Campfires and coloured shirts

Children's organisations in Norway 1910–1960

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Tuva Skjelbred Nodeland, *A Battle over Children: Nonformal Education in Norwegian Uniformed Children's Organisations, 1910–1960*, Studier i utbildnings- och kultursociologi 18; Utbildningshistoriska meddelanden 11 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 2023). 312 pp.[1]

The wearing of uniforms was one of the more visible manifestations of the modern phenomenon of standardization during the nineteenth century. In different forms and contexts, uniforms were adopted to "intimidate, discipline or show solidarity".[2] During the inter-war period, uniforms – in the form of coloured shirts worn with or without neckerchiefs and other accessories – came to be used as markers of political affiliation, associated especially with political parties and movements on the extreme left and right of the political spectrum. In the febrile political atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s uniformed groups came to be seen as potential threats to political order, meaning that liberal democracies across Europe even went so far as to ban them.[3]

From the turn of the twentieth century, children and young people participated in a range of activities associated with uniformed organisations, including parades, camps and various outdoor leisure activities. These organisations and their activities are the object of study for Tuva Skjelbred Nodeland's doctoral thesis, in the context of the "liberal democratising" state that was Norway during the period 1910–1960. The thesis insists on

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1. Editorial note: Anne Berg, one of *Historisk tidskrift*'s editors, has not been involved in the administration or editing of this review, as she was Tuva Skjelbred Nodeland's supervisor.

2. Jane Tynan & Lisa Godson (eds.), *Clothing and Discipline in the Modern World* (London 2019).

3. Annebella Pollen, "The Public Order Act: Defining Political Uniform in 1930s Britain", in Tynan & Godson (eds.) (2019) pp. 25–47.

the need to consider ostensibly non-political organisations, like the Scouts, as engaged in ideological projects alongside political groups, including those on the political extremes. The aim of the thesis is to understand how, "the emergence of uniformed children's organisations [...] initiated a process where children were increasingly politicised by adults" (p. 33). This leads to two main research questions: first, an investigation of the emergence of uniformed organisations in Norway, their ideological projects and their relations to the wider society of which they were a part. Second, the thesis asks how these organisations employed what is termed "nonformal" education – rituals, activities, practices – to further their different ideological projects.

The thesis is thus concerned both with the ideologies (or ideological projects) of these organisations and the means and practices which they used to do this. Organised around four periods, the thesis takes us from the first years of independence after 1905 through the political turbulence of the inter-war years and the rupture of the German occupation, to the period of social democratic hegemony and the construction of the welfare state in the 1950s. The dual focus on ideology and practice is reflected in the structure of the thesis. There are two chapters for each period, the first of which explores the ideologies of the different organisations, and the second focuses on the practices: oaths, rituals, uniforms, magazines and summer camps. The exception to this is the period of occupation 1940–1945. This structure means that the different organisations are treated comparatively, as far as possible, allowing for the identification of differences and similarities.

The organisations studied fall into four groups: the Scouts (*Speiderbevægelsen*), with separate organisations for boys and girls; left-wing children's organisations such as the Red Scouts (*Røde Speidere*), the Communist Party's Pioneer Association (*Norges Pionerforbund*) and its post-war successor the Young Pioneers (*Unge Pionerer*); the social democratic *Framfylkingen*, launched in the 1930s in response to the fascist threat and connected to the Labour Party (*Arbeiderpartiet*); and NSUF (*Nasjonal Samlings ungdomsfylking*) which as the name suggests was the children's wing of the national socialist party NS. This was the only organisation allowed to operate after 1941, but it failed in its ambition to become an organisation for all Norwegian children and youth. The Boy Scouts was the biggest of these organisations, with over 26,500 members at its peak in 1948, followed by the YWCA Scouts for girls with over 20,000 members (p. 282). The political organisations were smaller: Framfylkingen reached a peak of 7500 members in 1939, which was maintained after 1945, but significantly fewer joined the Pioneers and NSUF. Some discussion of how these figures should be interpreted in the broader context of Norwegian society would have been welcome, though of course any attempt to extrapolate national trends would overlook significant re-

gional and local variations. An important point is that all these organisations were concentrated in urban areas.

Studying these organisations presents some empirical challenges, as there are no complete archives for any of them. The most important sources for the thesis are therefore the publications of the different organisations, namely their members' and leaders' magazines, which are used extensively to analyse ideological programmes and educational practices. In addition, the thesis makes use of some unpublished archive material and other published sources including handbooks and annuals; other organisational material like the Labour Party's annual reports; legal material relating to the formal uniform ban; and a whole range of local newspapers. Overall, the thesis presents a richly detailed empirical study. Theoretically it is informed by the concepts of ideology and hegemony, and the use of nonformal educational practices to mobilise children.

Findings

The thesis shows how "tens of thousands of children became targets of political education, and were mobilised in political struggles over the constitution and direction of Norwegian society" (p. 257). This was not in itself novel, nor was it peculiar to Norway. But Nodeland argues that the practices that were used by the different organisations to build and shape the identities of their members as part of collective organisations were new, in two ways.

The first was the use of visual features to create public spectacle: uniforms, and public performances by uniformed bodies. Nodeland describes the "[s]tern Boy Hird members in uniform standing guard in front of the Royal Palace in Oslo, khaki-shirted YWCA Scouts filling the streets of the capital with torchlight processions, and fist-clenching Pioneers in May Day parades" (p. 262). The significance of the uniform was demonstrated by the Storting's decision to pass legislation banning the wearing of political uniforms in public in 1933 and 1934. This was inspired by similar measures in Denmark and Sweden, where the uniform ban was adopted as a pre-emptive measure to prevent street fighting. Controversially though – and unlike in Denmark – the Scouts were excluded from the ban.[4]

The second means was the rituals and practices used internally within the organisations, typically ceremonies, oaths and pledges to the organisation's rules and aims. For all of these organisations, the residential summer camp

4. On Denmark see: Kristina Krake, "Uniformsforbud, 1933–1952", danmarkshistorien.dk (2017). Available at: <https://danmarkshistorien.dk/vis/materiale/uniformsforbud-1933-1952>; Charlie Krautwald, *Kamp klar! Venstrefløjen og den militante antifascism i Danmark 1930–39* (Odense 2020).

was a very important part of membership, where many of these practices were enacted. The activities originated in organisations outside Norway, and were transferred and translated into the Norwegian context. Influences included Robert Baden-Powell's Scouting for Boys movement started in Britain in the first decade of the twentieth century, but also communist and fascist organisations, such as the Communist Pioneers in the Soviet Union and the Hitler Youth of 1930s Germany, and social democratic organisations linked to the International Falcon Movement (IFM). Such links became especially important after 1945, when all the organisations embraced internationalism.

Given these common influences, it is not surprising that we should find quite striking similarities in these practices, and in the ideals they cultivated. Nodeland sums these up as, "[g]ood health, strong bodies, disciplined behaviour, moral fibre and readiness to help the cause" (p. 264). Such similarities of practice did not imply ideological convergence, however; rather similar methods were used for very different ideological ends. The children's organisations therefore became sites where different groups struggled for ideological hegemony. The ideological project of the Scouts was based on loyalty to the prevailing social order, though here there was also internal disagreement over what came first, God or fatherland. The political organisations saw themselves as counter-hegemonic: saving working-class children from the "bourgeois" dominance of the schools, recruiting children to the anti-fascist struggle, or in the case of NSUF, building an elite group of true believers in the new order. After the Second World War, the Scouts' Christianity, and the Communism of the Young Pioneers became "counter-hegemonic points of mobilisation" (p. 261) in the context of social democratic political hegemony. At the same time, the state became more involved in funding children's organisations as a way of training future citizens in democratic practices. The start of the 1960s, where the study ends, marked, Nodeland argues, "an end to social conflict fought out within the framework of collective movements with a traditional collectivist model of expression" (p. 262).

The thesis' contribution to knowledge can be summarised under three headings. The first is political culture and civil society in Norway during the turbulent half century or so following independence in 1905. Norway in 1910 was a young state, and the 1920s and 1930s were decades of polarisation and political extremism.[5] Studying the children's organisations sheds light on some of these contemporary divisions within Norwegian society: religion; politics on the right and left; the class differences on which these were based. Some of the other divisions – for example between town and countryside; core and periphery – are less visible here, for the organisations studied were

5. Knut Kjeldstadli, *Et splittet samfund 1905–1935*, vol. 10, in *Aschehougs Norgeshistorie*, K. Helle (ed.) (Oslo 2005).

associated above all with urban areas. Indeed, Nodeland's analysis of the social backgrounds of the leaders of the different movements, with references to Kjeldstadli's "class triangle", shows how farmers were conspicuous by their absence. While the labour movement organisations saw themselves as organisations for working-class children, both the Scouts and NSUF drew their leaders from lower and upper middle class occupational groups.

Following on from this, the second broad area concerns the thesis' contribution to histories of education – not, however, in terms of formal schooling, but rather the broader tradition of popular education within civil society organisations (*folkbildning* or *dannelse*). A distinction is made in the thesis between three types of education: formal (education conducted in state institutions – schools); informal ("unplanned and unorganised everyday experiences" for example play and media consumption); and nonformal education, which supplements or provides an alternative to formal school education. It is this third category which is in focus here.

There is certainly a strong tradition of studying education and autodidactism within voluntary associations and popular movements in the Nordic countries, though this has mostly been concerned with adults. Nodeland's thesis deals with school-age children, where the distinction is less obvious. As noted in the introduction (p. 15), Norway was early in providing compulsory, state-run elementary school education, meaning that the nonformal educational activities of the movements studied here took place in the context of a state education system with its own ideals and values. This made schools a target for some of the activities of the organisations, for example the Pioneers' attempts to form school cells and challenge the contents of the curricula. That interplay between formal and nonformal education, between school education and popular *dannelse*, could have been discussed further in the thesis. The emphasis is however on how: the strategies used by the organisations to recruit and maintain the loyalty of child members.

The third area, then, concerns histories of childhood and adolescence. The thesis is concerned with children in the age group 10–15 years, that is the years of adolescence before what for most of them would have been the milestone of confirmation and thus distinctive from the category of "youth", including young people in their later teens and twenties. The thesis has the stated ambition to challenge two prevailing ideas within the literature: first, to question an understanding of late childhood and early adolescence as a privileged state of protected innocence, where children were seen as inherently apolitical; second to challenge John Gillis' idea that the first half of the twentieth century was "a unique era in the social history of youth", where adolescence was a turbulent phase requiring adult guidance and control, and youth movements like the Scouts could be seen as disciplinary tools to

control children, especially working-class children, and prevent them from becoming "juvenile delinquents" (see p. 19). This contrasts with periods of rebellious youth during the nineteenth century and again from the 1960s. In older historical research, uniformed youth movements like the Scouts are seen as "an expression of cultural anxieties" (p. 21); an attempt by adults to protect adolescents against the corrupting influences of modernity.

The overall ambition in this thesis is to consider children as political subjects in their own right. It shows how childhood became a political category at a time when youth itself was often glorified in political discourse. It also shows "how different and contradictory ideas about childhood co-existed and competed in Norway between 1910 and 1960" (p. 267) and thus contributes to nuancing understandings of childhood and adolescence as a historical category. The sources used here can only provide glimpses of children's own experiences of these movements, however, and it would be worthwhile to consider how written memoirs or even oral history might cast further light on this.

The thesis could have been bolder, moreover, in drawing broader conclusions and placing them into a wider context. What do these organisations tell us about Norwegian democracy? Despite the existence of political extremism in Norway, we know of course in hindsight that Norway did not experience a communist revolution in the 1920s, and its democratic institutions also survived the challenge from the far right. NSUF failed in its project to mobilise Norwegian youth during the years 1940–1945, despite its organisational monopoly. The apparent robustness of Norwegian and indeed the Nordic democracies has been a topic for extensive research and debate, where in particular the role of the popular movements as "schools for democracy", forging political consensus, has been debated. How do these children's organisations fit into that - did they amplify political extremism or did they help to contain it? Why did NSUF's project ultimately fail? And why did Norwegian democracy survive – was it an accident of historical contingency, or was it due to deep-rooted traditions of pragmatism, amounting to a Nordic *Sonderweg*?

Overall, Tuva Skjelbred Nodeland's thesis breaks new ground as a rich, empirically detailed study of uniformed children's organisations across the ideological spectrum – ranging from NSUF to the Scouts to the Communist Pioneers. It is based on a thorough investigation not only of the ideological projects of these organisations, but also the "nonformal education" practices that were used, such as oaths and rituals, activities like summer camps and uniforms. The thesis is thoroughly and competently researched, and moreover clearly organised and well-written. It raises interesting questions and provides valuable new perspectives on central topics such as the role

of popular movements in Norwegian democracy, democracy and political extremism and children as historical subjects. The role of uniformed youth organisations and their nonformal educational practices is potentially relevant in relation to contemporary questions, for example to do with adult anxieties about how children spend their time in front of screens or out of doors; or the measures that democracies need to take to protect themselves, like banning political uniforms or other activities considered provocative. These are important questions, and Nodeland's thesis makes an important contribution to our understanding of them.