

**Cultural Origins of the Norwegian Regime of Goodness: the role of “Memes”  
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Existing research shows a set of economic and institutional premises for the emergence of the Nordic model have included a: (a) high tax and ongoing levelling of social difference, (b) free education and health service, (c) solid net of social welfare and social security, (d) ongoing, centralized salary negotiations guaranteed by strong labor unions, (e) high percentage of privately owned housing, (f) strong state, (g) high level of decentralization, and (h) mixture of capitalist and socialist economies that inject regulation mechanisms into the free market economy.

In my research, I attempt to supplement the studies of institutional and techno-economic foundations of the Norwegian paradigm with a closer look at the cultural forces and values that have created, not just the modern welfare state, but what can be called the “Norwegian Regime of Goodness.” How is it that the Viking Terminators have evolved into a modern society that illustrates the Christian principle, “Blessed are the meek?” What have been the main architects of this cultural evolution? What representations, images, and means of persuasion have they used? And why and how have their stories and symbols resonated with the community?

In my studies of the semiotics of Norwegian culture, I have borrowed Richard Dawkins’ concept of *memes*, i.e. aggregate forms of cultural expression such as myths, symbols, rites of passage, models of cultural heroes, etc. But I disagree with Dawkins’ rather simplistic understanding of the term as “a replicator and a unit of transmission which, by analogy with genes leaps from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.” While I agree that like genes, memes put constraints on human thinking, behavior, and even health, I argue that they are not mechanically reproduced but constantly redesigned and creatively elaborated by diverse cultural agents. I also insist that memes become a fruitful concept when they are understood as units of social memory, i.e. durable creations of human imagination which, once conceived, do not atrophy but start influencing positive – or negative – selves of a culture and endow them with meaning. Memes are thus value-charged images, stories, rites, behavioral patterns, as well as visual and musical motifs that are transmitted from generation to generation and which define a culture’s ways of knowing, its beliefs and aspirations, the level of social trust and collaboration, the degree of compassionate behavior, communication patterns, etc.

To illustrate the different workings of nationally significant memes, consider the construction of modern American national identity that drew, very much as in Norway, both on a liberal civic tradition and on the memes of a vast, unexplored wilderness. The attempt to root American national consciousness in nature can be seen in a multiplicity of texts, from presidential declarations (Jefferson, Jackson, and Roosevelt) to the Wilderness Preservation Movement pioneered by Muir and Turner.<sup>1</sup> Literary luminaries such as Cooper, Whitman,

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1982); See also Benjamin T. Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1957) and Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956).

Emerson, and Thoreau identified the new Republic with nature and watched with horror the systematic despoliation of virgin lands. The parallels, however compelling, break down as soon as they are invoked: The American “errand” in the wilderness was too bound up with the myth of the American Dream and the meme of conquest, frontierism, and industrial development to preserve the original connection.

Not in Norway. Here, nature memes have never become mummified into exhibits of past national history or used in their competitive “Darwinist” sense. On the contrary, with urbanization, their meaning has become reinforced and tied to the meme of “national goodness” (through outstanding thinkers, explorers, and writers such as Wergeland, Nansen, Bjørnson, or Naess). Today a strong Norwegian “peace-and-nature” meme – signifying naturalness, equality, justice, and cooperation – continues to nurture the ethical and political predispositions of Norwegian culture. It is a legacy with which people identify, which they personify, and which personifies them. Its most prominent incarnation is to be found in the Norwegian fairy tale about Askeladden that generations of Norwegian children have had hammered into their heads. Askeladden – unlike the American Superman – is a humble peasant idler and a “village idiot” who wins half a kingdom and the princess through a unique ecological code of action: (a) He spares his energy and never strains, (b) he helps the weak and the needy, (c) he listens to nature and partners with its forces, and (d) he believes in his good luck.

The fascinating question is, “To what extent cultural memes – and the quest for meaning within culture – are the true causes of human action: What has been the battle of memes and genes in the evolution of the Nordic model?”