

Book Reviews

Peder Anker. *The Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 288 pages. Open Access. ISBN 9781108477567 (hardback) US \$ 99.99.

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In Norway, one of the first proverbs you learn as a foreigner is “there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.” It is not surprising then that a country with such a common saying has a deep-rooted and storied relationship to nature. What perhaps is surprising is that Norway, this small player in the game of world politics, helped to bring about the modern ecological mechanisms governing the world’s current environmental policy. It is this unusual path, from the ideas of mountain-climbing academics and eccentric explorers to the Norwegian government’s critical diplomatic efforts to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, that Anker maps out so persuasively in *The Power of the Periphery*.

It is precisely the unpacking of what this term “periphery” means that proves so compelling with the story Anker wishes to tell. He begins by charting the ideological lineage of the ecology movement in Norway, surveying the soil that fertilized these ideas: from the habitual weekend cabin trips made by ordinary Norwegians to the extreme adventures of modern explorers, crossing the Pacific in papyrus boats and seeking out the archeological footprints of Viking settlements in Canada, before coming to the vast array of ideologues in the ecology movement. The different fields of ecology, ecophilosophy and environmental studies in Norway in the 1960’s and 70’s are mapped out along with their main participants. These range from scientific researchers to radical, self-styled eco-philosophers, from Marxist adherents to clergy in the Norwegian state church—yet they are all outsiders in some way, all *peripherals*, and draw their ideological inspiration in turn from Norway’s geographical periphery: the desolate mountains, the long, rugged coastline and the great forests in between. And it is this devotion to the periphery that proves the impetus to protect it from the environmental ruin that is currently taking place and quickly accelerating.

Leading the reader through this *mélange* of ideas, Anker proves a knowledgeable guide. The terrain gets tricky from time to time, wandering through the miry minutiae of ecclesiastical debates and overviews of course curricula, yet the reader never gets bogged down for too long in any one section as Anker presents enough character studies of the principal participants to keep the history moving—and intriguing. Indeed the different personalities portrayed represent not just the variance and spectrum of the early origins of the ecology movement, but also its chaos and fragmentation. Anker shows that, like any fringe movement, the bickering between its relatively small cohort of participants lead to some fascinating clashes, attacks, rebuffs and power struggles, such as the case of Jørgen Randers discussed in Chapter 7. Randers was a Norwegian scholar from MIT and key contributor to *The Limits of Growth* report in 1972, one of the most important environmental reports in the latter half of the 20th century. Yet, upon Randers's return home to Norway he found himself attacked for his too "shallow" and "middle-class" approach to environmentalism by the more radical Arne Næss and the Deep Ecology movement and at the same time mocked as a "doomster" for his "energy pessimism" by the Marxist geologist Ivan Rosenqvist, who believed there were plenty of natural resources available for limitless economic growth (168). Indeed, Randers would find himself in the no-man's land between the two sides over the questions of how to interact with the environment and to what ultimate end. While both sides shunned capitalist, industrial growth, the philosophy of the Deep Ecologists wished to move the focus from economic growth to environmental self-sufficiency while Rosenqvist and the Power-socialists wanted to harness the natural resources of Norway to enhance the welfare of the working class, and the two sides became an almost Cold War duality in environmental debates in Norway so that Randers, occupying a middle position, was ultimately squeezed out of the discussion despite his greater recognition on the world stage.

As Anker discusses how the environmental debates and ideas made more headway into mainstream Norwegian politics, specifically in the form of policies by the very powerful Labor Party, he turns his focus from the "periphery" to the center of "power" and he dives into the Norwegian government's incorporation of the ecological ideas circulating in the Norwegian political climate of the 1970's and 80's. This leads to the most fascinating part of *The Power of the Periphery*, namely its account of the political career of Gro Harlem Brundtland, the young Minister of the Environment in 1974 before becoming Norway's first female Prime Minister in 1981 and who was heralded as "the mother of the nation." Hardly auspiciously though, Brundtland began her first, and short-lived, premiership with the social and environmental disaster of building a hydropower plant in the land of the indigenous Sámi people in

Norway's far north that spurred mass protests and intense debate. Paradoxically, this gave Brundtland the extra fortitude to engage in real environmental action in a subsequent premiership, pointing out, already in 1990, the need for the reduction of CO₂ emissions and the dangers of global warming. With the desire for Norway to become the trailblazer in environmental policy for other nations to follow while at the same time protecting its lucrative petroleum industry, Brundtland and her government begin laying the groundwork for what would ultimately become the Kyoto Protocol. After intense diplomatic efforts, the Kyoto Protocol was ratified, which consolidated Norway's global position: it was able to profile itself as a pioneer in sustainable development through real efforts to manage climate change, while at the same time Norway safeguarded its petroleum industry from more heavy-handed regulation. Thus, as Anker wryly notes to close the penultimate Chapter 9, Norway's ecological ideology and global diplomatic standing "was all paid for by the very cause of climatic change—petroleum" (229). And thus it almost reads as a grassroots success story for Norway, from a marginal movement of nature-loving idealists and inspired scientists to a successful coup of soft power flexing on the world stage.

But thankfully Anker goes on to avoid closing on such an indulgent happy ending. In the last chapter, *The Alternative Nation*, Anker leaves the historian behind and becomes the philosopher, ruminating on Norway's achievement on the world stage as the self-styled "humanitarian superpower." Indeed *The Power of the Periphery* does not end with a stunning view of the pristine fjords as Norway would have the world see, but Anker reveals the polluted backwaters feeding into this clean, polished image of Norway: the cynicism of its policies, its failures at home to prevent and restrict its own poor environmental practices, its turning a blind eye to environmental disasters abroad it has a hand in, and its history of good intentions and progressive rhetoric that veer, far too often, from reality.

But more than a critical lambasting of the current state of affairs in Norway, the book's final message reads as a reminder of all that remains to be done. In many ways, Anker reveals the inherent chaos of movements at all times in their developments, and brings a vivacity to Norway's environmentalist past that reflects the mood of our time as well. It is easy to see the philosopher Arne Næss's call to environmental arms in Greta Thunberg's protests, or the claims of climate change as a hoax from ideologically-charged Norwegian scientists in the 1980's in the policies of the Trump administration.

Indeed, the book serves as a well-studied, detailed log of the journey one nation has taken in its approach to environmental policies that has affected our current world. The direction in which our world now heads off in its approach to ecological practices is a question left hanging by Anker, but one

which the reader unavoidably must confront upon closing the book. There is perhaps no simple answer to this, but in *The Power of the Periphery*, Anker shows that clarifying the choices of the past will bring clarity to the choices of the present. And as trailblazing Norway has led us this far, it is well worth inquiring how it got us here and where it might lead us next.