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## Letter to a Norwegian Historian

posted by Jimmy Higgins [from the blog "Fire on the Mountain" <http://firemtn.blogspot.com/>]

[This post requires a little background for non-Norwegian readers. It was written by Morten Falck, long the main science journalist at **Aftenposten**, Norway's leading daily, and a personal friend. Morten, his wife Sissel Henriksen, and most of my Norwegian acquaintances are members of a newly formed left-wing political party, **Rødt** (Red, in English). Rødt candidates won office in cities and towns across the country this year, and the party may well place several members in the Storting, Norway's parliament, in the national elections in 2009.

One of **Rødt's** predecessor organizations was the Worker's Communist Party of Norway (AKP in Norwegian), a major feature of the country's political life since the late '60s. Recent years have seen a spate of articles and books denouncing the AKP as 1. lunatic leftists single-handedly ruining Norway's near-perfect society and 2. totally ineffectual and insignificant. US residents used to seeing today's anti-war demonstrators dismissed as dirty, elitist, granola-eating, America-hating, tree-hugging 1960s leftovers will recognize the pattern--and the purpose: scaring people off from making common cause with a force threatening to the powers that be.

This open letter to one of those critical of the AKP was published in the daily **Klassekampen** and Morten, knowing I would be interested, kindly had an English translation awaiting me when I arrived in Oslo to attend the recent memorial service for Cde. Tron Øgrim.. Certain that I am not the only non-Norwegian who will find it fascinating, I got his permission to post it here. He has helped further by providing cool graphics, some never printed or posted before.]



A representative of the "social democratic paradise" seeks to engage the young Tron Øgrim in dialogue.

Dear Hans Petter Sjøli,

You have written a book about the history of the Norwegian Marxist-Leninist movement, ***Mao, Min Mao***. That history is my history as well, and you have kindly mentioned my name *en passant* on page 24. That is why I write you this letter. For I do not recognise my own history in your rendering.

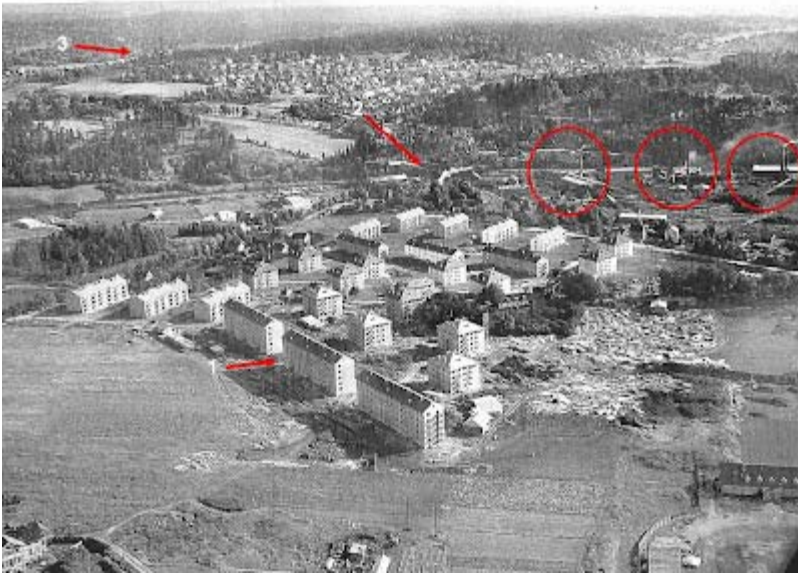
That is not primarily because of errors you make in the details, like when you tell us that the leftist scholar Gutorm Gjessing was a professor of biology. That certainly would have come as a surprise to him, sitting in his office at the ethnographic museum! Such errors could make me suspect you of sloppiness – but never mind, we can all make a mistake.

It is more serious when you write that the Socialist People's Party (SF) in the 1960s was "a Mecca for industrious troublemakers from the 'east side' with a liking for green tea." (p. 19) Green tea? We had not even heard of the stuff in the Sixties. This kind of error shows me that you lack sufficient knowledge of the background. You seem to take the situation of today for granted, and make your assessments from that. But please remember that the Sixties was before we hit oil. It was before the Value Added Tax was introduced. It was back when Norway was a (relatively) poor country, and before the selection of commodities offered became overwhelming. The Sixties was another world.

You call yourself a historian, and claim to have researched the history of the Marxist-Leninist movement. But that makes your description of the Bryn-Hellerud-area of Oslo, a cradle of the movement, rather odd. "There are far more petty-bourgeois villas than worn city blocks or apartment buildings in the area," you tell us on page 22.

"Worn city blocks"? Here, far out in the rural Østre Aker district, where the apartment buildings sprouted from peasants' fields during the '50s and '60s? And why don't you pose the question of who lived in these wooden houses that you call petty-bourgeois villas? And since you make a point of it – did the Marxist-Leninist movement have the most members in the apartment buildings or in the wooden houses?

Petty bourgeois villas? Here is the Bryn Hellerud area seen from the west in 1951. The author, then six, moved into the apartment pointed out by the foremost red arrow in December 1951.



The Bryn match factory is pointed out by the red arrow in the center of the picture. Klosterheim is situated among the trees just beneath that. Tron Øgrim lived approximately where the red arrow in the upper left corner is pointing. The three red circles shows brick works along the Alna river and the railway, which can be seen running horizontally through the picture. Teisen high school is situated just outside of the picture to the left (in the opposite direction from the first red arrow), Bryn railway station, with the former brewery, and the then active textile mills along the Bryn falls are just outside the right picture frame.

Being a historian, you ought to know we are talking here of an old working class area, the scene of the famous match workers' strike of 1889, maybe the most famous strike in the whole history of the Norwegian working class, because it was the first woman workers' strike. It became an area of brick works, textile mills, chemical industry, breweries, etc. (The Bryn Temperance Union was founded prior to the 20th century by workers' wives who were infuriated because the brewery sold beer in pails to the brickworkers on payday. Bryn-Hellerud SUF, the core from which the young Marxist-Leninist movement sprang in Norway, held our meetings at Klosterheim, the hall of the Bryn Temperance Union.) Bryn was the first "railway station town" in Norway, as the station was established in the growing industrial center at the Bryn Falls. You will find plenty of sociological facts about the environment in Pål Steigan's book *At the Square of Heavenly Peace*, which is listed among the sources in the back of your book..

Why are you placing quotation marks around "east side"? Maybe it is just a part of the rhetoric? Starting from page one you employ an ironic – not to say sarcastic – distancing toward the object of your research. A rather elaborate choice of words seems designed to lead the reader's thinking. (Just one example: "The chairman lit the path" (page 18) – to make us associate Mao Zedong with the ultra-left Peruvian guerrilla movement "Sendero Luminoso." But historically and logically this is to turn things upside down.)

As research this does not call for much admiration. But it suits the pattern of the book. You start by claiming that "the movement – as far as one can call it by so great a name – achieved very little politically. It hardly affected the social development" in "this country, which in fifty years had changed from impoverished outcrop into a rich, modern and in every way successful society, governed by the workers movement's own party. The revolution had been completed. The Social

Democratic Party had in many ways created a social democratic paradise. The working class had got a social and material lift unequalled in history. The social security net was in place..." (page 9-10)

With appropriate modesty you write that this is not the final history, just "my attempt to understand the Marxist-Leninist movement." (page 14). But both the ironic language and the prejudiced point of view are obstacles to understanding. You start from a picture of Norway that is unrecognisable, and renders the 1960s and the Marxist-Leninist movement incomprehensible.

I will thank you for making it so clear that you don't understand, as well as for suggesting why. If history is to be comprehensible, it must be viewed against the preceding times, and every social movement must be understood in relationship to its own time, not the present of some historian living several decades later. Oh, yes, I do recognise the picture of Norway that you draw. They served it to us in school: "The class struggle is over. Norway is the perfect democracy, the best of all worlds." But it was precisely when reality broke the school-peddled myths that we became Marxist-Leninists. Allow me to get a little personal.

### **Understanding the sixties**

On the 25th of January, 1965, Winston Churchill died. He was mourned by many in Norway. The department store Steen og Strøm in Oslo filled its big windows with pictures from his life. One late evening I came by, and stopped to look at the display.

Nedre Slottsgate (Lower Castle Street) lay desolate and quiet. Only a single, elderly gentleman in a gray coat and galoshes came walking through the sleet with a worn leather briefcase under his arm. "Lawyer," I thought.

He came up to me, tapped on my shoulder with a bony finger, nodded towards the picture behind the mirror glass pane, where Sir Winston stood bare-headed and unyielding among the brickheaps in a bombed London street – and said in a somewhat dry voice: "Young man, He didn't have as much hair on his head as you. But *he* had so much more within!"

Did I glibly retort "So that's where he had it!"? Oh, no, not in my wildest dreams! I had not yet turned 19, and was not yet accustomed to being insulted in public just because I had let my hair grow till it covered the edge of my ears. But I was soon to learn that hair length made me a total outlaw. Nice, cultured grown-ups could freely shower me with disparaging remarks because my hair was longer than average. Elderly married couples would step demonstratively sideways out into the driveway, pointing their fingers and hollering when I was going for a walk with my parents through the quiet Sunday streets of Oslo the following summer (by then both hair and beard had grown longer still) "Hey! Is that a boy or a girl?"



The author, apparently a boy, 1968

The reactions were not unique, rather, typical. The next year a young pupil named Odd Hansen was thrown out of Teisen High School because he had long hair and a beard – and even wore spectacles. The teachers claimed it was impossible to teach such a pupil.

But over the shimmering television screen flickered black-and-white images from the Vietnam war: Children burnt by napalm, captured guerilla fighters: young women and young men with their hands tied behind their backs – youths like us. They were communists, the Norwegian voices repeated after the American soundtrack. A specially vile type of communists, called “Vietcong”. But to me they looked like quite ordinary humans, like us. (At that time, the television still broadcast something called news, dealing with important events all over the world, and it was more than just headlines.)

There was an enormous gap between the suffocating, stagnant, unidirectional, official Norwegian "reality," where all problems, everything that did not "fit in" was swept under the carpet – and the reality that confronted us outside of schools, newspapers and public opinion. Out there, in the world, there was war! Out there, in reality, young girls who had unwanted pregnancies died from illegal attempts at abortion. To bear a child out of wedlock was still a scandal. There was no security. Outside, in the real world, there still existed enormous differences between the poor and the rich, and a quarter of a century after the start of the Second World War, the third one loomed as a substantial threat. The very end, nuclear war. And yet, my hair length was a bigger problem!

We had observed the 25th anniversary of the start of the Second World War and the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, with television serials, radio-programs and movies. Strong anti-war movies like *Oh, What a Lovely War* and *King and Country*. The Russian nuclear tests at Novaja Zemlya had added new and nervous terms like "Strontium 90" to our vocabulary, and the Cuban missile crisis was still fresh in memory. I, like many others, was an ardent pacifist. But the world was standing at the brink of war. Indeed, it was war. In Vietnam, my fellow adolescents were fighting for their lives and freedom against the United



States of America, the very superpower of technology.

Merely twenty years had passed since my parents fought the same struggle against the German Nazi occupants. But still the important thing was that you dressed like your grandpa and wore a haircut like a US marine. Form was the important thing, the surface, the look of things, not the content. If we did not have the same conditions, we still were to look the same! Newly ironed tulle curtains, clean fingernails, membership in the state church. It was essential not to deviate. The pressure to conform was unbearable. No one asked for your opinion. The politicians took care of opinions on your behalf. And though the social democratic politician Einar Førde did not coin the sentence until much later, it was supposed that "We are all social democrats."

## **I commence**

In 1965 I participated in my first march against the war in Vietnam. I dragged a friend along, for I knew no one there. But I had to participate in that demonstration. I had to express my opinion. So was I interested in politics, then? I was not. Art, literature, movies and theater, history – and biology, but not politics. But the world meant something to me, for that was where I intended to live.

The march started from the square outside of Centrum Cinema. A couple of hundred participants rallied there, serious grown-ups with hats and coats, some youths deep in parkas. They were strangers, unknown to me, but obviously many of them knew one another. That demonstration did not make me an activist.

But the next year I got acquainted with Bryn/Hellerud SUF.

1966 was a year of active recruiting for the Bryn/Hellerud local section of the Socialist Youth League, SUF. (The SUF was the youth section of the Sf, the Socialist People's Party, then the leftmost of Norway's large electoral parties.) My brother was elected editor of the school newspaper at Teisen High School, and became a member of Bryn/Hellerud. But I did not follow suit. I was older, had turned twenty, and taken the preliminary course of philosophy at the University, today called Examen philosophicum. I had objections, I didn't like communism, I was concerned about the environment.



Members of the Bryn/Hellerud local section of the Socialist Youth League, a hothouse for future leaders of the AKP.



Right: Jorun Gulbrandsen  
Below: Tron Øgrim

But the Bryn-Hellerud-section did not give up. One night the doorbell rang. Outside stood Tron Øgrim. He stepped out of his botfores (a sort of ankle-high lined winter galoshes), deposited his fur-coat, I brewed some tea (ordinary Earl Grey!) and we withdrew to the boy's room. During teapot after teapot, night by night, we discussed topics like pacifism, war and peace, revolution, communism, socialism, the Chinese cultural revolution, economics, philosophy, materialism and idealism, dialectics and metaphysics, the atomic bomb, literature, art, environmentalism, and of course science fiction – or Tron would not have been Tron.

We discussed Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the Swedish diplomat Georg Borgström's books on food supply for the world's exploding population – and Reverend Malthus. Or if there was any hope for the great whales. Then Tron came armed with a copy of *Scientific American*. Tron was well prepared. In the end I had no arguments left, and only one road was open if I wanted to keep my self respect: I had to join. Tron made me a Marxist, and for that I will always be grateful. He taught me to see how the world works.

You wonder why we became Marxist-Leninists. But every opposition in the world was Marxist-Leninist. The Chinese Cultural Revolution was a revitalisation of Marxism-Leninism, it was seen as extremely liberating, and inspired uprisings and protest all over the world. Anti-imperialists the world over called themselves Maoists. It would have been a much greater mystery had we not become Marxist-Leninists.

## **Did we make a difference?**

To see whether the Marxist-Leninist movement has had any significance, we have to look at Norway before the movement emerged, and see what changes have taken place.

I remember a discussion during a Norwegian lesson in high school, after an essay about whether women might or ought to be employed outside of home. It may have been in the autumn of 1963 or spring, 1964. We were 24 pupils in the English class, with a great majority of girls. But during that discussion only two – maybe three – were of the opinion that women ought to have their own occupation! One of the heavy counterarguments came from a boy who lived in the military apartments at Ulven. His mother had been away the preceding week, and there had been no one to empty the ashtrays!

The '60s really was another world, and I doubt you would have liked it there.

The fight for women's equality with men met with opposition from broad sections of the official Norwegian society. It was far from evident that women were entitled to their own occupation. An individual woman's right to decide for an abortion, which you may consider an evident democratic right, was actively sabotaged by the Socialist Left Party, which gave the individual conscience of a single, male Member of Parliament higher priority than the right of women to control their own bodies.

The fight for kindergartens for everyone has still not been won, and the fight for equality at work will probably go on for a long time yet. But today the demand for the six hour working day has wind in the sails, and it is generally accepted that women have the right to provide for themselves. Would the world have changed in the same way without us?

When the SUF raised the issue of Palestine, shock waves penetrated far into The Socialist People's Party (our mother party). The party weekly ***Orientering*** and the party central committee took a clear stand against us. Now even the former conservative Prime Minister Kaare Willoch agrees with us. Do you think this has happened on its own?

When we supported the South Vietnamese resistance, the National Liberation Front (NLF), people asked "Are you a communist?!" to shut us up. The best answer was a clear and loud "Yes!". That shut them up. It still is legitimate to be a communist in Norway. In the mid 1960s the Cold War was at its sharpest, and the shadow of McCarthyism loomed heavy in public opinion. It was close to sacrilege to criticize the USA, whatever the reason. Now, a great majority stands against the US war in Iraq. And everyone agrees that the US was a bandit and an aggressor in the Vietnam War. A lot of people also agree that the US is an imperialist state. Do you think that has happened by itself?

We headed into work places and met petrified unions whose leadership were shocked by any initiative from ordinary members. The members were to listen to their elected representatives, and apart from that, keep "order in the ranks." Newly employed at the Freia chocolate factory in the autumn of 1970, I took the podium and proposed that we should support the on-going strike among the bus and tram drivers of Oslo. My local union leader was married to a striking bus



driver, but she was a member of the ruling social-democratic Labor Party, and so she (and the rest of the board) opposed the proposition. But they lost the vote. Their panic was palpable.

On page 47 you tell us: "Towards the end of 1969 [the organisation initiated] the most widespread strike activity in recent times in Norway." Don't you think that all the strikes might have come as a result of actual unrest among the workers? We raised the fight for local mobilization, against the rule of pampered union bosses and suffocating Social Democratic control of the labor movement, we supported local demands and local actions. Today another climate has taken hold in Norwegian industry. Local initiatives are normal. Union bosses loyal to the government are no longer in monolithic control.

We broke the sixties' dank conformity, we expanded democracy.

### **Keeping the EU's thumb off Norway**



The fight against ruling class efforts to bring Norway into the European Economic Community (EEC) was critical, yet you focus on the slogan we used! You write that EEC was "the name the Vote No people used for the European Community (EU)." No! The name European Economic Community had been commonly used in Norwegian debate since the early Sixties. With the aim of sugaring the pill, the Norwegian Department of Foreign Affairs pushed Norwegian membership in 1971-1972 under such new banners as European Commonwealth (EF) and European Economic commonwealth (EØF), to draw on the Norwegian traditions of collectivity, but to no avail. The most rational name was of course that which had been used in the debate all along, and which people understood without further explanation. [During the 1994 effort to re-raise this question, when the AKP again played a leading role in urging our fellow Norwegians to Vote No, we used the term European Union, because *that* was the one everyone understood. It didn't help advocates of Norway joining--the proposal was still rejected.]



Falck, family and colleagues, again making no difference, during 2nd campaign to defeat EU membership, 1994

You serve up some figures (p. 68) to show that AKMED (The Worker's Committee Against EEC and Inflation) had no following and no effect. I strongly doubt that your numbers are anything more than guesses. And the Marxist-Leninists worked not only within AKMED, but were active within all sectors of the broader people's movement as well. We were activists, we mobilized the Norwegian people, and we were of great significance to the victory of September 25, 1972.

It goes without saying that we were not alone in achieving this. Thousands of people made a giant contribution against the EEC, and can quite rightfully claim a part of the credit for the victory. But we were important to the outcome because we were active, we went out and discussed with people, we offered reasons and we pointed out connections, and we helped organize.

Yet the struggle against EEC membership was just the beginning. In its wake arose local struggles on every rock and in every alley, on every shore and in each fjord. While some kept busy ridiculing the struggle for Blowaway Commons [the Norwegian equivalent of East Nowhere--jh], we connected with and participated in these struggles to defend the living conditions of the Norwegian people. Some of them we lost, and many others we won. Thus we changed Norway, and made it possible to breathe. It is no longer required that you dress according to code and say the same things as your grandfather – or what is decided in the headquarters of the Social Democratic Party. You breathe so freely because we were there. We weren't alone. But we were the vanguard. There was no other political movement in Norway which did all that. We were the motor of all these struggles that changed Norway. Do you think it would have happened like that without us?

In the Sixties, few had even heard much about homosexuality. It could not be mentioned, and was even criminal for males. Now the Salvation Army is losing support because of its discriminatory practice towards gay people. Isn't that good? But without seeing the Sixties for what they were, you will not see the difference.



A daily full color newspaper called **Class Struggle** in a country with a population about 2/3 that of NYC!

This connection, which seems so evident to me, you don't see. It even looks as though you don't see the importance of the daily newspaper **Klassekampen** (Class Struggle). We started a daily newspaper, and have helped keep it going right up to the present. Its very existence, to the left of all the other daily newspapers on important questions like war & peace, anti-imperialism, the European Union – drives wedges in the ice that so easily covers the other newspapers. As long as **Klassekampen** has not turned totally loyal to the government, it opens breathing space and creates greater space for skeptical and diverse opinions in the other newspapers as well. It is peculiar that you, who work there as a journalist, are unable to see this. And that you don't understand that this has been a struggle for greater democracy, greater freedom.

Certainly you may insist that we made mistakes, that we were sectarian, and so on. Well, do it in a way that we can learn from, and I shall not protest. But give us credit for what good things we did. And if you are going to say something about Mao's policies and writings, it would be wise to read him. If not, it will not be possible to understand what ignited us, and you make us look foolish, which we were not.

But you do suggest connections that did not exist. On page 48 you say that the militance of the SUF was partly responsible for the ruling Labor Party drawing over one million votes for the first time in the election of 1969. You know that is nonsense. Twelve years earlier, the Labour Party, with a two percent higher vote, fell short of a million. The numbers hide a growth in the electorate – and it may be a little hard to blame the Socialist Youth League for that? At least at such an early date?

Since I have embarked on the road of anecdote, let me end with a tale about the absolutely rigid and humourless discipline that ruled the AKP. For **Klassekampen's** Yule party in 1981, a special spoof edition of "Klampekassen" was produced without the knowledge of the editorial board. At that time I was an active book reviewer and participant in debates on the cultural pages, specialising in books on natural history. "Klampekassen" featured a parody of my work: a rave review of a (non-existent) must-have, 12-volume, popular work on the ticks of Norway. Editor Sigurd Allern evidently found it a little over the top, and came over to me during the party

with an awkward apology. I will never forget the look on his face when I responded, "I wrote it myself."

We were disciplined because we were serious. But within that discipline, there were room for humour, hilarity, irony, creativity and laughter. Say what you will about the Workers Communist Party, but don't ever call us tedious.

**Morten Falck**