



9. Capitalist egalitarianism: A Norwegian dilemma?

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Abstract Norwegian egalitarianism is based on a traditional work ethics but is funded by a stock market within a globalized economy, which means that it is financed by and based on the exploitation of labor and the poor of the world's periphery. It is therefore essential to discuss, as this chapter will do, the dichotomy between Norwegian egalitarianism and capitalism that increases global poverty, or, how Norway can stay well-funded enough to offer egalitarianism and the idea of egalitarian work ethics on the national level, without basing it on the lack of egalitarianist standards on a more global scale.

Keywords capitalism | underdevelopment | socialism | exploitation | Oil Fund

INTRODUCTION

Egalitarianism seems to be particularly important in Norway and somehow a specific part of a Norwegian identity, although categories like elite or class have been debated by recent scholarship as factors that in a way contradict the basic idea of all Norwegians having equal access to central resources and being able to live free (Korsnes, Nordli Hansen, and Hjellbrekke 2014).¹ We must therefore critically reflect on the concept, particularly with regard to the moral implications of the economic processes that are supposed to ensure its continuity in the future. There consequently seems to be a dilemma for Norwegian egalitarianism, namely, that it can only be guaranteed on the national level as part of the world's industrialized core, through economic exploitation of rather peripheral regions' labor force within a global world system of trade (Wallerstein 1974). Regardless of such "globalized considerations" the Norwegian welfare state has long been praised as a success story, as it secured egalitarianism for the people (Paskov 2016, 4), i.e., access to all relevant resources of the society in a supposedly equal

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way. Praised for its solidarity with economically weaker people, and sometimes referred to as “Nordic socialism” (Dragsted 2021), the economic and social system of Norway is understood as one that has used the existence of its welfare state since the end of the Second World War to positively stimulate the existence of an egalitarian structure (Jonassen 1983; Gullestad 1984, 1992, 1996; Soderlind 2012, 164).

Nevertheless, as Gullestad has pointed out, “there are close relations among egalitarian cultural themes, majority nationalism, and racism” (2002, 45). When we discuss Norwegian egalitarianism, we consequently have to be aware that there are diverse aspects and consequences relating to it, especially when the national perspective is set aside. From a global point of view, Norwegian egalitarianism and the welfare state that is supposed to secure the former’s existence are nowadays also based on the world economy and capitalist exploitation abroad. The challenge for Norwegian society in the future will consequently be to extend its egalitarian ideals to the global level to reduce exploitation of peripheral labor and resources in other regions of the world. The dilemma, as it presents itself at the moment, is that Norwegian egalitarianism is egalitarian only “at home” and has consequently to be considered nationalist rather than socialist or democratic from a global perspective. The elements of the globalized world system have already been criticized, especially by different left-wing intellectuals whose arguments will be presented throughout the following chapter and whose considerations further emphasize this dilemma of Norwegian egalitarianism.

Abram remarked in this regard that the image of Scandinavia in general and Norway in particular “has long stood rather uncritically as a[n] ... icon of egalitarianism and democracy” (2018, 87). She further claims, based on existing debates in the English-speaking world and academia, that “[a] vision of the Norwegian welfare state, supported by abundant oil income, is often invoked either to dismiss the reality of the welfare state as a viable political structure without excessive income, or to idealize the Norwegians as environmentalist egalitarians with, perhaps, naïve expectations of human nature” (Abram 2018, 87). The image of Norwegian egalitarianism therefore seems to be rather a partially created one, related to the “imagined community” of the Norwegian nation (Anderson 1983). This “is, like most national myths, carefully and continually reproduced by key actors in both academic and political contexts” (Abram 2018, 88). Of course, Norwegian egalitarianism exists and has without a doubt had a positive impact, although the latter one is rather felt at and almost exclusively on the national level. This means that Norwegian egalitarianism is not an illusion, but unfortunately comes with a high price if taken into consideration from a more global perspective. However, the idea of Norway being a “kind of welfare paradise, courtesy of oil income, high

taxation and its egalitarian culture, and, as such, as a kind of exception to the normal rules of European economics and politics” (ibid., 90) does not fit the realities. This is particularly the case given the globalization of the world economy and the available Norwegian oil resources, discovered in the late 1960s, which changed some of the important aspects of Norwegian egalitarianism, whose existence predated the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, Norway seems to have been more egalitarian before the massive oil resources allowed the Norwegian government to create the “Oil Fund”—actually the Government Pension Fund Global—to secure the financial endurance of its egalitarianism-centered social support system.

The present chapter intends to show two things related to this Norwegian dilemma, namely, how the change in work ethics damaged older egalitarian traditions and how the oil-based riches made it hard to perpetuate the traditional ideas about a Norwegian society that is based on egalitarianism. It is not surprising when Flø and Tägtström point out that “[l]abor is a crucial resource for society, but labor participation is also of great importance to the individual. Work gives identity, contributes to financial independence and social belonging” (2013, 17). The ability and possibility to work within an existing society is in fact an inclusive element (Stenius 1997, 164; 2010), and especially in Norway, “[o]ne does not talk about work as a way of making a fortune, or that through work one can realize the idea of oneself as a creative being” (Stenius 1997, 164).

In the harsh conditions of northern Europe, it was also rather a duty to make sure that the poor people were integrated into society, as those who could were supposed to take care of them. These basic ideas seem to have changed, especially since more resources became available, and for Trägårdh, “it is perfectly clear that the Nordic ... welfare state can be viewed as a gigantic deal whereby individuals have bought themselves collectively free from personal, individual responsibilities under the guise of state-run solidarity” (1997, 262). It seemingly was and still is globalization that “pose[s] particular problems for the Nordic countries”, as “the integrity of the nation-state at the economic level is severely undermined by the loss of control of fiscal policies and the construction of a common market at large” (ibid., 283). These developments also seem to erode Norwegian egalitarian traditions, especially in relation to work ethics. A second focus of the present chapter will therefore be on the role of the Oil Fund in this erosion, with regard to Norway’s integration into a larger and worldwide economic system of capitalist exploitation of economic resources and labor.

The welfare state, and thereby Norwegian egalitarianism, are paid for through the Oil Fund, which “has a small stake in more than 9,000 companies

worldwide, including the likes of Apple, Nestlé, Microsoft, and Samsung. On average, the fund holds 1.4 percent of all of the world's listed companies" (Norges Bank 2021). Accounting for a market value of USD 23 billion in 1998, the total market value of the Oil Fund reached USD 1.275 billion in 2020, while generating an annual return of 6.3 percent (*ibid.*). According to official statements, "investment insights, financial transactions and decisions are based on research and analysis of the developments in financial markets and the global economy. We share internal research and analysis as well as content from conferences or seminars. We invite to dialogue and have a strong collaboration with academics, peers and practitioners with an aim to improving the investment strategy and our results" (*ibid.*). Considering that the development of this financial measure will support the welfare state for future generations, it must, however, be argued that the price of Norwegian egalitarianism is paid for through the gains secured in the international stock markets, which indirectly also means the exploitation of resources and labor in peripheral parts of the world by the stock market companies or corporations that the Oil Fund invests in. This financial success is obviously based on speculation, as much as it is related to the exploitation of the global peripheries and semi-peripheries, to apply the Wallersteinian theoretical reflections on the existence of a capitalist world system (Wallerstein 1995, 2004; Jacob 2022).

In the present chapter I will argue that Norwegian egalitarianism was historically based on the Protestant work ethic, which was corrupted through a globalizing capitalist exploitation. By referencing some classical works of the European Left, i.e., Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Vladimir I. Lenin, I will show that Norwegian egalitarianism is in fact facing a dilemma, based on the short-sighted idea that an equal Norwegian society can be secured without inflicting damage through exploitative means in other parts of the world and exploiting foreign labor. I will consequently argue that Norway rather presents an example of capitalist egalitarianism, which primarily seeks to secure the equality and social security of Norwegians, instead of longing for a universal egalitarianism, especially with regard to labor. While the egalitarian system is present in Norway, it is only pursued in the country's national context. I will therefore also emphasize some basic problems with regard to the lack of a broader and more global egalitarian society. This does not mean that the Norwegian idea of egalitarianism, or its modern interpretation to be more precise, is wrong, but that it should be applied on a broader scale, as an egalitarian society that can only be created by the exploitation of peripheral and semi-peripheral regions—even if such an exploitation only exists indirectly—cannot be considered to be egalitarian at all, but only nationalist, capitalist, and even racist (Abram 2018, 96).

NORWAY'S PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC AND THE OIL FUND

When one talks about Norwegian egalitarianism, the arguments are often related to a “Nordic heritage consisting of an assertion that citizens of Nordic society are similar, an assertion that the good life is a life of conformity” (Stenius 1997, 161). However, this almost mythical idea led to numerous debates. Stenius argued that “critical historians can accept as meaningful a hypothesis that the common Nordic historical heritage consists of a belief that Nordic subjects/citizens are to a high degree homogenous—socially, culturally, religiously, and ethnically” (ibid.). Trägårdh criticized such a view, stating “that, despite the common perception of the collectivist nature of the Nordic welfare state, what is perhaps even more remarkable is the extent to which behind the *Gemeinschaft* of the so-called ‘homes of the people’ one finds a *Gesellschaft* of atomized, autonomous individuals” (1997, 253). It was consequently contested if and how egalitarian Norway really was, particularly at the end of the twentieth century. Regardless of this debate, it was an essential aspect that scholars and the public seemed to agree upon with regard to egalitarian interpretations, namely, that labor was an essential equalizer. In the tradition of Pietism, one of the determining forces of Scandinavian early modern history, work was considered important as it “strengthens the pattern of conformity” (Stenius 1997, 165). For seventeenth-century pietists, shared work was important, especially since people would gain from their shared work, because “[w]hen working there is little fear of lapsing into self-righteousness [for them]” (ibid., 164). At the same time, Reformation leaders like the Swedish theologian Olaus Petri (1493–1552) had spread the reform ideas in Scandinavia (Heininen and Czaika 2012) and taught the egalitarian elements and impact of work per se that should have an impact on Scandinavian societies: “The fact that grown-up and healthy people lived off other people’s sweat and toil was unbearable to him. He thought it was against the Bible” (ibid.; on Petri, see Hallencreutz and Lindeberg 1994).

Egalitarian thoughts in relation to work were consequently quite central when Norway’s transformation into an industrial and independent nation state began in the nineteenth century (Sandvik 2018). Although embedded into larger European developments, the modernization process as such, and modern Norwegian society, “created in the tension between the *embetsstand* (intellectuals/bureaucrats) and the popular movements” (Fasting 2013, 27), was considered to have been particularly Norwegian in nature as well (Skirbekk 2010). Between 1814 and 1890, Norwegian society was transformed from an agrarian to an industrial one, determined by private capitalism, especially from 1840, although the first transformations had already been achieved in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Hutchison 2012). Despite the fact that Norway was industrialized, the farmer

remained some kind of hegemonic ideal in the northern country (Sørensen 2001). This was related to specific Norwegian features with regard to social demographics: “Norway was a country without a nobility, without a capitalist elite or bourgeoisie, with the exception of a few. Of about 900,000 inhabitants in 1814 only 1,700 to 1,800 were *embetsmenn*, and a handful were entrepreneurs and capitalists. Around 90 percent were farmers (or smallholders) who, to some extent, were literate and who were well represented at the constituent assembly at Eidsvoll in 1814” (Fasting 2013, 28).

The Norwegian farmer was “a free and independent, but rather small, landholder” (Fasting 2013, 28) and an essential element within the political landscape and remained in this position even after the ideas of the European Enlightenment had strengthened the educated bourgeoisie: “The Norwegian farmer was then an enlightened figure tainted by ideas of romanticism. The farmer was not only the symbol of equality and freedom, but also an educated and virtuous figure. The cliché was that farmers, but not any kind of farmers, inhabited Norway” (Fasting 2013, 28). Farmers in Norway not only were classical peasants, but acted as local administrators, representatives to the Parliament (Storting), and had been quite active on the municipal level since the 1830s as well (Vike 2018, 69). While this led to some mystification with regard to the story of a “peasant Scandinavia” (Trägårdh 1997, 258) during the nationalist nineteenth century, it cannot be denied that the farmers were an essential force within Norway’s modernization process that culminated in the country’s independence as well.²

This specific process of modernization, however, also stimulated a sense of egalitarianism, because, as Stenius argues with regard to work-related egalitarian thought, “[i]f you are rich, you are part of society by being able to show that you, too, work. Physical work was never alien to the upper-class lifestyle in the Nordic countries” (1997, 165). This means that being rich was considered good, if it helped society. And exports, although not oil, were also part of Norway’s national income, as Adam Smith (1723–1790) described it for the impact of Norwegian wood exports in the late eighteenth century (Smith 2007, 132). Lutheran traditions were consequently transformed in some ways, but “at the same time remained remarkably unchanged” and consequently continued to stress the necessity of egalitarian work ethics: “Work has been made a constitutional right, because unemployment poses a threat to the whole system (or it has been thought)” (Stenius 1997, 167). This also puts the Norwegian development into contrast with other countries

2 For a critical debate of Norwegian historiography in relation to these national myths also see Aas (2022).

in Western Europe, and while “[i]n the West the ideal-type was the honourable gentleman, in Scandinavia it was the modest peasant” (Trägårdh 1997, 258).

The idea of social solidarity and egalitarianism was consequently already in existence and well-articulated before the labor movement in the late 19th and early twentieth century was able to gain political influence in Norway, and “[w]hen the labor movements and the social democratic parties in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, respectively, achieved parliamentary hegemony from the 1930s onwards, they largely extended a political agenda that was originally developed by this agrarian-liberal alliance” (Vike 2018, 70). The success of egalitarianism was consequently closely linked to the tradition of the Lutheran work ethics in Scandinavia in general, and Norway in particular, and the welfare state “gained broad support simply because large parts of the populations came to see public services and benefits as attractive, sufficiently so that they were willing to make the sacrifice of accepting that others were gaining even more” (ibid., 71). If “egalitarianism can be seen as a leitmotif of Norwegian political history” (Abram 2018, 90), it can only be perceived as such in relation to the role of work and equal labor duties. This also means that capitalism in Norway is accepted, as long as it is equally shared, because “Norwegian democratic capitalism accounts for the popularity of egalitarian politics” (ibid., 92).

When the Oil Fund is now taken into consideration, one must emphasize that its existence per se is considered to be a guarantee for Norwegian egalitarianism in the future, although it demands a discussion about capitalist expansion in a contested global market and the commodification of labor at the same time, especially in a time when nationalist forces are rising again (Jacob and Schapkow 2021). The Government Pension Fund Global was created when oil was discovered in the North Sea and is the largest state fund around the world, owning 1.5 percent of all shares by globally listed companies, i.e., ca. 9,000 companies worldwide, which gives Norway and the Oil Fund’s managers enormous power. While Norway has gained from its oil resources since the late 1960s, when “one of the world’s largest offshore oilfields was discovered off Norway”, the Oil Fund is supposed to “serve as a financial reserve and as a long-term savings plan so that both current and future generations get to benefit from ... oil wealth”. Despite the name of the fund, it is no longer solely based on oil resources, but revenue “has been earned by investing in equities, fixed income and real estate”. Hundreds of buildings in global metropolises are also part of the portfolio (Norges Bank 2019).

The Oil Fund is essential for Norway’s wealth, but the value of it also lies in its power to change the global capitalist system. The Ethical Guidelines are the basis for dialogues with the respective companies, whose shares are part of it, and if the

ethics standards are violated, such misbehavior can lead to exclusion from the Oil Fund:

The exclusion mechanism in the Ethical Guidelines for the Norwegian Government Pension Fund represents one of the very few existing systems which entail disinvestment based on a set of fixed criteria. Clearly, disinvestment as an instrument for achieving ethical aims is relatively rare within the sphere of corporate social responsibility. Engagement with companies through dialogue and exercise of ownership rights, with the aim of improving company conduct, is a far more common approach to ethical challenges. Once a company is excluded from a portfolio, the means of influencing that company is considerably weakened. One might thus argue that exclusion of companies on ethical grounds does not in itself contribute to improve the state of the world. (Nystuen 2011, 42)

With an engagement mandate (Central Bank) and an exclusion mandate (Council on Ethics), the Norwegian Oil Fund is consequently constructed around egalitarian ideas that have traditionally been an important aspect of Norwegian society. Although the named measures are only future-oriented and do not punish retroactively, it is still important to consider these aspects as vital to preventing labor-related exploitation in the future, especially since the Oil Fund invests in several thousand different companies or corporations, but in a way it currently still lacks the staff for its ethical control measures. An understanding of these shortcomings and its anti-egalitarian consequences on the global level is essential to further strengthen Norway's egalitarian agenda abroad as well. What seems to be a successful combination between capitalist aims and egalitarian values must consequently be analyzed closer and in relation to the Oil Fund's impact on the increasing commodification of work in Norway and the global exploitation of labor and resources in relation to expanding Norwegian capitalism abroad.

FROM HONEST WORK TO ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL AND KRONER IMPERIALISM?

The Norwegian labor market has intensively been internationalized over the last fifteen years, especially since "high employment, generous welfare schemes and a high degree of equality in working and living conditions" (Ødegård and Eldring 2016, 11) also attract labor migration from abroad. This, however, also created new challenges in some branches of Norway's industry, where controls needed to be intensified to prevent exploitation of the foreign workforce. Foreign workers

are in greater danger of suffering from “unequal” working conditions (*ibid.*, 12). However, the danger of the commodification of unequal labor has been prevented by new measures to protect the rights of immigrant workers:

[S]everal of the industries that have recruited many working immigrants are now covered by a generalized collective agreement. Generalization means that the coverage area of the minimum wage (and possibly other collective bargaining agreement) is expanded, so that it applies to everyone in an entire region, industry and/or profession, regardless of whether the employer and/or employee is organized. So far, the following industries are covered by a generalized collective agreement: construction, shipbuilding, agriculture, cleaning, electrical engineering, fishing industry, freight transport and passenger vehicles. (Ødegård and Eldring 2016, 16)

Furthermore, the Stoltenberg administration also presented a plan to prevent “social dumping” in 2006, with new additions in 2008 and 2013. These measures were supposed to prevent work-related crimes (Ødegård and Eldring 2016, 17). It has also been shown that better working conditions, including higher pay, have helped and will continue to help to better integrate immigrant communities into Norwegian society (Rogstad, Alghasi, and Eriksen 2009, 168). Norwegian work ethics, as described above for the early modern period, consequently continue to influence considerations about the labor market and respective control measures to avoid any form of inegalitarian exploitation there.

It is therefore not surprising that work forms like the au pair system were publicly debated in Norway in the 2000s, with a special focus on possible forms of exploitation related to them (Gullikstad and Annfelt 2016, 55). In the public and social media, “debates have partly focused on families who have exploited au pairs as cheap labor or subjected them to other criminal offences, and partly on how the au pair scheme is beneficial to au pairs and host families alike” (*ibid.*, 56), which in a way reflect the general Norwegian dilemma that is obvious when egalitarianism and capitalism clash. The central question related to the au pair system could consequently also be considered a reflection on the global impact of Norwegian capitalism:

Does the scheme contribute to unregulated and vague working conditions, making au pairs servants in private families, and does it contribute to the exploitation and abuse of women, particularly young women from the Global South? Or does the au pair scheme give young women a good chance to become familiar with a foreign culture while earning some pocket money and living safely within a family? (Gullikstad and Annfelt 2016, 56)

The investments of the Oil Fund in a way represent a globalized and transnational form of what Marx in volume 1 of *The Capital* (1887 [1867]) referred to as “transformation of money into commodities, and the change of commodities back again into money; or buying in order to sell. Money that circulates in the latter manner is thereby transformed into, becomes capital, and is already potentially capital” (Marx 1887 [1867], 104). If money is invested in such a way, it is not spent for the commodity or production as such but to create a surplus for the money initially spent, i.e., invested: “By the purchase of his commodity he throws money into circulation, in order to withdraw it again by the sale of the same commodity. He lets the money go, but only with the sly intention of getting it back again. The money, therefore, is not spent, it is merely advanced” (ibid., 105). If the genuine reason for investing the money is to secure the Norwegian egalitarian system through a surplus for the financing of the welfare state, this action is without a doubt capitalist in nature. It consequently reduces the supposedly socialist character of Norwegian egalitarianism to absurdity. Marx in the first volume of *Capital* “places emphasis on the way in which the factory system requires the accumulation and restructuring of capital across economies of scale and/or scope into ever-larger enterprises to accrue productivity increases” (Fine 2013, 48) and describes the consequences of the accumulation of capital, or maybe better the financialization of capital (Fine 2013) in more detail and in relation to labor. He argues:

Since the capital produces yearly a surplus-value, of which one part is yearly added to the original capital; since this increment itself grows yearly along with the augmentation of the capital already functioning; since lastly, under special stimulus to enrichment, such as the opening of new markets, or of new spheres for the outlay of capital in consequence of newly developed social wants, &c., the scale of accumulation may be suddenly extended, merely by a change in the division of the surplus-value or surplus-product into capital and revenue, the requirements of accumulating capital may exceed the increase of labour power or of the number of labourers; the demand for labourers may exceed the supply, and, therefore, wages may rise. (Marx 1887 [1867], 434)

If these considerations are applied to the Norwegian case, the developments achieved through the accumulation of capital and the creation of an annual surplus through the various investments have a positive impact on wages and social security measures in Norway, as the society that invests large amounts of capital in thousands of different companies worldwide. Although Norway is not investing its capital directly in the periphery, it invests it in companies that often reduce costs by outsourcing labor related processes to countries of the global periphery

or semi-periphery. Norwegian investments thereby somehow indirectly stimulate labor exploitation in other regions of the world. This is why stricter demands could be formulated for Oil Fund–related investments to prevent such consequences. At the moment, the surplus is produced abroad, and not in Norway, where it is nevertheless used to secure egalitarianism on the national level. It could, however, be globally extended if investment related to the Oil Fund were to encourage egalitarianism, i.e., the abolition of exploitative labor conditions abroad as well.

Marx, however, was not the only one who tried to explain the functionality of labor exploitation in relation to global capitalism. Both Luxemburg and Lenin addressed issues related to the accumulation of capital and its negative impact in *The Accumulation of Capital* (Luxemburg 1913) and *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (Lenin 1917), respectively. Luxemburg’s “main theoretical work” (Dath 2019, 22) considered some of Marx’s views historically obsolete and in a way tried to update the former’s thoughts according to her own theoretical reflections about revolutionary processes and developments (Müller 2009, 86, 100).³ She had worked on the manuscript for several years and it was an “outgrowth of ... Luxemburg’s teaching activity at the school of the German Social Democratic Party in the years after 1906” (Sweezy 1967, 474). In it, beyond critically reflecting on Marx and his views, Luxemburg also intended to provide an economic explanation for the development of imperialism, which, since John A. Hobson had introduced the term into the economic and historical debate with his work *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), caused leftist intellectuals in particular to link this phenomenon with capitalism (Krätke 2013, 58).

Luxemburg (1913, ch. 26) emphasized that “[t]he process of accumulation, elastic and spasmodic as it is, requires inevitably free access to ever new areas of raw materials in case of need, both when imports from old sources fall or when social demand suddenly increases.” She wrote this in a time when the economic globalization and capitalist penetration of peripheral parts of the world had been less intense than today, but regardless of predictions that the capitalist world system would collapse, it continues to exist, although forms of capitalist exploitation have changed and the outsourcing of expensive production processes to regions where labor is cheap is just one expression of these changes. In addition, to quote Ben Fine (2013, 48), “the capitalist economy [still is] organized around the accumulation of capital through the production, circulation, and distribution of (surplus) value as a totality of economic relations, processes, structures, dynamics, and corresponding agents.” The forms and measures within this process might have been changed over the past, but Marx’s basic idea “is distinct in principle

3 On Luxemburg and her theoretical approach towards revolution, see Jacob (2021).

from other approaches that may focus on one or more aspects of the economy and how they interact with what is taken to be financialization, not least the heavier presence of finance” (ibid.).

Luxemburg, who referenced the former, and in a way predicted later theoretical works, e.g., Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, argued that there were generally two spheres. She referred to:

the conceptions of internal and external markets which were so important in the controversy about accumulation. They are both vital to capitalist development and yet fundamentally different, though they must be conceived in terms of social economy rather than of political geography. In this light, the internal market is the capitalist market, production itself buying its own products and supplying its own elements of production. The external market is the non-capitalist social environment which absorbs the products of capitalism and supplies producer goods and labour power for capitalist production. (Luxemburg 1913, 346–47)

With regard to the markets, the “semiperipherization” of the world changed the situation, but cheap workforces and labor exploitation remained some important aspects of capitalist accumulation. However, Luxemburg wanted to revise the existent conceptions and added the following explanation:

Internal capitalist trade can at best realise only certain quantities, of value contained in the social product: the constant capital that has been used up, the variable capital, and the consumed part of the surplus value. *That part of the surplus value, however, which is earmarked for capitalisation, must be realised elsewhere.* ... Further, with the international development of capitalism the capitalisation of surplus value becomes ever more urgent and precarious, and the substratum of constant and variable capital becomes an ever-growing mass – both absolutely and in relation to the surplus value. (Luxemburg in Anderson and Hudis 2004, 61, my emphasis)

The accumulation of capital, due to the related struggles for market influence and resources, should then also increase the tension between competing capitalist and imperialist nation states and therefore stimulate a rise of militarism.

If one applies these considerations to the example of Norway, it becomes obvious that Norway, through its export of capital to other parts of the world to create surplus value, even if indirectly through companies that are actually responsible for production conditions and the generation of a financial gain, intensifies

the negative impact of an imperialist form of investment that is orchestrated by a nation state in the center-region of the world system, while the regions in the periphery and semi-periphery suffer from the exploitation of natural resources and their labor force to generate the surplus capital of the former. Other leftist intellectuals, e.g., the anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, had criticized this interrelationship between the export of surplus capital and imperialism, and criticized this practice as well, especially since the tensions between the great powers led to World War I (Jacob 2020a).

Lenin also took a closer look at this relationship, but in contrast to Luxemburg, he considered imperialism to be a necessary step towards the revolution. Although Lenin would later morally corrupt the latter in 1917 (Jacob 2020b), his theoretical considerations about imperialism and prediction that it would lead to war and revolution were proven correct. However, here it is more interesting to take a closer look at his definition of imperialism, i.e., as the highest stage of capitalism. The Russian revolutionary tried to provide a definition of the phenomenon of imperialism that was based on the following five “basic features”:

- (1) the concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life;
- (2) *the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this “finance capital,” of a financial oligarchy;*
- (3) *the export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance;*
- (4) the formation of international monopolist capitalist associations which share the world among themselves, and (5) the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed. Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun, in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed. (Lenin 1917, ch. 7, my emphasis)

The second and third aspects are especially important, when considering the case of capitalist egalitarianism as it is represented by present-day Norway. The export of capital is obvious, as the Oil Fund is spread across thousands of companies in more than seventy countries. With regard to the investments of capital, Norges Bank (2021) reports that “[t]he fund exists to help finance the Norwegian welfare state for future generations. The future value of the fund depends on sustainable growth, well-functioning markets and value creation at

the companies we invest in.” If we leave the empty phrases of this information aside, one could, taking Lenin’s definition into account, also argue that Norway is actively participating in imperialist practices of exploitation, i.e., a new form of *Dollar Imperialism* (Einzig 1972, 78–88; Arfaoui and Ben Rejeb 2017; Qiu and Zhao 2019). One could also claim that Norway supports companies that exploit their workforces or avoid taxation, like Amazon or Apple(refs); pay no attention to the violation of human rights in the regions where they operate, like Volkswagen historically in Brazil or now in Xinjiang; or did not care for their employees during the Covid-19 crisis, instead focusing on creating dividends and profit, like Lufthansa (Labournet n.d.).

The critical question everyone who argues on behalf of a capitalism-based egalitarianism in Norway has to ask themselves is simple and almost trivial: Is the welfare state’s existence for 5.3 million Norwegians worth the exploitation of millions of people in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions of the capitalist and globalized world system? Marx, Luxemburg, and Lenin might have been wrong with regard to their prediction of a successful world revolution, but their reflections on capitalism and its functionality on a global scale are still worthy of consideration, especially when it comes to the legacy Norwegian egalitarianism should leave beyond in Norway in the decades to come. There have been attempts to structure the Oil Fund–related investments according to more ethical standards, but this transition has been criticized by Norwegian conservatives in particular (Dumas 2019). As Norway’s funding policy has a global impact on the companies listed or not (Al Ayoubi and Enjolras 2020), the question of investment has an impact beyond the national context, but the policy as such is no longer only decided in Oslo, but probably by global lobbyists and foreign investors alike. While reviews of the management performance of the Oil Fund are positive (Dahlquist and Ødegaard 2018), different investment strategies seem possible, but in a way represent a crux the Norwegian welfare state and egalitarianism are confronted with.

THE NORWEGIAN DILEMMA AS A MORAL CRUX

The crux that presents itself with regard to the Norwegian welfare state and the egalitarianism that it stands for and secures for the future is that the related fund’s success is based on capitalist exploitation elsewhere. An exploitation not only of financial and natural resources but also of labor abroad, an act that seems dichotomous to Norwegian work ethics and ethics relating to work that have been part of Norway’s social tradition for centuries. This means that Norwegian egalitarianism is confronted by the problem that it is currently also based on exploitation of

the weak in other regions of the world. It thereby also stimulates anti-egalitarianism in other regions of the world and between the producing labor force, whose members are often exploited in different ways by the companies that act as some kind of intermediaries between the former and the Norwegian state fund. If we take the aims of the Norwegian welfare state system into account, that it attempts to make the world a better place, one has to stress the necessity of sustainable investment (Fiskerstrand 2019). It would also demand that Norwegian investments are not related to a company's or corporation's performance, but more strongly consider and enforce the positive and sustainable impact their growth could have in a local and global context alike; to spread egalitarianism instead of claiming that Norway alone is the center of egalitarian welfare and workers' rights.

This also means that the Norwegian welfare state would at least partially have to abandon the capitalist and surplus-oriented methods of investment and ultimately consider Norway's future from a solely nationalist perspective. A global advance should be provided for all people around the globe, and especially for those who have suffered from colonialist and imperialist exploitation for centuries. While Norway is usually not referred to as an imperialist power, its policies for financing the national welfare state and egalitarianism are forms of a postmodern imperialism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which could, however, also be turned into true egalitarian forces. The economic power of the Oil Fund could really change the world, and it should, but in the name of workers' and peoples' solidarity, not in the name of capitalist surpluses and exploitative gains. The investments are still adding to historical underdevelopment of colonial regions (Rodney 1972) and will only create national egalitarianism, which is morally nothing more than a farce. Norway's goals for the future should rather address these issues, and there should be a desire to create a global egalitarianism and truly secure Norwegian work ethics not only in the national context to turn them into an essential element of a better future. This could be done by demanding companies and corporations further strengthen their ethics codes before they secure capital investments from the Oil Fund.

On the other hand, this would also mean that Norway returns to what would be considered a socialist agenda, which is interested in a better world for all, rather than an egalitarianism for the few, especially when this egalitarian society would be based on the suffering of people who are, in the name of Norwegian wealth, exploited by multi-national corporations that solely act in the name of mammon.

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