A darker shade of pale: Cultural intimacy in an age of terrorism

Guest Editorial by Thomas Hylland Eriksen

Oslo, 5 August 2011: It was a grim and rainy day as I made my way to the harbour to catch the local ferry to Nesodden, a community which had lost two of its brightest stars – Bano Rashid, 18, and Diderik Aamodt Olsen, 19 – in the terrorist attack of 22 July, in which right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik detonated a bomb in Oslo, killing eight people, and shot dead 69 more at a Young Labour (AUF) summer camp on the small island of Utøya. On this Friday alone, more than 30 memorial services for Utøya victims were taking place across the country, and I had been asked to speak at Diderik’s service. I had met him once, this spring, when I gave a talk on nationalism and minorities to AUF members, and I remembered his sensible and critical contributions to the subsequent discussion. Diderik had a place at the University of Oslo, which he was due to take up in August. At the memorial service, an image emerged of a caring, intelligent, knowledgeable young man, passionate about history and committed to diversity, whose last activity at Utøya before he was slaughtered had been to fry wafers at an outdoor stall in a safari hat and a flowery apron.

The secular service, which was held in the large community hall (Samfunnshuset) at Nesodden, was unusually well attended, as were all the services for Utøya victims. I shared some whispered words and a hug with the minister of culture, Anniken Huitfeldt, a former chair of the AUF, before it began. The event was highly emotionally charged. Even Mayor Christian Holm, who presided over the proceedings, a cheerful man with a grey ponytail testifying to a hippie past, eventually broke down in tears. The sense of belonging to a metaphorical family was overwhelming, reminding me of Benedict Anderson’s analysis of the tomb of the unknown soldier, and how it connects the abstract nation to personal experience (Anderson 1983).

The collective shock experienced by Norway as the extent of the catastrophe became known quickly gave way to profound expressions of a compassion shared, it seemed, by the entire population. There was almost unanimous consensus that the country’s leadership – political, religious, and royal – had handled the crisis in an empathetic and appropriate way. A few days after the attacks, an estimated 200,000 people attended a memorial event held outside the town hall in Oslo to show their sympathy; to lay red roses for the victims (the red rose is a symbol of the Labour Party), and to hear impassioned speeches from Prince Haakon Magnus, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg and others. It was the middle of the Norwegian holiday season, and the capital would normally have been deserted, but more than a third of the city’s population participated in this secular ritual, marking the country’s darkest hour and celebrating its ‘unity in diversity’, as Prince Haakon, a liberal man with strong anti-racist views, put it.

The public displays of compassion and grief that took place across Norway in the days and weeks following Breivik’s attacks soon caught the attention of the international media. Having spent the first days contrasting stereotypes of a serene, slightly boring Norway with the brutality of the attacks, foreign media now began to focus on the Norwegian reactions. Rather than stirring up aggression and calling for revenge, Norway’s leaders and its public were performing rituals affirming the openness and democratic nature of Norwegian society, the compassion and solidarity uniting its population. It was almost as if Norway had been struck by a tsunami, not a terrorist attack. Journalists from around the world asked domestic experts like myself for an explanation, usually claiming that in their country, the public reaction would have been angrier and more vengeful.

The response would almost certainly have been different if the perpetrator had been a militant Muslim group. In the hours after the Oslo explosion, before the shootings at Utøya were...
known, it quickly became a form of tacit common knowledge that an Islamist terrorist group was responsible. By late afternoon, Muslims\textsuperscript{2} were already being harassed on the streets of Oslo, and some terrorism experts on television were intimating that the attack bore the hallmarks of an al-Qaeda operation.

Norwegian nationalism has several scripts readily available for responding to foreign invaders and enemies. It is far more difficult to make sense culturally of a terrorist who is 100\% Made in Norway, and to frame his actions within a known narrative. Since to many Norwegians, Norway signifies inherent goodness (Witoszek 2011), it has been tempting to view Breivik as an isolated madman. Yet it is impossible to deny that he developed his Manichean worldview in an ideological universe shared by many Norwegians (and other Europeans), according to which there is an irreconcilable conflict between the West and Islam. As we try to understand the powerful displays of solidarity after 22 July, it is important to keep in mind the fact that this was a homegrown kind of terrorism.

On the face of it, Breivik was an utterly unremarkable man from the leafy western suburbs of Oslo. However, he never completed an education, failed in his business ventures and must have been perceived as something of a failure in his middle-class surroundings. Studies of right-wing extremism and militant identity politics tend to show that recruits often have a background in the lower middle class and a strong sense of injustice and de facto disenfranchisement, usually tinged with conspiratorial leanings (Holmes 2000). Yet, of course, many find themselves in a structurally identical position to Breivik without becoming violent.

Whatever Breivik's personal motivations, his actions remind us of the importance of recognizing the presence of Islamicophobic tendencies in Norwegian society. Anthropologists have been writing about European Islamophobia for years (Bangstad & Bunzl 2010; Bowen 2011; Bunzl 2007; Gingrich 2005), but rarely as a security threat from within. Recruitment to contemporary far-right militant circles follows a very different logic to that of old-fashioned extremist movements. This is partly why the Norwegian Police Security Service had not hitherto viewed the new right wing as a security threat. These militants do not have organizations and membership lists, indeed they do not even share a coherent ideology. What they have in common is a conviction that their government is betraying the nation by allowing Muslims to settle in Norway, since, in their view, Islam is incompatible with democracy and modernity. The logical implication of this view, propagated via a forest of contemporary far-right organizations, is that to many Norwegians (and other Europeans), according to which there is an irreconcilable conflict between the West and Islam. As we try to understand the powerful displays of solidarity after 22 July, it is important to keep in mind the fact that this was a homegrown kind of terrorism.

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