



## **De-naturalizing Egalitarianism in the Nordic Countries: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives**

ISP-workshop, Bergen, 24 - 25 November 2015

Organizers and conveners: Synnøve Bendixsen, Mary-Bente Bringslid and Halvard Vike

### **Workshop description**

Egalitarianism and equality have long been viewed as fundamental values in the Nordic societies. Equality has become a Nordic label that presumes a particular kind of ethos – *the passion for Equality* (Graubard 1986 in Vike 2013: 182). Yet, the notions of egalitarianism and equality have several analytical dimensions with theoretical implications that are understudied.

In this workshop we will historicize and discuss aspect of the Nordic egalitarianism. Our approach towards the notion is broad: as a history of ideas, political values, social practice and a naturalized frame of lifeworld. The spatial understanding of ‘egalitarianism in the North’ can both signify explicit political values and appear as the foundation of a more general source of social, cultural and political legitimation.

The workshop will approach this by exploring four main themes:

- 1. The tradition of equality/egalitarianism as a European inheritance deriving from the time of enlightenment.**

In focus is modernity’s tradition of equality and Nordic local societies. Stråth and Sørensen (1997) have argued that in the formation of the nation-state, peasants in most of Europe largely functioned as legitimate symbols, whereas in the Nordic countries peasants were effective political actors. This contributed to the development of a different social and political foundation in which the ideal of equality in the Nordic region was developed,

bringing into being what Stråth and Sørensen call the Nordic "Sonderweg». We will explore this "Nordic sonderweg" hypothesis. Does Norway have its own modernity?

**Invited speaker:** Bo Stråth, University of Helsinki

2. **Egalitarianism as a 'keeper of equality' at a social level.** Gullestad has discussed in the Norwegian context how ideas of egalitarianism can lead to a style of interaction where differences are played down and 'imagined sameness' is produced and overemphasized. In "The Art of Social Relations" (1992) Gullestad has argued that Norwegians from all class strata has a tendency to under-communicate difference as part of a rather consistent attempt to keep up an appearance that we are all equal. In this interaction, similarity is not confined to equality (*likeverd*), but is rather acted out as sameness. In the increasingly plural Scandinavian societies it has also been suggested that social styles of 'imagined sameness' becomes part of boundary construction and how the nation is imagined as a moral community (Gullestad 2006). Some anthropologists have contributed with important objections towards how Norwegian egalitarianism has been understood and presented. For example, Lien (2001) has suggested that the analytical lens of egalitarianism sometimes overlooks the role of reciprocity in how social practice is enacted. We will here discuss egalitarianism as "sameness" where a general under-communication of difference is frequently highlighted.

**Invited speaker:** Thomas Hylland Eriksen, University of Oslo

3. **The role of egalitarianism for resistance and social mobilization.** Ideas of equality and egalitarianism can also be the starting point for resistance and social mobilization. Such inspirational and legitimizing sources for resistance movements can be traced to historical movements (i.e. district policies, class struggles, women's movements) as well as in more contemporary struggles, such as the queer movement and the occupy movement. To what extent and how are Nordic social movements driven by ideas of equality and egalitarianism? We seek to develop an understanding which interconnects historical analysis of resistance struggles in the Nordic countries and the anthropological discourse of equality and egalitarianism.

**Invited speaker:** Halvard Vike, University of Oslo

4. **Nordic egalitarianism as a resource for migrants?** Gullestad, and other anthropologists, have stressed how egalitarianism can also produce an exclusionary mechanism. Perceptions of equality, researchers have argued, can also be part of excluding certain groups, such as migrants. However, here we seek to discuss the flip side of this mechanism: can orientations of egalitarianism and equality also become a resource for migrants? What are the conditions for it to become a resource?

**Invited speaker:** Karen Fog Olwig, University of Copenhagen

## Call for papers

We invite papers that engage with one of these main themes. Please send an abstract (200 words) to [nora.haukali@uib.no](mailto:nora.haukali@uib.no) by **22<sup>th</sup> of October 2015**. We aim to publish selected papers in an anthology after the workshop. Papers (in progress) for those selected should be submitted by 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2015. The workshop (including lunch and dinner) is free of charge, but all travel expenses must be covered by the workshop participants. There is also room for a few participants without papers, but everybody will be expected to have read all papers and contribute to the discussion.

## Venues

Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> of November: Litteraturhuset Bergen, Østre Skostredet 5-7  
Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> of November: Fosswinckelsgt. 6, 9<sup>th</sup> floor

## References

- Gullestad, Marianne (1992): *The Art of Social Relations*. Oslo: Scandinavian U.P.
- Gullestad, Marianne (2006): *Plausible Prejudice: Everyday Practices and Social Images of Nation, Culture and Race*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget
- Lien, Marianne, Hilde Liden og Halvard Vike (red) (2001): *Likhetens paradokser*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget
- Stråth, Bo & Øystein Sørensen (eds) (1997): *The Cultural Construction of Norden*. Oslo: Scandinavian U.P.