The Origins of the “Regime of Goodness”
An Interview with Nina Witoszek

In November 2012, Jumana Manna and Sille Storihle met with the Polish Norwegian academic and fiction writer Nina Witoszek at her home in Oslo. Witoszek’s book *The Origins of the “Regime of Goodness”*, which remaps the cultural history of modern Norway, as well as the paradoxes and successes of the “Norwegian model” today, provided a helpful guide in the making of our project *The Goodness Regime* (2013).

This interview focuses on the hazards and possible future scenarios of the Regime of Goodness, its blind spots, and Witoszek’s understanding of this regime, not as a facade, but as a deeply felt tradition in Norway based on the imperative of “being good.” We began by asking Witoszek to define the “Regime of Goodness.”

NW Ironically, it’s more difficult to define the “Regime of Goodness” positively than to unmask it. There is always a thrill and almost triumphalism in the unmasking, deconstructing, and destroying of what seems to be the achieved utopia of the world. This achieved utopia represents, in fact, the ideals of the left: justice, equality, social welfare. It seems to me that unmasking this “goodness” as mere window dressing is unfair for two reasons. The first reason is that it offends and insults some 70 percent of the Norwegians who really try to practice and think goodness with great conviction. Secondly, I would say, it falls into a postmodern trap where all distinctions disappear. That is to say, there is no longer any distinction between so-called good and evil, fair and unfair, equal and unequal.

Now, it has been said that the Regime of Goodness is just a cynical manipulation of the ruling elites who try to sell this image abroad and, at home, the image of Norwegians as better than anybody else. But it seems to me that there is also a deeply felt sense of identity based on goodness, on a shared perception of the imperative of “being good.” Not necessarily better than others—but simply decent, responsible, and fair. I think most Norwegians are convinced that performing good deeds and practicing them—both at home and abroad—is a genuine national feature.

The project of goodness arrived in Norway in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the period I’ve called the “Norwegian Christian Enlightenment.” This is the founding tradition that constitutes the national identity of not just Norway, but of Scandinavia in general. There once were Enlightenment priests who preached Christian ideals based on goodness. And there was a population that practiced them without constraints from the outside, or from some “Other” challenging from the inside. This was a benign Christianity whose essence was “be good to your fellow neighbor” and “turn the other cheek” rather than fight and kill. Equality in its comprehensive sense, justice, and goodness—plus the belief in reason and common sense—are the three basics of what can be called a Christian Enlightenment.

These ideals have not been disturbed in Norway; they were not challenged by some Nietzschean ideals of the Übermensch. Norway was a peasant society, and its ethical code was very much based on peasant Christianity until the 1970s. The basic ideals of goodness, which go back to this pastoral Enlightenment steered by Lutheran priests, were reinforced in the work of the national poet Henrik Wergeland, who is sort of the founder of modern Norway in artistic and ethical terms. These values were then reinterpreted and revised by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, who is another shining national hero. Finally they become secularized in the thought and practice of the greatest Norwegian humanitarian, Fridtjof Nansen, a “secular” Christian who saved millions of people from misery, homelessness, and starvation. That being said, we also find goodness propagated in children’s education. The motto-song from the favorite children’s story about Kardemomme By is “Du skal ikke skade andre. Du skal være grei og snill. Og forøvrig kan du gjøre hva du vil.” Translated into English, it goes: “You should not harm others. You should be sweet and kind. Apart from that, you can do whatever you want.”
What do you think of Norway taking on the role of an international peace broker?

NW We need a good sheriff in the world. We’re all brought up on American westerns! There is always a good sheriff that protects the disempowered and sets a good example. I think it’s very uplifting to have Norwegians supporting the good causes of the world, even if there is an occasional double agenda behind this project. No country is perfect. Every country has developed a set of comforting myths about itself. Norway is a bit of an anomaly on the moral map of Europe, because it’s an outsider and yet it’s also an insider. It gives the Nobel Peace Prize to people who do “good.” Norway is also an international anomaly in the sense that it has the greatest number of voluntary workers in the world. Both at home and abroad, Norway recognizes organizations supporting and financing peace and international aid. It’s said that the United Nations’ international aid to countries in trouble is practically financed by Scandinavian countries: they give more than the US. And I think it’s not just about buying yourself a good conscience; it’s a deeply felt project in the national community. The imperative of being a peaceful nation is beaten into the Norwegian soul.

Of course, it’s easy for Norway to be a peace nation. Norway has had very little war and trauma; it has had relatively little experience of human barbarism at its worst. It’s almost like a virgin without much experience. Norway is also an outsider, everywhere, but it is a noble outsider—and it’s easier for an outsider to be a negotiating or navigating agent between all kinds of conflicting parties. Norway is known for relative “decency” and impartiality, so it makes sense for Norway to be a peace nation. Of course, this has its hazards.

What would those dangers be?

NW National complacency and megalomania—we are better than the others—are obvious ones. But I would say there is one danger that no one talks about, namely that goodness is not very sexy. Today it’s much easier to sell evil, to sell the horrors of the US, earthquakes, tsunamis, and ethnic violence. This is what sells. Quentin Tarantino movies and violent crime stories sell because evil fascinates people. Goodness is boring. The Good Christian ideals are a bit of a drag, so to speak.

Secondly, I think, goodness, peace, and ideals of equality are postulations that are always risky, because we are trained to think that most people are selfish at heart. So being good must be some cover-up. Not to mention that if you believe, truly, that you represent all these beautiful things—and, on top of it, you are rich—you do easily fall into a trap. You lose imagination. You can easily become a narcissistic philanthropist who thinks: Why aren’t all people like us? So there is a hidden sense of superiority in talking to the “Other,” who is not as good, successful, equal, or rich as Norway. Out there are the horrors of Africa and Afghanistan, or the misery of the poor Poles and Albanians, those who haven’t yet grown into this Norwegian fantastic utopia. Sometimes I think that this idea of being a peace-and-nature community has made Norwegians into some sort of extraterrestrial beings.

The third danger is rooted in the phrase “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Unfortunately, here we must remember that the project of trying to achieve the impossible, the utopian, the good, the super-duper good, in the ‘70s and ‘80s was on the verge of turning Norway into a communist utopia! There was a real plan conceived by the intellectual elites from the Leninist and Maoist circles to install an authoritarian communist regime in Norway. I’ve read they even had a list of people they would assassinate, including the king. So here we have these problems with the unachievable project: what you create is a Rousseauist “dictatorship of virtue,” and it never turns out well.

One of the last two problems I see—perhaps because I’m an outsider—is the excessive trust in the state. In all the countries I’ve lived in—England, Ireland, Italy, France, the US—nobody ever trusted the state or the newspapers as much as the Norwegians. Other societies always try to read between the lines. In Norway, it seems to me that the average person’s trust toward the state borders on self-destructive
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It's amazing to see people who are intelligent citizens think in terms of “the state is usually right” and “what newspapers write is more or less true.”

How do you see the relationship between foreign aid and immigration in Norway?

NW

It has been rightly pointed out by the Norwegian academic Terje Tvedt that Norway has had too little debate in regard to its foreign aid. Critically reviewing the effects of Norwegian international aid to developing countries has been almost taboo in the public domain, though recently it has loosened up a bit. This is disturbing because there is growing evidence that the large sums Norway donates to developing countries more often than not land in the pockets of dictators or are simply wasted away.

The situation is tragicomic: researchers go to these poor countries, do their fieldwork, and prove the Norwegian blunders, but their reports are hardly ever read in the ministries. In short: the ministry orders these reports, but then, in a kind of Buddhist act of transcendence—based on the conviction that we are beyond all problems—we are actually immune to the criticisms they contain. We don’t need to read the negative reports, for we are immune to them.

Let us go back to the debate on multiculturalism, minorities, and perceptions of the Other. As we know, Norway used to be one of the most “monologic” cultures in the history of Europe: monologic in the sense that there were no competing cultures clashing with the Norwegian master narrative. The Norwegians largely talked to themselves, and to the trees, if they talked at all. They were doers rather than talkers. Norway had been ensconced on the margins of the “real world.”

When you have a psychological problem, you don’t go to the psychiatrist—first you go to the forest.

Norway wasn’t very urbanized until the true metropolis emerged in the 1980s. A “village mentality” surfaced as a result of this delay—a local village that didn’t like the urban center. It has been called “distrikt-Norge.” In the ’80s, things started changing: all of a sudden, minority populations—Pakistanis, Africans, Eastern Europeans, and so forth—challenged the native codes. And suddenly you have a new ethnic theater with all kinds of smells, signs, sounds, modes of behaviors, which must have disturbed the homogenous population. This confusion was already manifest in Henrik Ibsen’s dramas, in which the urban population, or borgerskapet, is perceived as an alien element. There is a constant unmasking of the borgerlig løgn—the urban lie—in Ibsen’s bourgeois interiors. In the ’80s and ’90s, and now in the twenty-first century, Norway has been struck by the new foreign organism within its body, confronted and challenged by the Other. This process has a lot of positive sides. Norway has stopped being an undersocialized, largely peasant community with no manners, which is what irritated me when I first came here in the ’80s as a former member of the chatty Krakowian intelligentsia. Now, Norwegians have developed a taste for debate: Oslo debates about everything—it’s there every time you turn on the radio, or when you go to Litteraturhuset and see queues for the debates. Public argument is “the” thing today. I think it’s inspiring; we need minorities to not just come and force Norwegians to innovate and become more flexible, more European, but also to force a culture of dialogue, of talking to—and understanding—the Other. It’s a process, and I think that Norwegians are only just learning. Norway is much behind Britain, which has been forced to innovate as a result of its own colonial legacy. I think Britain is an example of how a culture can become color-blind in a positive sense. I don’t think Norway is there yet. The natives are still trying to find a modus vivendi with the Other.

How has oil infused this image, or allowed it to come into being?

NW

I should say it is empowering the Regime of Goodness in an interesting way. First of all, if your identity is founded on goodness, and you are wealthy, you have this extra confidence that can boost the goodness—or stain it. Goodness that springs from religious imperatives, from the fact that you have no other choice but to be virtuous, has its problems. In Norway, good gestures coexist with wealth, which I think is a bit
of a moral anomaly. When you are filthy rich, you are supposed to be mad or bad or greedy. Further, oil has made Norway petroholic, and has very much increased the double-mindedness, the double-speak, the double-think. We know that this oil money was invested in, for example, the deeply problematic tar sands project in Canada and in Nigeria.

But goodness enters even into the talk of the oil tycoons. In their famous advertisement of Norwegian oil success, they use a fairy-tale adventure inspired by the national folk tale hero Askeladden, who is the embodiment of goodness. In their charming ad, a father sits by the bedside of his daughter, telling her a story about a treasure that is going to ensure her bright and brilliant future. She is of course very happy and delighted, and follows her father on a magical journey to exploit the wealth that lies at the bottom of the sea. This is the new, super-rich tale of Askeladden, in which nature doesn’t suffer; instead it fosters the joys of exploiting and polluting resources. Fairy tales like this create a national schizophrenia. The old set of fairy tales told us of the Askeladden who helps the old and needy and listens to nature. The new Askeladden doesn’t listen to the environment: he sees it instrumentally, as a resource and as the beginning of a new fairy tale.

Askeladden, the central figure in Norwegian fairy tales, is very much about goodness, but his main attribute is his luck: “Jeg fant! Jeg fant!”

NW Askeladden bumps into opportunities—he doesn’t try too hard, he doesn’t strain, he believes in his good luck. There is a self-fulfilling prophecy in this belief. Word becomes flesh. We have Norwegians who discovered oil, and after oil they’ll discover diamonds.

There is a certain sense of contentment, an overaccumulation of wealth in Norway today. So, what now?

NW The next step could be a creation of a rentier society, if there is no apocalypse that makes it all go to hell. Everyone gets a slice of the pie. You can stop working or keep working—do whatever you like. Go to the Canary Islands, fish in the morning, and do hobby carpentry in the afternoon. You live in the Qatar of Europe, where slave labor from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia is running around, serving you around the clock. This is one decadent version of the future Norway. But there is another version—the country that tries to live up to its idea of being an icon of goodness, setting a good example for others while at the same time critically exploring its goodness to make it less sterile and ossified.

It seems to me that there is one particular challenge in this other scenario, which is the challenge of not betraying the legacy of Nansen, Bjørnson, Wergeland, and the Christian pastors. This would be the way forward for Norway and for a “fair society.” It seems to me that there are enough forces in this society, enough innovative youth, to maybe grab the chance to lead Norway in this other direction. In many ways, Norway is a laboratory of the future, in terms of trying to achieve the best possible society. It’s a Herculean challenge, and I’m not sure if Norway is up to it. But I think Norway has the premises for it at least. Maybe it is the only country in the world that can fulfill this vision?