (administrative law)

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The outcome of these interlinked processes may be precisely the «democratic despotism» Tocqueville warned about. But the causal forces here are not tyrants or classes, it is our own values deeply embedded in our way of thinking. Such «unwritten rules» of a society will as part of a «language» and embedded in a «thought style» be some kind of longterm «causal» force in the preservation and transformation of social order.

At least to me this seems a more likely road away from our democratic order than direct manipulation. During the last 30 years Norway has been at a significant crossroads choice twice: The choice of joining the European community or not.

Some may say that the government tried to manipulate the Norwegian people into the European community. But if so, they did not succeed. I am not sure that putting a question out for referendum and committing oneself to heeding the advice qualifies as manipulation. In any case, twice the referendum has returned a «no» to the government's proposal of membership.

It is rather interesting to note that the three west European countries currently not members of EU are Switzerland (completely outside), Iceland, and Norway (both associated). Their historical location on the margins of European society may have given them some common traits which can account for the similar attitudes to centralized power, despite all their other differences.

Norway and the European Community

In 1972 and again in 1994 the Norwegian government proposed that Norway should join the European community. On both occasions the government felt it was necessary to conduct a referendum even though there is no such thing as a referendum in the Norwegian constitution. The referendum could only advise the decision in the Storting (the Norwegian parliament). On both occasions the Norwegian people voted unambiguously «NO», to the great dismay of the government. On both occasion the government withdrew the proposal.

In 1972 the labour party government with prime minister, Trygve Bratteli, put his job on the line. He would resign if the answer was no. And resign he did. In 1994 the labour party government of Norway with Gro Harlem

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Brundtland as prime minister did not go as far. The government promised just to follow the advice of the referendum

Both Bratteli and Brundtland and most of the leaders of the Labour party believed strongly that Norway ought to become member. Denmark and UK had joined in 1972 and in 1994 it seemed probable that Finland and Sweden would decide to join, as they also did. Their referendums returned a «yes» to their governments proposals.

In 1994 Brundtland and most prominent politicians voiced no doubts. The issue had to be decided by a referendum. This was the obvious and proper way of doing it. It was «natural» that only a favourable referendum could change the «no» of 1972 to a «yes» in 1994. Obviously the prime ministers both in 1972 and in 1994 believed they had good proposals and that they could persuade the people to support their proposal.

But if they believed very strongly in their proposal, why did they not make contingency plans, particularly in 1994? Why did they not try some serious manipulation of the Norwegian people?

Quite a few pages has been written about why the two Labour party governments lost the referendums. But nothing has been said about why referendum was thought to be the only proper way of deciding the question. Some will say that the government gambled that it would be easier to persuade 51% of the people than to persuade two thirds of the Storting. But I am not sure. To most Norwegians a referendum seemed the obvious way of deciding. And so it seemed to be for the Danish, Finnish and Swedish peoples. But for their governments the referendums did not pose any problem. The result was what it wanted.

For the Norwegian power elite the referendum became a problem in 1972. The prime minister lost power and personal prestige, the labour party lost power, and the urban manufacturing and business community were left (at least emotionally) on the outside of the common market. Why was a referendum still the «natural» way of deciding the question in 1994: maybe even more necessary than in 1972?

The conspicuous lack of «real» manipulation can be taken as an indicator of some kind of «democratic» attitude. But what does it consist of? Where does

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it come from? Why isn't it lost in the multitude of social and political changes?

The question of «why was a referendum the natural way of deciding» becomes a question of ways of thinking about decision procedures and ways of valuing probable outcomes. So what are the Norwegian values?

Mistrust of political power

Norway is (at least by Norwegians) considered to be an egalitarian and decentralised society.

Stein Rokkan (1967, 1970) described two basic long-lasting cleavages in the Norwegian society. One is geographical based on differences between political centre and periphery. The second is a cultural cleavage where mainstream culture stands against the «counter-cultures» (fight for a national language, promotion of temperance, and Lutheran pietism). A third cleavage is of more recent origin. This is the class differences between workers and salaried employees, professionals, and businessmen.

In some sense all three of these cleavages can be seen as arising from the underdog fighting the power structure for equality: equality in the welfare distributed by the political system, equality of cultural expression and equality of political opportunities.

Many who compare Norway and Sweden are struck by the remarkably much stronger municipalities and local powers in Norway. The welfare policies are similar but the implementation is different. The central administration is smaller and the local municipal bureaucracies more active. I guess one can say that compared to Sweden, Norway has a weak government and weak central administration.

This relatively decentralized state can also be characterized by a concomitant suspicion of anything originating in the capital, in the central government or the central administration. Proposals from the central government are *a priori* suspicious, and all kinds of persuasion is usually needed if it is not obvious how the «districts» will profit from the proposal.

Why does not the weak Norwegian state come apart with each region/district for itself? Why was Sweden unable to hold on to Norway in 1905?

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Strong societal boundaries

Those who study the fate of immigrants, particularly those from the third world, since about 1970, are struck by the very strong suspicions they are arousing and the concomitant strong political pressure for limiting their entry. Still many hesitate calling it outright racism. The political pressure (of the silent majority) is not fuelled by feelings of superiority or any particular kind of hostility, but by strong feelings that «they» do not belong here, «they» come only to exploit our welfare, «they» should go home to where they belong. The boundary between Norwegians and «others» is strong. How can we square this with the egalitarianism?

How do egalitarianism and weak governments fit together?

The order of centralized hierarchies is fairly well understood. Also the inherent instabilities involved in the «imperfections» of centralized power are understood.

At the other extreme, in the decentralised society, the constitution of order is less well understood. Let us start with an abstract theoretical model.

The problem of collective action in small scale societies is no different from larger societies. Mary Douglas (1987) outlines an interesting model for explaining how rational choice can initiate cultural processes - ways of thinking (thought styles) - which will lead to the stabilisation of collective action in a minimal society.

Following Mancur Olson she argues that the constant threat of withdrawal from a community will lead to the exploitation of the great by the small. The collective actions will be conducted by veto backed by threats of withdrawal. Coercion will be impossible. The leadership of such groups will inherently be weak.

Now, if this society is located on the periphery of the world where the resources for selectively rewarding entrepreneurs for activities producing collective goods are nonexistent and the margins of existence require all hands to be at work, what can the members of the community do to strengthen the community?

Douglas suggests they adopt a rule requiring equality and 100% participation in the society. Every self-interested member of the society would want such a rule in order to be sure not to be made sucker by free riders. In order to ensure monitoring, the rules of entry to the community

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must be clear making both entry and exit costly. The boundary of the community will be strengthened and clarified. Thus strong societal boundary and emphasis on equality among members are tightly linked.

But in order to stabilise as a community, a group also needs a common image of themselves and what kind of group they are. This common image is also a product of collective action, a common good. And what minimal self-image can we expect a minimal community to agree upon? The belief system must at a minimum justify the two characteristics described so far: the weak leadership and the strong boundary of the community. Douglas suggests that a shared belief in an evil conspiracy, leading to mutual accusations of betrayal of the founding principles, will do the job. The weak leadership will make it impossible to agree on legislation and sanctioning deviants. The threat to secede is controlled by the cost of exit. Only oblique political action is possible. Since there are no (other) rules the only thing incipient faction leaders can be accused of is principled immorality. The belief in an evil conspiracy is reinforced.

These three elements will fit together in a functional loop where each element depends on and reinforce the others without the actors actually intending this to be the case.

The minimal «state» is thus the outcome of two individually rational goals:
1) to control the power of the leadership to for example levy taxes, and
2) to ensure that they are not made suckers by free riders

The means of control is the belief in an evil conspiracy among the leadership, a threat of exit, and a strong assumption of equality among members.

On the origin of egalitarianism and weak governments in Norway

The model proposed by Douglas assumes that the ecological conditions of the community are marginal given the prevailing technology. The economy of the community is supposed to be small scale and the marginal surplus does not allow selective incentives and large inequalities among community members. Culturally it presupposes a common language and a frontier condition where exit is straightforward. In the development of the Norwegian democracy such conditions presumably existed during the period when the various tribes started wandering north through Denmark and Sweden into Norway. Thus, in prehistory, before the Viking age, the ecology of the Norwegian society seems to conform to the conditions given by

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Douglas. But what do we know of their attitudes towards equality and leadership?

The description given above of the current Norwegian political system: its weak central leadership and strong local identity with difficulties for immigrants, also conforms to the theoretical minimal conditions for a stable polity. Do these characteristics have roots in our prehistory? Or are they recent and transient phenomena, a mere coincidence? If the characteristics of egalitarianism and weak leadership really are at the core of the values creating order in Norwegian society, they must have been here for a long time.

Now, supposing that the Douglas model of a minimal polity applies to the origin of Norway, that it explains the way order was achieved in the prehistory of Scandinavian societies, and then we should expect to find, also in Viking society weak leadership and strong local communities.

Leadership and community from Viking society to early modern Scandinavia

Contemporary Norwegian society as well as the Danish and Swedish societies consider themselves to originate in the 8th and 9th centuries in what is now commonly called the Age of the Vikings. At that time all three societies were ruled by local chieftains basing their power on family ties and allegiance from the yeomen of the surrounding countryside. The logistics of power usage in that kind of clan society would scarcely allow more extensive geographic holdings. With the development and perfection of shipbuilding during this time several long term changes were initiated. The Viking ships transformed the logistics of power usage locally, making the coast of Denmark and Norway both accessible for warlords, and a field of skill development in sea warfare.

By the start of the Viking age (ca750) the frontier conditions of easy exit and small scale were dwindling, but not disappearing. Part of the drive for the Vikings was a search for land to settle, but primarily it was an escape from authoritarian rulers at home and a way of gaining the reputation and wealth necessary to play the game of power politics at home. Early in the 9th century the Hebrides, Orkneys, Shetland and the Faeroes were settled, and by the end of the 9th century Iceland. At the end of the 10th century there were still opportunities for exit, now to Greenland. By the end of the 11th century the Viking age was over. The transition from the Viking age can be

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described as a transition into civil war both in Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and Norway. In Norway the civil war lasted from ca 1130 to ca 1240¹. The scale of societal activites was changing. One indicator of this may be the fact that legal rules were written down, and the Crown started using professional administrators.

The end of the Viking age has several reasons. The various European societies both in east and west which for several centuries had been the testing ground for the qualities of Viking warriors, and a source of wealth, had grown stronger. They were not as easily subjugated (partly because Viking aristocracies had gained power in Russia, Normandy, and England - as well as in Southern Italy, Sicily and Syria). Adoption of Christianity also affected the way the Scandinavian tribes were operating. Their old warrior habits were frowned upon and since the late 11th century directed into crusades. More profoundly, the introduction of reading and writing skills opened the possibility of centralising the administration of larger territories.

Viking society is usually described as consisting of three classes: the people (the «boendr»: these are the free men, slaves or freedmen are not included), the magnates and the king. Even though most conflicts are between king and magnates, their social status seems fairly equal.

Bagge (1991) in his study of «Society and Politics in Snorri Sturlason's *Heimskringla*» concludes that «while the King in «Heimskringla» is superior in rank to the magnates, his actual power is vaguely defined and to a large extent depends on his own personality. The leaders have the right to rule by virtue of their descent, wealth, and personal qualities but they are also supposed to rule in the interest of their inferiors. As they depend on the latter for support, they are easily deposed if they do not.» (Bagge 1991:144)

Lars Lönroth concludes that «Important characteristics of such leaders in the sagas are usually their restraint, common sense, balance, and strong sense of honour, which make them respected by their men and fortunate in their undertakings - until they start to act rashly, often provoked by less balanced kinsmen and lovers. Chaos and tragedy are almost always caused by emotional mistakes of this kind» (Lönroth 1997: 229)

¹ The internal wars in Viking society can hardly be described as civil war. Before turning their attention on Eastern and Western Europe the Scandinavian tribes were raiding and warring on each other.

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Until the end of the civil wars when primogeniture was introduced for the kingdom, there was usually competition for becoming king. Even though «royal» blood was necessary, it was not sufficient. There usually were many who were able to claim royal descent. Only by gaining support from a sufficient number of the magnates would a prospective king be able to get support from the people at the thing assemblies. To get support from the magnates three factors were prominent: marriage and kinship alliances, distribution of wealth and proven qualities as a warrior («hamingja»: the luck which comes from courage, intelligence, and forethought coupled with good circumstances). This explains why Viking raids became so important for ascendance in social and political status. Here «hamingja» could be proven.

With the acceptance of Christianity in the 11th century a new factor, and a new societal power, emerges. The Viking warriors were slowly turned to warriors of Christ. They participated in the Crusades in Palestine, but primarily they spent their energy on the crusades against the east (first against the Wends, the Livonians, the Estonians and Prussians, and later against the Lithuanians and Russians), which lasted well into the 16th century (Christensen 1997). In Norway the hereditary line of succession to the Crown was made law in 1260 and the violent competition for it subsided (but a main factor in this may have been the fact that between 1227 and 1387 only one Norwegian king died leaving more than one legitimate son). The introduction of reading and writing and the growth of skills in reading and writing among the magnates of the realm furnished a foundation for scholarship and a literature in the vernacular. And the educated class became a source of skills necessary in the building of a powerful medieval kingdom. The ascent of the Papal state in the early 11th century also led to closer contact between the Scandinavian states and the rest of Europe.

By mid 13th century Norway may superficially resemble other medieval kingdoms in Europe. But the ruling aristocracy was different. On the eve of the Icelandic free state, at the time Snorri Sturlason was writing up his history of the Norwegian kings, Bagge is of the opinion that in both Iceland and Norway «oratory and political manoeuvring held an exceptional importance. One's position in society was more dependent on personal performance than in the more stable and stratified societies in feudal Europe, and the most important aspect of this performance was the ability to gain adherents and outwit one's opponents.» (Bagge 1991:p.246).

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While the Viking kings were «weak» leaders in the sense that they could effectively be deposed if their rule became too oppressive, but as long as they were perceived to have «hamingja» (leadership luck) they were strong rulers and could command loyalty and obedience of their administration (hird) and people (boendr).

The resolution of leadership conflicts and the growth of societal power during the 13th and into the 14th century, led to a «strong» position of the king, but still perhaps a «weak» government in the sense that his power was dependent on the support of the magnates of the country. The government was effective only in so far as the king could rely on the cooperation of the magnates, and as long as the king had the personal qualities («hamingja») necessary to rule. On the occasions where a king died without leaving a clear heir (the law of succession was amended in 1273 and 1302 to answer such situations), the council (in effect the magnates of the country) often chose minors as kings. During their regency they were usually able to strengthen their own position.

Royal marriage alliances and the Norwegian king dying without male heirs led to the election of the same king in Norway and Sweden in 1319. Similar situation occurred several times during the 14th century and in 1397 Queen Margareta of Norway was able to get her nephew Erik of Pomerania elected as king in both Norway, Sweden and Denmark. For a brief moment the Scandinavian tribes were united under a common king. Sweden however had several revolts against the common king. Their final break with the union came in 1523 when Gustav Vasa was elected.

Leadership in Norway from the Kalmar Union to constitutional monarchy in 1814

Queen Margaretha was the daughter of Valdemar II of Denmark. During her reign (she was after 1380 regent first for her son, and after his death in 1387 for her nephew Erik until she died in 1412) she showed herself as a supreme power broker and an able regent. But she angered the councils of both Sweden and Norway by granting fiefs to Danes and Germans in Sweden and Norway, but not to Swedes or Norwegians in Denmark. Erik continued this policy and started some expensive wars which further angered the councils. However, the Norwegian magnates showed more loyalty to their king than the Swedes or Danes who both deposed him before Norway.

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The Norwegian council followed the lead of the Danes and Swedes in the election of Christopher of Bavaria as king in 1442. The Swedes soon defected while Norway continued to follow the lead of the Danes. Gradually the council lost their power. The magnates were replaced by Danish nobles. By the beginning of the 16th century the most «Norwegian» group among the magnates was the bishops. In 1536 king Christian III declared Norway a Danish province. But the declaration did not seem to have many practical consequences. New legislation was still enacted separately for Norway. There was still a Norwegian council, and local administration continued as it was organised in the 13th century. Norway became a peripheral province in the Danish-Norwegian kingdom. Without much in the way of aristocracy (the distance from the king and Copenhagen was too big), and after the reformation also a weak church, controlled by royal appointments. Denmark and Sweden developed strong centralised monarchies both to some extent checked by Estates General. Norway paid taxes and supplied soldiers for the wars between them. After major defeats by Sweden in 1658 and 1660, the Estates General in Denmark consented in 1660 to releasing the king from the charter of 1648 and making the Crown hereditary. The next year the king declared himself absolute ruler in all his realms (Denmark, Norway, Iceland, the Faeroes Islands, Schleswig and Holstein).

What remained of leadership within Norway in early modern times, we find at the local level. Within the local communities the various classes of owner and tenant peasants continued to take care of their own affairs. When the king's servants became too greedy they sent delegations to Copenhagen to complain, or they rebelled and killed them. If some of their own big men became too greedy they complained to the king's servant. Usually they were more than happy to uphold the law.

The distinction between the ruling Danish officials and the local people was plain. This strengthened the cohesion of the local communities and made their internal differentiation less significant.

Probably the most significant aspect of the situation was the survival of the judicial system. Munck's (1979) assessment of the situation at the end of the 17th century is that «The Scandinavian countries were exceptional in contemporary Europe for having comparatively simple and effective law courts, to which anyone had ready access at least at the lower levels» (Munck 1979:242).

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On a very practical level, because of distance from the centre of royal power and because of the strong belief in the rule-of-law, the local communities were to a large degree self-governed, ruled by the «best men» of the community. There was perhaps no more equality among them than in the Viking society. But compared to most of Europe, the citizens of the local communities were practically equal.

The rule from Denmark ended in 1814 when the Danish-Norwegian Crown again came out on the losing side of a war. In the settlements after the Napoleonic wars Sweden demanded Norway as reward. This they got, but in the process Norway gained its own constitution and parliament. The self-government was extended from local to national affairs. And by now there was time for a national revival.

Viking age values from the sagas.

The image of Viking society created in the sagas is important to contemporary Scandinavian society because of the role it played in the age of Enlightenment, the Nordic Renaissance, and the nationalistic revival of the 19th century. Snorri Sturlason's Sagas of the Norwegian Kings rivalled the bible in the readings of people. National identity was confirmed and ideals about national leadership and equality of all yeomen was either recreated or reaffirmed.

While Sweden experienced the rise and fall of an empire and continued as a vanguard in the industrial development of the 18th and 19th century, Norway was fairly undisturbed as a society both before and after 1814, even if we were involved in the many wars of the Danish king, particularly in those against Sweden. The central bureaucracy was in Copenhagen, the Danish aristocracy which were awarded land in Norway never became entrenched. The local rule continued on its own path of development, reacting to the king's policy decisions as best they could. In Iceland this was even more the case than in Norway.

The image of the Viking society merged with the Norwegian and Icelandic struggle for independence. The long centuries of rule by Danish kings both in Iceland and Norway may have had the effect of preventing, delaying or diluting the societal developments associated with feudalism and the centralized rule by the aristocracy of the older European states. Thus, at least to some extent, the romantic view of the Viking yeoman had a remnant of foundation to build on in these more peripheral Scandinavian countries. The

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equality of citizens was a continuation of the free yeoman. And the democratic rule-of-law was just an extension of the local thing which still was working. After Norway got its parliament in 1814 and finally independence in 1905 one may say that the competition for parliamentary positions and the conscious nationalistic policies and sentiments of the elite worked towards establishing basic legal equality of all citizens. Based on the local identities and strong local community boundaries they achieved even more. They recreated once more the basic characteristics of the minimal polity, the weak central leadership. This drive was fuelled, perhaps, not so much by a belief in an evil conspiracy as by a profound mistrust of central government. And thus Rokkan's centre periphery dimension was established. This mistrust of leadership can also be found in the Viking sagas. Lönroth observes that «There is ... an inherent contradiction in the saga presentation of the Vikings, and this contradiction prevails in literary narratives even to this day. On the one hand they are the greatest heroes; on the other they are not heroes, but problematic characters - or even villains - if they devote too much of their life to typical Viking activities such as warfare, piracy, and plundering.» (Lönroth 1997: 230)

I think this ambivalence to leaders is at the core in our attitude to government and closely tied to our penchant for equality. They are tied together, maybe as Mary Douglas suggested?

Conclusion

In a recent study of «Birth of the Leviathan. Building States and Regimes in Medieval Europe» Ertman (1997) explores the trajectories of state building resulting in four different types of 18th century states:

- absolutist patrimonial² states
- constitutional patrimonial states
- absolutist bureaucratic states
- constitutional bureaucratic states

Denmark-Norway is classified as absolutist bureaucratic while Sweden is constitutional bureaucratic (the only state besides Britain). Poland and Hungary are classified as constitutional patrimonial states. These are three different outcomes, yet before 1450 he find that they all four are constitutional patrimonial states. Their divergent development represents an anomaly. The explanation is found in the character of local government and

² Patrimonial/ bureaucratic refers to the type of tenure of office in the state administration.

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its link to the national assembly, and in the timing of sustained geo-military competition.

His main conclusions on the conditions favouring development of a constitutional bureaucratic state are interesting. He points to the «key role played by the organisation of local government during the early period following state formation», and «The involvement of a broad segment of the population in the management of its own affairs at the local level,» he argues, «creates bonds of solidarity and commonalities of interest which, when combined with the material resources at the disposal of participatory local bodies, allow effective resistance to be mobilized against the monocratic designs of stat building political leaders.» (Ertman 1997:324)

The emphasis on the local community I will second, but his easy assumption that solidarity automatically will develop in self governed local communities is precisely the error Mary Douglas tries to address. If the outcome is solidarity it needs explanation.

My general problem have been the question of how or why the Norwegian democracy will remain democratic. Our local self-governing tradition is old and strong. If the initial social conditions, when social power begins to grow, are local self governance and a basic mistrust of centralised power, then the logistics of power in Scandinavia may have been such that it was difficult to weed out these conditions even if the central governor wanted to do that. It may be no coincidence that the local self-governance and judiciary system in Scandinavia is our most enduring institutions.

In some ways our system of governance resembles basic features of the minimal polity model of Mary Douglas. Such a polity may lose its basic characteristics in two ways:1) by conquest from alien cultures along the boundary of shared understanding, or 2) by loss of competition for leadership.

If we disregard the prospect of conquest, the real threat may be in the way we think about competition for leadership. The all out competition of the Viking age and the civil wars is not on the agenda. We are perhaps closer to a situation where we all are so content and satisfied with our government that it transforms into a democratic despotism. But, fortunately, I think that road still is long.

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In general a governor will be circumscribed in what can be done, not only by his command of weapons, and material resources, but also by the kind of persons he is able to recruit into his service, their professional knowledge and their beliefs about legitimate action, as well as by the beliefs about legitimate action among the taxpayers. To this we should add the complications of information flow both up and down the gradient of power, and the time-space constraints, and principal-agent problems in usage of force with incomplete, asymmetric and unreliable information.

Even the slow collapse from boring consensus takes time. New variation in values and priorities is created by the routine changes of society. Every now and then real challenges, like the EU referendums, arise. Then the competition for leadership is real, and real leaders with the right «hamingja» are created.

To me the strength of our democracy seems to be directly related to the degree to which it allows grass roots policies to rise and affect the central government. In other words: the strength of our democracy is our weak government.

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