

7 The feeling of being robbed

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Introduction

Norway is teeming with rural dissatisfaction these days. We have seen this clearly during recent years, and even more so in this last year. We have seen rural activists dressed in traditional folk dress rowing boats to campaign for the continued operation of delivery rooms; we have seen local communities rise in protest against closing regional schools and colleges and against the reforms of the municipality structure, the police and the postal service. At the same time, we have seen heavy artillery used in campaigns against toll booths in West Norway, and otherwise good-natured islanders from Frøya in Mid-Norway have smeared faeces on the footboards of excavators clearing the land for windmills belonging to multinational power companies. In brief, we have seen what ever more people are calling rural resistance. But where does this dissatisfaction come from, and what is at the roots of this rural resistance?

If we look behind the specific issues, behind all the reforms, behind the centralisation of the police and the downscaling of the postal service and educational facilities and what people see as cut-backs in basic infrastructure and welfare services where they live, we will see that people have started losing faith. If we look behind what comes across as resistance to the green shift, behind the demonstrations against toll roads and the anti-windmill campaigns, we will see that the grounds for this resistance is mistrust, and the grounds for this mistrust is betrayal.

In this chapter I want to communicate to readers some of the things that people in Norwegian rural areas have told me. I want to share my thoughts on what we today know by the relatively imprecise term “rural resistance”. I want to explore what it originates in, and I will argue that it is a reaction against a development whereby people in rural areas lose out whilst people in urban areas are winners. I will argue that the resistance is directed at a neo-liberal modernisation advocated by an urban political, financial and cultural elite, reinforced by an ecological modernisation heavily founded on economic rationalist thinking, championed by the same class. While great parts of the ongoing socio-political research and “the pundits” – or the political commentators and commentary journalists – have presented the conflict in the rural–urban divide as socially constructed representations, I argue that it is

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first and foremost about materiality, even though the aforementioned representations also play a part. It is about the very real loss of jobs and the disadvantages that local communities in rural areas are subjected to, without getting anything in return. And to the extent that representations play a part, it is about urbanity representing this loss. That is why people in rural areas reject the knowledge that is being produced, as well as the political statements put forward by the representatives of “the city centres”.

It has been smouldering for a long time

Rural dissatisfaction has been smouldering for a while. And those who know rural Norway have probably seen it coming for a long time. People who have taken the time to talk to people in the local communities, up on the mountain farms and along the valleys, in the innermost parts of the fjords and farthest out on the islands, have seen that people there have started giving up hope.

For my part, it took time before I saw it. Only in the early 2000s, as I was wandering about in a small fisheries community in the Lofoten islands, did it start to occur to me. I had an appointment for an interview with an entrepreneur in the field of tourism and the meeting was postponed, so I took the opportunity to have a look around this once-upon-a-time so lively fisheries community. The last time I had been there was in 1984. At the time I had a leave of absence from military service (conscripted in Norway) and went there in the hope of seeing what I thought were the last remnants of Norwegian whaling. But it struck me that what I was looking at back then, in the 1980s, were the last remnants of a local community.

“Yes, things have changed a lot since back then.” The man of advancing years came to a halt and looked right at me. It was as if he doubted me. “What did you say you were doing here?” he asked. “I’m here in connection with a research project on tourism.” I could tell by his face that his doubts were confirmed. “Yes, that seems to be what everything is about now – tourists and leisure,” he said, with a look brimming with mistrust of an industry that already at the time had been hyped as the Great Deliverance.

For me, the talk with the retired whaler was a wake-up call. Since I started doing rural research in 1999, this was the first profound conversation about what I at the time thought were the perceived drawbacks of tourism, but which I later understood was a critique of the new rural policies.

He told me about a dying local community that only 20 years earlier had been brimming with life. When I was there in the 1980s, there were more than 400 people living there. The small fishing boats lay three abreast at the quay and you could hear people swearing and laughing at the fish landing centre and the dispatch area. It sounded like it is supposed to sound when people are at work, and it smelled of fish, petrol and sea. But in 2004, little of it was left. The population had shrunk to 180 people, and many feared that what still remained of livelihoods, places to meet, service functions and welfare services would disappear in the near future.

“Tourism alone can’t make up for this,” said the retired fisherman. “For that we need politics, we need rural policies and fisheries policies that ensure that the value creation from the fisheries benefits the local communities.”

After talking to several hundreds of people in local communities in the context of various research projects over the years, I noticed that they have increasingly been telling such stories. They have been talking about local communities that have gradually been emptied of jobs and of venues for meeting up. They talk about ever more impoverished communities, about acquisitions and the closing down of local businesses, and they see it as an active downscaling of rural development measures to their own detriment and in favour of market forces. I have listened to stories about people out in the rural areas feeling disempowered and alienated. They perceive that the agents of change are outside themselves, outside their community, outside their region and even outside the country. “They are in the globalization of finance and culture”, as Reidar Almås (2002, p. 408) put it. People who work with production have less say than ever before, especially in the primary industries. “An ever smaller part of the value creation comes about in the primary industries and ever more of it comes about with the efforts of capital, foreign raw materials, scientifically based knowledge and external distribution” (Almås, 2002, p. 408). So they’re left there, the farmers, the fishermen and the villagers, stuck in a manufacturing chain of factor inputs and processing industry segments, feeling small and disempowered. Because in the driver’s seat are forces outside and beyond both the rural areas and the primary industries.

The cultural turn and a downscaled rural policy

Rural dissatisfaction has, however, rarely been the subject matter of the journalists and the commenting experts in the national media. There, content relating to rural policies has been relegated to the feature departments, who produce reports such as the weekend supplement to one of Norway’s leading newspapers, with the title *Bygdestyret*, a pun on “rural conflict”, a term meaning a kind of rural version of “the tall poppy syndrome” and “rural rule” in Norwegian (A-Magasinet, 2017), or the report in the weekend supplement to the largest Norwegian financial newspaper (DN-Magasin, 2014) with the even cleverer title *Lande-klage*: a pun on “rural complaint”, “plague” and “hit” in Norwegian. It tends to be the exotic side of rurality that is highlighted in such articles. A reporter and a photographer typically go to a rural area to report on a foreign culture, writing articles that are beautifully illustrated with photos of café interiors, such as Klætt kafé in Klætt or the Konditoriet in Rjukan, interiors every bit as much part of the retro style fad in interior decorating, with their functionalist Nordic design teak and Respatex furniture from the 1960s, just like apartments in the capital featured in interior design magazines. Yes, there have been good articles, written by skillful journalists, but they have rarely prompted political debate. They have seldom been mentioned in the editorials on page two, because the rural areas are no longer considered to be an issue of political interest.

But maybe one cannot blame the editors alone; maybe this just reflects the general debate on social issues? My own observations and the above-mentioned reflections by Almås (2002) in many ways broke with the then ruling perspective among academics in general and rural sociologists in particular. Because at some time in the early 1990s, the formerly so materially oriented rural sociology abandoned its traditional heavily socio-economic perspective for more social constructivist and social representation-theoretical perspectives (Bell, 2007; Flø, 2009, 2013). And precisely this shift – or the cultural turn, as the British human geographer Paul Cloke (1997) calls it – had consequences for the development of rural areas as well as for the rural policies (Perkins, 2006; Flø, 2010, 2013, 2015). Gradually, Norwegian officialdom let go of the sturdy measures that had actually worked for so long. “The development of infrastructure in the rural areas was put out to tender with price and short-term profits as the main criterion,” says a former local politician from Nordland county. “And the term ‘redistribution’ practically disappeared from the vocabulary of our most prominent politicians.” The cultural turn can be linked to the shift in rural policies in the 1990s, a shift that according to Håvard Teigen (2020) ended up as a “merged-up and downscaled” rural development policy. Inspired by post-modern theories on the new consumption (Best, 1989; Perkins, 2006), more and more people started hoping that status-pursuing middle-class consumers, employed in liberal professions and with more money and leisure time than ever before, would take a liking to rurality (Flø, 2013). Scientists, consultants and politicians opined that rural areas should start making themselves attractive to the growing urban middle class. Farmers should make use of what they saw as niches in various markets and start “crafting good stories” (content marketing) and “wrapping” their products in local and environmentally friendly symbols:

Rurality was to be sold. Rural traditions, activities and culture was be turned into commodities and sold in this new market, and farmers and villagers were to be taught to stimulate the consumers’ hunger for symbol products lending the consumers distinction.

(Flø, 2015, p. 20)

With substantial support from the Norwegian Hospitality Association (*NHO Reiseliv*) and Innovation Norway, rural areas were to be turned into what Aasetre (2010) calls “recreational colonies” for a steadily growing middle class on the look-out for trendy identities to self-project on social media.

From social democratic order to neoliberal order

“It started in the 1980s,” said the thin, sinewy older man. He heaved a box of fish from his small fishing boat onto the quay, before leaping ashore. “It started with those new, slippery politician types of ours, the ones with the shoulder pads and long hair at the back of their necks,” he continued. He had voted for them himself, he said. Because he had believed in them, for a long time.

Maybe the fisherman has a point. Maybe you have to go back to the 1980s to find the source of the rural dissatisfaction. Maybe you have to go back to the political scene after Thatcher and Reagan, politics that Thatcher's highly trusted cabinet member Nigel Lawson (2011) described as "a mixture of free markets, financial discipline, firm control over public expenditure, tax reductions, nationalism, Victorian values, privatisation and a dash of populism" (Chapter 5, paragraph 9).

The historian Berge Furre (1992) also highlighted the political shift that took place in the 1980s. "The social democratic order was in the main dismantled in the eighties," writes Furre (p. 421). The social democratic order was typically characterised by mixed market economy compromises and a strong belief in infrastructure and regulations. The concern of the rural areas, with ancestry going back to the early days of industrialisation, was still very much alive for our politicians. "They carry their history about with them," a long-term mayor and later deputy MP told me in 2006. He was talking about the older politicians in his own party, the Norwegian labour party. "They remembered our early members of parliament, like Johan Castberg, and the substantial attention to rural policies that characterised our early institution building."

The former politician and judge Johan Castberg is a good example. Reading the minutes from the parliamentary debate on the concession laws in 1917, this attention to rural issues comes across very clearly:

We shall to the greatest possible extent take the opportunity to strengthen these more remote and barren areas by letting them have a substantial part of those values that are created within their borders... You take the values out of the rural areas and channel them into the industrial centres and the cities, emptying the villages, emptying the local communities, especially the mountain communities, acquiring their values without remunerating them and this is absolutely wrong.

(quoted in the White Paper Norwegian Official Report
(*NOU*), 2012: 09, p 70)

The heritage from Mr Castberg and several other of our early MPs is what I have formerly called the heritage of a "morally rooted" attention to rural issues (Flø, 2017). But what transpired during the discussions on the concession acts was in itself also a heritage. It was the heritage of "the Norwegianist movement" (*norskdomsrørsla*), part of the nation-building in Norway during the 19th century, after 400 years as a Danish colony came to an end when Sweden sided with England during the Napoleonic wars and subsequently demanded Norway as a "war prize" to be handed over by the Danish king in 1814. The arrangement was called a union. The union with Sweden was dissolved, unilaterally, by Norway in 1905. The "Norwegianist movement" and the general nation-building period focused largely on rural musical, literary, artistic and folk dress traditions – and, of course, language. That heritage, with all the songs saluting mountains and fjords, the paintings depicting beautiful scenery in remote places, presented important symbols for the

Norwegianist movement. The cabinet-making inspired by folk crafts, the music inspired by folk music traditions and the poems and the literature from that period, a lot of it written in a Norwegian aiming to relieve itself of the Danish language formerly imposed on Norwegian writers, stayed with the politics of the interwar period and the crisis compromise between the Labour Party and the then “Farmer’s party”, a party that also in its present form and with a new name (the Centre Party) continues to be concerned about decentralisation issues and rural areas. This heritage informed rural policies during the entire duration of the social democratic order.

Another former mayor, from the North Gudbrandsdalen valley, was of the opinion that our “new politicians” were incapable of understanding the needs of the municipalities, along with those of rural industry and commerce – especially farming: “We could have tough fights before as well, but back then, in the 80s and the 90s, it was like banging your head against a wall.” Arguing well for something didn’t get you anywhere, because “they just didn’t get the reasons argued”, he said, explaining that also in earlier days MPs and cabinet members could “be stingy”, but he never doubted that “they understood the realities out there in the municipalities”. Implicit in this story is a sense that the mayor feels that “they” – meaning “the new politicians” – ignore the municipalities in rural Norway. The moral position that the rural districts had had in the political debate under the social democratic order had been weakened with “those new and slippery politician types”, as the fisherman at the quay had put it. At any rate, this was what one of the local activists against oil production in the fisheries hub where the Lofoten and Vesterålen islands are was referring to when he in 2017 voiced the opinion that “we have a Minister of Petroleum that is f---ing useless”, before elaborating “This is not going to become Stavanger!” By that he was referring to a doctrine that has a strong presence in the Norwegian writing of history – i.e. that of the political strategist and long-time mayor of Stavanger, Arne Rettedal (Conservative), who made sure that the depressed area of Stavanger acquired a special position in the development of the Norwegian petroleum industry (Kindingstad, 1998). “Oil won’t bring any more jobs to North Norway, nobody thinks like that about developing industry anymore, the oil will only gobble up the jobs we already have”, the activist continued. And just before Christmas 2019, the news that Equinor will not be landing oil and gas from the Castberg oil field locally was released. It was hardly a surprise that the mayor of Nordkapp (the North Cape) feels cheated.

From the late 1980s, it seems that the attention to rural areas was increasingly pushed into the background, with a greater focus directed towards business development policies – at least, that is what I hear from people in rural areas. And even if Berge Furre (1992) hesitated to give the new era the contours of a name like the era before it – i.e. the social democratic order – I will name this era “the neoliberal order”. The neoliberal order is very much alive today and is, like Nigel Lawson (2011) says, marked by a naïve belief in a laissez-faire economy, privatisation, tax cuts, deregulating, free trade and cuts in public expenditure.

Deregulating and new regulating hand in hand

During the last 25–30 years, the attitude that publicly run enterprises are not sufficiently efficient became established in the general political debate. The attitudes of the 1950s, '60s and '70s have been turned upside down. The scepticism towards the governance-enthusiastic state was guided by economists, hotshot players in the business community and the influential newspaper and television editors who were blooming so profusely before the Internet became public property. We get little in return for our tax money, they opined, and so it was time to open the door to the private business sector.

The critical attitude to the publicly run operations was hardly rooted in tax resistance and public inefficiency, says former senior civil servant and CEO of Telenor Tormod Hermansen (2004). It is also about the publicly run operations having invaded areas that traditionally belonged to the private sphere and the civil society.

That was also how the fisherman on the quay justified that he for a long time had voted for these kinds of politicians. “Everything was bureaucracy, overruling of local decisions and the introduction of principles that were out of place here in the High North,” he explained to me, in an attempt to justify voting for parties that he was no longer proud of having voted for. He had been stopped when he wanted to build a small house for equipment storage and a quay in order to fish directly from his home, instead of having to rent a house for equipment and tools a three-hour drive from where he lived. “The littoral zone act,” he said simply, and as he said it, I knew that he was referring to part of the Norwegian Planning and Building Act (*plan- og bygningsslova*) (2008, sections 1–8) and the prohibition against building in the 100 metre littoral zone – or 100 metres from the shore – which came in 1989. Similar reasoning also transpires in a study I did in the district I come from (Flø, 2013). Here, there was an old barn that the farmer was not allowed to tear down because the chairperson of the county counsel thought it fitted beautifully into a tourism landscape that the bureaucrats were vividly imagining. “You know, that’s the sort of thing that makes us do so well in the opinion polls,” my friend told me, referring to the right-wing Progress Party’s (FrP) steadily increasing support in Sunnmøre county in the west of Norway in the early 2000s. In my notes, I have many similar stories that all testify to Hermansen (2004) having a point. “The man in the street”, whose opinions right-wing populists so often claim to voice, felt that public institutions got too close and became too “hands-on” as regulators. They perceived the paradox of a period marked by deregulation in many fields also carrying in it new regulations in others, especially in the field of environmental issues, and gradually more and more so as regards the field of climate.

Sustainable development

After the environmental discourse of the late 1960s and well into the 1980s had been dominated by pessimistic prophets who had read up on classics

such as *Limits of Growth* (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972) and *Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith & Allen, 1973), the dystopian world view that the Western consumer society suffered from a deep cultural crisis was created, and this dystopian view was substituted by an idea of turning our social and environmental problems into the business model itself. Because that, apparently, was what it was going to take. If we were to have a hope of any “sustainable development”, it had to be profitable. That was the great promise.

With the final report from the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), the term “sustainable development” became universal. But something that was also turned into a universally accepted concept was that the changeover to a more sustainable society should not change the basic principles of the economy. To the contrary, in order to succeed in accomplishing the environmental objectives, we were to preserve the existing economic regime. This way, our understanding of sustainable development contributed to the continued economic growth essential to success in the work before us. At the same time, we excommunicated all dissidents and thought that they were naïve utopians.

Still, there were a lot of things to like about the Brundtland Commission and the term “sustainable development”. Here, the local grassroots participation was emphasised, and with a diversity of decentralised, experimental approaches, sustainable development was turned into a democratic strategy for environmental protection, rather than one governed by experts. Many people, such as political scientist Maarten Hajer (1995), considered the term sustainability to be “one of the paradigm statements of ecological modernisation” (p 26) and a forerunner of the perspective that now dominates the discourse on the environment and the climate – i.e. ecological modernisation.

Ecological modernisation

Sustainable development and ecological modernisation have several common features. Both perspectives see the need for more cross-sectoral environmental politics. Both think that economic growth is not incompatible with solving the environmental problems. Both consider technology to be an important means of solving environmental problems.

Later on (i.e. from the last half of the 2000s and to the present), it seems as if technology is no longer just a means of solving environmental challenges: it has become the end itself. Here is the business concept, here are the grounds for favourable financing of research and development as well as for patenting and establishing industries and here is the competitive edge in the fight for the clients.

All the same, there is a difference between sustainable development and ecological modernisation. The ecological modernisation perspective is not overly concerned about distribution and fairness, asserts Oluf Langhelle (1998). And maybe that is exactly what we are looking at now? Maybe we are

looking at the consequences of the fact that ecological modernisation has unfairly distributed impacts. When rebels wearing *Gilets Jaunes* (yellow vests) set fire to cars along the Champs-Élysées, it is a sign of a lack of social sustainability. When people damage toll booths in Bergen and pile faeces onto the footboards of excavators on Frøya, it is a sign that we have wandered far off course on the way to a socially sustainable green shift.

Because that is what they are protesting against. That is what the resistance to toll roads is really about. That is what the anti-windmill activists on Frøya and people along most of our coast are so furious about. They are not climate deniers or opposed to a green shift, they are just opposed to the way that shift is attempted brought about. They are opposed to what Robyn Eckersley (1995) calls “the discipline of environmental economics’ key role in shaping the economy-environment integration debate” (p 12). They are simply opposed to most of what is meant by the term “environmental economics”.

Environmental economics

Environmental economics are based on a neo-classical socio-economic theory. This is the academic foundation for that “environmental discourse” that John Dryzek (1997) called “economic rationalism” – i.e., the principle of using market mechanisms in order to accomplish public objectives. This constituted the grounds for privatising nature worthy of preservation. This became particularly popular in the USA in the 1980s, when business-like principles were introduced for the American national parks, turning them into a hospitality industry, whereby visitors pay to come and see the national park and the profit is used for the maintenance of it (Buckley, 2003). Likewise, this also constituted the grounds for the “pollutor pays” principle and the introduction of green taxation and environmental taxes. And it is this principle that Hajer (1995) thinks has created a technocratic version of ecological modernisation permeated with financial reasoning. But the principle stuck, and since the late 1980s this has been the most legitimate way to discuss environmental politics, internationally as well as nationally.

This was also what triggered the resistance. The resistance came about as a consequence of the measures resulting in unfair impacts. The logic of the environmental economics impacted some more heavily than others. And the resistance is not irrational, contrary to what the commenting journalists and the people in expensive shirts keep telling us. It is, rather, a direct and rational reaction based on basic ethics of fairness. Road tolls, fuel tax and higher parking charges impact people in outlying areas hardest. These expenses impact those who, from the 1950s and well into the 1980s, did exactly what they were encouraged to do. They impacted people who bought land in the developments that the municipalities had put up for sale in the small communities and the peripheral areas outside the densely populated areas and cities. They impacted those who for a long time had called themselves social democrats and had believed in the promises made by politicians. They impacted those people who for the longest time had had the most confidence

in the politicians elected to be their representatives, the same politicians who strove to reduce public expenses by centralising the schools and the public services. Now they are stuck in their small communities and their monocultural housing developments – 20 to 40 km or 12 to 24 miles from a town or city centre – knowing that there is nothing there but a bed and a kitchen. Everything else has to be got in the town or city centre. The school is shut down, the shop is closed and what was once a living fish landing centre has been taken over by a self-made turbo-capitalist who swore that he would ensure the future operation of it, but ended up landing his fish elsewhere, thereby depriving the place of all economic activity.

New regional policies

In 1992, parliament passed a resolution to merge what translate as “The Regional Development Fund” (*Distriktenes utbyggingsfond*), “The Industrial Fund” (*Industrifondet*) and “The Small Businesses Fund” (*Småbedriftsfondet*) into the National Industries and District Development Fund (*Statens nærings- og distriktsutviklingsfond*, SND). The White Paper with the historical title translating as “City and Country, Hand in Hand” (a Labour Party slogan from 1933 which rhymes in Norwegian) (St. meld. Nr. 33 (1992–1993)) was termed by Håvard Teigen (1999) as a White Paper “of great historical interest because the regional policies unique to Norway are discontinued with this White Paper” (p. 203). At the end of the 1990s and on into the 2000s, many of the business and industry policies and the economic development policies were delimited by the EEA agreement, and the opportunities to use classical business development measures such as cheap credit, cheap power, interest-free loans and other kinds of crisis support measures were more or less removed. What we often call globalisation came ever more to the fore for large parts of the economic activities, especially in the rural areas. An ever closer economic, political and cultural integration into Europe and the rest of the world curtailed the space for traditional Norwegian economic development measures, and gradually the more neoliberal currents also caught up with the rural areas.

During the three or four years before the financial crisis in 2008, the most remote municipalities lost more than 6,000 inhabitants. In spite of the so-called “red–green” coalition (the Labour Party, the Socialist Popular Party and the rurally oriented Centre Party) being self-proclaimed rural development enthusiasts, 210 of the then 430 municipalities in the country shrank considerably during this period. And while rural areas had been home to more than half of the Norwegian population in the late 1980s, to day seven out of ten Norwegians live in, or near, the biggest cities.¹

Some regions noticed the changes very clearly into the 2000s. While some regions – like the Sunnmøre region, where I come from – did well as a consequence of business owners insisting on developing their business locally, other regions were practically closed down. And the manufacturing and processing industries we had then have now moved to parts of the world where

costs and taxes are lower. But the local business owners have their challenges, because hardly anybody wants to work in the manufacturing industry anymore; nowadays, young people dream of becoming “something in the media”. And if somebody was interested in becoming a skilled worker in the manufacturing industry, they would probably be diagnosed as spineless under-achievers by school counsellors and others who queue up to advise young people to move away from the community they come from (Brox, 2016). A former CEO at the Kleven shipyard in Ulsteinvik told me, in 2004, that “there is nothing we would rather do than recruit local young people, but it’s impossible to get hold of them [...]. Nowadays they’re all going to university.” The solution for local business owners was to import workers from EEA countries. The influx of capable skilled workers from Eastern Europe was followed by a deterioration of working conditions and wages. In January 2020, the Kleven shipyard became Croatian-owned, with the conglomerate DIV Group in the driving seat. Some of the employees felt relieved at having avoided bankruptcy, while others counted the days to a feared closure. “They could have given us a green assignment,” said a former shipyard colleague of mine. “The Prime Minister could have asked us to build these offshore windmills, I know we could have done it.” But she didn’t. Premier Solberg and the other politicians we have entrusted with our vote no longer ask for things like that; they pin their faith on the markets. And in the meantime our skilled workers pack up and move, and get replaced by temporary workers conveyed by staffing agencies.

Our production industries become distant from the local communities that they were once a part of. Young people get professional training or education that requires them to move away from rural Norway as there are no jobs for them there. The regional university colleges seem to be a thing of the past, and the vocational schools attach increasing importance to theoretical subjects. This growing emphasis on theoretical subjects leads Knut Kjelstadli to note that the great number of dropouts from the vocational schools is due to the fact that they have let the students down through creating a “a school for reading and listening” rather than “a school for seeing and doing” (Skolen, 2006). This all contributes to changing our industries as well as our local communities.

Big structural changes, especially in the fisheries (Isaksen & Bendiksen, 2002), have had extensive local spillover effects that made a lot of people in rural areas every bit as concerned as the man I met in Lofoten. Everybody worries about what they see as the destitution of their local communities. They look at their homes and their communities and see them die a little more every day. The broad rural policies, meaning rural policies that include “weighty” political fields such as defence, manufacturing industry and transport – a type of vision that has been the lynchpin for Norwegian rural policies for decades – are now unravelling. It is now the *narrow* rural policies, emphasising individual measures in order to entice individual players to start businesses in rural areas rather than in cities, that country people should pin their faith on.² Nowadays, the rural areas are to be built with “project finance”.

From the early 2000s onwards, we could read reports and in-depth interviews with young, newly hired project managers who were working on making the local communities more attractive for families with small children. The political counterculture that was typical of the anti-urbanites moving to the rural areas in the 1970s has now been replaced with a smooth compliance culture, the projection of identity and staged rural idyll. The inherent message from the many move-back-home projects in various parts of the country was “If you are resourceful and energetic, move to our area”. Like mediocre travel agencies, rural Norway tried to sell itself by the means of advertising materials financed by Innovation Norway, striking the chords of light entertainment connected to outdoor recreation and relaxation.

The background for this was a political vision wherein natural and cultural values were emphasised as ever more important effort factors for new businesses. It was a policy based on a desire to facilitate the establishment of creative businesses and thereby create local communities that came across as more attractive, especially to young people. The key words were adventure, identity and symbols of distinction. Or, as the then Minister of Municipalities and Regional Affairs, Åslaug Haga, put it when she presented the government’s action plan for culture and business in June 2007: “By focusing on [...] culture, adventure and leisure, this will contribute to rendering a place attractive and stimulating a sense of identity. Culture and adventure means a lot to people, regardless of whereabouts they live” (Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2007). Haga had the support of both then Minister of Trade and Industry Dag Terje Andersen and then Minister of Culture Trond Giske, who had both participated in working out the action plan.

This was the new regional policy, and it must be understood as being part of a bigger whole. It is permeated with the thinking of the academics and the suppliers of knowledge to the players involved with regional policies. In keeping with the spirit of the times, attempts were made to turn local communities into attractive tourism destinations, with waiters dressed in national costume offering visitors local delicacies. The clearest shift in the neoliberal order was an individualisation of the responsibility for your own success. The business community was relieved of the burden of regional policies, and in rural areas the project creators were given the responsibility for regional development.

The fight for survival is hardening

In the course of approximately the last hundred years, we have moved on from morally rooted regional policies, via regional policies in party politics marked by mixed economy responses to political and market-related challenges, before stepping into a neoliberal order where the state has worked hard at washing its hands of the responsibility for rural development and left an ever-greater part of it to the local communities, local businesses and the locals themselves. Downscaled regional policies, professionalised politicians and an active trimming of the nation-state in favour of international agreements and global players was followed by the betrayal that fed the growing

dissatisfaction in rural districts where people saw the consequences right before their eyes. They saw their resources being harvested, they heard the sounds of lorries that were empty on arrival and left fully loaded, day and night, but they saw little of the value created by the exports.

It is in this context that we should understand the man I met in the Lofoten islands, and a whole lot of other people in rural areas I have talked to in recent years. Be they dairy farmers in Telemark or MPs representing a district, former mayors from the north of the Gudbrandsdalen valley, sheep farmers in the north of the Østerdalen valley, county politicians in Helgeland up north, hairdressers in fjord hamlets down south, blue-collar workers in Sogn og Fjordane county in the west or business owners in Sunnmøre – they are all watching their own local community, and what they are seeing is that the fight for survival is hardening. Many people have a feeling similar to what a smallholder in West Norway explained to me: “We have seen the robbery happening before our very eyes for a long time now. And here they’re now going to produce power for the Brits without paying us.”

They have felt the shifts in regional policies at their cost. Local fish landing centres, dairies, abattoirs and boatyards are disappearing, along with shops, schools and public health centres. And “the only thing we’re offered is a White Paper on tourism,” as one of my informants put it, referring to White Paper (*Stortingsmelding*) No.19 (St. meld. Nr. 19 (2016–2017)), which told them to turn culture, adventure and leisure into business. And they are perceiving this all as a betrayal.

All the same, they roll their sleeves up and take hold of what they can. They stake capital and health on building the country; they invest millions in required loose housing barns and buy cod quotas at exorbitant prices. They enter into partnerships with R&D players for developing innovative welding technology and new methods for the recycling of waste from the building and construction industry as well as from the fisheries industry. All this and more is what I see when I travel through the local communities, but on television the ever-debate-ready know-it-all lecture about how the local communities have to adapt and facilitate the implementation of the promising bioeconomy and the green shift.

Rural people are not asking for advice about adapting, they are just asking us to see that adapting is exactly what they are doing. They are in the business of adapting every single day; every single day they are working steadily on creating value, jobs and welfare. They produce materiality: food and goods for export. And they produce a lot of collective goods: cultural landscapes, biodiversity, food safety and living local communities – goods us city people can enjoy on our way to the chalets worth millions that we have spread along the littoral zones and in the best summer mountain pastures. What they have seen of the bioeconomic industry so far differs little from the fossil-economic industry. It sprouts ever more distant multinational players who come to steal the wind as well as the kelp and the spruce forests without leaving anything in return but disadvantages for the people living there.

Us and the others

And what do we do? We don't want to see them. We – in David Goodhart's (2017) understanding of *anywheres* as the urban middle-class elite with higher education – dominate the public debate with our socio-liberal “citizen of the world” identity. We ignore their work and underestimate their contributions as well as their feelings, invalidating them and calling it “nostalgic sentimentalism”. We accuse them of being backwater luddites holding the opinion that all change is loss.

Ourselves, we claim that we are devoid of nostalgia because we are egalitarian meritocrats who are of the opinion that we have deserved the powers we hold because of our own intelligence and reason. We therefore close down local hospitals and delivery rooms; we close down local police stations and call it “the community police reform”; we dismiss all local referendums that oppose municipal amalgamations and claim that people do not know what is in their own best interests. We demand that the farmers, who have shown us a higher growth in productivity than practically any other industry, must become more efficient. And should any of us come up with the clear-headed idea of moving a job or two in state enterprises to a “forgotten small town in some rural area”, the whining from the bigger cities drown all other news for weeks.

We are still seeing only the early beginnings of a rural resistance. It will be a long time before a possible rebellion materialises as anything more than legal protest marches, support for certain political parties and civil remarks in newspapers and social media. But precisely because of that, it might be time to slow down. Maybe it is time that we – as representatives of the urban middle class with higher education who dominate the political scene, the public administration and the public debate – start looking around us, start listening. Because what we need now is for us as a society anew to be able to discover the mutual benefits between city and countryside and realising that we need to look up from the short-term economic models, see the bigger picture and acknowledge that the rural areas have their own intrinsic value at the same level as the cities. Only then might we possibly manage to relieve the feeling of robbery in the rural areas.

Notes

- 1 Statistics Norway SSB
- 2 The divide between the narrow and the broad rural policies is the same divide that Håvard Teigen (1999, 2020) defines as explicit and implicit rural policies. Explicit rural policies consist of regionally differentiated political measures, whereas implicit rural policies are the sum total of allocations that distribute and re-distribute funds between the regions. Allocations of funds to the municipalities over the government budget make up the most important part of these measures, but transport, defence, industry, agriculture and other political fields are also significant elements in the implicit rural policies.

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