

Rural Modernities and Welfare in the Northern European Periphery

Nordic Ruralities, Senter for Bygdeforskning, Trondheim 10. september 2014

Halvard Vike

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo/Telemark Research Institute  
(Telemarkforskning)

## **Introduction**

The Nordic countries represent a particular version of European modernization. Modernization processes in Norden were heavily influenced by the mobilization of the non-privileged classes, who became unusually politically successful. Moreover, contrary to what most modernist narratives of development convey, the processes generating social and political transformations towards “democratic capitalism” during the late nineteenth century onwards were primarily rural, rather than urban. “Modernizing institutions” incorporated key aspects of the sociocultural reality of the periphery. The key illustration is the Nordic political institution par excellence: the municipality. The municipal institution can be characterized by (relatively) small size, a high degree of institutional complexity, and a great amount of service providing responsibility, and a social architecture characterized by roles and relations that cut across institutional boundaries – to the extent that distinctions such as that between “the state” and “civil society” are quite meaningless. Historically they represent an exceptional trajectory of evolving complexity. By “complexity”, I here refer to certain culturally specific aspects of what is commonly termed, in anthropology, “multiplex” relations, that is to say relations or social encounters that involve actors who may draw on a multitude of social roles vis-à-vis each other. Most often the idea of multiplexity is applied to social context in which such roles are not highly differentiated, and so actors may draw on a whole repertoire simultaneously and/or be more or less unconcerned as to which roles he put to use. For example the Melanesian big man may draw on his role as the head of the kin group, religious leader, and political leader – all roles, perhaps, being dependent on his economic role, that is his ability to accumulate resources substantial enough to enable his to provide material gifts to his followers.

The Nordic countries represent an almost complete contrast. Here, multiplex relations are institutionalized in highly particular and interesting ways. In the following I will argue that the significance of multiplex relations cutting across the boundaries between formal and informal contexts in small municipalities can hardly be exaggerated. Multiplex relations in small scale institutions may be easily absorbed by family networks, ethnic loyalty and/or clientelism, but in Norden they developed historically as a system of strongly formalized, highly individualistic social ties in face-to-face worlds. In order to understand this, it may be fruitful to look more closely at the problem of dependency and autonomy in social relations generally and in institutional contexts more specifically.

In our contemporary world, one major form of institutional context is the state. The state, however, is no unitary thing; its forms and functions vary much more than what seems to be generally acknowledged. In particular, the social embeddedness of state institutions is extremely different even within the category of political regimes subsumed by the term liberal democracies. Let us look more closely at this.

Historically, individual autonomy has been closely related to the modern state. Although of course property and material wealth has been essential for achieving autonomy, the modern state – above all the welfare state – contributed heavily to free large parts of the population from personal dependence. Egalitarian societies without a rights-based institutional infrastructure are for the most part hunter- and gatherer societies, and are mostly found in the periphery of modern states, where the threats to their egalitarianism tends to be profound. In at least some such societies, notably in South-East Asia, the possibility to choose between obligations according to individual preference, and possibly withdraw from social relations is a fundamental mechanism that prevents reciprocity from becoming intolerably asymmetrical. Authority tends to depend upon some active will on the part of others to adhere to it, ad hoc, and vital resources simply cannot be monopolized.

Individual autonomy is, in one way or another, idealized in all modern political ideologies. In reality, however, it turns out to be as radically opposed to the institutional infrastructure of modern states as it did during the old feudal order in Europe. In one sense, the answer as to why this is the case is easy to see: despite their egalitarian ideology, to a considerable extent modern states have served as institutional means for reproducing personal dependence in new ways. The idea that mass democracy and the expansion of citizen rights would undermine personal dependence, in the way Jürgen Habermas presents it with reference to the future potential of the European Union, seems extremely optimistic. Mass democracy, understood as an ideology containing a self-reinforcing process towards truly representative institutions and with the state serving as a tool for those who are represented, has had a very short career indeed and has enjoyed limited success in terms of promoting increasing equality. The social catastrophe following the financial crisis in 2008, not least in Europe, indicates how badly equipped most state institutions really were in terms of influencing the deeply unequal distribution of power and resources. It is interesting to note here that when the Norwegian research program on Power and Democracy came to an end in 2003, its leader Øyvind Østerud commented that almost none of its many critics seemed interested in discussing democracy on the basis of participation and political representation; rather most of them considered this a conservative approach and focused instead on the innovative potential of EU lawfare policies. In contemporary academic debates on politics, state governance and poverty in Africa leading international scholars argue that what they call “emancipatory liberalism”, that is to say the enlightenment idea that freedom equals individual autonomy, has proven a dead end. Personal dependence constitutes the very building block of social organization. The implication is that we should take people’s desperate attempt to escape “asocial inequality” in order to achieve “social inequality” in exchange for some degree of safety, more seriously policy wise. To my mind this reformulation of the enlightenment road to freedom and democracy is interesting; it makes explicit what seems to be implicit in neoliberal reforms in Europe and the US. It represents a dramatic contrast to Gösta Esping-Andersen’s famous diagnosis of the Nordic modernization path: a continuous process of state sponsored de-commodification of social relationships.

When trying to understand how modern state institutions influence individual autonomy, a fruitful approach may be to look very closely on whether the institutions of the state can be controlled and possibly transformed by social forces beyond their own formal boundaries. It is interesting to note, however, that our empirical knowledge of what goes on, both formally and informally, across the boundaries of formal institutions is very limited and the data are scarce. Social scientists have been bad at mapping the social relations that cross these boundaries and thus shapes what we call the embeddedness of such institutions. In this context I want to look at this from one particular analytical

angel: overlapping political and social cleavages. The concept, prevalent in the work of the historical sociologist Stein Rokkan, seems highly useful for this purpose, yet underdeveloped. I will return to this shortly.

As indicated above, historically it has proven extremely difficult to unite the egalitarianism of many social movements with clientelistic state institutions. The latter tend to absorb the former. We may ask: under what conditions may social movements gain sufficient power and strength to withstand the clientelistic structure of state institutions and utilize the universalism of the state to their own advantage?

Of course, not all social movements are egalitarian. Comparative historical sociology and anthropology has shown that the degree and nature of social differentiation is a key factor here. State institutions may be politicized from above and personalized and traditionalized from below – via kinship, locality, ethnicity, etc. – simultaneously. In the European context, which is my main reference here, the historical trajectory leading beyond this structural tragedy cannot be understood without taking what Rokkan called cross-cutting or overlapping cleavages into account. By overlapping cleavages he referred to political interests that crossed each other and became institutionalized as overlapping forms of membership in voluntary organizations. In this way each organization represents only one or a limited bundle of political interest, leaving each member with the need to affiliate her/himself with other organizations in order to pursue other interests. Consequently, conflicts tend to form a crisscrossing pattern of cleavages that do not converge; single conflicts mobilize actors who need to protect themselves from each other. Loyalties and statuses are specific to contexts specific alliances and do not apply to persons beyond such contexts; indeed they may well be reversed. Among the classical examples of conflicting loyalties in anthropology are Max Gluckman's "Peace in the Feud" and Fredrik Barth's "Political Leadership among Swat Pathans". Barth was particularly interested in how Pathan landowners fought each other, and that conflicts between neighbors and close kin were especially tense. However, because each rational landowner sought alliances with more distant kin, and the result was that, on a higher structural level, conflicts tended to offset each other through ever shifting alliances. The segmentary logic described by Gluckman, Barth and others mostly took place in social systems that were "hungry for people", as it were, and hence they were structured by relations of personal dependence.

In my view, it is somewhat ironic that we know so little about how systems of personal dependence were undermined by egalitarianism in European states. Indeed, the reason may be simple: most places it did simply not happen. In the Nordic countries, democratic mass mobilization happened in a context where peasant society already had been deeply transformed by processes of social and formal differentiation, and forms of local democracy had long been firmly established. In an important sense Norden consisted of extraordinary complex communities of a kind that Tönnies' *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* misses completely and, what is more, local complexity became in a peculiar sense large scale. Local forms of social control became an integral part of state governance. In this light it makes sense to argue that the Nordic periphery has always been more modern and more complex than more urban places. Although complexity is intimately linked to scale, it has nothing at all to do with size in the sense the urban-rural contrast hints to. In fact, if we define complexity simply on the basis of the number of social roles constituting a given social system and the social persons in that system, we realize that the smaller the social context the more complex social relations are likely to be. This applies directly to the organization of modern states. In states

that (still) carry a substantial service-providing responsibility, the question of social complexity primarily applies to bureaucratic organization and citizenship. The crucial question with regard to complexity, however, in fact relates to the question of whether the functions of such states are organized locally. In the Nordic countries, the welfare states are indeed organized locally – most forms of political decisions and administrative management and implementation pertaining to service provision are carried out in municipalities, most of which are small but highly complex in terms of the criteria specified above. In my view, the political economy of the Nordic welfare municipality is seriously understudied in comparative terms. In political science, Rokkan's model of cross cutting cleavages has been transformed into electoral research, and in sociology it has been virtually forgotten. In my perspective, it is exceptionally well suited for understanding how individual autonomy, egalitarianism and institutionalization are linked. In Rokkan's work the emphasis was on how cross cutting cleavages facilitated compromise and democratic culture in some parts of Europe, and – when cleavages, for some reason or another, began to converge – established the conditions necessary for fundamentalism, confrontation, and authoritarianism. My own interest focuses on the question of how cross cutting cleavages sometimes facilitate the growth of horizontal relations may offset, modify, and perhaps transform the vertical, potentially clientelistic logic of state institutions, so as to make these institutions controllable from below. When such alliances arise, the consequences seem profound.

The Nordic welfare states constitute an interesting case in point here because it has proven more difficult to pursue radical state retrenchment policies than what has been the case in the rest of Europe. Neo-liberal policies have not been able to dismantle the welfare state and dramatically reduce the obligations of the state, despite the fact that economic common sense demands it. One very important reason for this is that the institutional set up of the Nordic states makes them much more vulnerable to local politics, so to speak, than any other political regime. To a great extent political opinion is generated in local contexts where citizens' most urgent concern – to secure and increase welfare services, broadly speaking, and to control local elites – are firmly institutionalized.

To make a long story short: the aggregation of political interests are profoundly shaped by the very practical sensibilities that grow from everyday politics and service provision at the local level, and the organizational infrastructure of party politics rests heavily on local branches. Nordic welfare policies are not only significant in terms of their ideological content; they have turned out to be extraordinary successful in practical terms. Quite simply, almost everyone wants more of them. One simple way to account for this is to embrace the fact that what Isaiah Berlin has called "positive freedom" has a tremendous significance in this peripheral part of Europe. Welfare services and educational possibilities have been largely available to all, and as such welfare state universalism has been experienced not as humiliating charity but rather the key to achieve what everyone seem to desire more than anything else: individual autonomy, that is to say both freedom from personal dependence and market dependence. Another, equally important explanation may be identified in our discussion of cross cutting cleavages. Such cleavages may, under certain conditions, prevent hierarchical, centralizing, potentially authoritarian bureaucratic structures from becoming deeply alienating. Thus in the following I want to pursue the following hypothesis: the more extensive and local the system of cross cutting cleavages, and the more numerous and different they are, the stronger they stimulate the experience that one's own interest cannot easily be undermined by other persons or political teams, however wealthy or powerful they may be. This is in line with Mark Granovetter's theory of the strength of weak ties, but in this context applied to both formal and

informal relations in local communities. Also the analytic affinity to Putnam and others is obvious; yet I would like to point out that the romantic connotations associated with “bridging/bonding”, “social capital” and so forth does not apply to my perspective here. My point is that forms of bridging/bonding that runs across each other constitute a distinct potential for controlling hierarchical chains of power and prevent clientelism from growing, not that it serves some kind of particularly valuable civility external to the state.

The strength of cross cutting cleavages and weak ties is, among other things, that conflict may be productive and that gradually people learn that there are at least some ways to prevent powerful interests to withdraw from mutual obligations. In the Nordic countries, the extreme popularity of voluntary associations may be seen in such light. Through membership in such associations an exceptionally large part of the population has taken active part in a massive formalization of social relations; a form of formalization (or bureaucratization, if you will) has formed as a key metaphor for understanding the relationship between the state and the individual. The municipality is responsible for most of the functions of the state that really matter in people’s everyday lives, and to a large extent the municipality is not understood as a part of the state at all but rather as an extension of the experience of being a member of a voluntary association. Members constitute an egalitarian, yet strongly formalized community in which solidarity does not primarily arise from some sort of communitarian sensibility, but rather the opposite: the ability to use formalization as a means to keep a distance, maintain autonomy and at the same time being able to control those in power, that is to say elected leaders. In such contexts, cross-cutting cleavages may become particularly effective when people know each other well. Interestingly, although the relevance of informal relations and background knowledge can never be ignored completely, the very fact that everyone knows that this is indeed the case, may reinforce the actors’ investment in formal rules and procedures – the desire to avoid being subject to personal dominance may be the only thing they all have in common. Rules may be means for protecting oneself from others and for controlling others simultaneously. Another interesting observation may be drawn from this: the legitimacy of formal rules, and the willingness to accept powerful bureaucracies, is closely related to the ability among those subjected to them to negotiate and influence those roles when they are seen as inadequate. In the Nordic countries, this ability has been much more strongly developed in small communities than in urban contexts, and is an essential aspect both of political culture and institutional logics of political negotiation and social control.

Let me try to illustrate at least some aspects of this dynamic and some of its implications.

In one of my fieldwork projects, focusing on political participation and policy-making in a Norwegian municipality, I followed a local politician – I call her Elisabeth – who found it increasingly difficult to combine her various political roles. For her, the problem was partly moral. Elisabeth was around sixty years of age when I met her, and at the time she was looking forward to retirement from her job as rector at a local secondary school. She was an active member of the local Pentecostal church, and belonged to a network of politically active people from her own and other Low Church congregations, people who belonged to different political parties but shared a strong interest in welfare and educational policies. Elisabeth herself was a Labor Party member and told me that she belonged to the movement and the party; it was a question both of morality and identity. She was a member of the Municipal Assembly and the Health- and Welfare Committee; a sub-committee under the Assembly. In political issues involving budget cuts, her role as a backbencher in the Municipal

Assembly became foregrounded – she was a part of a moral opposition to those who became commonly called “the administrative elites” and “top politicians in all parties”. Several times she stood up against the leaders in her own party and accused them for forgetting their values and their obligations vis-à-vis their constituencies. On such occasions she contributed to cultivating alliances between, on the one hand, the backbenchers in all the main political parties, and the municipal grassroots bureaucrats and their unions on the other. In addition clients’ associations as well as the administrative heads of the welfare office, the elderly care office, and the health office were sometimes enrolled into the alliance, although the latter had to be careful about it since formally they had to demonstrate loyalty to their boss, the administrative head of the municipal Health- and welfare sector. As rector Elisabeth often mobilized such horizontal alliances in order to sabotage both the leadership style and the budget policies of her superiors. For several years in a row most major municipal units had spent too much money, thus increasing the frustration among her superiors. For Elisabeth and her allies, who operated on both sides of the formal boundaries of the municipality, this was largely seen as virtuous political practice: they secured that someone actually took the needs of “the weak groups in the community” seriously, interpreted the municipality’s obligations to provide services in literal terms, and acted upon it. In the Municipal Assembly Elisabeth was not very outspoken, and most of the time she lied low. In the media, however, she repeatedly stood up as a spokesperson for those whom the political elites tend to forget or ignore when the money started talking.

During the twenty years that have passed since I followed Elisabeth as a local politician, the institutional infrastructure in local government in Norway has changed quite drastically. Administratively, loyalty to one’s superior is paramount, and has at least partly become a matter of personal, that is to say neo-clientelistic loyalty. Budget discipline, too, is a non-negotiable issue. Among politicians, Elisabeth’ concern that her different political roles amounted to a moral dilemma in situations when they became incompatible, and that such dilemmas could be “solved” by being loyal to the clients and the intentions of the government/the central state, has become increasingly anachronistic. Horizontal alliances that cut across formal boundaries seem rare, and the effects of cross cutting cleavages are much less significant. Yet at the same time a reverse tendency is developing. The central state, more or less independent of which party is in government, overwhelms municipalities with good intentions in the forms of new, universally oriented welfare rights to citizens. Although this contributes heavily to reinforce the typical municipal dilemma of being legally responsible for providing more and better services for less money without any legitimate way of establishing boundaries, that is some basis for making acceptable priorities, it does in fact give the service-delivering level some leverage. To my mind this is a highly significant side-effect of organizing both service provision and political prioritization through local, often tiny but yet structurally complex organizations: welfare services turn into a vital interest for almost all, and they are extremely difficult to make conditional or relative once they have become locally owned, as it were.

However, the main tendency is unambiguous and deeply problematic: The Norwegian public sector is going through a massive centralization process, and municipal autonomy is seriously threatened. My argument indicates that this may change the political economy of the welfare state fundamentally. Politicians like Elisabeth – and let me emphasize there have been many of them in municipal politics in the Nordic countries – moved in worlds of cross-cutting cleavages, and could utilize institutional complexity in order to cross boundaries, undermine potentially authoritarian bureaucratic power,

secure that welfare services were provided despite arguments that there is not enough money to maintain them, and, finally, insist that things that don't work must be negotiated and corrected. Considering the fact that the Nordic Welfare states are probably the most ambitious states on the globe, the vision of non-correctable, centralized bureaucracies is both realistic and scary. To my mind, we are beginning to understand why the welfare state has not provoked massive alienation.

Elisabeth was a politician, and a woman. In order to understand the social embeddedness of the municipal institution, gender is a vital factor. The overwhelming majority of the welfare states local service providers are women, working in the context of what mostly male sociologists have coined "the semi-professions". As street level bureaucrats, they contributed heavily to transform the very nature of public bureaucracies in Norden as they became really influential in the 1960's onwards. During fieldwork in Norwegian municipalities, I have often observed how nurses, social workers, teachers and others perform their role as mediators between, on the one hand, clients/pupils/patients and the municipal administration on the other. Their loyalty to the former is often much stronger than their identification to their employer, as they very frequently experience that the conditions under which they work is not favorable for maintaining the kind of quality their professional identity tend to demand. In this situation, they find themselves in a profound dilemma. Structurally, their ability to act upon this dilemma lies in the principle of welfare state universalism. As long as the central state's grand welfare ambitions are taken seriously and literally, the grassroots bureaucracy may draw on alliances both with the central state and user groups to put pressure on municipalities. My point here is that in structural terms, grassroots bureaucrats are strategically placed in the institutional boundary zones of the welfare state; one which is quite favorable for utilizing the same kinds of sources of power as Elisabeth did in my story above.

We can summarize this as follows: Welfare state universalism has grown out of local politics, and rests firmly on the structural properties of the municipal organization. Its key cultural foundation is individual autonomy, and the mechanisms that prevents the contemporary Nordic welfare state from transforming itself into a bureaucratic monster, is that institutional complexity of the kind I have tried to specify above have made it possible to reproduce local forms of social control within the context of growing bureaucracies. As I have tried to show, all this seem to depend on viable and preferably quite small municipalities.