

Anker, "The Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World"

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Book Review

Anker, Peder. *The Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

The Scandinavian countries generally, and Norway specifically, offer a persistent puzzle to the world. Despite--or perhaps because of--a small population size and relative distance from the world's great metropolitan centers, not to mention intense cold and lengthy periods of darkness, these nations continue to impress. They are immediately identified with incredible natural beauty from fjords to snowy mountains to large green cities, annually top international measures for happiness and human development, and embody socially progressive policies that emphasize equality, education, democracy, humanity, and the modern welfare state. And the region perennially produces pivotable leaders in the environmental movement, from Norway's Arne Næss to Sweden's Greta Thunberg. The overarching question is, how do they do it? What are the key traits or conditions that have made countries like Norway such world leaders in environmentalism?

Peder Anker seeks to answer such questions in his book, *The Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World*, which is available in hardback and as an open access ebook. Anker, originally from Norway, teaches the history of science at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University and specializes in environmentalism, environmental philosophy, ecology, and sustainable design. His previous books are *From Bauhaus to Ecohouse* (2010), which considers the intersections of architecture and ecological science, and *Imperial Ecology* (2001) on the role of ecology in the British Empire. Thus, Anker seems well positioned to consider the history of environmental discourse in Norway.

Anker's title immediately sets out the seeming improbability of Norway's central role in environmentalism. He presents his argument in the introduction, "We Are As Gods"--that Norway, a country of 5 million, has become such a leader in environmentalism mainly because of its relation to and embodiment of the periphery. First, through a series of invented traditions and social constructions that eventually solidified as a "system of belief," Norwegians remade their image of themselves and earlier generations by privileging nature and their supposed fisher and peasant ancestors (peripheral persons themselves) as found at the periphery of modern Norwegian society, quite apart from corrupted urban centers like Oslo. To this way of thinking, nature as "the periphery [is] morally superior and the source of everything good" (4). Second, it is not only access to the nation's vast natural spaces that gives Norway what Anker summarizes as a "culture of environmental harmony" but also its own position (geographically and politically) in opposition to other nations that can perhaps be inspired and convinced to follow Norway's lead. In sum, Norway as a microcosm represents environmentalism, ecology, and natural beauty,

whereas the global macrocosm frequently represents pollution, violence, and wrong-headed, short-sighted economic plundering of the natural environment. The question is whether the macrocosm can and will learn from the microcosm before it is too late.

In one sense, Anker's book is a history not only of Norwegian environmentalism but also of the role of public intellectuals, who, in this case, happen to be environmental scholars and activists or both. Indeed, the book's interdisciplinary nature is necessitated by the diverse fields of the thinkers who came to be these environmental leaders or contributors, including anthropologists and archeologists, biologists and ecologists, philosophers, politicians and economists, religious leaders, and geologists. That being said, Anker follows a chronological framework that begins with early ecologists and then, unsurprisingly, deals with the inception and development of Deep Ecology and then turns to the resulting influences of environmentalism on the social and political structure of Norway and the wider world. The volume is at once a thirty-year intellectual history of Norway and its diverse environmental movements as well as a collection of concise biographies of the main players, which does much to keep readers attentive.

Anker immediately tackles the complexity of tracing how Norwegians from several different fields contributed to the emergence of the nation's early environmentalism. In his first chapter, Anker argues that the reimagining of Norway and its environmental culture began in the 1960s through the inward- and outward-facing work of the ocean explorer Thor Heyerdahl, the archeologists Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine, and the social anthropologist Fredrik Barth. This reimagining resulted, for example, in the conversion of peasant and fisher cottages and rural areas into vacation and recreation spaces for Norway's growing middle class as a part of the new "cult of the outdoors" (9). In his second chapter, Anker considers the growth of the field of ecology in 1960s Norway as impacted by biologists, the academic and political reactions to Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the establishment of the High Mountain Ecology Research Station at Finse in 1965, and Norwegian contributions to the International Biological Program.

What might be considered the book's most productive chapters are those that deal with the Deep Ecology movement, certainly one of the most monumental, impactful, and lasting contributions of Norway to the global environmental movement. Anker first focuses on Arne Næss, the trajectory of his career and thought, and the various impacts of figures such as Peter Wessel Zapffe, Sigmund Kvaløy, Johan Galtung, and the Ecophilosophy Group at the University of Oslo. Anker does not offer a hagiography here, but rather gives a more honest appraisal of Næss, including his choice, as an avid mountain climber, to build a cottage at Tvergastein in 1937 and then his famous shed at the peak of Hallingskarvet in 1942 despite the dangers of construction to human and animal life. Anker also points to the troubled circumstances around Næss's resignation as Chair of Philosophy at the University of Oslo in 1969 at the age of 57. According to Anker, it was then at this crossroads in his life that Næss first turned to environmental issues and

found himself inspired in this cause by Gandhi's teachings, by the lives of the Beding Sherpa living in harmony with nature whom he met on a climbing trip to Nepal, and by increasing opposition to Norway joining the European Community in 1972.

With such influences, Deep Ecology began to emerge in opposition to what Næss saw as shallow, technocratic half measures, although it also faced opposition from Marxist Leninists. Næss himself soon adopted a new academic home in the recently founded Environmental Studies institute at the University of Oslo and started to develop "Ecosophy T," his personal philosophy of the principles of Deep Ecology, later presented in his *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*. Chapter 5 pertains to the relation of ecosophy, specifically, to religion in Norway, both ecology as a secular religion and the extent to which the churches sought to orient themselves to ecology during the period. Anker's breadth of treatment also includes Norwegian opponents to ecosophy. Chapter 6 follows the career of Jørgen Randers (criticized as a "shallow" ecologist by the Deep Ecologists) and his research into issues of population control and sustainability, namely his work co-authoring *The Limits of Growth* in 1972 and his association with the World Council of Churches.

A laudable aspect of Anker's treatment is not shying away from the outright anti-environmental factions and political decisions in Norway. Indeed, as he notes in Chapter 8, both liberal and conservative political parties through the period he examines agreed that the exploitation of natural resources was the best path to national prosperity (175) as it applied to harvesting oil reserves discovered in the North Sea from the early 1970s and the expansion of hydroelectric plants. Controversy arose with an application in 1970 by Hafslund, a Norwegian electric company, to build an oil-burning power plant at Slagentangen. The chapter thus raises some of the inherent contradictions in seeing Norway as an environmentalist utopia, namely the nation's economic dependance on petroleum, which accounts for about 20% of its GDP. There is a glaring dichotomy here: although the nation generates almost all its own electricity needs from hydroelectric power, it has become one of the world's leading exporters of oil. Further, the ruling Labor Party was quick to develop the petroleum industry, the proceeds of which have done much to power many of the crucial social welfare programs so lauded by Norwegians. Anker traces this part of the conversation through the career of Ivan Th. Rosenqvist, a professor of geology at the University of Oslo who sought the further industrialization of Norway as a path to prosperity for the working classes and who blamed more radical environmentalists like Næss and the ecosophists for holding back the nation's economic development (176)].

In a fascinating section of the book, Anker focusses on Gro Harlem Brundtland, who in the late 1970s was the Labor Party's Minister of the Environment and who later became a three-term prime minister, the Chair of the U.N.'s World Commission on Environment and Development, and the Director-General of the World Health Organization. Anker first investigates the sharp conflict

over the question of acid rain's effects in Norway between Brundtland and Rosenqvist, and in the final chapter follows Brundtland's vision for Norway as a "pioneer country" for the world in concert with Jens Stoltenberg, a Labor economist who would be a two-term prime minister, the United Nations Special Envoy on Climate Change, and the Secretary General of NATO. With the end of the Cold War, Deep Ecology began to wane in its influence in Norway (although the movement's ideas continued to develop in popularity in North America and around the world through the efforts of thinkers like Bill Devall). Key in this waning was the failure of the Deep Ecologists, despite a sustained effort from 1978 to 1982, to stop a hydropower development in the Alta-Kautokeino waterway, a pristine area populated by indigenous Sami peoples. Although an environmentalist herself, Brundtland supported the project at the time but perhaps came later to regret her involvement, which shows the breadth of opinion among Norway's ecologically minded leaders. This stance contrasts with Brundtland's later role as a global proponent of sustainable development and climate change action, most notably as the Chair of the U.N.'s World Commission on Environment and Development (popularly known as the Brundtland Commission). The commission and its final report, *Our Common Future* (1987), arguably laid the groundwork for the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and its subsequent agreements on environmental protections, and it was in fact Brundtland who led the Norwegian delegation and spearheaded the promotion of sustainable development at Rio.

The book's last chapters further problematize the easy identification of Norway with environmentalism not only through attention to the central role of the oil industry but also by a discussion of Norway's public defense of its whaling industry. (Anker might also have discussed charges of overfishing.) Interestingly, as Anker earlier notes, Næss's brother, who financed Arne Næss's life-changing trip to Nepal when he was so inspired by the Sherpa, made his fortune in industrial whaling in the 1930s and oil exportation in the 1960s (76). Thus, it is accurate to say that Anker's book is also an analysis of how Norway identifies and publicizes itself (the Global Seed Vault, Nobel Peace Prize, Oslo Accords) versus the many cracks in that green, progressive image (territorial disputes, oil and gas exploration and exportation, whaling). In contrast, though, to Anker's titular argument that Norway is the world's environmental pioneer, the story he tells in the book is rather of a messy, conflicted series of disagreements by individuals who passionately desire very different things from the nation's collective imagination and treatment of the environment. While it is possible that the rhetorical presentation and perception of Norway count as greenwashing or that the wider world simply has a reductive and one-sided view of Norway, it is also true that nations and movements are complex and often self-contradictory.

There is a spirit of indomitable hopefulness in Anker's writing that is inspiring. Indeed, he notes early on that an integral part of the modern secular environmental agenda "harkens back to a missionary history enforced by the country's all dominating pietistic Lutheran religion," and

because of this, "ecologically inspired scholar activists . . . assumed the power of gods in their gaze from the periphery" (6), an act that Anker says can also be traced back to ancient Norse values (8). At a time when environmentalists feel the earth to be creeping ever closer to the abyss while politicians and citizens accomplish little, can relatively peripheral individuals, academics, or countries accomplish anything of value that can change the world and lead to a promising future of sustainability and harmony? Anker's repeated answer is yes.

Kelly MacPhail