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Helge Høibraaten:

Norway in 1968 and its Aftermath: Maoism, The Power of the Periphery and the Cultural Upper Class of the Sixty-Eighters.[1]

I. 1968, Norwegian style: unoriginal, idyllic.

What was distinctive about the 1968 experience in Norway?

Not much. One might to be tempted to say that the most distinctive characteristic was the lack of originality – or in other words: the imitative quality of it all. There were many Viet Nam demonstrations of course, there was some noise in the universities resulting, with time, in some reforms, there were life style changes of hippyist and Marxist kinds, with time also of the ethnic kind (I am thinking especially of the cultural awakening of the Sami people of the North, corresponding to the world–wide rise of movements of the Original Peoples), and there were reproductions (mostly creative reductions) in Norwegian of thoughts coming in from Frankfurt, Paris and California. There was, however, no Viet Nam war being run by one´s own politicians, no Nazi father and mother generation to attack (by and large), no spectacular deaths or shoot–downs like those of Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Benno Ohnesorg and Rudi Dutschke, no terrorism, no general strike that looked for a romantic moment as if another revolution had broken out in Paris. Just plain imitation, i.e., the mellowing of something bigger and more terrible into something smaller and more idyllic – and if there were Norwegians in the avantgarde with respect to any of these developments, then it was the Sami people.

However, this relative lack of originality was of course anything but original, for this was in general the fate of smaller nations. Also, it did not really diminish the 68 experience for the imitators. True, there had been almost a revolution in Paris, but

[1] This article was originally written in 1996 for another purpose. Due to a strange misunderstanding, it did not, however, get published then, and it has been lingering in my cupboard until the 3oth anniversary year. Thanks to Guri Hjeltnes for her willingness to publish it as part of the proceedings from a conference to which I was invited but which, alas, I did not have the opportunity to attend.

only almost, and in the end: who wanted it really – at least if we look a little from afar, disregarding those beaten up by the police or who turned deadly serious for other reasons? Wasn´t it in fact the *quasi una rivoluzione*-quality of the whole, the possibility of a revolution that did not in fact produce the melancholy of its fulfillment – wasn´t it this romantic revolution without a revolution that was the secret attraction of it all, and made the imitations look almost as real as the somewhat unreal original? The sixties had introduced sex without pregnancy. Now here – and especially in Scandinavia – there were quasi–riots without very visible consequences, at least in the short run.

Of course, there were true revolutionaries around, if we are to believe them. True, there were individual university teachers that for some reason or other were subjected to fairly cruel treatment by some of them. There were others, who – without cruel treatment – were shell–shocked by what they saw as an affront to all intellectual culture. There were even people who were profoundly shocked just by the carnival aspect of it all, even though they recognized that serious intellectual learning processes were in fact taking place. One professor told me that he had, since the war, associated all political demonstrations with the Nazi movement. (Though I could not, of course, accept his view – it would, for one thing, have made Nazis out of the Social Democrats when they were out in the streets on May 1 with their suits and their ties –, I was reminded of it some 10 years later when the punks began playing with Nazi symbols while insisting they were on the left.) Nor did the Social Democratic Party, with its fairly authoritarian traditions, like what was going on: when the philosophy students of the University of Oslo went "on strike", organizing their own education for a week, spokesmen for that party immediately scolded them for having abused a time–honored political tradition. – But, as these examples increasingly show, the drama of it all should not be overrated. The Norway of 1968 and 1969 was a fairly idyllic place.

II. The Maoists.

Then, however, came the Maoists. They came as it were from the fountainhead of the Norwegian people, and made Norway even more Norwegian than it used to be. It remained, to be sure, a pretty idyllic place, and as in other countries, the experience of Maoism was in many ways farcical. And yet there was a difference, to which I will their return at the end of this article.

Now Maoism itself was of course not a Norwegian invention, but a general Western phenomenon, part of the fascination with The Third World that

characterized the sixties and the seventies. And as such a phenomenon, Maoism certainly shared part of the romantic quality of the 68 experience. The Chinese Cultural Revolution itself, of course, was hardly a romantic phenomenon in the above sense, but a skillfully organized totalitarian craze. In comparison, European Maoists were comfortably and romantically away from real things, even as they – in a decade of heavy political tourism – visited their favorite countries China, Albania, some of them even so–called Democratic Kampuchea.

Nevertheless, romanticism alone was not everything, not with the 68 generation in general, and especially not with the Maoists. In addition came a moralism that wanted changes in the here and now, and so little cultural revolutions took place all over Europe, inspired by the great one taking place in China.

The revolution in Norway was particularly successful. For a time, it swallowed a very significant part of the 68 generation proper, and especially of those who came onto the scene somewhat later, when the habits of former ways of life had vanished. The Maoists did not of course become culturally dominant in Norwegian society, but their influence reached surprisingly far. They were, for example, able to convert a lot of influential authors of literature to their creed, and given the fact that Norwegians cherish their authors almost as much as they cherish their royal family, this was no small thing. All of a sudden there was a young author, who had previously written in a modernist vein and who had been the high hope of his generation, who now wrote a novel praising the sterling moral quality of Albanian life as compared to the bankruptcy of Norwegian ways. The tale was telling, not just because Albania was China´s only European ally at the time, but because Albania, as well as Norway, is a small country on the outskirts of the European continent.

Now, with hindsight, another novelist has written a long novel about these Maoist times, allegedly praising their fullness of life. That, I guess, is what 50 year old people tend to do. But a more important truth about these years is, I think, what the Norwegian poet Stein Mehren wrote about the end of the Maoist period, perhaps some 15 years ago.[2] They are still on stage, he said about the Maoist cultural elite, and they move around with the ease we are accustomed to. But in stead of howling out their message, they now keep smiling, smiles that aim at forgetting and at making others forget. Forget what?

One especially favorite thing to forget was, if I am not entirely mistaken, the Stalinist equivalent to what in connection with the Third Reich is called the thesis of the "Auschwitz Lüge" ("The Lie about Auschwitz"). Stalin simply had not killed that many people: this was the message from a large part of the Norwegian left, some

[2] Mehren was an enormously prolific writer at the time, and I have not been able to locate the article. I therefore try to state my impression from memory.

twenty five years after Albert Camus struggled to have the existence of the concentration camps recognized for what they in fact were. Like Mao, these people claimed that Stalin had made his errors, but that on the whole he was OK, to say the least. When Solzhenitsyn started to publish his works on the GULAG, they were unmoved. They had their experts on the matter. And when the Pol Pot regime started murdering its population, they went to Kampuchea and applauded the revolutionary spirit of the Khmer Rouge movement.

Now of course, such things as these were not specifically Norwegian either, by no means. What was specifically Norwegian was only the number of people who claimed or did such things, or who tolerated such opinions as official doctrines of a movement to which they had tied themselves by means of a new umbilical cord, despite misgivings about particular matters. What on the Continent was the Maoist specimen in the flowering of a hundred flowers, became in Norway a strong cactus flower threatening, for a little while, to turn the land into a cultural desert.

I am exaggerating, of course. What happened was that for a while, the Maoists were able to dominate the scene somewhat, with their crazy and hysterical political rhetoric that always talked about crushing and eradicating their political opponents (the implication being that it would take place physically as well as spiritually – an implication that, to be sure, was perhaps meant in part ironically, though I am also sure that its leading proponents somehow knew their spiritual powers were very limited, which would seem to leave them with physics); with their fascinating "inner life", which showed itself in sudden changes of habits such as not greeting your friends for a year or two, after which time the central committee in stead ordered cordial and friendly relations with, alas, irrevocably former friends; and with their fronts for all kinds of useful idiots that did not go all the way, but who thought they were emancipating women or preventing capitalists from snatching workplaces or saving criminals from prisons – and who may, in the long run, have been more effective in their political pursuits than the hard core with its pornographic directedness towards Mao, Stalin, Pol Pot and other exciting materials, towards organizational control of members, and towards the ultimate orgasm of the revolution.

Thus much for putting some color into the desert. But don´t for a moment think that this changes Norwegian Maoism into a desert in the other sense: this was a cult of the people, of bread and fish and Norwegian goat cheese, as it were. No refinements here and, though a good deal of enthusiasm (to the extent that it survived the torture mechanisms of the party apparatus) was present, there was little sense of both irony and humor, excepting some grotesque things, of which one was flirting with the bloody image of Stalinism (while, as mentioned, at the same time

denying the facts.) Of course, like good Leninist revolutionaries before takeover, and like good Norwegians, they did not show terrorist inclinations.

In 1969, in a book documenting some of the seminars held by the student movement at the university [3], I forecasted that, because of the general intellectual incompetence of the movement, it would not share the good fate of former Norwegian revolutionary sects (like *Mot Dag*) and be co-opted into the outskirts of the Social Democratic center of power: it would sit there, hyperactively, and wait for the revolution until it did not come, and then that would be the end of it. In retrospect, I have been proven partially wrong, or to put it a little differently: life goes on, after all, even for Maoists. The Maoists have indeed not entered the Social Democratic party to any great extent, though there are some exceptions. There have, however, been some tendencies towards private enterprise. Maoists turned into yuppies, and a former Stalinist dragon is now teaching business ethics in a private business school. And then, as mentioned, there are the novelists, who in 1969 were only beginning to enter this political and cultural space so foreign to spiritual and literary things, and who somehow survived into everlasting Norwegian fame, some because they managed to squeak out a little irony from within the life of the movement, and others because they believed in God anyway.

III. The Others. The Sixty–Eighters.

As mentioned, Maoism was not all there was to the years following 1968, the Maoists only dominated for a while. There were, however, all kinds of other socialists, organized or freischwebend, there was even an anarchist or two, there were greens ahead of time and there were Lukaçs style Leninists (in part flirting with Stalinism) trying in vain to compete with the Maoists , and of course there were all of kinds of feminists. There were publishing houses like Pax and Gyldendal which flooded the country with paperbacks of more or less politically correct persuasion, but with a little less of the Maoist ridigidity of mind; there were journals; and there was the generational effort called Pax Leksikon, where sixty–eighters rewrote history from a sixty–eight point of view. There were of course hippies and drugs and all that. There were, in general, the life style changes that have affected all of the Western world since 1968, and which made even Maoists divorce each other, closely surveilled by the party apparatus.

There was, after the first few years of Maoist prevalence, a tendency towards general anti–Maoism, which centered around some of the publishing activities just mentioned and, as time went on, in effect more of less locked the Maoists out of

[3] See Kampen om Universitetet, Pax Publishing House, Oslo 1969, p. 92f.

things. There were attempts at doing serious intellectual work in the Marxist tradition though, as in Europe in general, there seems to have been a law to the effect that the closer you were to Marx and his texts, the closer was also theoretical death after a while. But no matter, times change, and what was accumulated was, if not Marxist truths, at least all kinds of cultural refinements. As time went on, it became apparent that a concept was needed to describe this patrician part of generation of 1968, and at the same time to distinguish it from the Maoists. The need was filled by Nils Fredrik Nielsen in 1984,[4] who solved the name problem in the fashion of Columbus: after his book the non–Maoist part of the 68 generation was called The Sixty–Eighters, at least by that part itself, though the influence of ignorance and time have tended to make the epithet cover absolutely everyone, if not more. Nielsen described the mechanisms of cultural distinction with much subtle insight and humor. Needless to say, the book was much disliked by some leading Sixty–Eighters, who tried to describe it as a hum drum plebeian exercise.

IV. The Maoists as Norwegians. Populism.

The lack of humor thus displayed, though not Maoist in kind, now should return us to to the dreary theme of Maoism and its relative importance in Norway after 1968, as compared with other nations. What was it about these superserious and yet so farcical Maoists that made Norway even more Norwegian than it was before? In other to get a glimpse of this, let´s delve a bit into history.

Norway is a young nation. It gained internal autonomy in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, when the Danish king was forced to cede it to Sweden. A brief interlude after the Danish defeat in January 1814 was used by the Norwegians to good effect: a constitution was written up, on the models of France and The United States, and passed by an assembly of representatives from a very large part of the country, and from all classes, including the peasantry. Indeed, Norway was proclaimed independent, and a son of the Danish king was made Norwegian king. Sovereignty lasted only for a few months, however, when the real power situation forced the king to resign and the Norwegians to negotiate with the Swedish king, the former revolutionary general Bernadotte. Nevertheless, essential parts of the constitution survived, providing Norway with a large measure of freedom in the union with Sweden, until in 1905 full sovereignty was achieved.

Norway was thus, from its inception, a modern nation. As the nineteenth century unfolded, however, it quickly grew more ancient. Lacking the early modern

[4] in his Ekte sekstiåttere spiser ikke seipanetter (Real Sixty–Eighters don´t eat Fish Fingers), Gyldendal Publishing House, 1984.

imperial experience of Denmark and Sweden, Norwegians had to go back a thousand years to find a glorious romantic past to stand on, in addition to its brand new, revolutionary freedom. A link was found between the two ages in the form of the Norwegian peasant, who was never subdued under a feudal system, even as Norway was subdued by Denmark. Norwegian freedom was ancient as well as modern, and though it was modern too, it was nevertheless to a large extent thought of as the freedom of the peasant, who was romanticized by historians and by literary writers. True, without the Beamten class that largely ruled the country in the nineteenth century, and which to a large extent consisted of families of Danish and German descent that had gone Norwegian, the freedom of 1814 would not have been won nor consolidated. And the Norway of today is of course a heavily industrialized country.

Nevertheless, the romanticism of the peasant and of the fisherman still loom large in the idea of what the country is all about. Since the country is so large and the population is so scattered, the state and the national institutions that for the most part are concentrated in Oslo, have played a very important role in modern Norwegian history, making things possible that would not have come about through local and regional forces alone. This, however, is not to say that the regions are without political clout; on the contrary, they play a very important role through the center. When Norway voted no to The European Union in 1994, it was powerful peripheries that decided the election, just as they did it in 1972, when Norway voted no to what was then The European Community.

In a way, it was 1972 that was the real year for Norway, not 1968. Scratch a Norwegian, and you´ll generally find a peasant, even if he lives in Oslo. Scratch a Norwegian intellectual, and you´ll generally find a peasant, at least if he calls himself a radical. Norway is the country where Ottar Brox [5] could make a career on the left by calling his position populist, arguing for the survival of the traditional peasant/fisherman role combination in Northern Norway, but knowing full well that the term is often used to describe the flirtation of politicans with rightist leanings of the electorate. His populism, to be sure, was a populism from below, the way he saw it. He was never a Leninist, like the Maoists.

But the Maoists too, were dreaming of upsurges from below in the Norwegian people. And an upsurge there was indeed in the years before the 1972 election, when the people of 1968 joined hand with the people of the provinces to celebrate Norwegian independence from European capitalism.

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[5] Ottar Brox is a Norwegian social scientist and socialist politician, who has written much on the problems of Northern Norway.

The Maoist part of the 1968 generation tried as it were – with its cult of the people and the popular – to reinterprete the central meaning of Norwegian history by means of Mao Tse Tung. The attempt was farcical, and they did not, in the end, succeed. But they did not need to, either. They did, however, make Norway a bit more Norwegian through this generally humorless carnival. The Maoists may be said to have carried on some aspects of Nowegian provincial traditions of puritan religiosity, mostly though not exclusively in a secularized form. They combined the romanticism of the peasant with the deadly seriousness of the Norwegian puritan tradition.