A Self-Image to Drown In

Marit Paasche

Norway is a small country with a relatively short history as a sovereign nation, and what happens here generally goes unnoticed in the rest of the world. But in 1993 Norway was at the center of international events. A Norwegian delegation had managed the sensational feat of negotiating an agreement between Israel and the State of Palestine, as represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Yasir Arafat: the so-called Oslo I Accord. The Accord was signed in an elaborate ceremony at the White House, presided by Bill Clinton, Yasir Arafat, and Yitzhak Rabin. Overnight, Norway became an important contributor to world peace, and, in 1994, the Carter-Menil Human Rights Foundation, led by former US president Jimmy Carter, awarded a prize of US$100,000 to the Norwegian facilitators and the Norwegian people. Carter claimed that what the negotiating delegation had accomplished was a manifestation of something genuinely Norwegian and emblematic of Norway as a country.

In the years that followed, the peace process was actively used to create a self-image of Norway as a peace-loving nation of great consequence. When former Norwegian prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik held the traditional New Year’s address on the eve of the year 2000, his praise of the national self-image reached unprecedented heights. Norway’s foreign policy would thereafter be based on its role as an altruistic, charitable negotiator of peace. The small and young nation would thus become a humanitarian superpower.

In five years we will celebrate the centennial of our national sovereignty. That is worth celebrating! ... An assessment of our nation’s century of existence reveals clearly positive results: We have attained independence, freedom, and peace. We have attained prosperity and welfare unprecedented in history ... we have many reasons for self-respect, but no cause to be self-righteous. What we have achieved is important, but greatness is measured in what we can do for others. Here we have a legacy to live up to. Norway must be a nation of benevolence and solidarity. Let us follow in the footsteps of Fridtjof Nansen in his dedicated work for refugees and the needy in other countries. ... If Norway is remembered as a nation of solidarity, Norwegians will have reason to be proud. Norway must be a nation of peace: a contributor to conflict resolution and peacemaking initiatives.

This excerpt of Bondevik’s speech is included in The Goodness Regime, a film completed by Jumana Manna and Sille Storihle in 2013, twenty years after the Oslo I Accord was signed. The film is a parallel account of Norway and Palestine as nations. We move horizontally along a historical timeline, from the Christianization of Norway and the Crusades in the Middle East during the eleventh century; via World War II and the Norwegian resistance, the creation of Israel, and the expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948; the Six-Day War in 1967; the Norwegian oil adventure; and the Intifada of the 1980s, until it all culminates in the signing of the Oslo I Accord. The film is built around a series of historical tableaux in which children perform the roles. The children act out the parts but do not speak. Instead, Manna and Storihle make extensive use of audio recordings, among them Bondevik’s speech. The children appear to be unaware of what the roles entail and are sometimes awkward; in other words, they don’t engage in the roles but simply perform what they are told to do. This verfremdung, or alienating effect, combined with Manna and Storihle’s deliberately made stage props and the use of audio recordings, allows the tableaux to effectively comment on the ideas and visual elements that the Norwegian foreign-policy identity was rooted in prior to, and in the wake of, the Oslo I Accord.

Via the construction of a Norwegian self-image as an altruistic and peace-loving nature, the government easily claimed compassion as an intrinsic Norwegian trait. To put it bluntly, the result was that all of the emotions and consequences associated with the term “compassion”—such as responsibility, empathy, and solidarity—were assigned to a national self-image. Compassion became a natural extension of the self and thus totally detached
from the behavior that the word requires to have meaning. This was not only an unfortunate strategy with which to approach the rest of the world; it also had a negative effect on the public discourse.

Norway has ended up in a strange position with its foreign-policy image: with roots that go back to the Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, it underwent a “makeover” during the 1990s as a political power strategy with missionizing undertones, resulting in what now feels like a stumbling block for the conservative coalition government parties. At the same time, the argumentation of the left seems strangely ineffectual, perhaps because the self-aggrandizing foreign-policy “branding” of Norway makes it difficult to talk about compassion and solidarity without getting a sickening, holier-than-thou taste in the mouth.

II

Although Norway participated in several peacekeeping missions after the Oslo I Accord, in Sri Lanka and Colombia, among other places, it never received the same attention as in 1993. The next time the international media aimed their cameras at Norway was in the summer of 2011, after the Oslo and Utøya terrorist attacks on July 22, to cover the subsequent reactions and the trial against the Norwegian extreme right-wing terrorist Anders Behring Breivik. Three days after the terrorist attack against Regjeringskvartalet, the seat of the government, and the massacre at Utøya, which together took a total of seventy-seven lives, a spontaneous demonstration was organized. For most of the day and far into the evening, the streets of downtown Oslo swarmed with crowds waving red and white roses (the rose is the symbol of the Norwegian Labor Party, the target of Breivik’s terrorist attacks).

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The demonstration was originally intended as a march from Rådhusplassen in front of Oslo City Hall, past Parliament, to Youngstorget, but the plan had to be abandoned due to the unprecedented numbers that congregated in the streets. In his speech, the then-prime minister from the Labor Party, Jens Stoltenberg, proclaimed: “This evening the people of Norway are writing history. With the most powerful weapons in the world, freedom of expression and democracy, we are setting the course for Norway after July 22, 2011.” Crown Prince Haakon Magnus continued in the same vein: “Tonight the streets are filled with love. We have chosen to respond to cruelty with understanding. We have chosen to respond to hate with solidarity. We have chosen to demonstrate what we stand for.”

Many who participated in the rose procession in Oslo experienced it as an authentic and instinctive reaction to grief. Breivik’s attacks were aimed at a specific target. The Labor Party government was in Oslo, and at Utøya there is a long tradition of organizing annual summer camps for the party’s youth organization. The Labor Party was in power for large portions of the postwar period in Norway and played a decisive role in building the welfare model that the country is founded upon today. Breivik claimed that the Labor Party betrayed Norway by cultivating a political program that promoted both feminism and ethnic diversity. This was his motivation for wanting to kill as many politically active youths as possible, that is, those who would carry on the same program in the future—the budding politicians of the Labor Party. Most of the sixty-nine people shot on the island of Utøya were defenseless teenagers between the ages of fourteen and eighteen.

One can say that Breivik’s attacks were directed at the heart of Norway’s social democracy and the values many feel are an important part of Norwegian society: equality, solidarity, and human dignity. It seemed natural therefore to react to the attack by demonstrating these same values, as with the rose procession. The symbolic acts were repeated when the trial against Breivik commenced, and a large mound of roses accumulated outside the courthouse where the trial was being held. This conciliatory and non-aggressive response to Breivik’s terrorist acts was noticed in the foreign press, and Norway was again inscribed in the annals of history as a nation of compassionate and peace-loving people.

III

The rose procession and the reactions following July 22, 2011, may continue to stand as an example of a society that, under certain circumstances, is capable of mobilizing itself and
acting in line with fundamental humanist ideals. But the marketing of Norway’s foreign-policy image as a nation of peace—of which Bondevik has been the foremost exponent—may be seen as hollow and clammy because the words have not been followed up by action. On the contrary, Norway has been a willing contributor and participant in the wars in Afghanistan and Libya. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Norway has been so preoccupied with its neutrality as a peace negotiator that it has avoided taking a stance on fundamental moral and legal issues. For example, Norway continues to be among the hardly commendable minority of countries in the United Nations that have declined to recognize Palestine as a sovereign state. As The Goodness Regime points out so clearly, we are in danger of forgetting the history of our own nation and what compassion means in practice.

Norway adopted its constitution in 1814, but remained in a union with Sweden until 1905, which meant that it did not have an independent foreign policy. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, a heated debate about nationalism erupted, mainly influenced by a particular group of artists, scholars, and cultural personalities: Lysakerkretsen. The group was preoccupied with nation building, including how nations are created through language, culture, and visual symbols. The most dominating personality in Lysakerkretsen, and the person who gained the most influence on foreign policy in the following years, was Fridtjof Nansen, a man whom Kjell Magne Bondevik held up as a political ideal for Norway in his New Year’s address in 2000. Nansen became internationally famous for his research on neurology and oceanography, as a polar explorer, and as a torchbearer for humanitarian assistance.

Nansen was born during a period when there were still unexplored spots on the map, among them the northern regions. After defending his doctoral thesis, The Structure and Combination of Histological Elements of the Central Nervous System (1886), he decided to cross the Greenland interior on skis, something no one had done before. The project was partly motivated by the idea that by pressing human physical performance to its limit, one would discover new knowledge about nature, and thus drive the world forward. Implicit in this idea was its relationship to gender (the task was reserved for “great men”) and to nationhood. In his application to the University of Kristiania (later renamed Oslo) for financial support in November 1887, Nansen wrote that Norway was lagging behind its neighbors Sweden and Denmark in the realm of Arctic expeditions: “Norwegians are indisputably ... best suited for Polar research. We have the prerequisites to tolerate the climate better than almost anyone, and the superiority of our skiers is quite significant.”

When Nansen returned to Kristiania after the Greenland expedition in early June 1889, he was greeted by swarms of cheering admirers. Both Nansen and one of his biographers, Roland Huntford, have pointed out that it was not only the exploration of the polar regions they were cheering for, but that Nansen’s “triumph in the snow was a substitute for an absence of political progress.” This was underscored in a letter the writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson sent to Nansen: “What is at issue for us is to free ourselves inwardly from the outward coercion from Sweden. Every achievement such as Yours is a great contribution. It increases the people’s self-esteem and courage.”

A few decades and several polar excursions later, Nansen became instrumental in the League of Nations’ task of repatriating Russian prisoners of war stranded in Germany and in the dissolved Habsburg Monarchy (Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia), in addition to returning approximately a thousand prisoners of war from Siberia. The League of Nations appointed Nansen as special envoy in 1920, and he immediately began the work of financing the repatriations. He intended to collaborate with the Red Cross, but Russia refused to deal with international organizations or institutions, not least the League of Nations; however, they were willing to relate to Nansen as a private individual. By the summer of 1922, the repatriation mission was complete. Over four hundred thousand prisoners of war had been sent home. Among these, approximately half were Russians from prisoner-of-war camps in Germany and other Central European countries.

Nansen was also instrumental in finding help for Belarusian refugees who mostly came from Odessa. In addition, tens of thousands of stateless refugees, mainly in southern Europe, were rescued by identity certificates called “Nansen passports.” It is worth noting that neither before nor since has any single individual had the authority to issue a passport in his or her own name. During the period 1921–23, Nansen led the emergency relief mission for famine victims in Ukraine and the Volga region. In 1922–24, he worked with the wave of refugees that arose out of the war between Greece and Turkey, and during the years 1924–29, he devoted himself indefatigably to securing Armenian refugees from Turkey a future in
The driving force behind Nansen’s dedication to these tasks is clearly expressed in an article he wrote entitled “Compassion,” published in the periodical *Samtiden* in December 1921:

I see no other salvation for the human race than the *rebirth of compassion*. It sounds childish. ... I can just imagine the politicians shrugging their shoulders. ... what we need is Realpolitik. ... I am also an adherent of Realpolitik. ... I am exclusively ... interested in reality. But no Realpolitik is imaginable in a civilized society unless it is based on compassion, — reciprocity, kindness, and trust. ... Compassion is Realpolitik.

IV

Today’s humanitarian crises have dimensions that far exceed the circumstances Nansen worked under during the 1920s. And although most of us probably recognize that distribution politics are equivalent to environmental politics, which in turn are a form of Realpolitik, there are very few who act in response to the challenges that we face. To make matters worse, just a few years after *The Goodness Regime* was produced, the idea of being altruistic or of doing good has been so radically weakened that the basis for Norway’s foreign-policy image is in the process of crumbling.

In 2013, the same year that *The Goodness Regime* was released, parliamentary elections were held in Norway. Despite the sympathetic reactions following the terror of July 22, 2011, and the disclosure that Breivik was affiliated with extreme right-wing milieus, the Labor Party lost the election and a new conservative coalition government, consisting of the Conservative Party and the right-wing populist Progress Party, was instated. Like many of their kindred parties in Europe, the Progress Party cultivates its following via a restrictive immigration policy and by appealing to “original” national values. The new government tightened the country’s immigration policy yet another notch, and the rhetoric has shifted gradually, yet noticeably, over to the financial costs of immigration, humanitarian aid, and foreign policy. A new regime was introduced in this sector and the jargon shifted; two of the key terms are “realism” (in the sense of “not naive”) and “freedom of expression.”

The Norwegian Progress Party’s national convention took place in the midst of the worst (until then) immigration crisis in the Mediterranean. The papers were full of accounts of the gruesome fates of the boat refugees. Against the backdrop of this barrage of media images, and fully aware that the entire Norwegian press corps would be covering the convention, the party’s deputy chairman, Per Sandberg, wore a T-shirt printed with the image of a wave and the message “Good Journey.” This inhuman exhortation is not a sentiment limited to the far right, however.

Leading intellectuals accuse those who wish to help the refugees—no matter what the cost—of being naive and of practicing “virtue ethics.” In their view, we cannot help everyone in any case. The alternative “realistic” solution proposed by one of the world’s richest countries is to help them “where they are” and to crack down on the human-trafficking networks that transport them to Europe. The left remains more or less passive; there are no political gains to be had by showing solidarity toward refugees.

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10 Huntford, Fridtjof Nansen, 504.

11 Fridtjof Nansen, letter reproduced in ibid. Emphasis in the original.

12 The support of right-wing populist parties in Europe has increased in line with these parties’ expression of opposition to Islam and immigration in general. We see this particularly in France, but also in Germany, Belgium, Norway, and Sweden, and most recently during the elections in Denmark in June 2015, when the xenophobic Dansk Folkeparti won 21.1 percent of the votes.
Sandberg’s T-shirt trick has allowed the Progress Party to effectively communicate its message without verbalizing it, thus avoiding being held responsible for it. With the help of this form of sheer doublespeak, the party has sent countless assists to the far more extreme voices: a method that draws the discourse toward the right and subtly normalizes extreme points of view.

To give an example, the well-known Norwegian blogger Fjordman (a.k.a. Peder Nestvold Jensen), who is also Breivik’s ideological and intellectual ideal, posted the following statement on Facebook a few weeks following the convention: “What is happening in the Mediterranean today is not a ‘humanitarian disaster.’ It is an invasion, and should be treated as such.”11 He received a lot of opposition for this statement, and the next day he commented on the response to his post on Facebook:

The Norwegian left is once again going bananas on Twitter because I dare to say that what is happening in the Mediterranean today is an “invasion.” Serious demographers say that there will be 1.4 billion more Africans in the next 35 years alone. This is a continent that already has fundamental problems regarding food and water. In less than three decades Africa will increase in numbers double that of the EU’s entire population. How many of these people can or should Europe let in? The Muslim world also continues to grow drastically in numbers and is experiencing enormous inner unrest, instability and war. Jihadists are already traveling by the thousands between the Middle East and Europe. It is not right of us to open the floodgates to all of the problems in the Islamic world, to import these masses to our streets and dump them on the heads of our children.

Fjordman has a considerable position in the international extremist right-wing milieus on the Internet. He has published regularly on websites and blogs such as Gates of Vienna, The Green Arrow, and Vlad Tepes, where he enjoys considerable recognition. Fjordman has distinguished himself as a strong opponent of Islam and as a spokesman for the Eurabia theory.14

For those who have followed the public debate in Norway in the years since 2011, it is clear that the media have been afraid of accusations of censoring the more skeptical voices against immigration and of claims that these views are not being aired. They have instead maintained—with the “freedom of expression” banner held high—that the views of immigration skeptics burst like trolls in the sun when they are publicly aired and can be refuted by criticism. It appears, on the contrary, that consideration for freedom of expression has replaced the normal guidelines for what is allowed to be uttered in public. Examples of this flourished after the attacks on Charlie Hebdot in Paris on January 7, 2015, and on Lars Vilks in Copenhagen just over a month later. These attacks have led to a reexamining of the legal aspects of freedom of expression, in Norway and in other European countries, and in the process paradoxically seem to have contributed to a more infantile public discourse climate: to air a morally reprehensible viewpoint is used as proof that freedom of expression exists.

In addition, a disproportional amount of airtime and column space has been devoted to extreme political views. As already mentioned, this has not necessarily led to a lessening of radical views, but rather to a gradual normalization of racist commentaries and attitudes.15 An interesting example is the Fritt Ord Foundation’s allocation in 2013 of project funding for a book to be written by Fjordman. This book, which has yet to be published, will among other things shed light on the relationship between Fjordman and Breivik. There were many good arguments both for and against the allocation of project funding from the Fritt Ord Foundation. Opponents pointed out that the allocation might be interpreted as legitimization and a form of public recognition of Fjordman’s views and political standpoint. In addition, there was no guarantee about what would appear in print. The reputable and recognized foundation might suddenly find itself to be a contributor to a publication with racist content. Supporters argued, among other things, that Fjordman’s insight and assessments were of public interest, given his role as an intellectual ideal and model for Breivik. A book might amplify a relatively little-known relationship between the perpetrator and the provider of the mindset that the perpetrator felt justified his actions. Others viewed Fjordman as a totally deviant voice, at least in the context of project funding, but felt that it was just this type of mindset that would be of obvious public interest after July 22, 2011. No matter how good these arguments may be, it became difficult to defend the funding allocation after Fjordman suggested that the boat refugees’ presence in the Mediterranean could not be perceived as anything other than an invasion.
Briefly summarized, there has been increasing mobilization among conservative and radical factions in Norway since the terrorist attacks of July 22, 2011, and the tone of the debate has become more crass. When the more recent refugee disaster appeared in the media in May 2015, the divide between those who wish for a tough “realistic policy,” whereby one has to be “hard-handed” in order to eliminate human traffickers who exploit refugees’ situation, and those who believe that human beings in mortal danger must be given assistance no matter what, became solidified. According to the right, the latter position is extremely naive. One can generally say that altruism, or doing good, is not considered lucrative in today’s political reality. The aspiration of being altruistic is not met with recognition but is rather taken as a sign of inferior intelligence.

Things did not turn out as Bondevik had hoped on the eve of the new millennium. Norway failed to become a “nation of solidarity.” We will primarily be remembered for our wealth based on oil and not for our “dedicated work for refugees and the needy in other countries.” The compassion that flooded our country after the terror of July 22, 2011, was genuine, but it was primarily directed at ourselves and in response to the attack on what we perceive as our fundamental values. The work of transforming compassion into a Realpolitik that encompasses everyone remains to be done. Only when this is achieved will we rightly be able to claim we are following in Nansen’s footsteps.

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Translated from Norwegian by Francesca M. Nichols.

Marit Paasche is an art historian and former head of research at the Norwegian Video Art Archive. She now works as an art critic, curator, and writer. Her field of specialty is American and European contemporary art, with a particular focus on video art and experimental film.

Paasche was curator for the major exhibition We Are Living on a Star (2014) at Henie Onstad Art Center, Høvikodden, together with Tone Hansen. She has also curated exhibitions like The Human Pattern at Kunsthall Oslo (with Will Bradley in 2011), Deadlock Exhibited with Tone Hansen and Anna S. Gudmundsdottir at Kunsthall Exnergasse, Vienna (2008), and The Society of Mind at the National Museum of Art, Oslo (2005).

Paasche’s recent publications include Hannah Ryggen: En fri (Pax, 2016), Lives and Videotapes: The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art (Feil Forlag, 2015), and Et annet lerret. Fire historier om film og billedkunst (Feil Forlag, 2013). She is the editor of several books, including We Are Living on Star (Sternberg Press, 2014), A Thousand Eyes: Media Technology, Law, and Aesthetics (Sternberg Press, 2011), and Urban Images: Unruly Desires in Film and Architecture (Sternberg Press, 2011).