

Peder Anker

Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020

ISBN: 9781108477567 (HB) £75.00. 285pp.

Norway is a place of paradoxes when it comes to climate policy – at once a leading voice for climate action and at the same time a world-class fossil fuel producer. It is this dilemma and, above all else, the ecological thinking behind Norway's environmental politics that Peder Anker addresses in his fascinating book *Power of the Periphery*. As Anker notes in the book's introduction, Norway (population 5 million) has fashioned itself over the past several decades as a 'humanitarian superpower', leading the world's ranks of humanitarian aid donors and a source for peace and peacemaking. This is a familiar claim and builds on a large literature. Anker expands the argument – Norway has also sought to carve out a world-leading brand as an 'environmental pioneer'. How has this occurred? Anker argues that Norwegian scholars, activists and politicians used the country's peripheral location to their advantage. Early scholar-activists drew a distinction between pristine, rustic locations – in the Himalayas as well as in the mountains of Norway – and the sullied physical environments and ways of life of the city. An argument for superiority of peripheral lifestyles – political, scientific and moral – then pivoted to representing Norway as peripheral in the most positive of senses: clean, green and natural as contrasted to the polluted, materialist capitalism of Europe and much of the rest of the world. It was this distinction, Anker argues, between the idyllic periphery and the corrupted rest that Norwegian policymakers and politicians drew on in presenting Norway as a global environmental leader and trailblazing source of climate virtue.

The narrative unfolds through a diverse set of roughly chronologically-ordered chapters. The first substantive chapter explores inter- and post-war explorations of well-known Norwegians such as Thor Heyerdahl and Fredrik Barth in attempts to find wisdom, models or insight in global peripheries and bring them back to Norway and beyond. The middle chapters of the book look at the coming of the science of ecology to Norway, the founding and (multiple) ups-and-downs of the group of scholar-activists known as the deep ecologists, and debates between the deep and 'shallow' ecologists in the 1970s. It wraps up with a final chapter on how these Norwegian debates provided the background for its global climate diplomacy of the 1990s and 2000s.

The book is at its strongest in its middle chapters, discussing the origins and history of the deep ecologists. This careful prosopographical, institutional and intellectual history is deftly contextualised within the politics and cultural history of post-war Norway. Anker provides detailed discussions of the challenge presented by deep ecology to the Church of Norway, whose members

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struggled to make sense of the environment's place in the scripture. Also noteworthy are the close connections between leaders within the World Council of Churches and a young Jørgen Randers, the Norwegian third-author of the *Limits to Growth* report, and suggestions of a theological pre-history to the term 'sustainable development'.

Anker draws from a rich collection of sources including personal and private archives and papers, sources he leverages well. To English-speaking environmental humanists the world over, Anker has given an excellent overview and incisive analysis of a number of largely Norwegian-language debates and discussions. Indeed, even for the reader with more than a passing interest in environmental history in the European north and access to Scandinavian-language sources, this book still has a large amount to offer.

The book, however, has bigger ambitions and here it is on slightly shakier ground. For a history explaining, as per the subtitle, 'how Norway became an environmental pioneer for the world', the rest of the world figures surprisingly little into the analysis. This is a Norway-centred gaze. Norway's pivot to fashioning itself as a global climate leader, what one might have expected to be the focus of the book, is itself somewhat peripheral, emerging only in the second half of the last chapter. Aside from discussion of the politics of (declined) EU accession in Norway, the reader does not see Norway cast as an idyllic periphery very much, despite the fact that this one of the book's central claims. And while Anker interprets efforts to establish carbon trading schemes as adopting pleas from the deep ecologists to make Norway an 'environmentally friendly alternative nation for the world to admire', it was just as much a rejection of the kinds of societal changes they demanded. It seems additionally worth noting that the other Nordic countries also have impressive climate reputations internationally, despite not being the home of famous mountain-climbing philosophers.

Norway's new international climate policy of the 1990s relied critically on creating markets for economic 'bads'. Indeed, Gro Harlem Brundtland's three stints as prime minister witnessed not just a new environmental politics but also fundamental transformations in economic structures, ideologies and politics of the welfare state. The book's penultimate chapter on intra-Labour Party politics might offer an entry point to a more interconnected understanding of these shifts. Anker describes a split between old-guard, materialist Labour Party members ('power socialists') and environmentalists critiquing the materialism and productionism of both socialism and capitalism, demanding a new way of life more in harmony with nature. This could be a first step in thinking about the possible role of the environmental movement as the world tipped away from post-war embedded liberalism into the market (neo)liberalism of the 1980s and 1990s. There are tantalising hints here. Could it be that an individualised ethos of personal fulfilment and de-politicised state technocratic

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machinery offered something to both shallow ecologists of a new Labour Party and post-materialist environmentalists?

In sum, *Power of the Periphery* provides an invaluable account of the history of deep ecology and the environmental movement in Norway and deserves a wide readership. It is sure to be the first stop for any scholar of the environmental humanities or social sciences seeking an introduction to the history of deep ecology and ecological thinking more broadly in Norway from the 1960s to 1990s.

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