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EINAR NIEMI

North Norway

An Invention?

ABSTRACT The article has as a starting point the fact that regions are one of the central political topics of today. Though regions have certain roots in history, they were not politicized until the nineteenth century, when they were "invented" as a tool for identity-shaping and development in the fringe areas of the state. The article operates with North Norway as a case in analyzing modern region-building processes and state regionalization strategies. This region is well suited as a case because of its particular position as a border area and its unique position in Norway's political and economic history. The region-building process developed through distinct stages. In the 1970s North Norway came close to being understood as an identity region. Since the early 1990s, however, there have been fissures in this identity and the old regional visions have been under pressure from within as well as from without. In addition old tensions within the region have been disclosed. The most striking example is Finnmark, the northernmost county of the region, and of the nation as well, which through history has played a role in the margin. It is a kind of historical irony that the current development of the Norwegian "northern policy" programme together with the promising prospect of ocean-based oil and gas industry has put Finnmark in the forefront of future expectations.

KEYWORDS region, region-building, regionalization, transnational regions, Sami politics, Norway, marginal and fringe societies

REGIONS ARE ONE of the political topics of today. Currently Norway is set to undertake one of the most far-reaching governmental reforms ever, affecting both geographic divisions and levels of administration, namely a regionalization that is scheduled to take effect in 2010, re-mapping Norway's pattern of counties, *fylker* (Selstad et al. 2004, KOU 2004: 1, NOU 2004: 19). Similar reforms have been implemented or are planned in a great number of European countries, including the Nordic world.

In many ways North Norway represents an instructive case in the study of regions. First, thanks to substantial empirical data the regional history of North Norway offers good opportunities for testing theories on regionalism and region-building. Second, North Norway was among

the first regions of Norway to be defined as districts, *landsdeler*, larger than the county (*fylke*) and subject to state regional policy (*landsdelspolitikk*).

In order to provide some context for the ongoing debate on regionalization, it might be helpful to provide a historical sketch of the origin and evolution of North Norway as a concept, and of that part of Norway as a modern region. We will then discover that the idea of northern Norway, as a region in its own right, gained acceptance through the concerted efforts of an elite of regional enthusiasts. In this sense the region was “invented.” However, we will also see that the idea of the region bestowing identity, though “invented,” was nonetheless historically rooted – it was not invented *ex nihilo*. What we are dealing with is a regional building process that is probably unique in a Norwegian context, both in regard to the goals and to the organized use of means employed across distinct phases over time. The process is more or less representative of similar processes in many European countries.

Regions – really something new?

The claim has been made that Norway has historically been particularly strongly marked by the importance of regions, both in terms of administration and sources of identity (Rian 1997, 1998). Thus, there is undoubtedly evidence in the early historical records of the idea of separate parts of the country as regions and as “historical landscapes” and to some degree, administrative systems accommodated this awareness. However, it does seem to be the case that the emphasis on regions “from within” is a modern phenomenon. The major local governmental reform of the 1830s involved devolution of policy-making and administration to local communities, to municipalities and counties respectively (*Formannskapslovene*). But this reform represented in the main the demands of farmers for greater control of economic resources through local self-government, rather than any interest in region-building as such.

The first steps toward modern regionalism in Norway were taken as late as the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century with the formation of historical societies, the publication of local newspapers, a consciousness of regional place names and political demands based on regional interests. Such regional tendencies are in evidence in Agder/Sørlandet, the southernmost part of Norway (Slettan 1998, Andreassen (undated), Ohman Nielsen 1995, Bringa & Mygland 2001), as well as around Strilelandet, the coastal environments of Bergen (Døssland 1998, Døssland et al. 1999), in Møre and Romsdal, in the northwestern part of Southern Norway (Ljøseth 1996), in Trøndelag (Tretvik et al. 2005), and generally in

Western Norway (Helle (ed.) 2006). And last but not least, we find a climate for such ideas in Northern Norway, which we will soon consider in more detail.

On the one hand, this first phase of modern regionalism can be seen as an extension of and giving greater depth to nation-building and nationalism. The national project was not completed until the regional mosaic of the nation had been illuminated. But this phase at the same time represented a reaction to a one-sided aspect of nation-building: the emphasis on the higher interest of the nation, at the expense of regions, and on strong visions of national homogeneity. These tendencies can be found throughout Europe and the United States and in the scholarly world as well, with a focus on regions within the discipline of geography, whereas history essentially remained anchored in the idea of the nation (cf. Niemi 2000: 227).

With the exception of North Norway, however, the movement toward regionalism had more or less faded away in the years between the World Wars. During the post-war reconstruction period, regional mobilization was overshadowed by the rebuilding of the nation, in spite of signs of a dormant regionalism. However, in the 1970s, regionalism re-emerged with greater force as a result of ideological trends associated with the values of local communities, the movement for protection of the environment and culture, "roots" and identity formation. At the same time, the European Economic Community legislated a framework for regional policy which from the late 1980s has remained one of the main pillars of further development of the EEC, today the European Union. There is no doubt that the Community/Union has also been a stimulus towards late modern regionalism and regionalization outside its borders, as in Norway. The title of the French geographer Jean Labasse's book *L'Europe des régions* (1991) became a slogan for this change of political direction (cf. Veggeland 2000).

The "invention" of North Norway

As late as the second half of the nineteenth century, there was no term or name in common usage that applied to the whole northern region of the country, Northern Norway. Indeed there was no clear conception in the public consciousness of that part of the country as a distinct territorial entity. In more distant history, different terms had been used, but none that applied to the area as a whole. *Hålogaland* was originally used only in reference to Helgeland, the southernmost part of the later county of Nordland (*Nordland fylke*). But gradually, as the Norse settlement spread farther north during the Age of the Sagas, or the Early Middle Ages, the name came to encompass the area as far north as Malangen, immediately south of Tromsø, while

Finnmark remained outside, as “the land of the Sami.” In the nineteenth century the only common term used for the whole of Northern Norway was Tromsø diocese (*Tromsø stift*), a usage which appears in the 1840s after Tromsø became the bishop’s residence for the northernmost bishopric, in other words, the whole of Northern Norway. But, of course, it goes without saying that a term referring to the diocese was not a suitable general term or name for the region as a whole; thus, it never came into popular use.

In the nineteenth century as well as in earlier times, there were clearly historically conditioned notions of North Norway as a special area with distinctive characteristics – historically, topographically and culturally. However, the small group of now mobilizing regionalists had to create a name that could capture and unify their ideas and visions.

The name *Nord-Norge* (“North Norway”) was created at a small gathering around a coffee table at a café in Kristiania (later named *Oslo*) in 1884 (Niemi 1993, Tjelmeland 2000, Martinsen 2003, Niemi 2006b). The group consisted of students, artists, academics, and politicians from Northern Norway who belonged to the Association of Northerners (*Nordlændingenes Forening*) started in 1862, the first regional district association of its kind in the capital, in other words a kind of *diaspora* group. In this circle there are names like Sivert Nielsen, from Helgeland, member and later president of *Stortinget* (the National Assembly); Ole Olsen, composer from Hammerfest in Finnmark; Elias Blix, later professor, cabinet minister and hymnist; Ole Tobias Olsen, later pastor, folklorist, engineer and also known as “the father of the Nordland railway”; Anton Christian Bang, later professor, cabinet minister and bishop; Richard With, the father of *Hurtigruta* (the coastal express liner). Thus, this was an elite group, residing in the capital, generating visions of its own future, in the same manner as similar groups in other European capitals. Their point of departure was regional pride and the desire to settle the historical argument in opposition to the bureaucratic administration from above which had imposed a colonial-like status on Northern Norway. At the same time, the ideology was future oriented: these architects of regionalism were modernists with visions of a “land of the future” which would benefit from enormous natural resources that would raise the region from a state of backwardness to a developed, modern part of the country. These modernist visions were closely related to similar contemporary ideas of Norrland, the northern parts of Sweden (cf. Sörlin 1988).

Nord-Norge (“North Norway”) was a felicitous choice of name in the context of visions and ideas, yet it was simple and rooted in history as well as in geography and culture. It was akin to the old concepts *Nordlandene* (“the Northern Lands”) and the *nordafjeldske* (the land north of the mountains

ending at Dovre) respectively, and it had parallels in names like *Vestlandet* (West Norway) and *Østlandet* (East Norway) which occasionally were used at this time (Helle (ed.) 2006: 17–19). The name signalled that the region was *Norwegian* – a part of Norway. There was to be no suggestion of any form of segregation or any hint of separation, a sensitive question relating to the far northern borderland during the nation-building project of the nineteenth century. The name also emphasized the special geographical dimension of the north as a main identity marker, as well as to notions of a northern culture, for example represented by the Sami and the peasant–fisherman society. And finally, the name signified a decoupling from the historical baggage represented by the Age of the Sagas and national romanticism and the mental block that this weight of history had created against the modernist project (Niemi 2001a).

The name did not, however, come into common usage quickly in spite of aggressive marketing, though it appeared from the very start in certain contexts, for example as part of the name of newspapers and voluntary associations. It was not until the period between the two World Wars that the name really caught on as a result of political parties making the development of North Norway part of their platforms. The “region builders” had a significant influence on this process. But the name did meet with some competition from the name *Hålogaland*, which still survived and gained acceptance especially within the arts and humanities; cf. *Hålogaland historielag* (“Hålogaland Historical Society”), and the regional history journal *Håløygminne*, which was first published in 1920. Even today, *Hålogaland* has been used for new initiatives and institutions, such as *Hålogaland teater* (“Hålogaland Theatre”). Another example demonstrating the use of the name to-day, is the building of a separate, but not yet formalized local region encompassing the north of Nordland county and the south of Troms county, the so-called *Hålogaland region*. Thus the competing name *Hålogaland*, in spite of its heavy burden of historical heroism and romanticism, has been very tenacious until the present day. However, *Nord-Norge* (“North Norway”) actually turned out as the winner as early as the interwar period in the sense that the designation was adopted as the official name of the whole region, and as such, it has never since been contested.

Building North Norway

The development of North Norway as a region occurred across distinct phases, a process which is in keeping with the ideas on phases in theories on national and regional development, especially that of the Czech historian Miroslav Hroch on different historical phases (Hroch 1985) and of the

Finnish geographer's Anssi Paasi's model of regional institutionalization (Paasi 1986, 1996).

The first phase lasted from about 1860 to 1914 in which *Nordlændingenes Forening* was the main region-building instrument. Thus this was a phase when regionalism was mainly a concern of an elite residing in the capital whose main mission was to create a consciousness of the northern region, not least of which involved the use of symbols, with the choice of a name as the most important. But other symbols were also employed, such as landscape photos and photos of the well known northern fishingboat, *nordlandsbåten*, with its links back in time to the Viking ship, all of which were associated with distinctive aspects of the North. The regionalists mobilized during the elaborate national centennial celebration of the constitution in 1914, when they reminded people that northern Norway was often overlooked in the national context.

The second phase lasted from 1914 to the Second World War, a phase characterized by knowledge production regarding northern Norway and the creation of an action programme for the region; the latter was often presented under the heading "Northern Norwegian Rising." The regionalists took advantage of and disseminated the extensive research that was being produced at this time on the region within many disciplines and fields, both in terms of consciousness-raising and identity-building as the basis for new initiatives. At this stage, a number of region builders in the north came on the scene and made common cause with the old elite in the capital. Public officials and merchants were particularly prominent among them. The new programme being developed encompassed a range of concerns, such as demands for cultural and educational institutions, modern means of communication, industrial development, improved organisation of imports and exports from north Norwegian harbours, etc. In the 1930s, this work began to bear fruit insofar as north Norwegian political concerns became important issues on the national political agenda, and as such were dealt with in political programmes and campaigns. A significant number of measures aimed at regional development were actually implemented.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, North Norway was in the process of becoming a kind of administrative region or "periphery" or "front region" with hints of an identity region in the making. Many people felt or wanted to feel like a *nordlending* (a person from the North, a Northerner) and the conscious use of both *nordlending* and *Nord-Norge* undoubtedly contributed to the development of identity. To some degree, the regionalists exploited the widespread fears of the "the Russian danger" in their arguments for special measures: if the nation did not take responsible action, North Norway could fall victim to the powerful neighbour in the northern bor-

derlands. At the same time, the region builders emphasized that region and nation building went hand in hand – they were two sides of the same coin.

The third phase, a kind of interlude, lasted until roughly 1970, a period when organized regionalism and institutionalization played a modest role. The period was characterized mostly by reconstruction after the devastation of war and of new economic and social initiatives (Tjelmeland 1997). However, interestingly enough from our point of view, North Norway was viewed as a special regional case. Thus, in the early 1950s the first plan by the national government for regional development involved North Norway exclusively (*Nordnorgeplanen*). A few years before, in 1947, the development centre for north Norwegian trade and industry (*Studieselskapet for nordnorsk næringsliv*) was founded, a for-profit organization acting in the interests of businesses, organizations, municipalities, and counties, in order to promote economic development in the region. In this phase, with national and regional economic plans focusing on solving “the problem of North Norway,” there was little room for building identity on the foundation of the arts and humanities. However, certain initiatives along these lines were taken, such as founding the *Hålogaland Amatørteaterselskap* (the Association for the development of a regional theatre in North Norway) in 1954, with the mission to promote the “North Norwegian language on a North Norwegian stage.” Other examples would be the establishment of *Festspillene i Nord-Norge* (the Musical Festival of North Norway) in 1964 and of *Nordnorsk kulturråd* (the North Norwegian cultural council) of the same year – actually before the Norwegian Cultural Council at the national level saw the light of day.

The fourth phase lasted from about 1970 to roughly 1990, eventually with identity-building being a central concern and strongly linked to cultural institution building. The shared north Norwegian identity has hardly ever come closer to being realized than at this stage. Identity building found expression in a range of cultural developments, such as extensive organization of museums and historical societies, a flourishing of research and publishing in local and regional history, the establishment of *Hålogaland teater*, the first professional theatre in the region, and *Nordnorsk Magasin* (the north Norwegian magazine), a vibrant and dynamic mouthpiece for northern identity. There was an upsurge of popular songs with north Norwegian themes, as well as a national breakthrough for north Norwegian football, which rounded out earlier north Norwegian successes in winter sports. The district community colleges and the University of Tromsø made their contribution through the work of scholars and scientists which in some measure could both confirm and promote regional identity. A special commission established in 1974 to deal with concerns of importance for

North Norway (*Landsdelsutvalget for Nord-Norge*) made its contribution to the image of the region within social planning and development.

North Norway in decline?

In a fifth phase of the modern history of North Norway, from about 1990 until the present, questions have been raised about both regional identity and the old idea of one unified region. Fissures have emerged in the image of North Norway as an identity region; there are disconcerting signs of decline, and the region seems threatened by both internal and external forces.

To begin with, a new generation in this phase has not recognized itself in the images of the region and of “the Northerner” (*nordlendingen*), developed and almost canonized in the preceding phase with references to metaphors like “skiff and skerry” (*sjarken og støa*) and the symbols like Oluf i Raillkattlia, a well known north Norwegian comic with a far-reaching effect on north Norwegian identity-shaping in the 1960s and 70s. In the new phase regional discourses have revealed anti-essentialistic conceptions of identity with a contrary emphasis on flexibility, location, “creolization,” etc. Similarly, younger social scientists have opposed aspects of the interpretation of modern North Norwegian history and society that was developed in the 1960s and 70s. Thus, the pioneer and the giant among north Norwegian social scientists, Ottar Brox, has suffered “parricide” although there is still considerable support for his basic theses on north Norwegian economy and society, first presented and elaborated in his classic study *Hva skjer i Nord-Norge?* [“What happens in North Norway?”] from 1966 (Brox 1966, cf. Brox 1997). A clear sign of the break with conventional wisdom of the past is the never-ending public debate on the Northerner about who he/she actually is, and about who has the legitimate claim to be the “authentic” Northerner (cf. Eriksen (ed.) 1996, Tjelmeland 1996, Thomassen & Lorås (eds.) 1997, Fulsås 1997, Arbo 1997, Thuen (ed.) 1999, Jaklin 2004: 463–64, 470–477).

Secondly, new ideas about regionalization have come to the fore in the region, stimulated by neo-liberalism, centralism, structural changes in the economy, and by trends in general regional ideology. Several examples of institutional indifference to north Norwegian regional initiatives demonstrate that a decline from within has already occurred, such as discontinuing local regional efforts in the organization of arts, Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation’s (*Norsk rikskringkasting*) dismantling of regionally anchored organization and transmission, the prioritizing of county-level ambitions at the expense of north Norwegian regional efforts, the evolution of colleges into engines of local development, etc.

Thirdly, the pressure from outside is divisive in several respects. One

issue is the linkage between regionalism and ethnic mobilization, particularly with regard to indigenous policy and the Sami Parliament. The Sami Parliament, established in 1989, is a Norwegian “national” institution, but the Sami are an indigenous people spread across several countries within a “homeland territory,” Samiland/Sápmi, which in different contexts embodies an idea of a separate transnational region (Niemi 1997: 67 ff., 2001b: 35 ff.). Furthermore, international regionalization demands political resources and attention. On the one hand, North Norway is an integral part of the Barents Euroarctic Region and cooperation initiatives in the Arctic area of the Scandinavian countries and the Kola peninsula (Dellenbrant & Olsson (eds.) 1994, Stokke & Tunander (eds.) 1994) established in the 1960s and 1990s respectively. But on the other hand, there are tendencies for counties orienting themselves in different directions within the international cooperation of the region – such as Nordland towards St. Petersburg, and Finnmark towards Murmansk and Archangelsk.

Finally, there will be further pressure on North Norway as a region coming from developments in the Barents Sea – “the last frontier” – with its tremendous possibilities projected within the gas and oil industry. Thus far, there is activity related to this field only in the far north, with the opportunities that open up for Finnmark in particular. If the sea territories further south, that is the Norwegian Sea north of Helgeland, is not opened up for exploration, there will be a geographical asymmetry in developmental potential, and the local region most relevant in this context, Vesterålen and Lofoten, would be losing out and would become economic backwaters, as claimed by Nordland and Troms politicians. Environmental concerns constitute one set of issues which may contribute to such asymmetry, in particular the concerns for the Lofoten fisheries, the world’s largest cod fisheries.

Regions within the region, peripheries of the periphery

In the wake of all the reports and research findings related to regionalization lately, there is especially one important issue facing political groups in the peripheries’ struggle with small and diminishing populations and low employment: Will new regional boundaries work to the advantage or disadvantage of the peripheral area in question (cf. Pedersen 2006)? The question is especially urgent in Finnmark, where the county level assembly has recently passed a resolution stating that the county of Finnmark should remain a separate region even after the administrative reform – whereas some municipalities within the county are of a different opinion.

Because of Finnmark's peculiar position and role in the current political debate – and because of the necessity to realize that there more often than not are regions within the region – I will conclude with a historical overview of the issue of Finnmark as a special part of North Norway, and of the country as a whole for that matter. Over and above the political issues of any given day, are there not historical factors that can explain the scepticism in Finnmark against the county being integrated into the larger north Norwegian region?

Finnmark has clearly had a historically unique position in the history of Norway (Niemi 2006a). It was settled by Norwegians later than any other part of the country, and Finnmark is still the land of the Sami, *par excellence*, as the name indicates (*Finnmark*, from *finner* 'Sami'). The great waves of immigration have also given the history of settlement in Finnmark a unique character. This is particularly the case with the immigrants from Finland, called *kvener* (*kvæner*) in Norwegian, who have acquired their own distinct ethnic profile through their cultural encounters in the north. Similarly, the political incorporation of Finnmark within the nation state of Norway also highlights particular historical features of Finnmark, which is indeed the youngest part of the country. This came about initially when the Swedish-Norwegian northern border was drawn in 1751, with the inclusion of Kautokeino and Karasjok within Norwegian territory, and in 1826 when the Russian-Norwegian border was agreed, when South Varanger was included into the Norwegian territory. These circumstances contributed to the image of Finnmark as "a frontier," a dynamic borderland with great opportunities for settlement and economic development (Brox 1984, Niemi 2005a, 2005b).

Another salient feature of the history of Finnmark is the prolonged efforts by the national government to integrate the county within the state, in the face of stubborn cultural and ethnic resistance. A number of projects along these lines have been launched over time, in due course stimulated by conceptions of state building, nation building, and welfare state building, with varying means employed, from economic policy to missionary activity, from minority policy to defence policy, etc. Many of these policies put a stamp of inferiority on the area and its people, especially in the harsh assimilation minority policy era – the *Norwegianization policy* – from the middle of the 1800s to at least the Second World War (Eriksen & Niemi 1981, Niemi 2006c). At the same time, the focus of tourism on Sami culture gave a lustre of exoticism to the whole county. The perceptions of historical injustice, being used and exploited and relegated to colonial-like status and the experience of being discriminated against, have hardly been more intensely felt in any other area in the North than in Finnmark.

Throughout all this, actors in and from Finnmark had the experience of

the county being *different* even within the north Norwegian context. The people of Finnmark were not “real” *nordlendinger* in spite of the fact that North Norwegian regionalism applied to North Norway was a whole. There was and is still a widespread feeling that it is more appropriate to refer to oneself as a *finnmarking* than a *nordlending*.

The somewhat tense relationship between Finnmark and the rest of North Norway was clearly in evidence even in the early phase of north Norwegian regionalism; the “us-and-them” rhetoric was at work. One instance can be documented in the correspondence between two individuals who belonged to the elite who were advancing the project of North Norwegian regionalism. The individuals involved were the composer Ole Olsen, residing in the capital, and the poet Julius Bauman, who had emigrated to America and was engaged in the regional project from there. In their private correspondence they reveal that as *finnmarkinger* they had encountered an attitude that assigned “an essential difference in rank” between people from the counties of Nordland and Troms on the one hand and Finnmark on the other. The former perceived themselves as a people with an old and heroic history going all the way back to the great Hålogaland chieftains of the Saga Age and to the famous north Norwegian pastor and poet Petter Dass, often named the first Norwegian poet as well, and “true” north Norwegian culture, whereas people from Finnmark could essentially be passed over historically and culturally. According to Ole Olsen, any attempt to identify oneself as *finnmarking* invited indifference or ridicule (Niemi 2001a: 64–65). Through numerous encounters of this kind, the people for Finnmark were confirmed in their belief that they were perceived as existing on the margin of the region, in a periphery of the periphery, in a region within the region.

The Second World War and the reconstruction work after the war further contributed to the image of Finnmark as a separate territorial entity, which in some way included the northern part of Troms county as well. The scorched earth tactics of the German occupying power was a disaster that befell only the area north of the fjord of Lyngen in northern Troms. The reconstruction was thus organized with a local regional focus, among other things, through a separate Finnmark office, *Finnmarkskontoret* (Hage 1999).

The recent Sami mobilization and the rights issues that have been raised constitute a new development that further highlights the distinctiveness of Finnmark. The Sami Rights Commission, appointed by the government in 1980, finished its report on the general legal principles of minority and indigenous rights in 1984 (NOU 1984:18), and then it went on to concentrate exclusively on legal issues applicable to Finnmark, an undertaking that was brought to its conclusion in 1997 (NOU 1997:4). One of the results of this undertaking is *Finnmarksloven* (the Finnmark Act), adopted by the National

Assembly in 2005, and implemented 1 July, 2006. The Act places the entire land area of Finnmark at the disposal of the people of Finnmark, as represented by an executive committee chosen by the Sami Parliament and the County Assembly (*Fylkestinget*); the area has been officially designated as *Finnmarkseiendomen* (the property of Finnmark). In other words, this involves – in a Norwegian context at least – a unique transfer of autonomy to a regional body. The Finnmark Act is a clear recognition that Finnmark has a unique legal history, that the state has committed violations of rights throughout history and that the time has now come to right the wrongs of the past. That said, the people of Finnmark are strongly divided about the possible long-term effects of the Act.

Finnmark has also emerged with an especially interesting profile in a regional perspective, given the new relationship to north-western Russia after the end of the Cold War, the oil and gas industry in the Barents Sea, and “the Polar policy” of the Norwegian government (*nordområdepolitikken*, cf. NOU 2003: 32). In conjunction with the Finnmark Act, these developments may exemplify a new historical phase: a county with administrative autonomy over its territory, and with a strong hand to play given its geographic position and close involvement with almost every aspect of Norwegian polar policy.

In the years between the two World Wars, the North Norwegian regionalists dreamt that one day the people of the North would become “masters of their own destiny.” The people of Finnmark are perhaps no less entitled to entertain similar dreams today.

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