

3 - Moral economy in Scandinavia

- *Sarah Tobin, Chr. Michelsen Institute*
- *Mari Norbakk, Chr. Michelsen Institute*
- *Chisom Udeze, CEO and founder, Diversify*
- *Ainur Begim, NTNU*
- *Siri Lange, University of Bergen*

Taking the intersections of economy, ethics and morality as our starting point, this panel is organized around questions of how finance and economy are entangled with ethical considerations, religious morals, as well as practices linked to welfare, consumption, investment, banking and business development. We are particularly interested in contributions that look at these issues in the Scandinavian or Nordic context, but other cases are also most welcome.

Scandinavian economic systems have often been espoused as a hybrid – somewhere between market liberal principles and heavily state-regulated economies with comprehensive welfare systems. The linkages between “private” capital and welfare are not necessarily always explored in the Scandinavian context precisely due to the ideological focus on welfare and a collectivist state narrative. This does not mean that these entanglements are not present, and we are seeing a shift to increased dependence on private capital to take over certain aspects of welfare. Polarization may take the form of increased inequality, and this panel is interested in ways capital may intersect with state practices to undermine levelling factors built into the welfare system. As we look to these linkages, the panel is therefore also interested in contributions that deal with issues such as public ownership, accountability and transparency.

People’s practices of money-making, saving, investment and their moral and ethical deliberations on these issues; and how they seek to find insights, support, and consensus for how things are to be done “properly” are all of core anthropological interest. What was formerly viewed as livelihoods, integral to the organization of small-scale societies may in this panel’s explorations be redefined to look at how peoples’ economic practices are still very much tied to their world-making, their cosmologies, as well as self-making. On the flip side, the panel also opens to contributions that explore how certain economic scripts may be transposed onto other identity-categories and boundaries, contributing to increased polarization and inequality. Economic practices are for many people a very tangible way to envision state-individual relationships and conceptualize state, bureaucracy, or community – also in a transnational sense.

Economic practices offer a productive locus for examining topics like integration, nationality, identity, value, and worthiness. Further – looking at conceptualizations of banks and bankers; fund-managers constructions of citizens, customers, investors; and basic dualisms like good and bad credit; growth-potential and risk may open new paths for ethnographic enquiry of inequality and polarization. This panel will show the potentials for anthropological contributions to economic and financial research in Norway.

The reluctant entrepreneurs: outsourcing employment, immigrant entrepreneurial training in Norway

By Mari Norbakk, Post-doctoral Fellow, Chr. Michelsen Institute and Chisom Udeze, CEO and founder, Diversify

This paper presents preliminary findings from scoping fieldwork with an entrepreneurial training for immigrants in a Norwegian city and seeks to place and discuss one cross-cutting observation of reluctance:

The Norwegian state offers financial and structural support to entrepreneurial trainings for immigrants as one aspect of the employment and integration policy. This manifests in different ways, one may be to integrate entrepreneurial modules in the “introduction-program”, and another is to support and fund NGOs offering trainings and capacity building. As Norbakk spent a week observing one such NGO-based entrepreneurial training, one striking observation was the way the budding entrepreneurs had made their way to the course. They all told tales of a long list of rejections—having been unemployed and job-seekers for long durations, and the consequential sensation of lost identity and challenges with mental health and socio-economic wellbeing. In the end, they felt the only way out of the rut was to become entrepreneurs.

Exploring the (un)employment trajectory and feelings of social exclusion presented by many participants, this paper is an attempt at placing this phenomenon in the wider literature on work-policy and integration in Norway, with a particular view to “Arbeidslinja”. We aim to arrive at a tentative argument that the state outsources the employment of immigrants to the immigrants themselves.

Islamic Finance in Norway

Sarah Tobin, Research Professor, Chr. Michelsen Institute

Norway is home to some estimated 200,000 Muslims, many of whom are immigrants and entrepreneurs. Due to Islamic proscriptions, interest is to be avoided in economic transactions. This has the potential to limit the economic activity amongst this already-marginalized population. What are the dynamics that keep Muslim immigrant entrepreneurs in Norway from growing micro- and small-sized businesses into medium- and large-sized enterprises, and thus keep them from becoming enhanced sources of socio-economic equality and integration? How can they be overcome? This paper focuses on cases like: Mohammed, a 35 year-old Syrian refugee, arrived in Oslo in 2013. He opened a small grocery store, using informal financing from the local mosque. The small business is doing well, but he would like to expand to improve his family's living conditions. However, Mohammed is reluctant to take out a formal business loan because the interest charges (*riba'*) are forbidden in Islam. He approached his local mosque, but there have not been any feasible financing alternatives. He has hit the "invisible ceiling" of financial exclusion. Like other Muslim immigrant entrepreneurs in Norway, he experiences inequalities in his integration in Norway and obstacles to fully realizing his active citizenship. Research reveals that such Muslim immigrant entrepreneurs are often unable to access acceptable financial tools formally, and instead rely on informal avenues for financing that limit their growth potential and impede integration. Drawing on fieldwork with Muslim immigrant entrepreneurs and Muslim religious authorities in Norway, we discuss preliminary findings and explore the possibilities for further research.

Data, Finance, and Ethics: The Case of ESG in Sustainable Finance

Ainur Begim, Associate Professor, NTNU

Long championed by climate activists, the idea that the climate change is a profound threat to global prosperity has gained important momentum in the wake of the COVID pandemic. Governments and companies around the world are devising ambitious plans for energy transitions and conjuring visions of net-zero futures. In these “building back better” blueprints, the finance sector figures as an important enabler by moving the flow of capital away from fossil fuels toward “green” projects and sustainable solutions. Many financial institutions embraced the sustainability agenda, incorporating environmental, social, and governance (ESG) issues in financial decision making and decarbonizing their portfolios. Financial professionals see sustainability as a strictly financial, not a moral matter, underscoring the importance of ESG in risk management as well as profit seeking. Drawing on fieldwork in Scandinavian investment firms, I trace the everyday sustainability work of portfolio managers as they educate themselves about the climate change, biodiversity, and water management; collaborate with governments and other financial institutions to develop standards and disclosure mechanisms to make more ESG data available; and ultimately seek to harness “non-financial” data and knowledge to beat competition and earn profit. My interlocutors single out ready to use quantitative data or a lack thereof as the single most important challenge in doing sustainability work. This preoccupation with non-financial data, I argue, suggests a major paradigm shift within finance – an attempt to push beyond the limits of what is financial (data, analysis, practice). In this paper, I examine the tension between financial and non-financial, quantitative and qualitative, pragmatic and ethical, exploring how financial asset valuation intersects with nature valuation and markets with climate and people.

Doing global investments the Nordic way. The “business case” for Equinor’s support to union work among its employees in Tanzania

Siri Lange, Professor, University of Bergen

In the Nordic countries, unions are represented in company boards and can influence companies’ policies toward labor abroad. This paper focuses on the Norwegian national oil company Equinor and its support of unionization of its employees in Tanzania. This was inspired by the Nordic tradition of social dialogue between corporations and strong, independent unions. Corporation managers and union representatives tend to refer to this social dialogue as “the Norwegian model,” but this is a narrow conceptualization of the model that disregards the role of the state. I argue that while it is beneficial for the Tanzanian workers to be organized, it is probably also “good for business” to have unionized workers who have adopted the Nordic collaborative model, rather than a more radical union model.