

Gunnar Skirbekk. *Multiple Modernities: A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences.* Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011. 221 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-962-996-487-0.



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Historian Gunnar Skirbekk has written a considered and engaging reflection on the processes of modernization that have come to shape contemporary Scandinavian political arrangements. Inspired by the imperative to understand what it means to be modern in an age of increased global and environmental tensions, *Multiple Modernities* is a valuable reassessment of the standard narratives of European modernity and their often incomplete application to the Nordic states. Given the tendency amongst European and North American scholars to romanticize the “Scandinavian model” of welfare state efficiency and universal equality, this study attempts to explain how this seemingly successful version of modernization came to be. Skirbekk positions his text as a rewriting of the genealogies of rational thought that encompass “Norwegian modernity” to propose a number of broad, universally applicable assertions about the post-World War II period in the developed world.

Arguing that contemporary narratives of Scandinavian modernity are incorrectly situated

in mid-twentieth-century articulations of European post-industrialization, Skirbekk provides a corrective to this discourse by resituating the discussion within the nineteenth century, which he contends is the foundation for the “Scandinavian model” we see in the present. Gesturing toward current concerns for questions of plurality and universality that haunt discussions of “the West and the Rest,” Skirbekk maintains that modernization processes are “widely multiple” and specific in form and content. He sets out to demonstrate that center-periphery alignments in the local regions during the nineteenth century were more instrumental than other forces in providing the preconditions for the particularities of the mid-twentieth-century Norwegian nation-state: “a constitutional democracy with a political culture characterized by an active state using selected expert groups, a mixed economy with strong organizations, a general willingness to make reasonable compromises, and a universal welfare system with a basic redistribution of wealth” (p. 166). For Skirbekk, modernization processes are conceived

of in terms of “forms of rationality”; how they are differentiated and interrelated—and how specific institutions and actors become involved in these processes—is a central concern of the book. This focus on rationality allows Skirbekk to make the claim that relationships between the sciences, experts, and institutions can have unintended consequences, the solutions for which can only be unraveled with “reflective and argumentative rationality” (pp. 164-167).

Dividing the book into eight chapters, Skirbekk traces select Norwegian modernization processes from before the mid-eighteenth century to their aftermath in the post-World War II period. He maintains that these developments were encouraged by the emergence of local people’s movements, which he credits with championing Enlightenment ideals and driving forward political progress. Asking why the transition from tradition to innovation occurred so smoothly in the Nordic states—“without a revolutionary break-up” and “without a subsequent reaction against enlightenment ideas” or political fanaticism—Skirbekk considers several future challenges to “epistemic and institutional challenges” of the present day in his final chapter (pp. 11, 170).

Norwegian modernization, Skirbekk reasons, was closer to that of other European nations, different from the pro-market and anti-state model of the Anglo-American system, and productive of the “epistemic tensions in Norwegian culture” (p. 30). The forms of rationality that emerged during Europe’s Enlightenment did not merely trigger the rise of the sciences and decline of superstitious beliefs. The early nineteenth century was also distinguished by the advancement of argumentative rationality and public opinion; both furnished the basic principles of the popular movements and the development of a concept of “public space” as one stage in modernization. In chapter 2, Skirbekk organizes this history into a triangular constellation of instrumental, interpretive-formative, and argumentative rationality, which he argues is

at the heart of Norwegian processes of modernization and a peculiarly Norwegian form of rationality. Political leadership in the nineteenth century was organized primarily by state church officials, leaving popular movements with little choice but to contend with their demands. However, Skirbekk makes it clear that while popular movements were marginalized at particular moments, they were eventually able to occupy the center of state power by way of democratic parliamentarianism; these groups also drove processes of “modernization from below” typical of the Scandinavian region. Despite maintaining a similar relationship between state and market forces characteristic of countries such as France and Germany, Skirbekk contends that Scandinavian grassroots efforts manifest differently than in other European nations (p. 22). For Skirbekk, the significance of these movements lies in their ability to shift from spontaneous activities to high levels of organization, alongside state representatives and politicians, for the promotion of egalitarianism and a variety of civil virtues.

In chapter 3, Skirbekk illustrates this point by way of a local-level sketch of a rural community in eastern Norway between the years 1880 and 1920 to foreground “the interplay between some influential people and some special institutions” (p. 46). He organizes examples of these prototypes into two main groups: institutions (conversation associations, newspapers, people’s museums, and schools), and people (the politician, the editor, the scholar, the forest owner) to demonstrate the special attributes of modernization processes at the turn of the century. He suggests that a dynamic relationship between these two key groups encouraged education, cultural self-esteem, and self-organization amongst the worker classes. In one example, a local *samtaleforening* (conversation association), was established by three young farmers to bring people together “in order to discuss topics of common interest and to have lectures, the aim ... is to be enlightening and educating” (p. 47). Opposing arguments were presented on such

topics as the status of women, the appropriate payment for clergymen, armament of the people (that is, defense), the role of the monarchy, the relationship between Christianity and the political Left, and questions of school reform. These discussions provided a foundation for membership in more institutionalized organizational forms like the *arbeidersamlag* (workers' association), which was encouraged by "the politician"--a farmer, who would go on to greater involvement in party politics. Skirbekk argues that this *samtaleforening* is one example of the ways local activities worked from the bottom up to stimulate certain learning processes and promote "a democratic-participatory ideal" and "a practical and socially responsible enlightenment" (p. 51). These local movements fused together instrumental, interpretive, and argumentative rationality, which not only provided the basis for Norwegian modernization processes, but also reveals one of the central questions of the book: to what extent do these processes, roughly similar across the Nordic countries, help us to understand how these countries, in the mid-twentieth century, before late-capitalist affluence, were able to combine a universal welfare system and economic redistribution with a fair degree of political inclusion and a certain amount of tolerance in religious matters (p. 57)?

The answer lies in what Skirbekk identifies as "basic mutual trust" across class difference and political institutions. His argument, extended in chapter 4, is that while there were important class differences and struggles for power during this period, power-sharing was more balanced, and economic differences less extreme than in other countries. This may have facilitated a "compromise-oriented politics" (p. 66) of transition between power-holders during premodernization. This interval--roughly 1814-84--marked the cultivation of the "people's enlightenment" that fueled Norway's industrialization before and after 1884. In the Norwegian context this happened alongside the formation of progressive social laws and the creation of new regulations to govern this

process. These laws came together in the nationalist project of maintaining a strong state with independent politics, which sustained the ideals that would later fortify the Nordic welfare state. These ideals were well established by World War II, because the "preconditions were already in place for a transition into the social-democratic era that dominated the early postwar period" (p. 76).

Readers of this text might logically ask, from where did these particular early processes of modernization (1814-1940) originate? In chapter 5, Skirbekk travels back to the premodern "pastoral enlightenment" before 1814. The sociopolitical struggles and mutual learning processes of these years regulated the relationship between Lutheran state officials and the popular peoples' movements and were the early bricklayers of modernization in Norway. While Skirbekk's goal in the previous chapters was to outline the process of modernization in Norway after 1814, by cataloguing the processes that led to modernization in the nineteenth century, he now asserts that state officials in the mid-eighteenth century were generally supportive of the Enlightenment ideals that had gained popularity on the European continent. These ideals had also begun to circulate in pre-Christian Scandinavia of the ninth and tenth centuries, and during the transition to Catholicism in 1000-1539, an epoch defined by seafaring mobility (which introduced new and "foreign" ideas), the emergence of a rights-based discourse, and move from a Norse oral tradition to general literacy (and hence the potential for popular political participation).

Despite Norway's difficult transition from Catholicism to Lutheran Protestantism in 1537 (while under Danish rule), and subsequent erosion of national institutions, the first century after the Reformation was transformative and set the stage for future modernization processes with the dawn of a new regime and new beliefs. While the many examples of modernization Skirbekk presents do "reveal *universal* characteristics,"

(emphasis in original) Skirbekk also maintains that the multiple manifestations of Western modernization should be understood as “historically situated notions,” rather than ahistorical paradigms (p. 102). What makes the Nordic case unique is that a relatively small population was able to play a more significant role than those of other Western societies—by way of popular peoples’ movements—in shaping the temperament of democratic governance.

The emphasis on peoples’ movements in the earlier chapters anticipates Skirbekk’s discussion of World War II and the Norwegian encounter with Nazi occupation in chapter 6. He argues that the specific form of Norwegian modernization processes can also explain why so few of the country’s residents were coerced by Nazi ideology despite the potential security offered to those adopting such views. In what is one of the most convincing sections of the book, he determines that communities valued the democratic nationalism forged by the egalitarian ideals of the people’s enlightenment—a consequence of the movements. This ideology directly contradicted and was incompatible with Nazi beliefs, which privileged an authoritarian notion of national and ethnic superiority. Although Skirbekk is reluctant to challenge romanticized notions of Scandinavian “goodness,” and does not acknowledge counter-histories that question the contemporary valorization of Norwegian “resistance” against the Nazis, he is careful to note that despite this promising narrative, Norwegian resistance was primarily one of civil and attitudinal resistance. Economic collusion and cooperation with German forces by Norwegian consumers and employers was not seen to be in conflict with the imperative to uphold “entrenched attitudes and organizational culture” that defined what it meant to be a “good Norwegian” (p. 123).

It is in the final two chapters that Skirbekk’s core argument becomes most visible and the conversations with which he is attempting to engage

emerge. According to Skirbekk, the problem with the forms of rationality that influenced postwar modernization processes is that “there is an increasing danger of predominantly instrumental politics and objectifying social institutions, in both cases at the sacrifice of argumentative and normatively oriented interactions” (p. 134). Rather than interpret the Nordic experience of modernization as an unambiguous, steady progression toward egalitarianism and an efficiently ordered welfare state governed by the rule of law, Skirbekk argues the process was much more disordered and productive of the epistemic and institutional challenges of the present day. This “messiness” determines the question at the heart of the book raised in chapter 7, in which Skirbekk asks us to consider, “if there can be something in earlier modernization processes in the Nordic countries that could give us a hint as to how to live politically and culturally worthy lives in modern societies, but under more modest material conditions and with a more moderate consumption than what we have today” (p. 170).

In the final and eighth chapter, Skirbekk looks to the future challenges that will be faced by the modern inhabitants of our globalized world. Ultimately, “multiple modernities” will be unable to avoid the questions of long-term resource sustainability. Not only have other nations failed to supply a truly successful response, neither can the Nordic states—nor the “modern project” itself—be said to have achieved the utopian dream. Instead, the “Scandinavian model” responds to specific, historically situated political and cultural arrangements. In order to create sustainable configurations of modernity, industrialized countries will have to return to more tempered use of nature’s resources, and change practices of “consumption and reproduction” (p. 191). Skirbekk concludes with the suggestion that it may require us to create a way of life that “allows us to survive, and still stand right in moral terms. In other words, an environmentally responsible future, a

future with a moral concern for human dignity and for the vulnerability of life" (p. 194).

The strength of *Multiple Modernities* lies in Skirbekk's careful tracing of the inception of key Norwegian institutions and forms of rationality that produced particular state responses through the centuries. For readers interested in learning more about "the gentle charm of the Nordic countries" (p. 57), *Multiple Modernities* may offer perceptive insight into the histories of local political and cultural movements that decisively, if inadvertently, shaped social and political life in their aspirational image. However, the organization of the book detracts from an otherwise thought-provoking discussion. As a collection of essays that twist and turn through different stretches of time--and often read like transcribed lectures--the motivations behind the questions raised at the outset of the text do not become evident until the final chapter. Although Skirbekk opens the book with a detailed elaboration of his analytical method, what is missing is a more extensive introductory discussion connecting past events to the present political preoccupations he intends to engage in his conclusion. Similarly, while Skirbekk draws our attention to the works of other scholars of modernity in an early endnote--for example, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Dominic Sachsenmaier and Jens Riedel, and Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg--there is little engagement with the definition and use of the concept "multiple modernities" as employed by these scholars, or distinction made against his own application of the term.^[1] Skirbekk seems to suggest that not all interpretations of modernity can accurately be deemed "Western," but this remains unexplored.

It is apparent by the latter third of the book, although this is never explicitly stated, that Skirbekk wishes to contribute to current Norwegian scholarly debates about multiculturalism, pluralism, national identity, and ideological belonging that not only dominate, but have come to define the contemporary political moment in European

history. Readers in search of a critical interrogation of both Norwegian historiography and the welfare state will be disappointed, as such a discussion is beyond the intent of this work. These oversights are unfortunate, because Skirbekk misses an opportunity to explain how these particular processes of modernization have nevertheless produced a contemporary nation-state that is more culturally closed and less politically accessible and environmentally responsible than, he argues, it began.

These considerations aside, Gunnar Skirbekk's *Multiple Modernities: A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences* offers a rich tool kit for those seeking alternative ways to conceptualize processes of modernization. In providing a select history of Norway from the pre-industrial age to the present, Skirbekk delivers an important contribution to our understanding of the advent of reflective and argumentative rationality in European societies. By focusing his analyses on the ways Enlightenment thinking provoked the distinctiveness of the Nordic nation-state, Skirbekk illuminates the lively dialectic between institutions and individual actors. This discussion will be of particular interest to students and scholars of philosophy and modern European thought, as it draws attention to the ways forms of rationality are differentiated and interrelated, in what is likely to be a less-examined geographic context. *Multiple Modernities* will be a similarly useful contribution for those concerned with the history of social movements and welfare states. Skirbekk's emphasis on organizational and institutional history makes this work of special interest to anthropologists of the state, in addition to students and scholars of Scandinavian studies.

Note

[1]. Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg, eds., *Comparing Modernities: Pluralism versus Homogeneity* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Shmuel Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000):1-29; and Dominic Sachsenmaier and Jens

Riedel, eds., *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese and Other Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

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