

# Notes in retrospect

## for my Chinese friends

(2013, slightly updated 2024)

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## **Introductory remarks**

Seen in retrospect, many events in life appear to be neither foreseen nor planned. They just came about, unpredictably, due to special circumstances or interplay with other people.

That was exactly what happened in the fall of 1988, when a young Chinese philosopher suddenly turned up at our institute at the University of Bergen. He came for one year, from East China Normal University in Shanghai, to do research in philosophy. This unforeseen event led to a long-term collaboration and a life-long friendship that gradually included many of his colleagues on the Chinese side and many colleagues on the Norwegian side. His name was Tong Shijun.

Philosophers tend to discuss big questions. That is part of our trade. However, among friends, who spend time together, there are also “small questions” to be raised and pondered upon, questions concerning cultural and social differences and peculiarities in everyday life. In this sense, discussions and dialogues move in big circles as well as in small ones, and thus philosophy becomes a mutual learning-process both of a theoretical and personal kind. In such cases, *where* you are and where you come *from* are questions worthwhile considering; “situatedness matters”. That goes for socio-historical circumstances, but also for significant events and experiences on the personal level (in contrast to what is merely private).

Consequently, there were philosophical discussions of a general kind, on issues like normative justification and rule following, and there were discussions of Western philosophy versus Chinese philosophy; and then there were discursive learning-processes on similarities and differences in historical development and cultural modernization. Cf. Tong, *The Dialectics of Modernization: Habermas and the Chinese*

*discourse of modernization*, and Skirbekk, *Multiple Modernities. A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences*. In discussing the latter, where modernization processes are conceived as historically situated and differentiated, my Chinese colleagues came up with the idea that this book<sup>1</sup> could be seen as an auto-narrative of a general kind, and that I ought to go further and write down some of the events and experiences in my life as a philosopher: tell your story!

After some hesitation, I finally came to the conclusion that I would try to write about some of the things that perhaps could be of interest for younger colleagues. That was how these writings came about, and why: some notes in retrospect, from my life as a philosopher, for my Chinese friends.<sup>2</sup>

### **(A) Background**

Private life is private, without special interest for other people. Whether Hegel slept with a nightcap, or had slippers on when he read his newspapers, is irrelevant for our interest in his thinking.<sup>3</sup>

However, in considering a person's professional life, there are some facts of a personal nature that are worth mentioning, such as *when* and *where* – *time* and *place* – and also some information about *social background*: The date of birth is decisive for formative experiences related to major events, like wars and crises, and for the kinds of persons one could meet and the sorts of problems and projects that call for involvement and action. A similar point could be made for the place of birth and upbringing, and also for class and socio-cultural background. Hence, being born in 1937, in a Scandinavian country, more specifically

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., *Multiple Modernities*.

<sup>2</sup> Hence, these *Notes* were included in the Chinese version of *Multiple Modernities*.

<sup>3</sup> To twist one of his sayings: *für den Kammerdiener sind alle Geister klein* – in the eyes of the house servant, all spirits are small.

in Norway, with parents who were teachers and members of politically and culturally active families, these are facts about my background that also have relevance for my life as a philosopher. I shall briefly indicate how:

Born in 1937, I was a child during the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of Norway. For my parents, the German intruders represented the moral evil; the intruders should be thrown out of the country, and then life should be as it had been before! For us, the children, wartime and Nazi occupation were just normal. That was how life is. We had no memory of pre-war peace.

The German occupation was omnipresent: every ninth person in Norway at that time was a German soldier. They were everywhere. There were young German soldiers (we called them Fritz und Fratz) who gave you bonbons if you asked them,<sup>4</sup> and there were German officers who lived in requisitioned rooms in our private homes, often separated from our family members only by a thin wall and a simple door. In addition, there were numerous Soviet and Serbian prisoners of war, marching through the streets back and forth from their camp to places for forced labor.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, there were signs of various kinds, for instance: “No admittance. Unauthorized persons will not be stopped, but, for calls, shot”. (For sure, literacy was a useful skill.)

There were two ways of dying: You died, or you were sent to Germany. We knew it. (Nobody said so, but we knew.) Moreover, you could never be sure. For instance, in a dark evening, at the railway

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<sup>4</sup> “*Haben Sie Bonbons?*” was the first phrase of a foreign language that we picked up. But we were not allowed to ask, or to eat the bonbons if somebody else had shamefully gotten hold of it.

<sup>5</sup> When we succeeded in putting some bread or potatoes under the fence at their camp, they happened to give us small wooden horses and birds in return.

station, a colleague of my mother happened to say aloud, in Norwegian: “it smells German”; the phrase was immediately understood by a German officer who stood behind her; consequently, she was arrested and subsequently sent to the concentration camp at Ravensbrück. She survived, came back, and had things to tell. So, the seemingly correct German soldiers – who could give you bonbons – were also the ones who could send your parents to Germany.

However, even your fellow compatriots could be dangerous. One day toward the end of the war, as I was playing with a Norwegian boy whom I did not know, five houses down the street, I happened to say: “there will soon be peace”. “How do you know”, he asked. “My father has listened to news from London”, I said. “I’ll report your dad”, he replied. And I was scared to death. Nobody was allowed to have a radio. Nobody was allowed to listen to news from London. What would happen?

In short, there was a double dilemma: German soldiers, the evil enemy, could give you bonbons, and unknown Norwegian citizens, also children, could have your parents sent to Germany, for almost nothing.

Years later, I used to read German philosophy during the day, but now and then at night I would have a bad dream, for many years: German soldiers were about to attack our house, and I could do nothing.

All in all, just normal. Nothing special. Just a normal childhood under these circumstances. Nevertheless, at a later stage, the problem of evil, and the question of how to justify universally valid norms for a civilized society, became existential challenges, challenges that gradually brought me into philosophy and finally turned me into a philosopher by profession. Not intentionally. At first, I studied medicine, intended to go into psychiatry, to cope with human madness. However, I had to write on problems of evil and on whether or not there is a meaning in life, at least in the sense that we can rationally justify some

basic norms. The book was called *Nihilism?* (with question mark). It changed my life.

Being born in 1937, in Norway, into a special family (most families are special) – this meant that the collective and formative learning-processes that I at a later stage described in the book *Multiple Modernities. A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences* were integral parts of my own family background.<sup>6</sup> This, I think, could be said about many Norwegians of my generation, though in my case there were some special aspects with relevance to my later life as a philosopher:

Both my parents were teachers. I still have the impression that we the kids were “taught” almost continuously, and enthusiastically: history and histories, literature and languages, and learning-by-seeing and learning-by-doing – thus, we travelled a lot (especially from the early fifties, often with an old car and a tent), from Finnmark in the north to Paris and Rome in the south. Accordingly, practical activities, look-and-see and do-it-yourself were parts of daily life.

Then there were expanding horizons – Norwegian, Nordic, European, and North-American:<sup>7</sup> In order to understand other people (and yourself), you have to know history; but you also have to go other places and get acquainted with other people (at this point, there is a “tacit knowing” that cannot be acquired by books alone). Moreover, you have to know their languages, and their literature, as well as social and political facts about their societies and ways of life.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In that respect, my Chinese friends were right in referring to this book (*Multiple Modernities*) as a kind of “auto-narrative”.

<sup>7</sup> On my father’s side, we had close relatives in the U.S. In 1948, my father got a scholarship for half a year to study the American educational system in the U.S. He also renewed family connections.

<sup>8</sup> Nordic languages – Swedish, Danish, New Norwegian, and Danish-Norwegian, plus Old Norwegian or Icelandic – in my family, those languages were taken for

My father, a teacher, was also an historian and a public figure (writing regularly in newspapers and giving speeches), and the editor (for 40 years) of a yearbook inspired by the ideals of the popular movements,<sup>9</sup> and an active participant in organizations of various kinds. From his fifties he was the director of the local museum.<sup>10</sup> In 1945, he was member of the local council (*heradsstyret*), representing the Labor Party.<sup>11</sup>

My mother, also a teacher, was politically active in the Left Party (*Venstre*). As a member of the city council she fought for progressive issues in accordance with the ideals of the popular movements,<sup>12</sup> with a special emphasis on *likestilling*, equality between men and women, and environmental issues (at a time when such issues were not recognized as politically important).<sup>13</sup>

In short, I grew up in an educated and politically active family that was well embedded in Norwegian society, and with a broad perspective, in space and time – Nordic, European, worldwide - with a keen historical awareness.<sup>14</sup>

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granted. In high school, we learnt German and French in addition to English. For cultural and political reasons, I took some elementary lessons in Russian and Italian.

<sup>9</sup> See *Multiple Modernities*, The Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> *Glomdalsmuseet*, the third largest folk museum in the country, see *Multiple Modernities*.

<sup>11</sup> His father, Gunnar Skirbekk, was the politician, administrator and farmer, mentioned in Chap. 3 of *Multiple Modernities*.

<sup>12</sup> Again, see *Multiple Modernities*.

<sup>13</sup> Her father, Sigurd Nergaard, was the scholar mentioned in Chap. 3 of the same book. He was a teacher who became a state official as the director of the school system of the county. He was also a recognized ethnologist who collected orally transmitted legends and fairy tales. One of his brothers, Olav, was a wealthy forest owner, active in the timber industry and international trade, and also politically active, e.g. as a member of the national assembly, representing *Venstre* (the Left Party).

<sup>14</sup> I have met Muslims who seriously claim that they can trace their ancestry back to the Prophet. I have even met Chinese who think they have a genetic lineage back to Confucius. So what can a Norwegian do in such company! Well, if we are to believe written sources, e.g. from clergymen who wrote down information about birth,

Two points concerning self-reflection in that respect: (i) Citizens of small countries cannot allow themselves to be self-sufficient in the same way as citizens of dominant nations may do: In moving around, British citizens did not need to change language or cultural perspective. Nor did the French or the German, within their spheres of interest. Nor do present-day North-Americans. However, Scandinavians, members of small societies, have to change languages when moving around; in former days, even more so, since linguistically and culturally there was no worldwide Anglo-American dominance. Thus, we had to relate ourselves to different languages and cultures, such as German and French. In other words, we had to learn how to see ourselves from the outside and how to change perspectives. In philosophical terms, we had to reflect. (ii) However, within Norway there is a similar constellation, due to the traditionally pluralistic national identity, including considerable geo-political differences and socio-cultural tensions, for one thing rooted in the struggle between state officials and popular movements, and manifested in the two official Norwegian languages, New Norwegian and Danish-Norwegian.<sup>15</sup> As a result, there is a need to see oneself in the perspective of the other. Again, there is a need for reflection.

Traditionally, those who supported the popular movements were those who primarily had to be reflective in this sense, moving back and forth between two perspectives. As intellectuals, they were totally integrated into the dominant culture, and still they had another

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marriage and death, we may in many cases trace the genealogy of our ancestors back throughout the protestant period into Norwegian nobility in the Catholic era, and then to Norwegian kings and queens – and furthermore, according to the sagas, right back to the ninth century, and further on to the old gods! Fallible information for sure: one woman one night, one clergyman who did a lousy job, and the whole thing falls apart. Interesting stories, but surely, genealogies should be taken with a pinch of salt.

<sup>15</sup> See *Multiple Modernities*.



perspective as well – not dissimilar from the position of Jewish intellectuals who were completely integrated into the main culture, but who had another point of reference and other experiences as well.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, intellectuals stemming from the popular movements have traditionally contributed to a unique reflectiveness within Norwegian society, from Vinje, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, to Skjervheim, Hellesnes and others in the post-war period, up through the time of the student revolution and the democratization of the universities in the 1960s.

One should be careful in describing and explaining one's own life. Others might know better. However, with this reservation, I would point out two major events that were formative for my life as a philosopher: (i) being a child in wartime during the *Nazi occupation*, fostering *feelings of civilization crises*, and (ii) being exposed to a certain *reflectiveness and sensitivity* due to a *plural background and identity*.

These experiences may have given rise to an internalized calling, in a double sense: a concern for civilization crises and those concerned, and a concern for self-critical reflection and possible improvements.

A few remarks could be added, about childhood and youth, and the need get out of town and out of the country:

*Animals.* During wartime and occupation, food was essential. In the garden, there were hens walking around, and rabbits in cages – the latter were cute and impossible to eat. In the garage (after German soldiers had requisitioned the car), there was a pig, a fast runner that caused quite some trouble for the butcher. In the cellar, we once had a living sheep, since there were regulations on the transport of slaughtered animals.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Charles Taylor and his defence of the French heritage in Canada, or Jacques Derrida in Paris with his Jewish heritage from North Africa, or Pierre Bourdieu, making an academic career in Paris, coming from a modest family in the province.

After the war, I had a dog, and later, a cat – a pure luxury since they were not eaten. Moreover, around the age of ten, I got acquainted with a worker and horse owner who did outdoor labor for the community, in green areas and along the roads, using his two horses.<sup>17</sup> Now and then, early in the morning, I got up to ride one of the horses into the town, from the meadows where they stayed overnight. The horses were big, the boy was small, so I had to climb a fence to get on the horse's back. After school, I liked to be together with the horses and the workers.

*Workers.* I liked both, the working horses and the working men. I learned their way of living and the codes and understatement in their way of communicating. I learned to speak their local dialect. One weekend I even had one of the horses for myself, riding around in the woods around the city. Mutual trust, apparently, and a lot of freedom at an early age.

*Nature.* For a kid, the city was manageable – easy to get around, especially with a bike, and there were few cars in those days. Around the city: nature – farms, forests, hills. In wintertime, cross-country skiing. In the summer, a small boat on a big lake. With the money I had saved in primary school, I bought (at the age of 14) a wooden rowboat. I reshaped it, as a sailboat, with mast and jib and main sail. Later in life, when I had moved to the West Coast, with mild winter seasons, I got a hut up in the mountains, with snow for cross-country skiing in wintertime. In the summer, I had a small boat, in a nearby fjord.

*Out of town, out of the country.* At the local high school,<sup>18</sup> my main subjects were the natural sciences. However, the curriculum was extensive, as it used to be at a European Gymnasium. All in all, I thrived. Nevertheless, during the last period of the five years stay at this school, there was a growing discontent on my part. As a young man in the mid-

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<sup>17</sup> That kind of work was not motorized at that time.

<sup>18</sup> Originally a cathedral school established in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century by Cardinal Nicholas Brekespear, who later became Pope Hadrianus IV.

1950s, when Norway had materially recovered after the occupation, quite self-content and without a deeper questioning as to what had happened and what was about to happen, I had to get away. Get out of town, out of the country. And so I did. First, to Sweden, at a Nordic folk high school (*folkhögskola*), later, after the preclinical study of medicine at the University of Oslo, to France, then to Germany, a short visit to England, and finally, during the Vietnam War, to California.

### **(B) *Nihilism?***

During the summer vacation of 1958, between the spring and autumn terms of my study of medicine at the University of Oslo, I sat down to write. I segregated myself from the outside world, within my father's home office.<sup>19</sup> I just had to. At the end of the vacation, the manuscript was done, around 150 pages: *Nihilism? A Young Man's Search for Meaning*. A publishing consultant was contacted. He kindly told me that Norwegian readers were uninterested in philosophical writings. I then borrowed my brother's scooter and went up to Lillehammer, to see the philosopher Hans Skjervheim, who stayed at the Nansen School at that time. He started reading. Then he called a couple of his friends in Oslo. They contacted the publisher Johan Grundt Tanum, a cultivated gentleman in the trade. In a short period of time, the book was published. Before the end of the year, it was published in two editions. During the following 13 months, around 70 persons discussed or referred to the book in about 40 different newspapers and journals.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> He was at that time director of a museum, located 30 km away. During the summer season, he had to stay at the museum most of the time to arrange all kinds of events in order to get money for the museum.

<sup>20</sup> References, cf. *Nachlass, SVT arbeidsnotat 3/1994*, University of Bergen (ISBN 82-7733-004-9), pp. 7-8.

At the outset, I just had to write what I wrote. I had not paid much attention to what might happen thereafter, when the book was published. But apparently, the text gave words to an underlying unrest, underneath the post-war complacency in the Norwegian society. Apparently, the right thing at the right time: the problem of evil, Christianity and religion, search for meaning and for universal norms, a blend of literary style and philosophical thoughts. Existentialism, I was told by many people. Philosophy, I was told by the philosophers, from Hans Skjervheim and Egil Wyller to Arne Næss and Knut Erik Tranøy. Suddenly I was taken in, as one of them. What then?

Things went fast. After my exams in preclinical medicine, my philosophical friends persuaded me to keep on with my philosophical questions, at least for the time being. The following year, I went to Paris, and the next one to Tübingen, writing a thesis on Heidegger's theory of truth in a critical perspective, that was delivered and defended at the University of Oslo in 1962.<sup>21</sup> During that exam, as a member of the commission, Knut Erik Tranøy asked me to come to Bergen as a teaching assistant at the Department of Philosophy, that was established three years before, with Tranøy as the founding father.<sup>22</sup> So I did, and soon I was taken in by philosophical discussions and learning-processes, by philosophy as a communicative practice with other persons. I never returned to the study of medicine, and I don't regret it.<sup>23</sup> Gradually and unintentionally, I became a philosopher, even a philosopher by profession.

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<sup>21</sup> For the *magistergrad* in Philosophy, with French and Physiology (Pre-clinical Medicine) as *støttefag*.

<sup>22</sup> Later, in 1972, the book *Nihilisme?* (written in Norwegian) was translated into English by Knut Erik Tranøy (reprinted 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Nor did I ever regret my training in preclinical medicine (anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry). On the contrary, the background in the natural sciences was useful for me as a philosopher, and especially useful for a philosopher of science.

### **(C) Post-WWII: the intellectual constellation**

After the Second World War there was a need to respond to *the War and the Nazi period*,<sup>24</sup> to cope with the damages done to civilization, a need that was manifested by the Nürnberg Trial and the United Nation with its attempt to posit universally valid Human Rights (and not merely to impose the rights as conceived by those who happened to win the war). But how can universally valid norms be found and justified? Mere decisions will not do, nor the mere fact of a majority vote; and traditional metaphysical and theological claims will not do when confronted with skeptical doubt and critical counterarguments.

Moreover, faced with the atrocities of this war, there was also a feeling of meaninglessness. Where was God's voice in Auschwitz?<sup>25</sup> The problem of evil emerged with great force: Religion was challenged, but not religion alone. There was a general concern for a loss of meaning, for culture and civilization in crisis. The reactions were diverse: (i) For existentialist thinkers (like Sartre and Camus) the main challenge was the loss of existential meaning and a lack of common values and norms. (ii) For sociological critics of "modern times"<sup>26</sup> (cf. the early writings of Karl Marx), the main challenge was a loss of meaning due to reification and alienation in capitalist and technology-based societies. (iii) For

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, see Karl-Otto Apel, "Zurück zur Normalität? Oder könnten wir aus der nationalen Katastrophe etwas Besonderes gelernt haben? Das Problem des (welt-)geschichtlichen Übergangs zur postkonventionellen Moral in spezifisch deutscher Sicht". In W. Kuhlmann, ed., *Zerstörung des moralischen Selbstbewußtseins: Chance oder Gefährdung? Praktische Philosophie in Deutschland nach dem Nationalsozialismus*. Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1988, pp. 91-142.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Hans Jonas, *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz. Ein jüdische Stimme*. (The Concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish Voice).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the film by Charlie Chaplin, with the same name.

sociologists like Max Weber, the main challenge was a loss of meaning in terms of a “disenchantment of the world” (*Entzauberung der Welt*), due to the expansion of scientific explanations that reduces the realm for magic worldviews. Broadly speaking, the Nietzschean slogan of a “European Nihilism” seemed to gain ground.

However, one problem was the loss of meaning due to such rationalization processes, another problem was the propagandistic creation of new meaning of an emotional and non-rational kind. In this way, Nazism had been nourished by pre-modern ideas and attitudes. Accordingly, the reactions from scientifically oriented persons (like the members of the Vienna School) were quite different from the reactions of the existentialists: The irrational aspects of Nazism had to be fought with scientific rationality and science-based arguments!

However, among these rationalists, there were two trends: (i) There were those who conceived rationality in terms of the methods and concepts of the natural sciences, thus defending positivism as an epistemic position.<sup>27</sup> (ii) There were those who conceived rationality in terms of open and enlightened discussions, based on self-critical doubt, aiming at better arguments and improvement.<sup>28</sup>

In the ongoing discussions, the positivists were accused (e.g. by intellectuals affiliated with the humanities) of worsening the situation by denying the qualitative aspects of life and thereby undermining cultural meaning. In return, science-oriented thinkers blamed their spiritually oriented adversaries for shallow rhetoric and obscurantism, thereby giving support to regressive and dangerous ideologies.

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<sup>27</sup> From Alfred Ayer to Bertrand Russell (at some stages of his intellectual life).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Arne Næss and his textbook on interpretation and preciseness, written for the introductory courses at Norwegian universities (*examen philosophicum*), see below. Cf. also Jürgen Habermas on the need for enlightened public argumentation.

When more subtle versions of analytic philosophy<sup>29</sup> emerged, there was a critique in both directions, against epistemic shortcomings and one-sidedness of positivism on the one hand and of existentialism on the other.

In short, this was the intellectual and cultural constellation within which the book *Nihilism?* was conceived and received: loss of meaning, lack of universally valid norms – broadly speaking, with existentialism on the one side and positivism on the other, and with analytic philosophy on the rise. Hence, my next step, trying to interpret a major existential thinker (Martin Heidegger) by the use of analytic philosophy, was not accidental.

However, none of these positions, neither existentialism nor analytic philosophy as they were presented and discussed at that time, had a convincing answer to the question of how to justify universally valid norms. For historical reasons, that challenge was primarily elaborated by German thinkers, like Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas – but by then we have already moved into the 1970s.

## **(D) Philosophy in Norway after the War**

### **(i) General remarks**

In the 1950s and 1960s, philosophy in Norway had four main characteristics:<sup>30</sup>

*Mediation between analytical and continental philosophy.* Working analytically and argumentatively and at the same time taking the broader questions and the self-reflective approach of German and French

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<sup>29</sup> Say, from Gilbert Ryle to the late Wittgenstein.

<sup>30</sup> For further comments on Norwegian philosophy after WWII, see e.g. my contributions in the introduction of *Philosophy beyond Borders. An Anthology of Norwegian Philosophy*, eds. Ragnar Fjelland et al., Bergen, 1997.

philosophy seriously, this double approach represented a professional challenge. In the post-war years, this was also a political challenge, as a contribution to European reconciliation. It also contributed to a national normalization:<sup>31</sup> Geo-culturally Norway had always been located in between the two, the British and the German.<sup>32</sup>

*An interest in scientific and scholarly research*, and an interest in learning from colleagues in other fields, at the same time as one had a self-critical view of scientific and scholarly work. Consequently, *philosophy of science* became an integral part of Norwegian philosophy.

*An interest in urgent political issues* and thereby a concern for *political philosophy*. Bluntly stated, Norwegian philosophers were not politicized in 1968, but in 1940: For major Norwegian philosophers, the Second World War was decisive, not merely at a personal level, but also for what they did as philosophers: Arne Næss developed a Gandhi-inspired ethics of non-violence; moreover, he had the academic responsibility for the democracy project initiated by UNESCO after the war; Knut Erik Tranøy was among the Norwegian students who in 1943 were sent to German camps, an experience underlying his interests in moral philosophy ever since; Hans Skjervheim was among the Norwegian soldiers who were sent to Germany in the British zone after the War; throughout his academic life he persistently fought political dogmatism and worked for European reconciliation.

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<sup>31</sup> There were tensions and conflicts, especially related to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, due to his activities during the Nazi regime. For references, cf. *Nachlass, SVT arbeidsnotat 3/1994*, University of Bergen (ISBN 82-7733-004-9), pp. 16-34.

<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in a geo-political perspective, these attempts at mediating between analytical and continental philosophy were parts of the common efforts for a European reconciliation. In this attempt at reconciliatory mediation, the German partners were philosophers like Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas.



*An interest in open and enlightened public debate.* Not only did they defend the idea of a university as an argumentative community, they also defended the view that philosophers and other researchers should take part in public discussions and exchanges of ideas. Thus, Arne Næss' textbook on interpretation, preciseness, and argumentation (*En del elementære logiske emner*), written for the introductory and mandatory courses of *examen philosophicum*, was not merely meant to be useful for students and teachers at universities, but also for the strengthening of an enlightened and self-critical public sphere, in contrast to rhetorical persuasion and political manipulation. To take part in such debates, in newspapers and organizations of different kinds, was seen as an important task.

**(ii) *Examen philosophicum* – a Norwegian phenomenon**

*Examen philosophicum* is a legacy of the Danish-German university system that has survived at Norwegian universities – although in modified versions, via the student revolt of 1968 and through various university reforms in the years that followed. Especially in times of crisis, this educational scheme depended on support from the students and from colleagues in other disciplines and, ultimately, on general political support. During the student revolt, there was a common front by value-conservative professors in defence of formative education (*Bildung*) and radical students in defence of critical thought; both had a valid point, and together they served and saved *examen philosophicum*.

We may add that the four characteristics of Norwegian philosophy in the post-war period (mentioned above) may have been beneficial for *examen philosophicum*: a broad conception of philosophy, embracing analytic as well as continental philosophy; an interest in discussing

scholarly and scientific challenges in other disciplines, and thus an interest in the philosophy of science (*Wissenschaftsphilosophie*); an interest in political issues and in political philosophy; and a concern for enlightened and self-critical public debates. These may have been decisive reasons why *examen philosophicum* has survived to the present day. In neighboring countries, like Sweden and Denmark, the situation was different, and their versions of an *examen philosophicum* did not prevail.

Finally, within the philosophical profession, this exam had some beneficiary implications: (i) Philosophers who teach courses in *examen philosophicum* have to learn how to talk to young students, from different fields, in a way that is clear and conceived as relevant and interesting. (ii) Philosophers who teach the history of philosophy have to relate to a broad scope of different philosophical approaches and discussions; this experience is useful as an antidote against professional uniformity and philosophical narrow-mindedness.

## **(E) Philosophy as communicative practice**

### **(i) Fallibilism and egalitarian culture**

The notion of fallibilism, the awareness that I may be mistaken, is crucial in philosophy as well as in scientific and scholarly activities in general, and it is crucial for coping reasonably well with public issues.

To quote John Stuart Mill:

“There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes

of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right.”<sup>33</sup>

In short, as fallible beings we should listen to other people and learn from other people in order to improve our opinions and actions.

In this perspective, philosophy should be seen as a communicative practice between persons who listen to each other and learn from each other. In that sense, the “place of philosophy”, its *topos*, is not primarily the library or the bookshelf, but communicative practice between open-minded persons who know they are finite and fallible, but who are eager to get further.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the driving force behind our philosophical efforts is often due to personal encounters and communicative practices. Quite often, that is what keeps you going! If philosophy had been a solitary trade, most of us would have been less enduring, and probably more simpleminded and less interesting. However, the praise of fallibilism, as a theoretical claim, is commonplace among intellectuals: Self-critical doubt is a virtue!<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, now and then there is a tension between life and learning. Declarations are one thing, underlying attitudes something else!<sup>36</sup> Even worse, there are those who sincerely argue for free and open communication, for listening to the better arguments, and for taking skepticism and self-critical doubt seriously, but whose underlying attitudes and habitus are elitistic and exclusive. In this respect, it is reasonable to assume that there is a difference between hierarchical and egalitarian cultures, a difference that may pass unnoticed on the conscious and theoretical level, but that may still play a

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<sup>33</sup> *On Liberty*, Chapter II, “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion”.

<sup>34</sup> A reminder: cf. Plato’s high esteem of the dialogue, and skeptical attitude toward the written words (his 7<sup>th</sup> letter).

<sup>35</sup> As in Popper: fallibilism, falsification, growth of knowledge!

<sup>36</sup> As in the case of Popper, who theoretically defended auto-critical attitudes, but who disliked criticism of his own ideas.

role in practice, also in philosophical communication. This might be an indication of yet another characteristic of the philosophical environment in Norway in the post-war period, in addition to the four points mentioned above (Section D): an egalitarian and inclusive political culture.

In short, in this post-war setting, arguments were taken seriously, also as counterarguments relevant for oneself as a fallible being. Hence, the search for better arguments was at the same time a personal concern and a communicative concern.

However, at a later stage, with the restructuring of the universities, the commercialization of media, and with the politicized view that arguments are primarily power in disguise, there was a change to the worse, both for philosophy as a self-critical practice and for the idea of open and enlightened discussions in public space.

## **(ii) Philosophy by travelling around**

Philosophy as a communicative practice could be summarized in four points: reading, writing, talking, and listening. However, there is more to be added: travelling, and staying there for some time. By travelling, we see other places and learn about other cultures and societies. Moreover, by travelling as philosophers, we meet other philosophers, living and working within other cultural traditions and under other institutional conditions. By staying there for some time, reflective learning-processes may occur, that may often turn out to be philosophically fruitful.<sup>37</sup> Here again we talk about insight that cannot easily be transmitted by books

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<sup>37</sup> In order to understand other philosophers, and to be familiar with their way of thinking, it is thus advantageous to be acquainted with the culture and society within which they are living, and consequently, in addition to being there in person and staying there for some time, it is useful to acquire some knowledge about their history and literature, the present situation, socio-economically and politically, and preferably also their language. Hence, philosophical tourism is a demanding affair.

alone – a personal knowledge<sup>38</sup> as an integral part of philosophical *Bildung* (formation). At this point, the German word for experience, *Erfahrung*, is helpful: *Er-fahrung*, literally the internalization (*er-*) of travelling (*-fahren*). Thus, *Er-fahrung* is a personal *Bildung* (reminiscent of Hegel), not a question of a scientific observation of external events.

As mentioned above, travelling around, crossing borders and reflecting on what is going on, was already part of my life at an early stage.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, once I was on my own, I travelled a great deal at home and abroad (in Europe), and I stayed at different places:<sup>40</sup> as a student in the winter term of 1956-1957 in Gothenburg, in 1960-1961 in Paris, in 1961-1962 in Tübingen, and in 1966-1967 as a research assistant at the University of California San Diego. Later I had teaching jobs at universities in the U.S., France, and Germany. In addition, there were shorter visits, for instance to the Soviet Union in 1965<sup>41</sup> and to China for the first time in 1991.<sup>42</sup>

## **(F) Philosopher by profession – university and politics**

### **(i) At the University of Bergen**

In the fall of 1962, I came to Bergen as a teaching assistant at the newly established Department of Philosophy. From 1964, I had a tenured position in philosophy and in 1979 a professorship in the philosophy of

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<sup>38</sup> Or “tacit knowing”.

<sup>39</sup> Due to all the educative travelling organized by my (teaching) parents.

<sup>40</sup> This I did intentionally, not accidentally.

<sup>41</sup> Later I visited Russia and Ukraine, see below.

<sup>42</sup> Both visits, the one to the Soviet Union in 1965 and the one to China in 1991, were reported by the Norwegian secret service. As a result, they kept track of me for more than a quarter of a century! God knows why. My ideas have always been publicly available for anyone interested. Anyhow, it does show that I am not a “sixty eighter” – at that date, I already had a political record.

the sciences and humanities (*vitskapsfilosofi*). At the Department (under the auspices of professor Tranøy), everyone in the staff should teach at all levels: introductory courses for *examen philosophicum* as well as research-based seminars for students in philosophy.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, it was easy to combine teaching and research.

Moreover, Bergen is a coastal city, and the university was newly established (in 1949), and so it was accepted, and tacitly expected, that members of the academic staff went abroad regularly. In addition, the academic and social environment at the Department (and to a large degree at the university as a whole) was young<sup>44</sup> and dynamic. In short, Bergen was a good place to be for me as a philosopher. I have never regretted that I went there.<sup>45</sup> The University of Bergen became my intellectual and administrative home, as a basis for my later activities in Norway and abroad. I shall refer to some of these activities later in this paper, but for now just a few hints:

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<sup>43</sup> These students studied for the *magistergrad* in philosophy, a research-related degree, based on an independent and original thesis, in addition to two exams in two supplementary and supporting disciplines – all in all, in average it took 6-7 years after high school, sometimes more, sometimes less. From the mid-sixties, smaller exams in philosophy could also be taken. *Grunnfag* was supposed to take 1 year, *mellomfag* 1.5. However, at the Department of Philosophy, students often preferred to use more time, motivated by a genuine interest in what they were studying – to the perplexity of the university bureaucrats. Three points to be added in that respect: (i) In Norway, studies are free of charge, and students get special loans from the State. (ii) Students in philosophy had great freedom in putting together their reading list, and they got genuine supervision by the teachers. At that time, there were few students in philosophy, and those who had chosen philosophy were special, both in terms of skills and motivation. (iii) For this generation, the job market was not a problem.

<sup>44</sup> In 1962, age 25, the students in philosophy were broadly speaking of my own age-group (such as Kjell S. Johannessen, Jon Hellesnes, and Harald Johannessen). Even the students at the introductory courses were fairly close in age. This was an advantage for communication and mutual learning, but also a challenge, since a teacher is supposed to be the master, ahead of the students.

<sup>45</sup> Even though I came there unintendedly, by the unexpected request by Professor Tranøy, during my exams in Oslo in the spring of 1962.

As a first hint, two activities, directly related to teaching and research at the department of philosophy, should be mentioned: (1) based on my teaching in *examen philosophicum*,<sup>46</sup> I worked out a manuscript that subsequently became *a textbook on the history of western thought*;<sup>47</sup> (2) based on exciting research seminars, I took part in joint efforts to *mediate* between an *analytic* way of working<sup>48</sup> and insights from contemporary *continental* philosophy.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, three major projects were initiated by the activities at the department of philosophy, but shaped by new institutional settings: (1) *Senter for vitenskapsteori*, in English: Centre for the study of the sciences and the humanities, established in 1987,<sup>50</sup> and simultaneously, (2) a research project on modernization processes,<sup>51</sup> and on this joint background: (3) Marco Polo, a program for comparative studies of cultural modernization in Europe and East Asia, formally established in 1994.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See D (ii) above. However, since universities have now become mass institutions, *examen philosophicum* is put under pressure, for instance by being reduced from an average of 70% of a semester (with 15% of the high school students going to a university) to one third of a semester (with nearly 50 % of the high school students going to a university). As I see it, the justification of this obligatory exam for all university students presupposes that *examen philosophicum* entails a critical (and self-critical) reflection on different sciences and worldviews, and also a self-critical and argumentative formation (*Bildung*) concerning a certain repertoire of historically situated discussions. The courses should be part of a “modernization of consciousness” (cf. Habermas) that includes self-critical critique of rationality and self-critical critique of religions and ideologies (cf. the intentions of Arne Næss, mentioned above, D (i)). After the latest reforms, this is no more the case.

<sup>47</sup> See G below.

<sup>48</sup> Inspired by contemporary analytic philosophers, such as Ryle, Strawson, Winch et al., and especially the late Wittgenstein.

<sup>49</sup> Such as Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Heidegger. See H below.

<sup>50</sup> See section I below.

<sup>51</sup> See J below.

<sup>52</sup> See K below.

## **(ii) Achievements and decline**

During the modernization processes in Norway throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century,<sup>53</sup> there were serious public debates on urgent issues, based on general education and enlightenment. However, reflective high-level discussions on fundamental questions were rather rare.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, during the Nazi occupation in World War Two, the major resistance was primarily nourished by democratic and egalitarian attitudes and organizational skills,<sup>55</sup> not by intellectual discussions on fundamental principles,<sup>56</sup> and as a result the post-war reactions were largely characterized by a simplistic distinction between good guys and bad guys, black and white.

However, in rebuilding the country after the War, there was a general willingness to collaborate, to act out of solidarity and in a Puritan spirit<sup>57</sup> (“bread to everybody before anybody gets a cake”). Optimism prevailed, but to a large degree without critical reflections on underlying challenges.<sup>58</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as the university gradually expanded and new social sciences were established, a prominent group

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<sup>53</sup> Based on interplay between state officials and popular movements, cf. *Multiple Modernities*.

<sup>54</sup> Moreover, sociologically speaking such discussions were not required, given the practical nature of the immediate challenges.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. the role of teachers and clergymen during the German occupation, as successful agents in the non-violent resistance, cf. *Multiple Modernities*.

<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the UN declaration of human rights was formulated after the war.

<sup>57</sup> Temperance and solidarity (*Nüchternheit* and *Genügsamkeit*) were the virtues.

<sup>58</sup> For instance, cf. the challenges due to a technocratic bias inherent in the ongoing processes of modernization.



of philosophers and philosophically educated scholars emerged,<sup>59</sup> raising discussions on matters of war and military defence, on political ideas and ideologies, on the role of the sciences in modern societies, and on the importance of enlightened public debate.<sup>60</sup>

A culture for sincere argumentation was established, where the participants listened to each other and took arguments seriously. For instance, there were discussions going on between young value-conservatives and young leftists, writing and discussing with each other, often by contributions of leftists in a value-conservative journal or by value-conservatives in a leftist journal.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, young Norwegian philosophers had at that time worked their way through the writings of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, and thus they were well prepared when various simplistic and dogmatic versions of Marx were launched by radical students at the end of the 1960s.<sup>62</sup> So far, so good.

Moreover, with the expansion of the universities from the late 1960s onward, students and staff members from the classes that had been the social basis of the popular movements now entered the university. Due to their number and to their political self-consciousness (strengthened by the student revolt), they largely redefined the universities, the former stronghold of the state officials, according to their own backgrounds and ideals.<sup>63</sup> In a Norwegian context, this was a

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<sup>59</sup> Such as Arne Næss, Johann Galtung, Hans Skjervheim, and Knut Erik Tranøy, cf. *Multiple Modernities*.

<sup>60</sup> See D (i) above, on philosophy in Norway after WWII.

<sup>61</sup> Such as in the value-conservative journal *Minerva* and the leftist journal *Kontrast* (later *Pax*).

<sup>62</sup> In contrast to what happened in Denmark and Sweden, where unmediated Marxist ideas were often taken uncritically, at the same time as there was less intellectual communication between university philosophers (in tenured positions) and members of the student movement.

<sup>63</sup> This was especially the case for a new university like the one in Bergen, located in the midst of regions that were strongly influenced by the popular movements in the

remarkable event: in 1884, parliamentary democracy was introduced, but the university remained the stronghold of the state officials. In 1968 (and thereabout), young persons from other classes entered the universities, and redefined it, as a second step in this process of democratization and socio-political reconciliation. Again, so far, so good.

However, there were new tensions ahead, not least on how to organize and run the universities, and on urgent issues like nuclear armament and the Cold War, Vietnam and the Third World.

At this stage, from the early 1970s, the Maoist youth movement (*AKPml*<sup>64</sup>) got the upper hand at Norwegian universities (and in some trade unions), a unique event in a western country. They were skilled organizers,<sup>65</sup> with strict internal discipline and control. In a short period, by disregarding serious argumentation and conceiving all such activities as power-fight in disguise, they destroyed to a large extent the traditional *fora* for open discussion among students at the universities, thus undermining the discursive culture that had been established in academic circles in the 1950s and 1960s. How come? How could a civilized argumentative culture decline to such a degree, so quickly?<sup>66</sup>

There were many factors involved, not only the young Maoists, even though they played a decisive role at an early stage. Later, institutional and economic factors were dominant. Here are a few

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18<sup>th</sup> Century (such as Haugianism). For more details, though in Norwegian, see my article, “Forsoning og splid”, in *Humaniora i nasjonen. Nasjonen i humaniora*. Bergen, University of Bergen, Humanistic Faculty, 2007, pp. 44-55.

<sup>64</sup> Literally: “Workers’ Communist Party, Marxism-Leninism”.

<sup>65</sup> For instance, they managed to establish a daily newspaper, *Klassekampen* (“Class struggle”), which still exists, though ideologically changed into an open and highly interesting newspaper – even conservative politicians eagerly read it and write chronicles and letters to the editor.

<sup>66</sup> This question was raised by one of the Chinese translators of *Multiple Modernities*. It deserves an answer.

indications as to how this decline could occur, in the Norwegian context:<sup>67</sup>

First, a general reminder: Cultural and socio-political achievements *can be lost!* The fact that a country has obtained such results is not a guarantee that they will prevail.

Second, in the Norwegian case, cultural and socio-political achievements were to a large degree obtained at *a pragmatic level*, suitable for coping with immediate practical questions. The country was not equally well prepared for challenging questions that demand reflective and enlightened discussions at a high level.<sup>68</sup>

Third, at modern *mass universities*, structured and run according to economical principles of usefulness, crucial properties of a genuine academic culture (as the one among philosophers in the 1950s and 1960s) are put under pressure. For instance, disciplinary fragmentation<sup>69</sup> makes it harder to have a fruitful collaboration between science-oriented philosophers and philosophically educated scientists and scholars.<sup>70</sup> A market-oriented system of funding makes it harder to preserve an

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<sup>67</sup> However, talking about decline and the Maoist movement in Norway, we should add that Norway never got a leftist terrorism such as the Red Brigades in Italy or the RAF in Germany. One reason could have been that the Norwegian Maoists tried to gain entry into trade unions and popular movements (in the hope of getting control), the so-called “mass strategy” (*masselinja*), and consequently they had to act more pragmatically.

<sup>68</sup> For instance, at that time, the labor movement, and especially the Norwegian Labor Party, had become de-ideological. The student upheaval came as a surprise, and there was hardly anybody in the Labor Party who could match the students intellectually and ideologically.

<sup>69</sup> Despite current political rhetoric in the favor of interdisciplinarity.

<sup>70</sup> Philosophers now tend to be specialized scholars, each working within the frames of special professional preconditions, or doing “philosophers light” in public space. Scholars in the humanities and researchers in the social sciences tend to neglect the epistemic and normative questions, related to the question of *überzeugen* (to convince by better arguments), in contrast to questions of *überreden* (to persuade independently of validity-claims). Cf. e.g. Gunnar Skirbekk, “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of Transcendental-Pragmatics for Life. A historical perspective on the late Frankfurt School (Apel, Habermas, Wellmer), in: *Modernity – Unity in Diversity?*, Oslo, Novus Forlag, 2016, pp. 335-354.

academic culture of spontaneous and critical discussions among colleagues and across faculty borders.

Fourth, the discovery of *oil* along the coast gradually changed the Norwegian economy. This event has also influenced values and attitudes, for instance focusing on *short-term solutions through the use of oil money* instead of reflecting on structural challenges in modern societies. In short, economic wealth and intellectual laziness.

Fifth, the general *commercialization* of society, including the *media*, has not been beneficial for deeper debates and critical thinking in the public sphere.<sup>71</sup>

Consequently, there are various explanations as to why there were increasing problems toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, at an early stage, the Norwegian Maoists were co-responsible for this decline, even though, all in all, there were also other factors involved. Nevertheless, there is at least one general lesson to be learnt, from the political interventions of the young Maoists in Norway in the 1970s: In disregarding serious argumentation and academic quality, focusing one-sidedly on class struggle and power relations, they undermined the role and status of serious search for truth and for free and enlightened discussions. Thus, they paved the way for manipulation in modern commercialized mass media.<sup>72</sup>

For those who want to defend the role and status of serious scholarly activities and scientific research, and of reasonableness in

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<sup>71</sup> Today, also the impact of information technology, cf. e.g. Habermas, *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik*, Fr.a.M., Suhrkamp, 2022.

<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, quite a few of the Maoist students, as they lost faith in the Marxist-Leninist ideology and as they had to find a living, went into influential positions in Norwegian media, as journalists, as teachers of future journalists, and even as editors in chief (e.g. Hilde Haugsgjerd, editor of the main bourgeois newspaper in Norway, *Aftenposten*). Apparently, there is continuity: When they lost their faith, what remained was their urge to influence other people – to persuade (*überreden*), not to convince (*überzeugen*).

public debates, there is one major antidote: intellectual integrity and intellectual quality! Surely, there are times when we have to and ought to act strategically, not communicatively.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, the intent to take epistemic validity-claims seriously remains a rock bottom for intellectuals, inside and outside academia.

All in all, in recent years there has been a mismatch between the emerging internal and external challenges of modern societies and the general quality of intellectual and political life in Norway (described in the second part of *Multiple Modernities*<sup>74</sup>).

### **(G) A History of Western Thought**

Gunnar Skirbekk and Nils Gilje, *Filosofihistorie. Innføring til europeisk filosofihistorie med særleg vekt på vitenskapshistorie og politisk filosofi*. (Literally: “History of Philosophy. Introduction to European history of philosophy with special emphasis on history of sciences and political philosophy”.) English title: *A History of Western Thought. From ancient Greece to the twentieth century*.

Nils Gilje came in contact with the textbook for the first time as a student. He has been co-author since 1987. There have been various editions and revisions of the Norwegian text. First edition in 1970, with subsequent editions in 1972, 1976, 1980, 1987, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2007. The latter, in collaboration with Anne Granberg, Cathrine Holst and Rasmus Slaattelid.

#### **(i) Background**

In 1962, I became a teaching assistant (*hjelpelærer*) at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bergen. One of my responsibilities was teaching for *examen philosophicum*, mandatory for all university

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<sup>73</sup> Karl-Otto Apel thus talks about strategic acts to neutralize a strategic situation.

<sup>74</sup> Recently, and more generally, in my booklet *Epistemic Challenges in a Modern World*, Zürich, LIT Verlag, 2019.

students, and which included introductory courses in the history of philosophy.

At that time, there were two parallel courses in the history of philosophy for this exam, one going from Ancient Greek philosophy to the Renaissance and one from the Renaissance to our times. In the fall of 1962, professor Tranøy had the first one and I the second. I attended Tranøy's lectures (he was a brilliant lecturer), and he generously gave me copies of the notes that he used for his lectures. As part of my education, I taped my own lectures (by "wire recorder", as it was called in those days), and after each lecture I wrote them down. After a few semesters, I had a manuscript for the whole course.

At that time, as a textbook, we used the one that was written by Arne Næss, in many ways an excellent book, focusing on preciseness and argumentation. (However, as a student, I had spent a year in France, being interested in existentialism, and one year in Germany, where I had met Heidegger, whose philosophy I was working on at that time; in short, I was no "Næssian", such as Næss was at that time.) Moreover, after having taught for four years in Bergen, I had spent a year at the University of California in San Diego (1966-1967), where I had followed the lectures given by Herbert Marcuse. He emphasized political philosophy and historical situatedness, an approach quite different from that of Arne Næss. It then struck me that there was something to be learnt from both of them, the emphasis on arguments and preciseness in Næss and the historical background with an emphasis on political philosophy in Marcuse.

At the end of the 1960s, as the university expanded, the ex.phil.-students at the University of Bergen were divided into groups, according to their choice of faculty. At that time, I had the responsibility for the courses in

the history of philosophy for the students at the Faculty of Social Sciences. What was subsequently to become a textbook in the history of philosophy was initially a manuscript for those who were going to study at this faculty. In 1970, the manuscript was handed in to Editor Knut Lie at the University Press in Bergen under the title *Innføring i politisk teori* (“Introduction to political theory”). During the first two years, the manuscript was published in the form of two stencilled booklets in A-4 format (student price, 18 Norwegian crowns for each). The booklet was launched as a pilot project. Students were asked to give their comments, and so they did. We are now talking about the early 1970s: students were bright and dedicated, and they appreciated being involved in the project. (A reminder: in this booklet, there were also short sections from the original texts of philosophers and thinkers, in Norwegian and English, but also in German, covering Luther, Kant and Hegel, and in French, covering Plato, Montesquieu and Rousseau. At that time, all high school students, *gymnasiastar*, had courses in English, German and French.) In 1972, the book appeared in a revised version under the title “Politisk filosofi” (“Political Philosophy”). Since 1980, the book has had the title *Filosofihistorie* (Full title: *Filosofihistorie. Innføring til europeisk filosofihistorie med særleg vekt på vitenskapshistorie og politisk filosofi*; English title: *A History of Western Thought. From ancient Greece to the twentieth century*).

### **(ii) Pedagogical approach**

As a rule, the pedagogical organization was as follows: The textbook, with extracts from original literature, was part of a comprehensive approach, with lectures for the whole group and with smaller workshops where the students discussed central issues (often with a supervisor present) and where in turn they wrote answers that were handed in and

corrected by the lecturers (and commented upon during the next lecture when there were points of general interest). In short, the students were trained in discussing and in writing, in addition to following the lectures and reading the textbook (with original texts).

Regarding the textbook, the main approach consists in an attempt to combine arguments and actualization with history and *Bildung* – to combine Næss and Marcuse, as it were: truth claims and arguments should be taken seriously, and at the same time, philosophical ideas and discussions should be seen as historically situated.

Moreover, before coming to the *answer*, the reader should be acquainted with the *question* behind, and the background for that kind of question, and also with the kind of *arguments* that are involved, and for (and against) whom one is arguing, and finally also with the *implications* of the various answers. In other words, a four-point concern, focusing on (i) questions, (ii) arguments, (iii) answers, and (iv) implications – where the answer itself, taken alone, might appear as unreasonable or farfetched, as for instance in the case of the “first philosopher”, Thales, who supposedly had said that “everything is water”, straight forward an unreasonable statement (even on a rainy day in Bergen), but a statement that makes sense when seen as a first approach within the extensive discussions among pre-Socratic philosophers on questions of change and stability; and when seen in that perspective, with radical implications in terms of a secular worldview: everything can be understood by changes within a natural substance. Bluntly stated, to see the relevance of the answer, we have to look for the underlying question, we have to look at the reasons that might have been given, and also on the implications of the whole approach, and we ought to see each philosopher as a participant in an ongoing discussion, as within pre-Socratic philosophy from Thales to Democritus, and further into skeptical reactions among



the Sophists, leading up to anti-skeptical approaches in Socrates and Plato, which again foster philosophical reactions in Aristotle. In short, not single answers, but a concern for underlying questions and possible reasons, as well as for implications, and a concern for how each philosopher could be seen as situated within discussions with other thinkers. Hence, philosophers should be taken seriously for what they say, and at the same time they should be seen as situated, both in a socio-historical sense and in relation to other scholarly and scientific activities in their surrounding (as in the case of the interplay between the new natural sciences at the end of the medieval ages and classical rationalism and empiricism, as in Descartes and Locke). These are the basic pedagogical ideas, underlying this history of western thought.

On this background, the book gradually developed in such a way that it could be read on a private basis – or *con amore* – and thus be used regardless of examinations and of any particular syllabus.

In retrospect, there is a lesson to be learnt from the way this history of philosophy came about: In order to write a textbook, firstly, the author ought to teach for those concerned; secondly, the author ought to be actively involved in research in the field and thus keep oneself professionally updated. Both are required: close contact with those for whom the text is written and a close contact to the subject matter one is writing about.

### **(iii) Other people start using the book**

Our textbook in the history of philosophy, that celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2020, is shaped by the philosophical background and pedagogical setting delineated above, both as to its style and the philosophical approach. For one thing, political philosophy has a key position; the same is true of the development of the sciences, not only

the natural sciences but also the social sciences and the humanities, including law and theology.

Even though the book was originally written for those who intended to study at the Faculty of Social Sciences, over a course of time it was also used by others, both at the University of Bergen and at universities and colleges elsewhere in Norway. The responses from colleagues and students were helpful in bringing about the ensuing revisions of the book. Consequently, it gradually became a general introduction to the history of philosophy, not one that was designed for a particular syllabus.

The book, written in New Norwegian (one of the two official Norwegian languages), was also used at Danish universities. On the question whether my Danish colleagues had critical remarks, I did not get any reaction about the language. However, there were remarks on the chapter on Søren Kierkegaard: the presentation was too severe and Ibsen-like, there had to be more double-reflective irony! Hence, the text was changed accordingly. The original version, written in New Norwegian, did well at Danish campuses – it was even exhibited in windows of the Paludan's bookstore in Fiolstrædet in Copenhagen. That is, this Norwegian version did well until the Danish publishing house Gyldendal understood that there was money to be earned and thus got the book translated and published in Danish. In the preface of the Danish version we may read that the Danish translator had done his best to preserve the straight-forward and easily readable linguistic form of the original Norwegian text (“bevare originalens ligefremme og letlæste sproglige form”).

#### **(iv) Resistance**

However, at home not everything was idyllic. In Bergen, in the fall of 1968, there had been critical discussions related to the proposal of a “rationalization” of the universities, presented by an official commission (*Ottosen-komitéen*). In the spring of 1969, the Historic-Philosophical Faculty arranged an open meeting in a movie theater (*Engen kino*), crowded with people, where the philosophers played an active role. (During the vote, 4 persons supported the proposal for an economic-administrative rationalization of the university, 432 voted against – including a professor in economics, Holbæk Hansen, who had been a member for the commission.) In short, the political debates that were characteristic of the student revolt were now going on at Norwegian universities, though within civilized and democratic frames.

Even so, when the first version of textbook in the history of philosophy was published in the spring of 1970 – under the title “Introduction in political theory” and with sections on Marx and Mao (though together with other political figures – value-conservative, liberal, socialist, and even fascist) – the reactions were soon to be felt, primarily by the professorial elite among the historians (who were experts on power games among politicians in the national assembly, but not on philosophy). A campaign was launched against the book, partly in open arenas, such as the Faculty Council, but also by hidden actions. In retrospect, the editor of the Norwegian University Press in Bergen (Knut Lie) had stories to tell about subtle attempts<sup>75</sup> to stop a further publication of the book, by means of clandestine contacts with the university director (who was a member of the editorial board). Nevertheless, the campaign failed. On the contrary, there were steadily

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<sup>75</sup> Notably, by a senior professor at the history department, Alf Kaartvedt.

new editions in Norwegian, and gradually the book was translated in other languages.

#### **(v) Translation and publication abroad**

Regarding translations and publications abroad, Germany was the first. In 1993, the book was published at *Suhrkamp Verlag*, with the title *Geschichte der Philosophie*.<sup>76</sup> In the early months of 1994, the winter Olympics were arranged at Lillehammer, with good results for Norwegian skiers; in that perspective, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* presented the book as a Norwegian achievement similar to that of combined cross-country skiing.<sup>77</sup>

At that time, we were two authors. From 1987 onward, my former student Nils Gilje joined me as a co-author. The two of us collaborated with philosophical proof-reading of the German text, since the translator, Lothar Schneider, was a translator of literary texts, not of philosophy. Evidently, there are some major problems in translating a philosophical text, and more so in the case of a history of philosophy where one has to cope with quite different conceptual horizons and epistemic approaches. In such cases, there is a need for a double competence, a general linguistic competence as well as a philosophical competence, and the latter has to embrace a wide scope of philosophical concepts and ways of thinking – not an easy task. Moreover, this textbook is written as an introduction for young people, “with a straight-forward and easily readable linguistic form” (to quote the Danish translator once more, himself a philosopher), and thus the linguistic style is important for an

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<sup>76</sup> At that time, I had been involved with a couple of publications at Suhrkamp Verlag: *Wahrheitstheorien* 1977, initiated by Jürgen Habermas, and *Die pragmatische Wende* 1986, in collaboration with Dietrich Böhler and Tore Nordenstam.

<sup>77</sup> *FAZ* Febr. 24, 1994. Title: “Auf der Denkerloipe. Norwegisch kombiniert vom Start zum Ziel der Philosophie”, by Stefan Majetschak.

adequate translation. This need for a linguistic-philosophical double competence turned out to be a recurrent challenge in the various translations.

Two years later, in 1995, the book was published in Danish by Gyldendal publishing house. The same year (1995) it was also published in Swedish, by the publishing house Daidalos. In 1996, after 26 years, the book was translated and published in the second official Norwegian language, Danish-Norwegian (*bokmål*): the editor (Knut Lie) was afraid that many Norwegian students, being used to Danish-Norwegian (especially in Oslo), would buy the Danish version rather than the original version written in New Norwegian. Consequently, when the book appeared in Danish in 1995, there was no way back: it was soon published in the second official Norwegian language, *bokmål*.

Some years later, in 1999, the book was published in Icelandic, by Háskólaútgáfan in Reykjavik, under the title *Heimspekisaga*. This was the first comprehensive history of philosophy written in Icelandic. In order to establish a common national terminology, across different philosophical schools and traditions, many Icelandic philosophers (*heimspekingar*) took part in the translation – all in all more than 20, with Stefán Hjörleifsson as the main person.

In this case, there is a point to be made: for a Norwegian, having a book translated and published in Icelandic is a special honor, since the Icelandic language is basically the same language as the one used in Norway in the medieval age (say, from 800 to 1200, Norse or Old Norwegian), the language of the Vikings and of the great Icelandic sagas. Thus, for a Norwegian to be published in Icelandic, that gives a feeling of being a classic, while still alive! (As a comparison: how would it be for a French philosopher to be translated into Latin, by Latin-speaking

and philosophically well-updated colleagues, living on an island with Latin-speaking citizens somewhere out in the Atlantic?)

The next year, in 2000, the Russian edition was published by Vados Publishing House in Moscow, with the title *Istoria filosofii*, translated from the German and the English versions (the latter was available as a manuscript at that time), by two Ukrainian philosophers, Vladimir Kuznetsov and Sergei Krimsky. Professor Kuznetsov stayed in Bergen, at my institution, during the translation; he had frequent and extensive discussions with us, the authors, the entire time, in order to confirm the philosophical and linguistic correctness of the Russian version (since we, the authors, were not able to do the professional proof-reading of the Russian text, in the way we did with the German and the English versions, and later with the French text). There were soon new editions of the Russian version: 2001, 2003, and 2008 (according to information given in 2010). In the preface, we the authors expressed our interest in comments and questions, and soon there were emails from readers throughout the post-Soviet region, from Irkutsk to Yerevan. By 2008, around 35,000 copies had been sold, supposedly the most popular history of philosophy book in the Russian region.<sup>78</sup>

The English version was published by Routledge in 2001, with an American philosopher (now living in Norway) as the translator: Ronald Worley. The English title: *A History of Western Thought. From ancient Greece to the twenties century*. The change in the title, using the term “thought” in stead of “philosophy”, was partly motivated by the fact that the title “A History of Western Philosophy” is already taken (by Bertrand Russell), and mainly motivated by its comprehensive approach, including political ideas as well as the history of sciences, not only the natural sciences, but also the social sciences and the humanities, as well

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<sup>78</sup> In 2024, 631 references <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=lw0s3o8AAAAJ>

as theology and jurisprudence. Ergo, the broader term is the better one: “A History of Western Thought” – though, not entirely correct, since there are also non-Western sections, on Chinese and Indian thinking, in addition to sections on Arabic contributions and Islamic thinking.

In the fall of 2001, just after 9/11 and the attack on *The World Trade Center*, the fax machine started ticking, with a query from Tashkent in Uzbekistan: if they could be allowed to publish the book in Uzbek, with the purpose of promoting democracy and an open society, and with the intention of distributing the book for free to 63 institutions of higher education in Uzbekistan? The letter came from the Open Society Institute in Tashkent, an institution inspired by Popper (*The Open Society and its Enemies*) and financed by Soros. The following spring, in 2002, the Uzbek edition was available (*Falsafa tarihi*), with a new preface that I was asked to write; and in writing this preface, in contact with Uzbek colleagues, I was reminded of the fact that this region had played a crucial role in earlier times, located on the Silk Road between east and west, before the Europeans began sailing around the continents.

In Uzbekistan, there is a Tajik minority (about 20% of the population). As soon as the Uzbek version was published, we got a request from Tajik colleagues in Uzbekistan, as to whether they were permitted to translate the book into Tajik. Permission was given. In 2004 the Tajik translation was published, again with a new preface, this time initiated by Tajik colleagues (who emphasized that their community had an older tradition than the Uzbek population; Tajik is an Indo-European, whereas Uzbek is a Turkmen language).

In 2004, the book was published in Chinese, in Shanghai, translated by Chinese friends and colleagues, primarily Tong Shijun and Yu Zhenhua, both connected to the Marco Polo exchange program

(between East China Normal University in Shanghai and the University of Bergen, see below). As in the case of the Russian translation, there was a tight collaboration between the Chinese translators (who read English as well as German) and the authors. Six years later (2010), the book had been published in five editions, in addition to an unknown number of pirate copies (which is honorable, since it shows that readers on the black market conceive the book as an exciting one, not merely as a compulsory reading for official curricula). In 2012, there was yet another edition, this time in two volumes.

During a search on internet (searching for something else) it suddenly came up that this history of western thought had been translated and published in Turkish – first edition apparently in 2004 and the third edition in 2006. Nobody knew, not the Norwegian publisher nor the authors. Through friends from the region, we were informed that the book sold well in academic bookshops in Turkey. Then, in the fall of 2010, we got a kind letter from a Turkish publisher, asking for the permission to publish the book. The permission was given, though with the remark that this request was somewhat delayed, since the book had already been out for several years, in three editions.

A French translation was published in 2010 by Éditions Hermann in Paris. Three French colleagues, Jean-Luc Gautero, Angélique Merklen, and Jacqueline Boniface, collaborated with the translation, using the English and the German translations. Moreover, Jean-Luc Gautero, the coordinator, had close contact with me throughout the process of translation. In addition, to ascertain the philosophical adequacy of the translation in relation to the Norwegian original, I took part in the philosophical proof-reading of the French text. Jean-Luc Gautero wrote a preface for the French version.



The same year, 2010, the book was also translated (by Adil Asadov) and published in Azerbaijani in Baku, without any participation on our part.

Moreover, at that time, the Persian translation had been underway for quite some time; in 2012 the text was ready, published in 2024.

In 2012, the Arabic translation was published in Beirut, by the Arab Organization for Translation. The translator was Ismaël Hagar Hadj, who also wrote a preface for the Arabic version. The book was launched as a public event during the Norwegian-Lebanese Cultural Week in Beirut in April 2012. By way of this publication in Arabic, this history of western thought had made the journey along the Silk Road, from the east to the west, from Beijing to Beirut – in eight languages: Chinese, Uzbek, Tajik, Persian, Azerbaijani, Russian, Turkish, and Arabic. In addition, it is available in eight western languages: French, English, German, Icelandic, Swedish, Danish, Danish-Norwegian (*bokmål*), and New Norwegian (*nynorsk*); after 2012: Korean (2016) and Serbian (2017). Hence, available in 18 languages. In major countries, like China, Russia, and Turkey, the book has been sold in large numbers. Why?

#### **(vi) A popular book, but why?**

The question came up in different contexts: A popular book, but why? There are lots of histories of philosophy in the world. How could it be that this one, originally written in Norwegian for a Norwegian audience, could reach out in all these countries, both in major European countries, like Germany and France, supposedly self-sufficient in this respect, and all along the Silk Road, from East Asia through Central Asia to the Middle East?

On the request of director Taher Labib at the Arab Organization of Translation, the following notes were written on the occasion of the Arabic publication of *A History of Western Thought*:

***Notes on the occasion of the Arabic translation of “A History of Western Thought”***

This book was originally written in Norwegian, as a text for the introductory courses in the history of philosophy that are mandatory for all university students in Norway. Due to extensive discussions with the students, and useful remarks and proposals from colleagues, the text was gradually developed until it got its present shape as a comprehensive introduction to the philosophy of western thought. One of my students from the early years, Nils Gilje, became a co-author at a later stage.

The book is now read and used in many countries. At present [2012], it is available in 16 languages, from French to Chinese, from Russian to Turkish – in eight West-European languages and eight languages from Russian and eastward.

Why? There are many books in the history of philosophy, so why do people choose this one? We may rephrase the question: How is the book evaluated by foreign readers? What do they find attractive? These questions were given to colleagues in Russia and China where the book is much used and read. In brief, these are the answers:

- (i) The way it is written: The book is written in a language that is easily accessible for readers who are not professional philosophers, and at the same time, it is written in a way that is problem-oriented and argumentative.
- (ii) The presentation is comprehensive: It starts with early Greek thinkers and goes the whole way up to thinkers of our time. It does not end with Kant or Hegel, or some other classical thinker of the past. It goes the whole way up to contemporary thinkers and debates.
- (iii) Moreover, the presentation is comprehensive in the sense that it does not operate with a narrow notion of

philosophy. It operates with a comprehensive notion that includes main ideas and positions in political theory, and that includes a presentation of main developments in the sciences, in the humanities and social sciences as well as the natural sciences, not to forget jurisprudence and theology.

- (iv) In addition, it is comprehensive in the sense that it also focuses on how ideas and thoughts are situated historically and socially. Intertwined with a philosophical approach, taking questions and arguments seriously at face value, it has a historical and sociological perspective on philosophical ideas and discussions.
- (v) Finally, Chinese readers appreciate the mentioning of Chinese thinkers, and Russian readers, in the former Soviet Union, appreciate that Marx and Marxism are presented in the same way as other thinkers, not overlooked nor presented dogmatically as defenders of “the final truth”.

To the extent that these responses from foreign readers are reliable, we may presume that Arab readers will appreciate the joint presentation of philosophy, theology, and science in the medieval ages, including Arab thinkers and scholars, as an integral part of this history of western thought.

At this point we may recall that the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – appear as “western religions” when seen from a Chinese position. And why not? In our time it is no longer evident what counts as “the center for the world”, from which the rest of the world is seen as “east” and “west”.

A related point is the following: Is there only one way of being modern, say, the Anglo-American, or are there “multiple

modernities”? What does it mean to be Chinese and modern, Arab and modern, or Norwegian and modern? These are urgent questions of our time, and they represent a main concern underlying this comprehensive presentation of the history of philosophy: Conceived as a comprehensive history of basic ideas and discussions, it is thereby already concerned with the discussions as to how these ideas and processes have contributed to the development of the modern world. It is concerned with processes that shaped the modern world in its diversity and fragility, but also with its universal core, common to all, “western” or “non-western”.

It is up to the reader to evaluate the strength and weakness of a book like this. However, there is one more observation to be mentioned in this respect: In main European countries, such as France, Britain, and Germany, there is often a national bias when it comes to philosophy. In France it is very French, in Germany very German, and in Britain very British. On the other hand, in smaller countries, as in northwestern Europe, one has to “trade” with everybody, also philosophically. Being familiar with all the great nations and their intellectual traditions, one is less French than the French, less German than the Germans,<sup>79</sup> and less British than the British, but at the same time, and for the same reason, more “European” than most of them.

To follow up on this point, we may address the following hypothesis: Those who look upon the world and world philosophy from the Scandinavian countries, north of the former colonial nations of Europe, may have another attitude and self-awareness

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<sup>79</sup> This was written in 2013; today (in 2024), maybe less so, due to the influence of English in academia.

than the kind of condescending attitude to foreign cultures that may still prevail in countries with a colonial past.

Be that as it may, it is up to the reader to see whether this book conveys a perspective on the history of philosophy that is less biased than other presentations of western thought, and whether, for that reason, it is of special interest also for an Arab audience.

**(H) Transcendental-pragmatics, gradualist and meliorist,  
and the discussion about conceptual adequacy**

As mentioned above, from the early 1960s into the 1970s there were joint research seminars at the Department of Philosophy,<sup>80</sup> with the underlying agenda of trying to *combine analytic and continental philosophy*.<sup>81</sup> After the inherent dissolution of positivism,<sup>82</sup> various thinkers tended toward contextual contingency.<sup>83</sup> Hence, the philosophical question: is contingency all there is? Are there no necessities? The answer: case-oriented analyses of act-inherent preconditions, was the common approach at the time in these seminars, inspired by the late Wittgenstein as well as the early Heidegger. Case-oriented analyses, based on long-term learning-processes in analytic philosophy, focusing on act-inherent preconditions, known from continental philosophy (as in the Kantian tradition). In this setting, these

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<sup>80</sup> At first, with Jakob Meløe et al., later primarily with Kjell S. Johannessen, Tore Nordenstam, and Gunnar Skirbekk.

<sup>81</sup> See F (i).

<sup>82</sup> Or logical empiricism. It dissolved inherently by the ongoing critical discussion, as in the case of Arne Næss.

<sup>83</sup> From Kuhn to Rorty, and in a Norwegian context, by Arne Næss and his “possibilism”.

case-oriented analyses of act-inherent preconditions were called “praxeology”.<sup>84</sup>

Gradually these discussions merged with ongoing discussions in Germany on “transcendental-pragmatics”, as in Karl-Otto Apel and early Jürgen Habermas. Briefly stated, the term transcendental-pragmatics refers to philosophical reflection on speech-act inherent presuppositions,<sup>85</sup> where the term “pragmatics” indicates that it is *action-based*<sup>86</sup> and the term “transcendental” refers to *self-reflective presupposition analyses*.<sup>87</sup> By making the *linguistic-pragmatic turn*,<sup>88</sup> transcendental-pragmatics focuses on validity-claims inherent in speech-acts as *communicative activities*. On this background, transcendental-pragmatics seeks *universal validity*, also for some basic norms. This is done by strict self-reflection and by serious argumentation (based on a mutual recognition among fallible participants and the ideal of the “forceless force of the better argument”).<sup>89</sup> At the same time, transcendental-pragmatics is characterized by a practical concern, a *mission*, in favor of a civilized society in a modern world challenged by skepticism, cynicism, and civilization crises.

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. the anthology *Praxeology*, ed. Gunnar Skirbekk, 1983.

<sup>85</sup> Transcendental-pragmatics is different from pragmatism (as in James and Dewey). However, in both cases (pragmatics versus pragmatism) epistemic questions are conceived as communication and action related, and (e.g.) not conceived in terms of a passive reception of sense impressions within a subject-object model.

<sup>86</sup> Pragmatics in contrast to semantics. However, there is an interconnection between pragmatics and semantics, cf. the performative-propositional double structure of speech-acts, in Audun Øfsti, *Abwandlungen*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 1994.

<sup>87</sup> Reminiscent on Kantian thinking. Thus, “transcendental” has to be distinguished from “transcendent”.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Dietrich Böhler, Tore Nordenstam, and Gunnar Skirbekk, eds., *Die pragmatische Wende. Sprachpragmatik oder Transzendentalpragmatik?* Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1987.

<sup>89</sup> Mentioned by Habermas already in “Wahrheitstheorien” from 1972. Cf. Habermas, *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1984; espec. „Wahrheitstheorien“, pp. 127-183, and „Was ist Universalpragmatik?“, pp.353-440.

The philosophical confrontations between Wittgensteinian (language-game) pragmatics and transcendental pragmatics were lively and they resulted in an anthology in German published by Suhrkamp Verlag.<sup>90</sup> For my part, in this philosophical fight, I remained attached to the analytic way of working in terms of conceptual case-oriented analyses. At the same time, I adopted a gradualist and meliorist version of transcendental-pragmatics:<sup>91</sup> (i) In looking at different cases of reflective arguments, I concluded that there is a certain *gradualism* regarding the assumed transcendental necessities (and similarly, concerning the absurdity when these necessities were denied or violated<sup>92</sup>). (ii) Instead of the notion of an ideal consensus, I defended the idea of improvement as a regulative idea, in short a *meliorism*. (iii) Finally, in working with case-oriented analyses, I focused on questions of (relative) *conceptual adequacy* and tried to avoid high-level and ambiguous abstractions.<sup>93</sup> Notably, this goes for the discussion of the conceptual relationship between *man and animal* and for the discussion of the normative notion of a democratic *citizen* conceived in terms of *gradual autonomy*, as a personal and societal task – the first point with

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<sup>90</sup> *Die pragmatische Wende. Sprachspielpragmatik oder Transzendentalpragmatik?* eds. Dietrich Böhler, Tore Nordenstam, and Gunnar Skirbekk, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1987.

<sup>91</sup> For a philosophical narrative of the various stages in my work on praxeology and transcendental-pragmatics, see "The Modernity Debate: Rationality – Universal and Plural?", published in Skirbekk, *Timely Thoughts*, 2007 (Chinese version the same year).

<sup>92</sup> Cf. the role of "arguments from absurdity", e.g. Skirbekk, *Rationality and Modernity*, Oslo/Oxford 1993. The *via negativa* by a discursive use of arguments from absurdity (applied to various cases) is in many ways my "trade mark" in this field. NB a *discursive* procedure, both regarding what counts as absurd (in various interpretations) and in considering how the broken or violated preconditions should best be conceptualized.

<sup>93</sup> The question of (relative) conceptual adequacy is an important one, on the one hand related to the question of criticism of scientific or scholarly one-sidedness and (unreasonable) dominance of certain disciplines (to the sacrifice of other conceptual and disciplinary perspectives), and on the other hand related to the question of conceptual creativity (and "redescription").

implications for the normative justification of eco-politics, the second point with implications for the normative notion of politics, especially in modern democratic societies.<sup>94</sup>

In so doing, I join in with the transcendental-pragmatic philosophers in their attempt at a justification of basic norms for civilized societies.<sup>95</sup> This, we recall, was a major concern of mine, from the very beginning, when writing my first book.

In talking about precondition analyses, Kant is important. However, in focusing on historical and societal “situatedness”, Hegel is important, and also Marx. In short, the pragmatic-linguistic approach to epistemic questions is associated with political thinking and with conceptual questions in the social sciences and history. Hence, there are transitions to political theory, philosophy of the sciences, and modernization theory (see below).

### **(I) SVT – Center for the Study of the Sciences and the Humanities**

At the University of Bergen, there is a *Senter for vitenskapsteori*, in English translation “Center for the Study of the Sciences and the Humanities”. It is the only center of this kind in Norway. Moreover, the term *vitenskapsteori* (in German, literally: *Wissenschaftstheorie*) is defined in a special way in academic life in Norway. How come?

To find the answer, we have to refer to a conference at Jeløya in 1975, arranged by the Norwegian Research Council.<sup>96</sup> A wide scope of philosophically informed scholars and scientists attended the conference. At this conference, the term *vitenskapsteori* was defined, and plans for

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<sup>94</sup> Cf. discussions of these issues (e.g.) in my booklet *Herausforderungen der Moderne*, Berlin, 2012.

<sup>95</sup> By the use of speech-act theory and strict self-reflection.

<sup>96</sup> *Vitenskapsteoretiske fag. En konferanserapport*, NAVF 1976, ISBN 8272160013.



promoting “vitskapsteori” in academia were discussed. The report from this conference became the “New Testament” for the development of “vitskapsteori” in Norway.

However, there was a pre-history to the conference at Jeløya: As mentioned before,<sup>97</sup> after the War, Norwegian philosophers were interested in what was going on in various scholarly and scientific disciplines.<sup>98</sup> Personal contacts were established between philosophers and main researchers in other fields, at the same time as the philosophers remained critical (and self-critical) in the discussions with their colleagues in other disciplines. As a result, the ground was well prepared for the Jeløya-conference in 1975.

At the outset, *vitskapsteori*, bluntly stated, was conceived as “research on research”, that is, various kinds of research – historical, sociological, anthropological, philosophical, etc. – on various kinds of scholarly and scientific activities, not merely on the natural sciences, but on all disciplines at a comprehensive university, the humanities, jurisprudence, and theology included. In short, a broad conception. But then there are two restrictive provisions: The special definition of *vitskapsteori* agreed upon at this conference has two main points: (i) They who do research in *vitskapsteori* should understand what is going on in the scholarly or scientific field under investigation, that is, understand what is going on as seen from within these disciplines. In short, a certain double-competence is required.<sup>99</sup> (ii) They who do research in *vitskapsteori* should be philosophically trained and informed. In short, they should be competent to discuss conceptual and

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<sup>97</sup> See D (i).

<sup>98</sup> *Inquiry* was the name of the philosophical journal initiated by Arne Næss.

<sup>99</sup> The depth and degree of such a double-competence is up for discussion, but at least a reasonable degree of insight and training in the field under investigation is required, e.g. to the extent that one is able to be a competent co-discussant with researchers in the field.

methodological presuppositions and problems of the relevant scholarly and scientific disciplines, including normative issues and challenges within the process of research as well as in its usage and as to its role in society.

Consequently, the notion of *vitskapsteori* implies transdisciplinarity in a demanding and serious sense.<sup>100</sup> A specific double-competence is needed. Recruitment of academic personnel for positions in *vitskapsteori* is therefore not an easy task. Moreover, institutionally such positions should ideally include a double connection, both a connection to a community of researchers in *vitskapsteori* and a connection to the discipline or field of research under investigation. These were earnest concerns when the *Senter for vitskapsteori* was established at the University of Bergen. However, at the Jeløya-conference there was no agreement as to how *vitskapsteori* ought to be organized institutionally in Norway: Should there be one center (and where should that be), or should *vitskapsteori* be spread to all four universities?

To see what happened next, we have to take a step back. A major agent at the Jeløya-conference was Knut Erik Tranøy, professor of philosophy at the University of Bergen. He incarnated the characteristic concerns of post-war philosophers in Norway: mediation between analytic and continental philosophy (also as a contribution to European reconciliation), an interest in scholarly and scientific research, an interest in political issues, and an interest in open and enlightened public debate. As the founding father of the Department of Philosophy (in 1959) he was the right man at the right place and the right time, due to his professional

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<sup>100</sup> Politicians tend to speak positively, but naively about transdisciplinarity. Yes, transdisciplinarity is exciting and interesting, but also demanding: one has to know one field of research, and then still another, and in addition, one has to be able to mediate between the two in a fruitful way.

solidity, his pedagogical skills, his administrative competence, and his confidence-creating collaboration with colleagues in other disciplines, thus giving philosophy a significant amount of “social capital”. Consequently, when it turned out that there was no competent candidate for a vacant professorship in music in the late 1970s, Tranøy was able to convince the Faculty Board that this vacancy should be redefined as a professorship in the philosophy of the sciences and the humanities (*vitskapsfilosofi*) – since both professorships were interfaculty.<sup>101</sup> In 1979, I was appointed to this position.<sup>102</sup>

According to its description, the professorship in the philosophy of the sciences and the humanities was administratively located at the Department of Philosophy, with half-time obligations at the department and half-time obligations at an interfaculty level. At the same time, as a professor of philosophy of the sciences and the humanities, I was involved in a newly established committee for *vitskapsteori* at the Research Council. Accordingly, efforts were needed at two levels: nationally and locally, at the Norwegian Research Council (i) and at the University in Bergen (ii).

(i) At the Norwegian Research Council,<sup>103</sup> networking and negotiations were required in order to gain support for an arrangement whereby the Research Council granted money for the promotion of *vitskapsteori* at each university for a four years period, whereas the four universities committed themselves to a similar support for *vitskapsteori* in the following four year period. The negotiations worked out. Thus, a

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<sup>101</sup> Presumably, the philosophy of the sciences and the humanities could be useful and joyful for everyone, like music!

<sup>102</sup> Members of the commission: Georg Henrik von Wright, Guttorm Fløistad, Søren Kjørup, and Hans Skjervheim. Formally appointed, by the King in Council, as a State Official, in December 1978.

<sup>103</sup> At that time, I had been a member of the Council (*fagråd*) for the Humanities within the Research Council. In the mid-1980s, I was a member of the board of the Norwegian Research Council (*NAV*).

*vitskapsteoretiske forum* (or seminar) was established at each of the four Norwegian universities. The main activities consisted of lectures and discussions, given by prominent scholars, often from abroad. In that connection, the persons in charge, at each of these *vitskapsteoretiske fora*, collaborated closely and efficiently, as in a blend of an academic stock market and a travel agency, often trading with international stars – for instance, when Hans Georg Gadamer accepted the offer to lecture in Bergen, what about a visit to the other universities, for instance by the Coastal Express to Tromsø, the northernmost university in the world? At that time, such invitations<sup>104</sup> were less common than they are today,<sup>105</sup> therefore it was relatively easy to obtain a yes. In short, this system was efficient both in academic and economic terms. For a reasonable amount of money, brilliant scholars and scientists gave lectures and took part in discussions throughout this network.

(ii) At the University of Bergen, as part of my half-time obligations for activities outside the department, I was in charge of the local *vitskapsteoretisk forum*. In addition to the activities at the *forum* with external lecturers, I did networking by talking with colleagues and attending seminars at various institutes at the six faculties at our university, not only at the Faculty of the Humanities and the Faculty of Social Sciences, but also at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science, the Faculty of Medicine, the Faculty of Psychology, and the Faculty of Law.<sup>106</sup> In close collaboration with central persons at various

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<sup>104</sup> With a reasonable payment for the trip and for the lecture.

<sup>105</sup> Moreover, for quite a few, Norwegian nature was an attraction.

<sup>106</sup> For instance, professor of law and rector at a later stage, Jan Fridthjof Bernt, was one of the main supporters. At the Faculty of Natural sciences, I soon developed good relationships with various persons, such as professor Audfinn Tjønneland in zoology (we had many joint seminars on evolution theory and ecological challenges; we even published an anthology together), professor Rolf Manne in chemistry, and the professorial troika of Johannes Hansteen, Harald Trefall, and Jan Vaagen at the Department of Physics. When Ragnar Fjelland was appointed to a tenured position at

faculties and at the head of the university – notably, the university rector, Ole Didrik Lærum, professor at the Faculty of Medicine – it was decided (in 1987) that my half-time position, plus a half-time administrative position at the Department of Philosophy, should be relocated to a permanent interfaculty center for the study of the sciences and the humanities. This was the birth of *Senter for vitenskapsteori* (SVT).

A research project on cultural modernization, granted by the Research Council, became part of the activities of the Center. Moreover, at that time, the doctoral degree was revised: some mandatory courses were now required for the doctoral degree and it was decided that *vitenskapsteori* should be part of these requirements. Thereby the Center got a firm foundation in the education system at the university: whereas the Department of Philosophy had the responsibility for the mandatory introductory courses, *examen philosophicum*, the Center had now the responsibility for some of the mandatory courses at the doctoral level. Being a permanent center, with educational obligations of its own, for all faculties (though with differences from one faculty to the next), there was a firm basis for permanent positions – positions for scholars and scientists with the kind of double-competence required by the unique definition of *vitenskapsteori* (referred to above). Consequently, those holding these positions should collaborate with colleagues at the different institutes and faculties, and simultaneously they should participate in joint activities and internal seminars at the Center.

In short, a center of this kind depends on a common culture of serious academic discussions and social co-responsibility.

Now, there are academic centers that are established from above, starting with money and infrastructure, and then one needs to find

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the Department of Physics, and simultaneously as a staff member of SVT, this decision by the Department of Physics did not come out of the blue. There was a lot of networking in advance.

competent scholars with exciting projects and collaboration skills. On the other hand, there are academic centers created from the bottom up, starting with excellent persons and projects, and then one needs to look for money and infrastructure. To my mind, the latter is the better way – and that was how SVT came into being (though primarily out of necessity, not as a matter of choice).

When Tong Shijun arrived at the University of Bergen in the fall of 1988, this was his academic environment, partly at the Department of Philosophy, partly at the Center. Years later, when the Center was allowed to have its own doctoral degree, the first degree at the Center was awarded to Yu Zhenhua (in 2006). At that time, the Marco Polo program in comparative studies on cultural modernization in Europe and East Asia, between the University of Bergen and East China Normal University in Shanghai, had been running for more than a decade.

### **(J) Modernization theory**

At the time when the Center (SVT) was formally established, the Research Council granted support to a research project on modernization: *Modernizaiton – rationalization and differentiation*. At the outset, the project was inspired by Max Weber: modernization seen as rationalization and differentiation, in “value spheres” as well as in “institutions”.<sup>107</sup> The project aimed at a critical examination of the notion(s) of rationalization, in accordance with recent discussions and by focusing on case studies. Main members of the group were Nils Gilje, who later got a professorship at SVT, related to the Humanistic Faculty (especially for the courses in *vitskapsteori* for the new doctoral degree),

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<sup>107</sup> In short, “value sphere” in the sense of the basic validity-claims, such as truth, normative rightness, and beauty, related to the “institutions” of science, law, and art.

Harald Grimen, who later became a professor at SVT, related to the Faculty for Social Sciences (with obligations for the new degree), and David Doublet, who became professor at the Faculty of Law (with a double competence, manifested by his two doctoral degrees, one in philosophy and another in law). I was in charge of the project. Along the way, two philosophers, Lars Gule and Oddvar Storebø, were connected to the Center and to this project; they were most helpful in arranging international seminars and publishing anthologies.<sup>108</sup>

As Ragnar Fjelland joined the staff, with a double competence as a philosopher and physicist, a research project on ecology, technology, and human values (*Økologi, teknologi og menneskelege verdier*) was established at the Center, thus widening the scope, though still within the horizon of problems related to modernization processes. Then also Tordis Dalland Evans joined the staff, a psychologist with philosophical competence. These two staff members had obligations related to the courses in *vitskapsteori* at their faculties, the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences and the faculty of Psychology.

When Tong Shijun returned to Bergen, he lived at the Center, on the second floor in the newly renovated building at Allegate 32. Working on his thesis on the Chinese discussions on modernization in comparison with western modernization theory (notably Weber and Habermas), his immediate intellectual and social environment was the group of people connected to the modernization project.

A final reminder: my interest in modernization theory did not come out of the blue. The textbook in the history of western thought, including references to the development of the various sciences, from mathematics and experiment physics to theology and jurisprudence, may

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. *Development and Modernity. Perspectives on Western Theories of Modernisation*, eds. Lars Gule and Oddvar Storebø, Bergen, Ariadne, 1993.

rightly be seen as an introduction to western intellectual modernization. Likewise, studies of the humanities and the sciences (*vitskapsteori*), concerning epistemic claims (“value spheres”) as well as the way the various sciences and scholarly activities are “situated” in agents and institutions, are clearly relevant for the research on modernization processes.

My contributions could be divided into three sections: (i) I worked on the notion of rationality in a meliorist and gradualist version of transcendental-pragmatics (mentioned above),<sup>109</sup> related to the notion of modernity (cf. *Rationality and Modernity*, 1993), with the major claim that this revised notion of speech-act inherent and self-critical rationality entails a notion of necessity and universality, characteristic of science-based modernity, in contrast to the claims of post-modernist thinkers arguing in favor of contingency and contextualism<sup>110</sup>. (ii) I worked on problems in the interrelationship between different scholarly and scientific disciplines, in academia as well as in modern science-based societies in general, for instance on the danger of unreasonable one-sidedness and uncritical neglect of alternative perspectives (as evidenced by the crisis of the humanities, the disregard of long-term ecological perspectives, and in various cases of unreasonable predominance of special disciplines, be it economy, biology, or cultural studies).<sup>111</sup> Along the same lines, I worked on critique of religion<sup>112</sup> and the need for a

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<sup>109</sup> See H above.

<sup>110</sup> As in Rorty, cf. also the early “possibilism” of Arne Næss.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. the paper “A crisis in the humanities”, in the anthology *Timely Thoughts. Modern Challenges and Philosophical Responses: Contributions to Inter-Cultural Dialogues*, Lanham, 2007; in Chinese: *Shi Dai Zhi Si*, Shanghai, 2007.

<sup>112</sup> Critique, in a Kantian sense.



“modernization of consciousness”<sup>113</sup> in modern pluralistic societies, and on problems related to the interplay between politics and expertise in democratic and science-based societies, and also on the need for education in modern democratic societies, and the inherent demand for enlightenment and gradual improvement of personal autonomy in these societies. (iii) On this background, having elaborated a notion of modernization in terms of different versions of self-critical rationality and discursive reasonableness, I have tried out this notion on a selection of events and experiences in Norwegian history, cf. the book *Multiple Modernities. A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences* (from 2011). In the following paragraphs, I shall briefly indicate how I proceeded and why:

My underlying question was the following: *processes of modernization, one or many?* But then, how do we cope with this question? I would say: we need a notion of modernity and modernization and we need to try it out on some relevant cases.

First, regarding my conception of modernity and modernization: I conceive “modernity” and “modernization” in terms of *various kinds of rationality*. In order to explicate the term rationality, it is convenient to start with *the various sciences and scholarly activities*: There are causally *explaining* disciplines, providing “means to an end”.<sup>114</sup> There are *interpretive* disciplines, such as theology and jurisprudence.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, in all scientific and scholarly disciplines there are

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<sup>113</sup> For the term “modernization of consciousness”, cf. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, Frankfurt, 2005, p. 148. Discussed (e.g.) in Skirbekk, *Herausforderungen der Moderne*, Berlin, 2012.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Hempel’s joint concept of explanation, prediction, and technical maxim, in Hempel, C. G. “The Function of General Law in History”. In *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, eds. H. Feigl and W. Sellars. New York, Appleton-Century-Crafts, 1949, pp. 459-71.

<sup>115</sup> Those working in the natural sciences also interpret texts and utterances within their field, thus there are interconnections between the various disciplines and the various kinds of rationality.

*argumentative* activities, trying out the better arguments by taking counterarguments seriously. In short, there are different scientific and scholarly activities and thus there are different kinds of rationality, to be summarized by the terms explaining, interpretive, and argumentative.

I conceive the various kinds of rationality as *action-based* and as *situated* in *agents* and *institutions*, in terms of different skills and different kinds of expertise. Hence, the various kinds of rationality are spread out into society at large, through education, professions, and technology, and also through numerous daily activities.

Two points should be added: (i) Argumentation is here conceived as a mutual search for better arguments, among participants who are at the same time fallible and serious. Therefore, this kind of rationality, at stake in these communicative and deliberative activities, includes a sense of *reasonableness* in coping with diverse kinds of reason and in role-taking for a better understanding of other persons and foreign perspectives. (ii) Conceived as activities, the various sciences include act-inherent (non-propositional) skills, often called “tacit knowing”.<sup>116</sup>

That is *how* I conceive modernity and modernization. But *why*? There are various conceptions of modernity and modernization, why this one? I have two reasons.

The first one is personal: As a philosopher of science, working on historically and pragmatically situated versions of reason and rationality, including pragmatic conceptions of argumentative reasoning, this is an approach that suits me well.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Cf. Zhenhua Yu, *On the Tacit Dimension of Human Knowledge*. University of Bergen, 2006. Along the same lines, there are act-inherent skills in *socio-political learning-processes*; they too should be considered when we talk about rationality and reasonableness inherent in processes of modernization.

<sup>117</sup> For instance, the history of western thought (conceived as modernization processes) and a meliorist and case-oriented version of transcendental pragmatics. Cf. Skirbekk and Gilje, *A History of Western Thought*, 2001, and Skirbekk, *Rationality*

The second one is argumentative: Imagine that the various kinds of science and rationality were taken away. All of them. Starting with science-based technologies inherent in infrastructure and constructions, in media and communication technology, in energy supply and food production, in urbanization and transportation, followed up with legal institutions and administration, with various kinds of education and professional skills, and ending with socio-political learning-processes and formative public discussions that are crucial for an enlightened and critical culture and thus for improved personal autonomy.<sup>118</sup> If all of this is taken away, we may still talk about a “contemporary society”, but would it make sense to call it a “modern society”? Most of us would be reluctant to do so, I assume.

Then there is a point to be made: *argumentative rationality*, conceived in this way, is a common denominator underlying all scientific<sup>119</sup> and science-based activities, and it is a final court of appeal for fallible and reasonable citizens who are confronted with different views and reasons, different claims and perspectives.

Consequently, as to the question “*one or many?*” there is a conclusion to be drawn: According to this conception, modernity and modernization require all the various forms of reason and rationality. At the same time, an enlightened and self-critical argumentation underlies it all. In this double sense<sup>120</sup>, there is only *one* modernity. Note, this one-

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*and Modernity*, 1993.

<sup>118</sup> Societies lacking an enlightened citizenry capable of an enlightened critique of religion (in a Kantian sense), are not to be conceived as modern societies, according to this conception of modernity and modernization. Cf. the situation in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, and in large segments of the U.S. This is a politically important point, considering the political stalemate of these countries (and the U.S. support of Israeli warfare in Gaza, after September 2023; for the latter, cf. the film ‘*Praying for Armageddon*’, on the impact of Christian Zionists on U.S. politics)

<sup>119</sup> That is, scientific and scholarly.

<sup>120</sup> (i) All the various forms of rationality and reasonableness are required. (ii) Argumentation underlies all of them.

ness includes a plurality of disciplines and activities. In other words, already at the conceptual level there is a unique interplay of manifold and one-ness.

So far, concerning my conception of modernity and modernization! Now, when discussing processes of modernization in this perspective, it is fair to say that we have to cope with what is *common and necessary* on the one hand and what is *special and contingent* on the other. Moreover, in addition we have *deeply entrenched special experiences and learning-processes*: Different societies have gone through different historical crises and events that are decisive for the manner in which they are modernized. Topography, material conditions, catastrophes, wars and inherent socio-cultural tensions, these are among the (more or less) contingent factors that make a difference to the collective identity, institutional arrangements and political culture of a society.<sup>121</sup>

I return to the question: in trying out my conception of modernity and modernization on concrete cases, what kinds of cases should we be looking at? I would say: what we should be looking for are *entrenched* events and experiences that are deeply *formative* for these processes. How to find them and how to conceptualize them? Tricky hermeneutic questions, for sure. My choice is the following: In looking for *special, well entrenched* events and experiences that are formative for modernization processes in that given society, I focus on *dramatic and sudden events*, like war and crisis,<sup>122</sup> and on *persistent constellations*, like enduring class conflicts, socio-political learning-processes, and interplay between institutions and culture. This is the kind of thing I was

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<sup>121</sup> Moreover, there is an interrelation between institutions and culture: cultural values and personal virtues that are appropriate in clan-based societies may turn out to be dysfunctional in modern societies with well-functioning and independent legal and socio-economic institutions.

<sup>122</sup> By Björn Wittrock called “crystalizing” events, cf. *Thesis Eleven* 77/2004, p. 49.

looking for in my book on Norwegian events and experiences, trying out the general notion of modernization, spelling out what appears to be universal and what could be seen as unique.

### **(K) Marco Polo**

Tong Shijun arrived in Bergen in 1988; he stayed for one year. Before leaving, it was decided that he should take a doctoral degree at the Department of Philosophy. I was asked to be his supervisor. He then returned a couple of times, including a long period of time before his doctoral dissertation in 1994.

Throughout this period, commuting between the University of Bergen and East China Normal University in Shanghai, Tong Shijun became well integrated in the academic and social life in Bergen. He gave lectures and seminars and attended lectures and seminars, and he took active part in various activities, from social events to skiing and hiking to Norwegian huts. In addition to his academic research, he picked up socio-cultural codes. As a result, he soon became a popular member of the academic community.

With Bergen as a base, he also had the opportunity to travel, from Tromsø in the north to Dubrovnik in the south (visiting Eastern Europe while it was still under Communism on his way to Dubrovnik and visiting Western Europe on his way back). In addition, he met international scholars who were visiting SVT while he was there, such as Vladimir Kuznetsov from Kiev, Thomas McCarthy from Chicago, and Jürgen Habermas (who was then invited to China by Tong Shijun).<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Cf. the invitation of foreign scholars within the frames of the collaboration between the various fora for *vitskapsteori*, but also visiting scholars at SVT and special conferences, like the one on *Development and Modernity. Perspectives on Western Theories of Modernisation* in 1992.

During his last stay in Bergen before his dissertation, we arranged regular seminars where the various chapters of his dissertation were discussed by members at SVT (Nils Gilje, Harald Grimen, and Gunnar Skirbekk), thus practicing informed and serious argumentation in a setting of good colleagues.<sup>124</sup>

As Tong Shijun would be returning to Shanghai after his dissertation in 1994, we were eager to continue our collaboration. Therefore, we decided to establish an exchange program between our two institutions, with the purpose of promoting the exchange of personnel and publications, and of organizing conferences. Hence, Marco Polo was formally founded, as a program for comparative studies on cultural modernization in Europe and East Asia. In the years that followed, numerous scholars from both sides took part in this exchange program; books and papers were published both ways, and conferences were held.

These activities contributed significantly to mutual learning-processes between Chinese and Norwegian scholars at the two institutions – learning-processes both on the academic level and on the socio-cultural level as a “tacit knowing” by experiencing different geopolitical conditions and different socio-cultural traditions.

In retrospect, we may ask how this came about. Just accidental, dependent on personal choices and interpersonal relations? Or could there have been reasons why Chinese scholars came to Norway at that time? It is up to others to give an answer. But maybe the following factors had some importance: In Norway, as a small European country, one has to trade with the others. Thus, philosophy in Norway at that time was probably less German than the German, less French than the French,

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<sup>124</sup> Cf. *Philosophy Beyond Border. An Anthology on Norwegian Philosophy* (1997), published in Shanghai in Chinese translation, was a result of these interactions.

less British than the British, but at the same time and for the same reason, more European than most of them (as we have mentioned earlier). If so, Norway could be conceived as a good strategic choice for an access to “European thinking”.<sup>125</sup> In addition, Norway has no colonial history,<sup>126</sup> and maybe Norwegians are less arrogant than some others. Furthermore, some oil money was available at that time, not much, but some. Finally, at that time there was some administrative flexibility, combined with order and efficiency.

## **(L) Places and persons**

### **(i) University of California San Diego**

In the academic year 1966/1967, I stayed at the University of California in San Diego (UCSD) as a research assistant for Herbert Marcuse and Avrum Stroll. This was during the Vietnam War. San Diego was a military base. Troops and napalm were shipped to Vietnam. Around Marcuse, there were numerous PhD-students from all over the country. They took part in the anti-war movement. Some had burnt their draft cards. Anti-war movements and student movements. Conflicts were prevalent also on the personal level, in their families: one of the students had a father working in the Pentagon. One of the girls had a boyfriend who did not return from the war; when she got his diary, she was glad he did not.

The realities and cruelties of the war were right there, head on. In this setting, Marcuse with his political thinking and radical criticism of

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<sup>125</sup> In addition, recall the four characteristics of Norwegian philosophy after the War, characteristics that might have been congenial to the interests of Chinese philosophers in this period.

<sup>126</sup> At least not as in major post-colonialist European countries like Britain and France.

contemporary capitalism was an icon, and a great teacher, giving lectures and seminars on political theory and Hegel. Some of the younger follows called him “Herb”, though his style was unmistakably that of a German professor, with his cigar and his strong and cultivated German accent.

For some reason or another, the two of us went well together. Maybe it was an advantage being a Norwegian, considering the international esteem of Norwegian resistance during World War II. Maybe it was advantageous being a young Norwegian who appreciated German culture, just as Marcuse did. Or maybe it was the common Germanic fascination for Nature, or an interest in Norwegian literature, or a common and critical concern for the lack of organizational skills among the local student activists. Anyway, we got along well. The same was true for Avrum Stroll, whose specialty was modern analytic philosophy.

Marcuse, a former student of Heidegger. Stroll, a broadminded analytic philosopher. For me a perfect blend, since I worked on an interpretation of Heidegger’s theory of truth (as a theory of presuppositions) in an analytic perspective.

Herbert Marcuse died just before my next visit to UCSD (in the fall of 1979). With Avrum Stroll (born 1921), there has been a lifelong friendship into his nineties. However, as it ought to be among philosophers:<sup>127</sup> in professional discussions, sincerity and honesty are major virtues, not fake politeness. So, as I was about to present my first paper for Stroll, in a crowded research-seminar on analytic philosophy, he interrupted me after a couple of sentences, with the statement “you are completely wrong”. Anyway, I thought he was wrong, and I still do. Whatever, as time went on, we became close friends, and we still are.

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<sup>127</sup> As it was with Næss and Skjervheim and other Norwegian philosophers of their generation, and as it is with German philosophers.



There were other interesting people as well, whom I learnt to know:<sup>128</sup> Fred Olafson with his serious work on Heidegger, Jerry Dobbelt in political philosophy and the philosophy of the sciences, Aaron Cicourel the philosophically educated anthropologist, the liberal French Jesuit and philosopher Michel de Certeau, and many more.

Furthermore, interesting persons came along as visiting scholars, such as Karl Popper, in clear contrast to Herbert Marcuse, not only philosophically, but also in *habitus*: the cigar smoking upper class Professor from Berlin versus the ardent anti-smoker from a more modest background in Vienna.<sup>129</sup> Apparently, not everything can be solved with arguments alone.

As I returned to UCSD in 1979/1980 and later on (e.g. 1983), I got to know new friends and colleagues. One of them was Georgios Anagnostopoulos.<sup>130</sup> Born in Peloponnese, close to Ancient Olympia, he finished his education in engineering and the humanities at MIT and in philosophy at Brandeis. The two of us got on well together. We even had common courses at UCSD, on technology and human values.<sup>131</sup> Later we have met several times in California, but also in Norway and Greece.

## **(ii) Dubrovnik**

In the 1950s and 1960s there was an extensive socio-cultural criticism of modern capitalism, focusing on alienation and reification, partly inspired

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<sup>128</sup> At one point, I had a problem: the drug abuse among some of the students at UCSD. Favoring cross-country skiing, I never smoked (not even in southern California). Personal habits aside: my criticism was social and political: Students on the university campus, with their privileges, could allow themselves to take a day off. For disadvantaged people downtown, the situation is more precarious. Thus, students should not act as bad ideals for those who were less fortunate. Students and intellectuals should act responsibly. That was my point.

<sup>129</sup> Both Jews, by the way. Stroll also.

<sup>130</sup> Whom I had already met at a Pugwash conference in Dubrovnik in 1975, see below.

<sup>131</sup> Evaluated positively by the students.

by existentialism, partly by a renewed reading of the early writings of Karl Marx.<sup>132</sup> The summer school at Korçula, organized by the Praxis-group of Yugoslav philosophers from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, was attended by various humanistic and neo-Marxist intellectuals.<sup>133</sup> From 1975, these activities were transferred to Dubrovnik, at the newly established International University Center (IUC).

Thus, Korçula and Dubrovnik (in Yugoslavia, outside the two military blocks), became important meeting places for intellectuals from the East and the West, from both sides of the Iron Curtain.

I was at Korçula a couple of times in the early 1970s. There I met, among others, Gajo Petrovic and Mihailo Markovic.<sup>134</sup> In 1975, I went to Dubrovnik to take part in a seminar on Habermas<sup>135</sup> and also in a Pubwash conference,<sup>136</sup> chaired by the remarkable Croatian physicist, writer, peace activist and humanist Ivan Supek.<sup>137</sup>

In the years that followed, I went there regularly. At IUC, there were several courses and different groups. The courses given by the

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<sup>132</sup> Politically speaking, this criticism was articulated by value-conservatives as well as by the new left.

<sup>133</sup> Inspiring figures were intellectuals like Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Lucien Goldmann, Georg Lukacs and Erich Fromm, and not to forget, the young Karl Marx. Among the important persons on the Yugoslav side were Gajo Petrovic and Mihailo Markovic.

<sup>134</sup> With whom I kept in touch until Petrovic died in 1993 and until Markovic joined Serbian politics as the civil war broke out. My last encounter with Mihailo Markovic was in Boston, during the world conference for philosophy in 1998. We met accidentally in the dormitory. He immediately asked for a meeting, to explain his position during the civil war in Yugoslavia. We met and he had a long and detailed presentation.

<sup>135</sup> Here Thomas Pogge turned up, as a young German student, attending my seminar on Habermas' theory of truth. Ever since we have been in contact, be it in Oslo or Bergen or Shanghai.

<sup>136</sup> Where I met Georgios Anagnostopoulos and his family for the first time.

<sup>137</sup> An openminded European *Bildungsbürger* who had received his PhD by Werner Heisenberg, and who opened the conference not by excusing his Croatian accent, but by blaming the British for their awful pronunciation. Ivan Supek invited me to the Pugwash symposium on science and ethics in Dubrovnik in January 1975; my contribution was published in *Encyclopedia Moderna*, 30/1, 1975; pp. 33-38.

Praxis-people were run together with colleagues from western countries, and attended by people like Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, and Richard Bernstein, but also by people from European countries dominated by the Soviet Union, such as Andrzej Kaniowski from Polen.<sup>138</sup>

After some years, in 1981, as the journal *Praxis* had been forbidden by Yugoslav authorities, *Praxis International* was founded, with Mihailo Markovic and Richard Bernstein as founding co-editors.<sup>139</sup> I met as a member of the editorial board.<sup>140</sup>

At IUC, there were also courses in the philosophy of the sciences. One of the active participants was Kathy Wilkes, who in the 1980s arranged secret lectures by western intellectuals for Czech dissidents in Prague.<sup>141</sup> I went there for secret lectures in 1986, hosted by Ladislav Hejdanek – a strange experience.

There were also courses at IUC on transcendental-pragmatics, centered on Karl-Otto Apel. Similar courses, on modern transcendental philosophy, have continued in recent times, run by Wolfgang Kuhlmann.<sup>142</sup>

In short, before the civil war there was a variety of courses, and now, after the restoration of the buildings, there is again full activity at IUC. In other words, Dubrovnik – with all the people coming there and

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<sup>138</sup> Whom I later visited in Lodz and who has visited me in Bergen, and with whom I have kept in touch ever since.

<sup>139</sup> Until 1986, when Seyla Benhabib and Svetozar Stojanovic took over as editors (until 1994, when the journal was redefined and reorganized under the name of *Constellations*).

<sup>140</sup> From 1980 to 1993.

<sup>141</sup> In 1989, at the time of crisis in Yugoslavia, Kathy Wilkes was one of those who established the Central European University (CEU) in Prague, as a continuation of the activities in Dubrovnik.

<sup>142</sup> Run in German. I attended these courses until the pandemic, together with Jon Hellesnes, Audun Øfsti and a Croatia colleague (as the four non-Germans); cf. my contributions in *Herausforderungen der Moderne*, Berlin, 2012.

with the charming city as a suitable frame for meeting with and talking to interesting people – became a unique place for intercultural discussions and international networks, and it still is (in 2013).

### **(iii) The French connection**

I stayed in Paris as a student in 1960-1961. When I was writing my first book (*Nihilism?*), I was strongly influenced by French thinkers and intellectuals like Albert Camus and Gabriel Marcel. Now I went there. Camus had died in an accident earlier that same year, but Marcel was still there. I called him up, from a payphone on one of the boulevards. I had a precise question: I was amazed by the fact that he had spoken positively of Moral Re-Armament (MRA).<sup>143</sup> The voice at the other end of the telephone line asked me back, whether I was a journalist. No, a student of philosophy! Apparently, a happy answer: in praising the French spirit, *l'esprit français*, he right away agreed with my critical remarks on MRA and then invited me to attend his salon meetings on Friday afternoon. I went there. He lived in one of the old Parisian buildings between Odéon and Saint Germain, with wiggly wooden stairs up to his entrance: a tiny *monsieur* with tousled hair opened the door to an apartment with piles of paper all over and with a cat with tousled fur on the top of one of them. Apparently, a philosopher's version of a Parisian salon. Various kinds of people attended – both sexes, different ages – and different themes, but always seen and treated in a philosophical way. *L'esprit français*, live.

There is a point in recalling this event: seen in retrospect, this was a time of simplicity. Easy to take contact, few people around, no security

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<sup>143</sup> In his book *Un Changement d'Espérance à la Rencontre du Réarmement Moral*.

measures, less bureaucratic regulations of a student's life – and not so many cars.<sup>144</sup>

I followed courses at the Sorbonne, by lecturers like Jean Wahl and Vladimir Jankélévitch – mostly on Hegel and Husserl.<sup>145</sup> At *Collège de France*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty lectured for a crowded auditorium, entering in front of the audience through a door that was opened by a livery dressed servant. He carried with him some books in one hand and a sheet on paper with an outline for his lecture in the other. On the first row, *les belles dames de Paris*, and for the rest, a mixed audience of curious students and Parisian intellectuals of various kinds. Evidently, a star – an impressive lecturer and a handsome man in his mid-fifties. However, in early May the same year, he suddenly passed away.

I later returned regularly to Paris.<sup>146</sup> After the student upheaval, *Vincennes* was a remarkable place. Subsequently, *La maison des sciences de l'homme* and *Collège International de Philosophie* were the main attractions. At these institutions, we could meet interesting people from various places.<sup>147</sup> A colleague of my own age, Jacques Poulain, was a local contact in Paris.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> This was a special historical moment, with few cars and a privilege for those who had one. If you had one, you could easily go anywhere, within Paris or in the countryside. At that time, I had one. Together with two other students, a Jewish girl and a former monk, we drove around on weekends, visiting castles and monasteries and other charming places – however, compared with the situation today, our material standard was rather frugal.

<sup>145</sup> But not much on Heidegger. Thus, I put up a poster, to gather people interested in Heidegger's philosophy. Those who responded turned out to be German, plus a German-speaking Israeli.

<sup>146</sup> There were some interesting persons around, for instance (in 1973) Jacques Derrida lecturing at *École Normale*, Raymond Aron at *Collège de France*, and Michel Foucault at *École Pratique*.

<sup>147</sup> From local celebrities like Pierre Bourdieu at *La maison des sciences de l'homme* to foreign guests at *Collège International de Philosophie*, like Niklas Luhmann and Charles Taylor. Also outside Paris, as in Cerisy, with an international setting, including Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, and Richard Rorty.

<sup>148</sup> Not least for the publication of a couple of my books at the editing house L'Harmattan.

However, in the mid-1970s, I met Dominique Janicaud at the university in Nice.<sup>149</sup> Until his untimely death in 2002, we had always kept in touch, both professionally and personally.<sup>150</sup>

#### **(iv) The German connection**

In 1961-1962, I stayed in Tübingen, writing my thesis on Heidegger and following various seminars, especially the excellent lectures on Hegel by Walter Schulz, a former follower of Heidegger.

It so happened that Heidegger came to give a lecture on Kant (*Kants These über das Sein*), to be delivered in the private home of a professor in classical philology, Ernst Zinn. For some reason, I was invited. Everybody was there, among others also Heidegger's wife Elfriede, and even Ernst Bloch who had recently moved from East

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<sup>149</sup> In the spring of 1997, I worked there as a *professeur invité* – an interesting experience, for at least two reasons: (i) Working connections of French university professors were definitely different from those at home: salaries were higher, infrastructure quasi non-existent – no office, 300 pages by the copy machine per month, a lecture room with chairs and tables and a black board, but without chalk. The lack of office, and thereby the lack of an official space for a daily interaction between colleagues and between teachers and students, was probably the most significant difference. (ii) One of the students insisted on getting “the true” sense of various concepts – the true sense, independent of context and usage. Any person who has gone through the intellectual learning-processes of interpretation and preciseness in Arne Næss' courses, could never be such an orthodox essentialist (like the French student in my class), nor a postmodernist relativist (like Julia Kristeva or Bruno Latour, just to mention these two). In France, rhetorical elegance has a high esteem. However, there is at the same time an unfortunate tendency to use literary language in scholarly work and thus to blur the (relative) difference between analytic and literary genres. What is praised as the *clarté* of the French language may often prove to be rhetorical twists and conceptual obscurity.

<sup>150</sup> Through Dominique Janicaud I met various French philosophers and scholars, for instance Jean-Luc Gautero, who participated actively in the translation of two of my books, one of them being the history of western thought. Moreover, from an international conference, hosted by Dominique Janicaud in Nice in 1986, I vividly recall an almost symbolic scene: Dietrich Böhler running after Bruno Latour, by the end of the morning session, eager to continue the discussion and to enlighten Bruno Latour about his pragmatic self-contradictions, whereas Bruno Latour walks away, with steady steps, toward his French *déjeuner*, apparently uninterested in further discussions.

Germany to the West. The lecture was delivered. People sat down. It so happened that I sat between Heidegger and Bloch – two gentlemen who had not seen each other for quite some time. I yielded my seat to Bloch, to facilitate this historical meeting. As among civilized persons, the conversation commenced. About what? Not the War. Not politics. Not philosophical controversies. But on Goethe's youth and early life, talked about in a calm and civilized manner. Apparently, humanistic *Bildung* is not to be despised!

The next evening there was a discussion in professor Zinn's home, for a smaller group. Elfriede sat there, strict like a *Valkyrie*. Walter Schulz started with an introduction on Kant and German idealism. But apparently, the former "pupil" (Walter Schulz) did not please the "master" (Martin Heidegger): at a certain moment, Heidegger began knocking on the table, shouting *aber wo steht es, wo steht es!*<sup>151</sup> Walter Schulz was turned off and had to leave the room for a moment. An ugly scene. The day before, a peaceful humanist. Now a furious demon. Apparently, great philosophers are not always great persons

At a later stage, I often went to Germany on various occasions and to different places. There was a background for all this: The interactions between German and Norwegian philosophers were extensive and exciting, already from the early post-war period. In many ways a special relationship, a blend of historical experiences and philosophical concern. In short, Apel and Habermas with their experiences, Tranøy and Skjervheim with theirs – different, for sure, and still there was something in common, something you do not get out of books. Briefly stated, the war – as tacit knowing, and as a theme for serious reflections. Add to this that Apel and Habermas were invited to Norway before they became

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<sup>151</sup> "But where is it written, where is it written!" A particularly strange statement, since Heidegger himself often elaborated voluntarist [*gewollte*] interpretations of philosophical texts.

international celebrities.<sup>152</sup> (As Tong Shijun once said: one should know the president before the president becomes a president.) Also, add to this that Norwegians of that generation knew German and Germany fairly well, also German history, that for centuries had been intertwined with our history. All in all, a special relationship, on different levels and both ways.

German and Norwegian philosophers met at various places, in Germany, in Norway, in the U.S. and elsewhere. For my part, I shall concentrate on three places: Saarbrücken, Frankfurt and Berlin.

In the 1970s, there was a close connection with Saarbrücken, especially because of Karl-Otto Apel and Dietrich Böhler. In my case, this contact resulted in a contribution to the Apel-Böhler project *Funkkolleg, Praktische Philosophie/Ethik in Hessischer Rundfunk*. As Böhler moved to Berlin (and Apel to Frankfurt) the collaboration continued, notably with the anthology *Pragmatische Wende. Sprachspielpragmatik oder Transzendentalpragmatik?* (at Suhrkamp in 1986), edited by Dietrich Böhler, Tore Nordenstam and me. At that time, the anthology on theories of truth, *Wahrheitstheorien*, had been published (at Suhrkamp, in 1977). In the mid-1980s, both Apel and Habermas were teaching in Frankfurt. Close by, at Bad Homburg, Wolfgang Kuhlmann and two colleagues run *Forum für Philosophie*. Thus, there was contact on many levels.<sup>153</sup>

As Apel and Habermas retired, and Dietrich Böhler and Albrecht Wellmer were active at *Freie Universität* in Berlin – and as Berlin again became the capital of Germany – there was an increased contact in that direction. In the winter semester of 2000/2001, I went there as a guest

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<sup>152</sup> This was the underlying emotional mood in Habermas' speech when he received the Holberg Prize in Bergen in 2005 – an awareness of the early encounters.

<sup>153</sup> Among other things, I was a member in the Habilitation Commission for Marcel Niquet, together with Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas.



professor, filling in the vacancy after Michael Theunessen. Also in this case, like in France, it was a unique experience to work, as a colleague, in another institutional setting and with another kind of students, and not only be there on a short-term visit as a guest lecturer.<sup>154</sup> Especially the *Hauptseminar* on transcendental-pragmatics, attended by Dietrich Böhler and his bright assistants,<sup>155</sup> turned out to be useful for my own work as a philosopher.<sup>156</sup>

### **(v) Russo-Ukrainian connections**

I visited Russia, that is, the Soviet Union, for the first time in 1965 – and for the first time I really felt that I was in a very different country.<sup>157</sup> After the fall of the Soviet regime, I have been there on various occasions, meeting Russian colleagues. Interestingly, in the early 1990s, one of the two governmental business schools<sup>158</sup> in Norway established a collaboration program with colleagues in Leningrad/Sankt-Peterburg.<sup>159</sup> For some reason, on one occasion two philosophers were invited to take part, Nils Gilje and I. People were nice, but the mood was gloomy: Former teachers in historical materialism, from all parts of the former

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<sup>154</sup> On that occasion, I invited a few Norwegian philosophers, namely Dagfinn Føllesdal, Nils Gilje, Anne Granberg, Harald Grimen, Ånund Haga, Jon Hellesnes, Kjell S. Johannessen, Anders Molander, Vigdis Songe-Møller, and Audun Øfsti.

<sup>155</sup> The *Hauptseminar* (advanced research-seminar) went on for 3 to 3.5 hours, often without a break, for 16 weeks. At the very beginning, I was faced with the following question: “*Was ist Ihre Philosophie?*” (What is your philosophy?). Nothing less. To survive one had to deliver. Definitely a useful experience. Apparently, the role of *Hauptseminar* is decisive in order to see how academic German books are produced, and for whom.

<sup>156</sup> These contacts have continued in various settings, from Melbu (with Karl-Otto Apel, Dietrich Böhler, Wolfgang Kuhlmann, and also Hans Jonas) in the North of Norway, to Dubrovnik in the south (among others with Wolfgang Kuhlmann and Matthias Kettner on the German side and Jon Hellesnes, Audun Øfsti and me on the Norwegian side).

<sup>157</sup> Ever since, during 26 years, Norwegian intelligence kept track of me. (Because of the recommendation of the Lund commission in 1996, Norwegian citizens got the right to see the secret reports concerning their own person. I got mine.)

<sup>158</sup> The one in Bodø.

<sup>159</sup> This was in April 1992. The city changed its name in 1991.

Soviet Union, were assembled in what had now become Saint Petersburg, in order to learn about market economy. Few things functioned, from water toilets to infrastructure for education. The participants were somewhat confused, as to what it was all about. Moreover, the leader of the Norwegian group was an anthroposophist<sup>160</sup> who consistently argued against competition-oriented capitalism, in favor of green economy based on collaboration; that was not the kind of thing that was expected by the audience.

Then, why philosophers, in this setting? What were the expectations? Should we present something in honor of the Russian soul, with deep conversations on spiritual topics into the small hours at night? No, they were longing for something else: With the fall of the regime, also the former meta-language had withered away. Whatever they thought about the former official ideology – dissidents or not – now it was as if the God’s eye view had left them, the language by which the world could be kept together. That was their concern: how can modern man cope with the plurality of scientific and scholarly perspectives as well as with the plurality of cultural and ideological perspectives? What language should we use? What is still universal and how to communicate across borders? In short, the predicament of modernity. What a virtue in recognizing this challenge, instead of plunging into anti-modern ideologies!<sup>161</sup>

Somewhat later, I had a contract with a young Russian for the translation of the history of western thought. A charming person, from a privileged family in Moscow, who spoke Norwegian fairly well. However, even though he stayed in Bergen, under our supervision, his work ethic was so hopeless that the project had to be stopped.

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<sup>160</sup> Ove Jakobsen.

<sup>161</sup> Cf. the anti-modern movements of politicized Islamists.

(Apparently, there are closer connections between Protestant and Confucian work ethic than between these two and that of privileged persons from the Soviet system.)

Nevertheless, the project soon got a perfect solution, as the prominent Ukrainian philosopher of science, Professor Vladimir Kuznetsov, arrived at our Center as a guest researcher. Soon a fruitful collaboration was established, whereby Kuznetsov took over the translation, using both the German and the English versions, in addition to having direct contact with the authors. In addition, his colleague, Professor Krinsky, a specialist in ancient philosophy, took part in the translation. In 2000, the first edition of the book was published in Moscow.<sup>162</sup>

The collaboration with Vladimir Kuznetsov became extensive, both philosophically and personally, including visits both ways.<sup>163</sup> In that connection, a visit to Bergen was arranged also for Vasyl Lysevoy – a Ukrainian colleague who had spent more than ten years in camps in Siberia for having criticized the agrarian politics in Ukraine during the Soviet regime. What he said was known to be true by everybody. Moreover, everybody, also Vasyl Lysevoy, knew the price for saying so. His mother had health problems. His wife was pregnant. His colleagues warned him. Nevertheless – there will always be social considerations; therefore, we must stick to ethical principles – this was his conviction. As he later said: hunger and coldness were not the worst. (We are talking about Soviet camps in Siberia.) The worst thing was the psychic torture, directed against one's identity and self-esteem. The feeling and fear of losing oneself. Apparently, there are basic life-experiences that

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<sup>162</sup> See above, section G.

<sup>163</sup> Anders Molander and I were there in 1999.

contradict the simplistic view of human beings as basically being motivated by material gain.<sup>164</sup>

#### **(vi) Nordic connections**

The Nordic connections were diverse and deep.<sup>165</sup> Here I shall just mention two institutions.

(i) In the 1960s and well into the 1970s the institution called “Nordic summer university” (NSU) played a crucial role in bringing together young scholars and advanced students from all the Nordic countries.<sup>166</sup>

During the academic year, each university had various groups working on a voluntary basis with urgent and interesting questions. Then they came together during the summer vacation, at one of the universities, for intense discussions with members from similar groups at other places.<sup>167</sup>

At that time, the best groups in NSU functioned like a progressive (Nordic) *Jugendbewegung!* Lots of discussions, lots of fun, lots of networking. People learnt to know each other, and people moved around – going to Iceland or Finland was not a common thing to do at that time, for those living in the central parts of Scandinavia. The long-term effects

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<sup>164</sup> Knut Erik Tranøy told similar stories about the Norwegian students in German camps at the end of WWII, when the allied forces advanced and the prisoners in the camps in Alsace had to pack whatever they had and march away under terrible conditions. As the march went on, they had to ease the burden by leaving things behind. At the end, what remained were in many cases just small booklets of poetry – the last thing to loose is hope.

<sup>165</sup> As mentioned earlier, my first stay abroad, was at a Nordic ”highschool” (in Kungälv in Sweden), with students from all the five Nordic countries.

<sup>166</sup> NSU was established at Ustaoset, Norway, in 1950, and went through various changes. In its heyday, from 1969 to 1976, Kjell S. Johannessen played an important role, in 1969-1974 as the chairman of the program committee, in 1975-1976 as the dean.

<sup>167</sup> For instance, I took part in a group discussing the claim that ideologies were dead. This was just before the student revolt and the politicization due to the Vietnam War. However, by the radicalization of the student movement, some of the groups became ideologically dogmatic in their defence of various versions of Marxism.

of some of the joint seminars and common acquaintances in these years should not be neglected.

(ii) Around 1980, the Nordic Institute of Philosophy was established, initiated by Peter Kemp from Denmark and Páll Skúlason from Iceland. For the next decades, it functioned as an ambulatory forum for philosophical discussions.<sup>168</sup> Members of local committees from each the five countries had in turn the responsibility for arranging conferences inside their own country, on a topic and at a place decided by the committee. For the sake of the Finns and the Icelanders, this network was run in English, which also made it possible to invite foreign lecturers.<sup>169</sup> In many ways, this Nordic Institute of Philosophy functioned in the same manner as the more successful groups of the Nordic Summer University in the 1960s onward, though only run by philosophers with a professional agenda.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> I was member of the board from 1981 to 1998.

<sup>169</sup> Like Peter Winch and Charles Taylor, Albrecht Wellmer and Fred Olafson, Georg Henrik von Wright and Georgios Anagnostopoulos, just to mention a few.

<sup>170</sup> Habermas got the Holberg Prize in 2005; Onora O'Neill in 2017; hence, the name Holberg tends to be known, in relevant academic circles. But who was he, this Ludvig Holberg, born in Bergen in 1684, died in Copenhagen in 1724? In short, a Nordic Voltaire, a cultural modernizer of the Danish-Norwegian Monarchy. Hence, in 1984, at his 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary, there were celebrations in Bergen. For one thing, her Majesty the Queen of Danmark, Margrethe and her French-born husband, His Highness prince Henrik, took part in the celebrations in Bergen, together with Her Highness, crown princess Sonja, now Her Majesty the Queen of Norway. On that occasion, I (third generation republican) had the honor, as a member of the editorial board, to hand over copies, to these celebrities, of a *Festschrift* with the title *Mann og masker* (ISBN 82-991192-0-0), while uttering some polite statements (in French and New-Norwegian). My contribution (to that *Festschrift*): '*Bergensfilosofen Holberg, Nordens Voltaire*' (pp. 51-57); and later, in 2006, the booklet *Ludvig Holberg. Dobbeltmonarkiets kulturell modernisator*, published by *Det nyttige Selskab* in Bergen (ISBN 82-7128-398-7). All in all, these are reminders of the close cultural relationship between the Nordic countries.

## (vii) China

The Chinese connections are mentioned above, from the arrival of Tong Shijun in Bergen in the fall of 1988, by the founding of Marco Polo in 1994, and then through all the joint activities in terms of mutual exchanges of scholars and publications of various kinds, in addition to joint conferences. For the readers of this paper, these events are probably known, or at least easy to check out. In short, too close to deserve any lengthy representation at this point. So, just a few remarks:

During my first visit to Shanghai in February of 1991, I had the pleasure and honor of meeting Feng Qi and his wife.<sup>171</sup> At that time, Shijun and his family lived in a room of just 12 square meters. Being located south of the Yangtse River, heating was not allowed. The temperature inside and outside was between 5 and 10 degrees centigrade. In the following years, I have followed the immense and impressive development of the Chinese society, especially in the cities on the east coast.

During my visit in 1998, I was appointed as an advisory professor at East China Normal University. So, after I retired from my position as a professor and royally appointed state official at the University of Bergen, after 43 years on the payroll, I am now happy to be an honorary Chinese mandarin!

Finally, as the Shanghai-based *Philosophical Analysis* was founded in 2010, I had the honor of being appointed as a member of the

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<sup>171</sup> For non-Chinese: Professor Feng Qi (1915-1995) is a famous Chinese philosopher. He focused extensively on relationship between theory and practice, and between knowledge and wisdom. One of his sayings, on the background of his experiences during the Cultural Revolution, is the following: “Regardless of what kind of situation one is in, one should always keep one's mind free. This is a defining quality of a lover of wisdom.”

editorial council, together with Jürgen Habermas, Hilary Putnam, and Patrick Suppes.

However, in retrospect, I am above all grateful for the blend of friendship and comprehensive learning-processes that I have experienced throughout these years.



### **Final remarks**

A broad outline of my activities in Norway was delineated in the first sections of this paper. A more detailed description would hardly make sense in this context: it would probably have been too remote for a foreign audience. Moreover, for those who happen to read Norwegian, information about these activities is available elsewhere. At this point, just a few remarks:

(i) As the University of Tromsø, the northernmost university of the world, was founded, I became the chairman of the committee that elaborated the plan for a Department of Philosophy, notably with an arrangement for *examen philosophicum* that included more student activities than what was possible to obtain at the older universities, due to scarce resources.

(ii) As the university colleges (*distriktshøgskular*) were established from the late 1960s, I was the secretary of the committee that elaborated and presented plans for mandatory courses in critical thinking and “counter-expertise” <sup>172</sup> (*allmennfag*). The plan (delivered in December 1969) was warmly accepted by the minister of education

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<sup>172</sup> In Norwegian, *motekspertise*.

(Kjell Bondevik, from the Christian People's Party), but due to decentralized responsibility for its implementation, the plan was never realized as it should have been.

(iii) Moreover, during the political process of deciding where the various university colleges should be located, I collaborated with various colleagues and above all with the personal adviser of the minister of education<sup>173</sup> and with members of the youth organization in support of the New Norwegian language. As a result, we managed to have one of the colleges located in a region where New Norwegian is the main language (Bø i Telemark). Later, various university colleges were located in such regions, for instance in Volda, where I had an adjunct professorship for some time.

My basic motivation for these activities is highlighted through my presentation of the role of the progressive popular movements within the special modernization-processes in Norway, in the book *Multiple Modernities. A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences*.<sup>174</sup> The same holds true for my engagement for New Norwegian language and its standing in the Norwegian society, notably in the school system.

(iv) Finally, I have been politically active, in the public sphere as well as within the Labor party (from the mid-1980s), often critically.<sup>175</sup> My main focus has been the political challenges of various aspects of ongoing modernization-processes: the need for long-term institutions, the need for a rethinking of the relationship between politics and expertise, the need to consider the role of culture in a sociological sense,

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<sup>173</sup> Ingjald Ørbeck Sørheim, a member of the Labor Party. Though his father, a school director, was a former schoolmate of Kjell Bondevik – thus, socio-cultural confidence overruled party affiliations.

<sup>174</sup> Norwegian version with the title *Norsk og moderne (Norwegian and Modern)*, Oslo 2010.

<sup>175</sup> Again, cf. the last chapters in *Multiple Modernities*. For papers and articles in Norwegian, see homepage.



especially the role of enlightenment and of trust in a democracy and a modern welfare state, and the need to take ecology seriously.

(v) In addition, I have taken part in discussions on the role of religion in modern societies – again with connections back to my reflections on religion in my first book, *Nihilism? A Young Man's Search for Meaning*, from 1958.

So, maybe there is some truth in what Heidegger once said: a philosopher has but one question – if he [or she] has any! Or maybe not, for the world is complex and manifold, and in human life there are cases of development and change, sometimes even of improvement, and also cases of new and better questions.

Anyhow, now and then it is worthwhile to take the time to remember what you have been through: to know where you are, you need to know how you got there.





## **Publications**

### **Books**

- *Nihilisme?*, Oslo, 1958 (third ed. 1998; Engl. ed. 1972, second ed. 1998). New edition 2024.
- *Dei filosofiske vilkår for sanning. Ei tolking av Martin Heideggers sanningslære* [The Philosophical Preconditions for Truth. An Interpretation of Martin Heidegger's Theory of Truth], Oslo, 1966 (second ed. Bergen, 1999: *Om sanninga sitt vesen*).
- *Er ideologiane døde?* [Are Ideologies Dead?], ed. and co-author, Oslo, 1969.
- *Nymarxisme og kritisk dialektikk* [Neomarxism and Critical Dialectics], Oslo, 1970.
- *Truth and Preconditions*, Bergen, 1970.
- *Innføring i politisk teori* [Introduction to Political Theory], Bergen, 1970.
- *Politisk filosofi* [Political Philosophy], revised version of *Innføring i politisk teori*, Bergen, 1972, 2nd ed. 1976.
- *Økologi og filosofi* [Ecology and Philosophy], Oslo, 1972.
- *Wahrheitstheorien*, Frankfurt a.M., 1977, ed. and co-author.
- *Filosofihistorie* [A History of Western Thought], Bergen/Oslo, 1980, revised version of *Politisk filosofi*. New editions 1987, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2007. From 1987, together with Nils Gilje; ed. 2007, in collaboration with Anne Granberg, Cathrine Holst and Rasmus Slaattelid. German edition, 1993; Danish and Swedish editions, 1995; from the sixth ed. 1996 also in Bokmål; Icelandic edition, 1999; Russian, 2000; English, 2001; Uzbek, 2002 (new preface); Chinese, 2004 (new postscript by Shijun Tong); Tajik, 2004 (new preface); Turkish 2004; Azerbaijani and French (new preface by Jean-Luc Gautero) 2010; Arabic (new preface) 2012; Korean 2016; Serbian 2017; Persian 2024.
- *Praxeology*. Oslo, 1983, ed. and co-author.
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- *Manuscripts on Rationality*, Bergen, 1984; revised and enlarged version Bergen, 1992.
- *Objektivitetsproblemet i vitenskapene* [Problem of Objectivity in Science], Bergen, 1984, ed. and co-author.
- *Til Djevelens forsvar og andre essays* [In Defence of the Devil, and other essays], Bergen, 1987.
- *Die pragmatische Wende*, Frankfurt a.M., 1987, co-ed. and co-author.
- *Modernitet - rasjonalisering og differensiering* [Modernity - Rationalization and Differentiation], Bergen, 1988, ed. and co-author.

- *Vernunft und Verantwortung*, Bergen, 1992.
- *Kulturell modernitet og vitenskapelig rasjonalitet* [Cultural Modernity and Scientific Rationality], Bergen, 1992.
- *Eco-Philosophical Manuscripts*, Bergen, 1992.
- *The Commercial Ark. A Book on Ecology, Evolution and Ethics*, co-ed. and co-author, Oslo, 1992.
- *Geschichte der Philosophie*, Frankfurt a.M., 1993, together with Nils Gilje.
- *Rationalité et Modernité*, Paris, 1993.
- *Rationality and Modernity, Essays in Pragmatic Philosophy*, Oslo/Oxford, 1993.
- *The Notion of Sustainability*, Oslo, 1994, co-ed. and co-author.
- *Philosophy Beyond Borders. An Anthology of Norwegian Philosophy*, co-ed. and co-author, Bergen, 1997. Also in Chinese.
- *Vit og vitenskap. Postmodernistisk ord-bok om modernitetens babelske forvirring* [Wisdom and science. Postmodernist word-book on the great confusion of modernity], Bergen, 1998.
- *Une praxéologie de la modernité. Universalité et contextualité de la raison discursive*, Paris, 1999.
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- *A History of Western Thought*, together with Nils Gilje, London, 2001.
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- *On Pragmatics – Contributions to Current Debates*, ed. and co-author, Bergen, 2002.
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- *Den filosofiske uroa* [The philosophical restlessness], Oslo, 2005.
- *Religion, Modernity, and Rationality*. Bergen, 2006.
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- *Ideen om ein velferdsstat under vanskelege vilkår*, Bergen, 2015.
- *Diskusjonsvegring og maktarroganse*, Bergen, 2015.
- *Krise og medansvar. Politiske småskrifter*, Oslo, 2016.
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- *Philosophie der Moderne*, Weilerswist, 2017.
- *Three Lectures*, Bergen, 2018.
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- *Religion i moderne samfunn*, Oslo, 2021.
- *Religion in modern societies*, Oxford/N.Y., 2024.

Articles, see homepages.

Various activities, see homepage > links > cristin.

Letters, manuscripts, other material; available at *Manuskript- og Librarsamlinga*, Bergen University Library; Ms 2154, Gunnar Skirbekk