

“We Are As Gods”

“It is the Noah's Ark for securing biological diversity for future generations,” Norway's Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg told a freezing audience of world dignitaries, including the European Commission President José Manuel Barroso.¹ The occasion was the opening of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in February 2008, a vault constructed to secure the world's food crops against climate change, wars, and environmental disasters. The Vault was to be a safe deposit box for the world's genetic material, secured in eternal permafrost high above the coastline to protect against climate-change-induced sea level rise. In this icy arctic facility, national seed banks from all over the world could deposit their genetic heritage under Norwegian protection. After unlocking the Vault, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai of Kenya made the first deposit: a box of her nation's rice seeds.

“Doomsday Seed Vault” and “Noah's Seed Ark” were the nicknames suggested to the press by the Norwegian government. They were told that Norway had financed and built the Vault simply “as a service to the world community.”² The opening ceremony became a major news item in media outlets around the world, often as front-page news, with Norwegians portrayed as virtuous guardians of the world's biological heritage. These articles had a Biblical ring to them: The oceans were rising and Stoltenberg was depicted as the world's Noah securing at least two seeds of every

¹ Doug Mellgren, “‘Doomsday’ Seed Vault Opens in Arctic,” *NBC News*, Feb. 27, 2008.

² Svalbard Global Seed Vault, “‘Doomsday Seed Vault’ to Open in Arctic Circle on February 26th,” Croptrust Archive. Marte Qvenild, “Svalbard Global Seed Vault: a ‘Noah's Ark’ for the world's seeds,” *Development in Practice*, 18, no. 1 (2008), 110–16.

living species in his ark. The dramatic architectural design of the Vault entrance provided a perfect setting for a photo shoot, with a large perpetually glowing crystal-window in a landscape engulfed in the arctic dark. The Vault shone like a star in the polar night, and Norwegians were portrayed as the good citizens of the world providing a safe haven for the world's common genetic heritage. For countries in the Global South it was especially important that deposits in the Vault could only be accessed by the seeds' owners, as they were acutely aware of a legacy of seed industries that had reaped the benefits of their nations' genetic heritage without consent.³ Norway was to be on the good side of such conflicts, Stoltenberg assured the audience, by constructing the Vault to protect the vulnerable, rather than enrich the strong. In effect, Norwegians assumed the role of bank vault executives for the economy of nature.

Norway had an underlying political interest in building a presence on Svalbard. Since the archipelago was annexed back in 1920 in the context of the nation's imperial ambition, Norway has done its very best to confirm its sovereignty. Today most countries in the northern hemisphere have signed the Spitsbergen Treaty of 1920, which established Norwegian hegemony, while those in the Global South have not. Indeed, only forty-four out of a total of a hundred and ninety-five countries in the world had signed the treaty by 2008. Kenya, for example, is not among the signatories. The backdrop of building the Seed Vault at Spitsbergen was thus to showcase to the world – especially to the Global South – the virtue of Norwegian dominion over the archipelago. Yet it would be to miss the point to argue that the purpose of the Vault was only to strengthen Norwegian sovereignty. Stoltenberg also genuinely wanted to do something good for the world, and the Vault was a way of doing exactly that.

The act of doing something good was the cultural Archimedean point from which Norwegians tried to move the Earth in a new and, to them, more environmentally sound direction. This cultural point has, as the Seed Vault illustrates, taken the form of a self-confident, do-gooding gaze toward the rest of the world. Indeed, the official foreign policy has been to establish “Norway as a humanitarian super power” and “as a peace nation” in the world.⁴ There are numerous examples of Norwegians being

³ Hanne Svarstad and Shivcharn S. Dhillon (eds.), *Responding to Bioprospecting* (Oslo: Spartacus, 2000).

⁴ Quotes by Jan Egeland (1985) and Jonas Gahr Støre (2006), respectively Norway's State Secretary and Minister of Foreign Affairs, in Øyvind Østerud, “Lite land som humanitær stormakt?” *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*, 4 (2006), 303–16, quote p. 303. Helge Pharo, “Norway's peace tradition spanning 100 years,” *Scandinavian Review*, 93 (2005), 15–23.

engaged in this enterprise, most notably in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The so-called Oslo Accord of 1995 between Palestine and Israel may serve as an illustration of this.⁵ This agenda of being global peacemakers has been reinforced by the fact that the world’s dignitaries come to Oslo every year to witness the ultimate peace fest, hosted by the Permanent Secretariat of the Nobel Peace Prize and celebrated at the Nobel Peace Center. Being elected to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee is widely seen as the highest honor among Norwegians, who follow and debate every step the Committee makes. For those not elected to the Committee, the career path for a successful Norwegian politician or diplomat often leads to a leadership position within an international peacemaking organization, such as the United Nations, Amnesty International, the Red Cross, or Human Rights Watch. According to the principal historian of Norwegian foreign policy, Olav Riste, the nation’s diplomatic mantra can be captured with the phrase “Saving the Globe.”⁶ As a consequence, Oslo has become a hub for international peace initiatives, some of which are very visible and others only known as rumors that circulate in a fairly transparent city of only 600,000 people. During the Cold War, Norway was particularly well situated, both geographically and politically, to play this mediating role in a divided world, and the United Nations became an important arena in which Norway’s mission of becoming the world’s “humanitarian super power” played out. Terje Tvedt, the leading historian of Norwegian developmental aid, has shown that this gaze of goodness has been a hallmark for the nation’s foreign policy, serving as a disguise for socio-political self-criticism and reflection.⁷

At first glance Norway seems an unlikely place for worldly self-confidence. Its citizens speak a non-academic language and are educated at ordinary universities in the academic periphery. A tiny country with a small population like Norway may look like a no-impact-land at the mercy of events larger than itself. Yet, as this book will show, Norwegians put forward a set of policies and philosophies that detailed how to approach our global environmental crisis through innovative thinking about ecophilosophy, eco-politics, eco-religion, sustainability, sustainable development, climate economics, and much more. It was all formulated in

⁵ Edward W. Said, “How do you spell Apartheid? O-s-l-o,” *Ha’aretz*, Oct. 11, 1998.

⁶ Olav Riste, *Norway’s Foreign Relations: A History*, 2nd ed. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2005), 268–73.

⁷ Terje Tvedt, *Angels of Mercy or Development Diplomats?* (Oxford: James Curry, 1998); *Det internasjonale gjennombruddet* (Oslo: Dreyer, 2017).

the context of a culture of self-confident well-wishing for a troubled world. What was the source of this environmental gaze?

The title of the book – *The Power of the Periphery* – is meant to express the ways in which Norwegian environmentalists found nature in the periphery as morally superior and the source of everything good. To spend real or imagined time in the high mountains or on vacation in remote cottages was the norm. Such outdoor life and research in beautiful and pristine environments were considered to be superior to work done in central academic institutions where scientists taught and wrote. The power of the periphery was that of a pristine natural environment contrasted with the dirty center in need of change. At the local level that could be the forest outside the city, a mountain high above the town that sits down in the valley, or farmers or fishermen working everyday within nature in contrast to office workers that were detached from it. At the global level it became the beautiful, peaceful Norway contrasted with the polluted, troubled world. The power of the periphery was a social construction and a system of belief which allowed the environmentalist's self-confident gaze of goodness.

The power of the periphery allowed scholars and politicians alike to showcase Norway as an alternative environmentally sound nation compared with the rest of the world. Norway was fashioned by Norwegian scholar-activists as a microcosm for a better macrocosm. The North Pole, as historian Michael Bravo has shown, has for centuries served as a place of idealized dreams in contrast to the problematic socio-political realities around the world.⁸ In a similar vein, Norway sought to be an alternative loadstar for a world in need of an alternative environmental direction. For this reason it was important to Norwegian scholar-activists to maintain the distinction between local and global as a way of resisting the destructive powers of globalization. Abroad, Norwegians met a receptive audience, especially among North American scholars and activists on the progressive left admiring everything Scandinavian. Typically, when US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez promoted socialism and a Green New Deal in a 2019 interview for CBS' "60 Minutes," she pointed to Scandinavia and Norway.⁹ In doing so she appealed to deep-seated longings for the politics of this region among her audience.

⁸ Michael Bravo, *North Pole: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaction Books, 2019). Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin (eds.), *Narrating the Arctic: A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices* (Canton, MA: Science History Pub., 2002).

⁹ Anderson Cooper, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on 60 Minutes," CBS, Jan. 6, 2019. Bill McKibben, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2019), pp. 116, 193.

As a contribution to the field of history of science, this book will focus on the scientific and intellectual side of environmental debate by placing the well-meaning scholar-activist at the center of focus. In terms of timing, the book spans thirty years of Norwegian history, beginning with the translation of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* into Norwegian in 1962 and ending with Norwegian scholars attending the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The chief focus in terms of archival sources, however, lies in the 1970s, which the book spends a good amount of time unpacking. It tells the story of the ways in which ecological concerns were imported into Norway via Carson’s work and, thirty years later, exported from Norway to the world at the Rio conference in the language of “sustainable development.” During this period Norwegian environmentalists attempted to navigate the tense relations of the Cold War by adopting a middle-ground position that could be embraced by both sides. While Stalinists, Leninists, Maoists, and other intellectual hooligans on the left fought capitalist Vietnam warmongers on the right, Norwegian peacemakers and environmentalists alike took the high middle ground by developing alternative visions that could be embraced by both sides. The Norwegian ecologists provided a vision of harmony and stability in a world of tension and instability. This middle ground reflected the interdisciplinary nature of ecological debate in Norway, which was hardly divided by the “two cultures” in academia of humanists and scientists.¹⁰ The social interactions were particularly intense between ecologists and philosophers, as the formative years of Deep Ecology took place in this period.

The subtitle of the book – *How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World* – is meant to capture the ways in which the environmental researchers anchored their global solutions in a particular Norwegian culture of being good to the world. As will be shown, a telling illustration of the worldliness of ecological reasoning is the way ecology was first introduced to Norwegians. It happened in 1956 through a Cambridge University study of a remote village in north-west Pakistan carried out by the young Norwegian social anthropologist Fredrik Barth. This event will, together with studies conducted by the ocean explorer Thor Heyerdahl, and the archeologists Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine Ingstad who found Viking settlements in the United States, form the first chapter of the book. The formation of the biological field of ecology in Norway is the topic of the next chapter, which describes the ecologists’

¹⁰ Charles P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

contribution to the International Biological Program. The subsequent four chapters follow the Deep Ecology movement among scholars in Norway, particularly in the circle that congregated around the philosopher Arne Næss and the peace researcher Johan Galtung. Their antagonists were the “shallow” ecologists, namely the Norwegian co-author of *The Limits to Growth* (1972), Jørgen Randers, and the Chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Gro Harlem Brundtland, discussed in Chapter 7 and 8. The last chapter tells the tale of how Brundtland, with the help of Stoltenberg’s climate economics, envisioned Norway to be “*et foregangsland*” (a pioneer country) for the world. An aspiration she would later carry with her as Director-General for the World Health Organization (1998–2003). And besides creating the Seed Vault, Stoltenberg is also known for his work as the United Nations Special Envoy on Climate Change and as the Secretary General of NATO.

Each chapter in this book addresses environmental debates within different fields of academia starting with (1) anthropology and archeology, followed by (2) ecology, (3) philosophy, (4) politics, (5) environmental studies, (6) theology, (7) managerial sciences, (8) geology, and finally ending with (9) economics. Through the lens of social history of sciences, the chapters place people at the core of the narrative, especially the scholar-activists who were integral to these stories. Chapter 1 will untangle the peculiar Norwegian culture of nature that may be foreign to non-Norwegians. Chapters 2 through 6 are mostly about the Deep Ecologists, who dominated Norwegian environmental debates in the 1970s, while Chapters 7 through 9 explain the reaction to them at home and abroad from more mainstream scholars and politicians. What people described in this book have in common is that they sought to create a green vision for the world. How did these scholars and environmental politicians manage that?

Though secular in spirit, the environmental agenda of improving the world harkens back to a missionary history enforced by the country’s all-dominating pietistic Lutheran religion. The ecologically inspired scholar-activists were not particularly religious, but nevertheless assumed the power of gods in their gaze from the periphery. Though perhaps shocking to our secular ears, it is worth recalling that assuming the power of a god was a popular exercise within the counterculture. It was famously advocated for by the British anthropologist Edmund Leach, who told his BBC listeners in a 1967 radio lecture that we “have become like gods. Isn’t it about time that we understood our divinity? Science offers us total mastery over our environment and over our destiny, yet instead of

rejoicing we feel deeply afraid. Why should this be? How might these fears be resolved?”¹¹ His answer was that people should take charge of their own destiny by acting as if they were “like gods,” using science for constructive purposes and thereby intervening positively in the course of history. Leach’s idea would go viral after Stewart Brand adopted it in his opening motto for *The Whole Earth Catalogue* (1968): “We are as gods and might as well get good at it.” The *Catalogue* would provide tools and aid the “power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested.”¹² In the subsequent decade, Brand’s adaptation of Leach’s lecture became one of the most quoted lines among his generation, serving as a sort of hallmark for counterculture thinking. This assumption of divine power gave many of the characters mentioned in this book a ring of charismatic authority. In terms of personality, they often came across as being on a mission, driven by their own environmental goodness. Fortunately, the Norwegian scholars in the cultural studies of religion have already deciphered the religious bearings of the nation’s environmentalism, which is most notable in the work of Tarjei Rønnow.¹³ This book will continue these discussions of the role of Lutheranism in Norwegian environmentalism in Chapters 6 and 7.

In behaving like a good god, an activist or scholar assumed distinctive god-like abilities in their gaze from the periphery. The Norwegian scholar would often assume an argument to be valid at all places on Earth, for example, ignoring the world’s diversity of cultures and traditions. Research was done with the prime objective of letting the world know what it had to learn from Norway. The scholar-activists were also pursuing the right course against the evils of the world, and they framed environmental problems in the binary of good and bad by first locating the evil. They would then place the blame where they saw evil and mobilize a feeling of guilt around it. This was then followed by offering a path of awakening, salvation, and finally redemption. The scholar-activists longed for endless power so that they could solve all the problems of the world, as well as gain endless knowledge. Through their

¹¹ Edmund Leach *A Runaway World?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 1.

¹² Stewart Brand (eds.), *The Whole Earth Catalogue* (San Francisco: Point Foundation, 1968), p. 2. Andrew G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Of Kansas Press, 2007).

¹³ Tarjei Rønnow, “Takk gode Gud for moder jord, hun gjør oss ett med alt som gror: Religiøsitet og miljøengasjement i Norge,” *Norsk antropologisk tidsskrift*, 15 (2004), 18–31.

epistemological lens the scholar-activists assumed they were capable of answering most questions relevant to the environment. Naturally, there was much more to be learned and many new things the sciences could and should figure out. Yet the epistemological apparatus and scientific *modus operandi* were stable factors in the life of the scholar-activist. Indeed, the environmentalists discussed in this book would rarely admit to having made a false argument or advanced an erroneous opinion. Public self-scrutiny was not on the horizon. And finally, the scholar-activist perspective on time would often entail a narrative of the deep past reaching into the far future. It was a grand story of an environmentally harmonious past, followed by environmental havoc, which, thanks to the environmental awakening of the scholar and his or her followers, would eventually lead to the restoration of a new harmonious future for the world. To be sure, Norwegian scholar-activists did not think of themselves literally as gods. More precisely, they thought of themselves as having the right answer to environmental issues, and they brought it upon themselves to inform the world about their good news. In short, they were environmental do-gooders with a worldly gaze.

The idea of assuming the power of a god has old intellectual roots in Norway. According to ancient Nordic mythology, Ragnarök will one day befall upon us, and it will be in the form of a series of environmental disasters. At that time the god Heimdall will blow his Gjallarhorn to call upon all the gods to leave their heavenly Asgardr. From the periphery of Valhalla, Thor and an army of immortal Viking warriors and beautiful Valkyries will cross the Bifrost-bridge, and enter the natural world in order to protect the tree of life, Yggdrasil, which encompasses the entire world. This book will revisit a group of Norwegian scholar-activists, who, like those gods, rushed to save the tree of life from an impending environmental Ragnarök. Though the ethical aspiration of their efforts can indeed be traced back to ancient Norse values and the teachings of Edda,¹⁴ the focus of this book will be on more recent events, starting in the 1960s.

¹⁴ Nina Witoszek, *Norske naturmytologier: fra Edda til økofilosofi* (Oslo: Pax, 1998).