

Language disputes and modernization. Dissertation review

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Hoel
Måltreising og
modernisering i Noreg
1885–1940

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I. SWEDEN IS A COUNTRY that has, for almost two hundred years, been spared not only from wars but from disputes over national and minority languages. It is true that in the decades around the turn of the 20th century, the Swedish state opposed the official use of Finnish in Tornedalen, but the language issue did not give rise to national or political conflicts. From the point of view of other Baltic Sea countries, this is indeed an anomaly. In the Baltic States, political and cultural antagonisms between the native and Russian languages weigh heavily in today's politics. Even if the opposition between Swedish and Finnish is, today, less bitter than it has been, it remains constantly present in Finland's cultural and social life.

In Norway, the language dispute has had a different character. The issue, here, does not concern competition between two separate languages, despite what the most pugnacious have sometimes claimed. It is, rather, a matter of two variants of Norwegian, which, in turn, has much in common with Danish. In the beginning, these variants were called *landsmål* and *riksmål* – that is, country language and national/standard language – respectively. After 1929, the official terms have been *nynorsk* [New Norwegian] and *bokmål* [Old Norwegian, lit. Book Norwegian]. The source of the conflict between these two “languages” lies in events that took place during the nineteenth century, the century of nationalism.

POLITICALLY, NORWAY'S emerging nationalist movement was directed against Sweden, which dominated Norway within a Swedish-Norwegian Union created in 1814. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Norway had been liberated from Denmark, but forced to join Sweden in a loosely coupled Personal Union. The Swedish king was Regent of both Norway and Sweden, but Norway retained its constitution and enjoyed extensive autonomy. For a long time, Norwegian discontent focused on inequities within the political structure of the Union. Not until the 1880s did nationalists begin to openly demand its dissolution. The immediate cause of disagreement was the Union's foreign policy, which was exclusively han-



ILLUSTRATION: KATRIN STENMARK

dled by the ministry of foreign affairs in Stockholm. Although Norway was given some influence, such a limited voice could never satisfy the steadily growing national opinion, gathered, first and foremost, within the liberal farmers' party Venstre [The Left]. In 1905, the Union was peacefully dissolved, and Norway became a sovereign nation-state.

It was Denmark, however, that was the cultural opponent in the eyes of the nationalists. After centuries of Danish rule, Norway's civil servants spoke Danish, albeit with a Norwegian intonation; ever since the middle ages, Norwegian scholars had gone to Copenhagen for their training. Ivar Aasen (1813–1896) was a pioneer in the struggle against Danish cultural and linguistic influence. Starting in the 1840s, he conducted his studies of the different rural dialects in Norway. Using these as his base, he constructed a language of the country, the so-called *landsmål*. In this language, Danish expressions and linguistic forms were replaced by what were considered ancient, original Norwegian equivalents. Around the turn of the 19th century, the

radical writer Arne Garborg (1851–1924) emerged as Aasen's follower. By this time, *landsmål* had obtained an organizational anchor, not only in the countryside and, in time, various urban associations, but also, increasingly, in – among other places – publishing houses, newspapers, theaters, folk colleges, grammar textbooks, and coffee houses. According to the most radical *landsmål* advocates, Norway's language differences (between those who spoke Norwegian dialects and those who spoke Danish-inflected Norwegian) reflected the country's division into two nations: the people of the countryside and the cities' civil-servant class. The latter was defined as an “unnational” element in the Norwegian body politic. Unsurprisingly, an opposition movement soon arose. The writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørn-

son (1832–1910), whose national sympathies were irreproachable, became a leader of those defending the use of *riksmål*. Despite his political background in the liberal Venstre, Bjørnson – a Nobel laureate in Literature – held that the older written language be preferred. It was, he argued, the language of civilization; it had developed over hundreds of years and constituted the foundation of Norwegian literature. He doubted whether *landsmål* could attain a satisfactory level of sophistication that a modern written language with international ambitions would require.

NONETHELESS, UNTIL WORLD WAR II, *landsmål* – now called *nynorsk* or New Norwegian – continued to grow in influence. Gradually more schools chose to teach in *nynorsk*, and, as of 1930, all civil servants were required to master both *nynorsk* and *riksmål*. After World War II, however, *nynorsk* faced a long period of decline. But the legal standing that *nynorsk* had secured during the inter-war period remained very much intact. Today, the language receives state cul-

tural support, and is used in teaching and on the radio and television.

The *landsmål* had been introduced as a reaction to the dominance of high culture, and to the growth of the cities, during a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization. The *landsmål* movement could, thus, be understood as one that unequivocally distanced itself from the modernization process, fighting to preserve the old peasant society against the threats posed by industrialization, proletarianization and “sinful” city culture. Of course this view was an over-simplification, which is demonstrated in a recently-defended doctoral thesis, written in *nynorsk*, by Oddmund Løkensgard Hoel. This thesis investigates, as its principal question, the reasons for the language movement's initial success, and its subsequent, post-1940 stagnation. As opponent to Hoel's thesis defense, I will use his thesis as my point of departure for a discussion on modern Norwegian development as well as on the use of the concept of modernization in history.

II. ACCORDING TO HOEL, the concept “modernization” was seldom used in Norwegian history research before the 1990s. Although the concept has later been used, the language movement has rarely been discussed in a modernization perspective. Hoel's study uses, as its point of departure, classic modernization theory, according to which the degree of industrialization is seen as the determinant factor. Hoel's research focuses on three areas that caused problems for the language movement: urbanization, industrialization, and the emergence of the labor movement. Simultaneously, Hoel makes extensive reference to other theoretical concepts, e.g. Jürgen Habermas's “discursive rationality” and Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt's “multiple modernities”. According to Eisenstadt, both the routes to modernity and the content of modernity vary according to place and time, which is in conflict with classic modernization theory's linear view and sharp distinction between traditional and modern society. Interpretations of Norway's modern development have long been based on

Stein Rokkan's internationally acknowledged macro-sociological perspective (developed in collaboration with Seymour Martin Lipset). According to this model, tensions between center and periphery create a key conflict. The concept “counter-cultures” was introduced by Rokkan in 1967 in designating Norway's traditionalist free churches, the temperance movement and the language movement. All of these were defensive movements, directed against modernism. Political scientist Trond Nordby followed in Rokkan's footsteps, supporting his findings with theories presented by Eric Hobsbawm and Miroslav Hroch. For Nordby, the language movement is an expression of traditional agrarian nationalism, the defensive ideology of a countryside opposing modernization.

A NUMBER OF HISTORIANS have forcefully challenged this interpretation. First on stage was Jens Arup Seip, who, in 1974, took on Rokkan in an article entitled “Modellenes tyranni” [The Tyranny of Models]. Seip's critique was widely accepted among historians, but in sociology and public discourse the idea of “counter-cultures” continued to thrive, for instance in Henry Valen's research on voting behavior. Historian Øystein Sørensen, on the other hand, has – as editor of the anthology *Norsk idéhistorie* [Norwegian History of Ideas] – categorized both Venstre's national-democratic politics and the language movement's cultural nationalism as progressive projects. (Which, of course, does not preclude the coexistence of reactionary agrarian nationalism.) A similar approach is used by May-Brith Ohman Nielsen in her historical account of Bondepartiet [the Farmers' Party], whereas Svein Ivar Angell has found that the farming society's skepticism was directed against large-scale industry, not industry per se. One may add Francis Sejersted's influential studies of Norwegian developments, where he introduces the concept of “democratic capitalism”; here, small-scale industry is given a decisive role in promoting egalitarian social norms. Surprisingly, Hoel in his dissertation does not mention Sejersted. Other scholars, such as Ola Svein Stugu, have criticized social-science theories that view history as a forward-moving, linear process.

Hoel's study is primarily concerned with the leadership of the language

Continued. Language disputes and modernization.



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movement's central leadership – hence a study of an elite. As Hoel points out in his introduction, the study does not include an analysis of how the different branches of the movement have functioned in practice. The starting point is 1885 – that is, the date on which the Norwegian parliament decided that “the Norwegian folk language” (i.e. *landsmål*, later *nynorsk*) should be given as much space in the school system and in public life as the already existing written language (*riksmål*). The choice of 1940 as the ending year of the study has to do with research economy: it allows the author to avoid the post-war era with its new conditions, and, furthermore, an era which has been studied more thoroughly.

AN INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER, which discusses possible approaches to the problem, existing research, theories (quite extensively), and the language movement, is followed by an account of empirical studies, spread over eight chapters and divided chronologically into three sections: 1885-1900, 1900-1920, and 1920-1940. Each section emphasizes the three essential problems that the movement faced during those eras: urbanization, industrialization and the emergence of the labor movement. The source material consists primarily of secondary sources. The movement's newspapers make up the bulk of primary source material. As the subject matter is closely tied to nation building, the concept of nationalism is also discussed, to a large extent based on a division between modernists (Hobsbawm, Gellner, Anderson, Hroch) and non-modernists (Smith, Hutchinson).

The thesis was written within a research project on language and cultural change at the Ivar Aasen Institute, Volda University College, an institute established by the language movement itself. Hoel has held a leading position within that movement. This does not disqualify him from writing on it, but there is a tendency, in his thesis, to acquit the movement of accusations that it espoused non-democratic actions, militarism or, of more central importance, anti-modernist views.

Hoel admits that, around the turn of the nineteenth century, the countryside's distrust of the towns played an important role in securing the language movement's first wave of successes. The movement's attitude towards in-

dustrialization is, however, more complex. Movement members could oppose large-scale industry while simultaneously encouraging the development of modern technology and smaller industrial initiatives. The conclusion is that the movement did not fight modernization per se. Rather, it supported an alternative modernization program, based on small-scale industry. It is in this context that Sejersted's research might have been cited in support of the argument.

IN SPITE OF THE THESIS'S reliance on a modernization-oriented approach to industrialization and urbanization, political explanations are granted a significant role. The movement's expansion depended on its integration into Venstre's long successful nation-building project. In the 1930s, when Venstre began to lose power, the language movement was weakened as well. The movement never attained the same close relations with the new leading political power, Det Norske Arbeiderparti [The Norwegian Labor Party]. Although the latter was long formally neutral on the language issue, in practice the Labor Party supported *nynorsk*. The term *sammorsk* [Common Norwegian] stood for a fusion of the two Norwegian languages. Even though the proponents of *sammorsk* met with difficulties, their efforts did contribute to a weakening of the language movement.

At this point, the language movement no longer had the sort of national mobilization it had enjoyed in 1905. When groups closely associated with the movement fought, during the 1920s, for a “Norwegianization” of town names, they met strong resistance both from locals and from the opposition *riksmål* movement. The fact that the capital Kristiania in 1925 became Oslo was a special case. But the failed campaign to turn Trondhjem into Nidaros cost the movement dearly, even if the more Norwegian-sounding variant Trondheim did see the light of day.

The dissertation is voluminous. It gives a broad account of the language movement's development during the period, even if historians are already quite familiar with much of the stuff. In several areas, it serves to round off our picture of the movement. Although the thesis takes, as its central theme, the importance of modernization, the study nevertheless tends towards a more traditional, generally descriptive approach. The introductory chapter's theoretical expositions, which are well worth reading, are rarely followed up, and the concluding chapter is relatively thin.



BUT LET US RETURN to the modernization perspective! In what respect does it throw new light on how the language movement developed during this period? Here several problems emerge. Of the three criteria for modernization given, industrialization tends to dominate completely. It does not become clear

whether the growth of the labor movement poses a threat or an opportunity. Is fighting against the labor movement indicative of a “traditional” attitude? Then again, it is difficult to treat urbanization separately from industrialization, as the former is, if anything, a result of the latter. Urbanization was the one symptom of the emergence of industrial society that most palpably affected everyday life in the countryside. Industry was primarily located in the cities and in new, concentrated industrial areas. Migration to the cities became the most obvious example of the growing difficulties faced by the language movement, as people left the areas loyal to *nynorsk* in order to settle in the cities, which were filled with *nynorsk*'s opponents. Industrialization was more abstract, but without a doubt the driving force behind urbanization. Accordingly, industrialization remains this study's determinant factor, given its classic approach to modernization.

HOEL HAS A POINT when he claims that the movement's opposition to large-scale industry did not exclude an alternative approach to industrialization, one that would enable the agricultural sector to use modern technology and would allow the needs of small-scale industry to determine the direction of future developments. The problem is that his method allows any actors showing any degree of support for modern economic ideas, even if only to the extent needed to preserve their own trade, to be categorized as favoring modernization. This raises the question of what shape a Norwegian anti-modernization movement could, in fact, have assumed at the time. Not even the folk-college advocate and Farmer's Party member Lars Eskeland, who opposed any change that might threaten the stability of peasant society and who especially feared the dissolution of norms brought about by secularization, rejected modern technology or the development of small-scale industry in the countryside. Modernization becomes inevitable if almost any movement can be categorized as pro-modernization. In spite of the author's introductory, nuanced discussion, he ends by expressing an almost deterministic view of the development of the Norwegian society.

Another problem is that modernization, from the study's theoretical perspective, becomes static. The concept

of small-scale industry formulated in 1885 would have an entirely different implication if presented in 1940. As a result, the modernization perspective is not especially illuminating, and in the concluding chapter the author tends to depend more on political explanations. The primary explanation of the fate of the language movement can, somewhat brutally, be summarized as: the decline of Venstre! Hoel's analysis of the political development is, in fact, convincing. It does, however, indicate that some of the choices made at the inception of his research were methodologically somewhat unfortunate.

At the same time, there is an embryo indicating the possibility of more fruitful reasoning, one which gives us glimpses of more pathbreaking results. Hoel's own research does indicate that concepts of multiple modernities and discursive or communicative rationality might have superior explanatory power. This is also touched upon in the final chapter, in his discussions of the language movement's positive view of science and popular education, as well as in the discussion of modern organization and democracy. In a section which focuses on the importance of religion (chapter 6), a connection is drawn to a form of rationality that the classic modernization theory misses. Had this type of connection been used consistently, as a point of departure, the study would have escaped the disadvantages of a one-sided industrialization perspective.

HOEL'S BROAD-RANGING study of the Norwegian language movement has achieved, at least in part, a synthesis of its development during a revolutionary era, when modern Norway was established. Both the threats, and the opportunities, that the movement faced have been placed in the larger context of modernization. Even though the language movement was uniquely Norwegian, the thesis serves to remind the reader that historical research in other countries benefits from studies where the modernization concept is applied in a nuanced way, thus avoiding sweeping judgements about the character of popular movements as well as schematic descriptions of modern development.

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Note. Noreg is Norway in New Norwegian.

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UNCIVIL SOCIETY – REVISITED

In the book *Uncivil Society*, Stephen Kotkin and Jan T. Gross have questioned the description of the 1989 transformation of Eastern Europe as a popular revolt against communism. So far, Kotkin's and Gross's book has been reviewed with enthusiasm in *The New York Times* and with friendly interest in the *London Review of Books*. Timothy Garton Ash, a leading writer and historian who interpreted the course of events as a peaceful revolution, has, on the other hand, attacked its central premises in the *New York Review of Books* (2009, vol. 56: 17).

He employs two principal lines of argument. According to Garton Ash, one cannot, as Kotkin does, claim that the regimes in Eastern Europe were bankrupt. States, he maintains, do not go bankrupt. Had the Soviet Union continued to support the GDR, for example, that state would have survived for many years to come. This line of argument is, however, not particularly powerful, as the Soviet Union did withdraw both its economic and military support – this is integral to the analysis.

Garton Ash's other line of argument is, unsurprisingly, that Kotkin shows what amounts to disdain for the popular resistance of 1989, which terming it a “bank run”. This term suggests that the East European elite threw itself into transient democratic movements only after they felt the ground burning beneath their feet. “Ludicrous”, writes Garton Ash. Those who protested took a risk, and expected to be met by tanks. Instead of giving economic explanations, Kotkin and other historians ought to investigate how and under what circumstances such fast-growing political movements arise. In this line of argument, one senses a trace of Rosa Luxemburg's thesis on the spontaneity of revolutionary movements.

Garton Ash does not really discuss Kotkin's critique of the use of the concept civil society in countries with communist governments. This is an issue that will be worth returning to, as the debate continues, to balance the importance of economic factors against the impact of spontaneous popular movements. ≈

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