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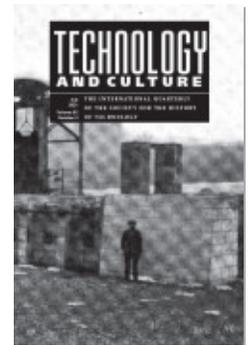
*The Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an
Environmental Pioneer for the World* by Peder Anker (review)

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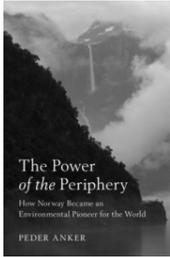
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The Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World

By Peder Anker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 288.



Many modern states of the last century are renowned for industrial development, but only the exceptional cases are known for their ecology. Peripheral Norway, as this book argues, is one such exception, having pioneered an approach to sociocultural and political development uniquely focused on the environment.

This book is a beautiful analysis of the interplay of environmental, technological, cultural, religious, political, scientific, regional, and global development in defining Norway's place in the natural, global environment. While not specifically a study of technology, Peder Anker examines how the environment was not only protected from destruction, but elevated as an absolute good in this economically stable country. He traces how scholars and activists, along with political actors, made Norway a nation actively opposed to environmental degradation—generally accepted across the world as an unavoidable consequence of twentieth-century technological developments.

While this study depicts Norway as part of the global periphery, importantly, it was nonetheless not isolated: Norwegian scholars traveled to countries ranging from the United States to Nepal and were continually involved in international communication. Anker also shifts focus from desk-based environmental studies to people's outdoor activities, demonstrating that environmentalism in Norway was deeply rooted in the philosophy and teaching of how to live in "the non-industrial world" (ch. 5).

Religion also plays a particular role in this story. To some, nature became a religion—or indeed, as Anker puts it, an "coreligion," informed by a vision of collapse and disaster that ideologues warned would follow the unrestrained technological exploitation of nature. It also meant the involvement of both scholars and church figures, and the book discusses a few in detail.

It also examines the impact of political decisions, showing for instance how policy around the opening up of oil resources attracted both protest and support. Anker focuses on deep ecology, a movement and intellectual effort in Norway that proposed a vision of an "alternative ecological steady-state nation" (p. 206), which was defeated after a failed protest against hydropower development in the north of Norway. Environmentalism also met opposition from scientists insisting that people need not fear any consequences of industrial development. Nonetheless, by the 1980s, Norway

had established itself as a pioneer, aiming “to show the world the path towards a sustainable society, a vision harking back to Environmental Studies’ eco-philosophical idea of Norway being an alternative nation for the world to admire” (p. 221).

While the book does not consider comparative dimensions a lot, the reader is nonetheless led in this direction. The conclusion that comes to mind after reading this monograph is that Norway represented another dimension in the Cold War: if America was a pioneer in consumer technologies and the USSR became a pioneer in space exploration, and both were extraordinary polluters of nature, Norway developed as a pioneering model of the future where nature-human relations were harmonious. Scholars and activists opened up Norway’s potential on the periphery with a divine imprint. This was a form of progress from the other end of the spectrum: it was not a fixation on heavy technologies, but a fascination with pure natural landscapes which turned out to be more important for humans.

On a compositional level, the book’s analysis moves from name to name and place to place within Norway and beyond. It draws various pieces of a grand network together, discussing the lives and roles of scholars and activists and showing their input in making environmentalism a peculiar national mission. Sometimes this renders the book more descriptive than explanatory. However, this volume is an important contribution to our knowledge about environmental developments of the past century, demonstrating a small nation’s place in the age of globalization.

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