

After I Lived in Norway, America Felt Backward. Here's Why.

A crash course in social democracy.

By Ann Jones

JANUARY 28, 2016



Citizens of Oslo celebrate Syttende Mai (May Seventeenth), Norway's national day commemorating the adoption of its Constitution. (*Ann Jones*)

Some years ago, I faced up to the **futility** of reporting truths about America's disastrous wars, and so I left Afghanistan for another mountainous country far away. It was the polar opposite of Afghanistan: a peaceful, prosperous land where nearly everybody seemed to enjoy a good life, on the job and in the family.

*This is a joint Nation/TomDispatch article and will appear on **TomDispatch.com**.*

It's true that they didn't work much—not by American standards, anyway. In the United States, full-time salaried workers supposedly laboring 40 hours a week **actually average 49**, with almost 20 percent clocking more than 60. These people, on the other hand, worked only about **37 hours a week**, when they weren't away on long paid vacations. At the end of the workday, about four in the afternoon (perhaps three during the summer), they had time to enjoy a hike in the forest, a swim with the kids, or a beer with friends—which helps explain why, unlike so many Americans, they are pleased with their jobs.

Often I was invited to go along. I found it refreshing to hike and ski in a country with no land mines, and to hang out in cafés unlikely to be bombed. Gradually, my war-zone jitters subsided and I settled into the slow, calm, pleasantly uneventful stream of life there.

Four years on, thinking I should settle down, I returned to the United States. It felt quite a lot like stepping back into that other violent, impoverished world, where anxiety runs high and people are quarrelsome. I had, in fact, come back to the flip side of Afghanistan and Iraq: to what America's wars have done to America. Where I live now, in the homeland, there are not enough shelters for the homeless. Most people are either overworked or hurting for jobs; the housing is overpriced, the hospitals crowded and understaffed, the schools largely segregated and not so good. Opioid or heroin overdose is a popular form of death, and men in the street threaten women wearing hijabs. Did the American soldiers I covered in Afghanistan know they were fighting for this?

DUCKING THE SUBJECT

One night I tuned in to the Democrats' presidential debate to see if they had any plans to restore the America I used to know. To my amazement, I heard the name of my peaceful mountain hideaway: Norway. Bernie Sanders was denouncing America's crooked version of "casino capitalism" that floats the already-rich ever higher and flushes the working class. He said that we ought to "look to countries like Denmark, like Sweden and Norway, and learn from what they have accomplished for their working people."

Welfare State

In countries with lower levels of political, economic, and social inequality, mothers and their children lead healthier, happier lives. (The US is #33 on the list.)



1. NORWAY
2. FINLAND
3. ICELAND
4. DENMARK
5. SWEDEN
6. NETHERLANDS
7. SPAIN
8. GERMANY
9. AUSTRALIA
10. BELGIUM



170. SIERRA LEONE / HAITI
171. GUINEA-BISSAU
172. CHAD
173. CÔTE D'IVOIRE
174. GAMBIA
175. NIGER
176. MALI
177. CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
178. DR CONGO

1 IN 12,160

WOMEN DIE OF A
MATERNAL CAUSE



MATERNAL HEALTH

A mother's lifetime risk of
dying as a result of
pregnancy or childbirth

1 IN 30

WOMEN DIE OF A
MATERNAL CAUSE

1 IN 290

CHILDREN DIE
BEFORE AGE 5



CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

A child's risk of dying
before their fifth birthday

1 IN 8

CHILDREN DIE
BEFORE AGE 5

He believes, he added, in “a society where all people do well. Not just a handful of billionaires.” That certainly sounds like Norway. For ages, they’ve worked at producing things for the use of everyone—not the profit of a few—so I was all ears, waiting for Sanders to spell it out for Americans.

But Hillary Clinton quickly countered, “We are not Denmark.” Smiling, she said, “I love Denmark,” and then delivered a patriotic punch line: “We are the United States of America.” (Well, there’s no denying that.) She also praised capitalism and “all the small businesses that were started because we have the opportunity and the freedom in our country for people to do that and to make a good living for themselves and their families.” She didn’t seem to know that Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians do that too, and with much higher rates of success.

The truth is that almost a quarter of American start-ups are not founded on brilliant new ideas, but on the desperation of men or women who can’t get a decent job. The majority of all American enterprises are solo ventures having zero payrolls, employing no one but the entrepreneur, and often quickly wasting away. Sanders said that he was all for small business too, but that meant nothing “if all of the new income and wealth is going to the top 1 percent.” (As George Carlin said, “The reason they call it the American Dream is because you have to be asleep to believe it.”)

In that debate, no more was heard of Denmark, Sweden, or Norway. The audience was left in the dark. Later, in a speech at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, Sanders tried to clarify his identity as a democratic socialist. He said he’s not the kind of socialist (with a capital S) who favors state ownership of the means of production. The Norwegian government, on the other hand, owns the means of producing lots of public assets and is the major stockholder in many a vital private enterprise.

I was dumbfounded. Norway, Denmark, and Sweden practice variations of a system that works much better than ours. Yet even the Democratic presidential candidates, who say they love or want to learn from those countries, don’t seem know how they actually work.

WHY WE’RE NOT DENMARK

Proof that they do work is delivered every year in data-rich evaluations by the United Nations and other international bodies. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's **annual report** on international well-being, for example, measures 11 factors, ranging from material conditions such as affordable housing and employment to quality-of-life matters like education, health, life expectancy, voter participation, and overall citizen satisfaction. Year after year, all the Nordic countries cluster at the top, while the United States lags far behind. In addition, Norway has **ranked first** on the UN Development Program's Human Development Index for 12 of the last 15 years, and it consistently tops international comparisons in such areas as democracy, civil and political rights, and freedom of expression and the press.

The Nordic model starts with a deep commitment to equality and democracy, because you can't have one without the other.

What is it, though, that makes the Scandinavians so different? Since the Democrats can't tell you and the Republicans wouldn't want you to know, let me offer you a quick introduction. What Scandinavians call the Nordic model is a smart and simple system that starts with a deep commitment to equality and democracy. That's two concepts combined in a single goal because, as far as they're concerned, you can't have one without the other.

Right there, they part company with capitalist America, now the most unequal of all the developed nations, and consequently a democracy no more. Political scientists say it has become an oligarchy, run at the expense of its citizenry by and for the superrich. Perhaps you've noticed that.

In the last century, Scandinavians, aiming for their egalitarian goal, refused to settle solely for any of the ideologies competing for power—not capitalism or fascism, not Marxist socialism or communism. Geographically stuck between powerful nations waging hot and cold wars for such doctrines, Scandinavians set out to find a middle path. That path was contested—by socialist-inspired workers on the one hand, and by capitalist owners and their elite cronies on the other—but in the end, it led to a mixed economy. Thanks largely to the solidarity and savvy of organized labor and the political parties it backed, the long struggle produced a system that makes capitalism more or less cooperative, and then redistributes equitably the wealth it helps to produce. Struggles like this took place around the world in the 20th century, but the

Scandinavians alone managed to combine the best ideas of both camps while chucking out the worst.

In 1936, the popular US journalist Marquis Childs first described the result to Americans in the book *Sweden: The Middle Way*. Since then, all the Scandinavian countries, and their Nordic neighbors Finland and Iceland, have been improving upon that hybrid system. Today in Norway, negotiations between the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions and the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise determine the wages and working conditions of most capitalist enterprises, public and private, that create wealth, while high but fair progressive income taxes fund the state's universal welfare system, benefiting everyone. In addition, those confederations work together to minimize the disparity between high-wage and lower-wage jobs. As a result, Norway ranks with Sweden, Denmark, and Finland as among the most income-equal countries in the world, and its standard of living tops the charts.

Nordic countries give their populations freedom from the market by using capitalism as a tool to benefit everyone.

So here's the big difference: In Norway, capitalism serves the people. The government, elected by the people, sees to that. All eight of the parties that won parliamentary seats in the last national election—including the conservative Høyre party now leading the government—are committed to maintaining the welfare state. In the United States, however, neoliberal politics puts the foxes in charge of the henhouse, and capitalists have used the wealth generated by their enterprises (as well as financial and political manipulations) to capture the state and pluck the chickens.

They've done a masterful job of chewing up organized labor. Today, only 11 percent of American workers belong to a union. In Norway, that number is 52 percent; in Denmark, 67 percent; in Sweden, 70 percent. Thus, in the United States, oligarchs maximize their wealth and keep it, using the "democratically elected" government to shape policies and laws favorable to the interests of their foxy class. They bamboozle the people by insisting, as Hillary Clinton did at that debate, that all of us have the "freedom" to create a business in the "free" marketplace, which implies that being hard up is our own fault.

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In the Nordic countries, on the other hand, democratically elected governments give their populations freedom *from* the market by using capitalism as a tool to benefit everyone. That liberates their people from the tyranny of the mighty profit motive that warps so many American lives, leaving them freer to follow their own dreams—to become poets or philosophers, bartenders or business owners, as they please.

FAMILY MATTERS

Maybe our politicians don't want to talk about the Nordic model because it shows so clearly that capitalism can be put to work for the many, not just the few.

Consider the Norwegian welfare state. It's universal. In other words, aid to the sick or the elderly is not charity, grudgingly donated by elites to those in need. It is the right of every individual citizen. That includes every woman, whether or not she is somebody's wife, and every child, no matter its parentage. Treating every person as a citizen frees each one from being legally possessed by another—a husband, for example, or a tyrannical father.

Which brings us to the heart of Scandinavian democracy: the equality of women and men. In the 1970s, Norwegian feminists marched into politics and picked up the pace of democratic change. Norway needed a larger labor force, and women were the answer. Housewives moved into paid work on equal footing with men, nearly doubling the tax base. That has, in fact, meant more to Norwegian prosperity than the coincidental discovery of North Atlantic oil reserves. The Ministry of Finance recently calculated that those additional working mothers add to Norway's net national wealth a value equivalent to its "total petroleum wealth"—currently held in the world's largest sovereign-wealth fund, worth over \$873 billion. By 1981, women were sitting in parliament, in the prime minister's chair, and in her cabinet.

American feminists also marched for such goals in the 1970s, but the big boys, busy with their own White House intrigues, initiated a war on women that set the country back and still rages today in brutal attacks on women's basic civil rights, healthcare, and reproductive freedom. In 1971, thanks to the hard work of organized feminists, Congress passed the bipartisan

Comprehensive Child Development Bill to establish a multibillion-dollar national daycare system for the children of working parents. In 1972, President Richard Nixon vetoed it, and that was that. In 1972, Congress also passed a bill (first proposed in 1923) to amend the Constitution to grant equal rights of citizenship to women. Ratified by only 35 states—three short of the required 38—that Equal Rights Amendment was declared dead in 1982, leaving American women in legal limbo. In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, obliterating six decades of US social-welfare policy “as we know it,” ending federal cash payments to the nation’s poor, and consigning millions of female heads of household **and their children** to poverty, where many still dwell 20 years later. Today, even privileged women, torn between their underpaid work and their kids, are overwhelmed.

Things happened very differently in Norway. There, feminists and sociologists pushed hard against the biggest obstacle still standing in the path to full democracy: the nuclear family. In the 1950s, the world-famous American sociologist Talcott Parsons had pronounced that arrangement—with the hubby at work and the little wife at home—the ideal setup in which to socialize children. But in the 1970s, the Norwegian state began to deconstruct that undemocratic ideal by taking upon itself the traditional, unpaid household duties of women. Caring for children, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled became the basic responsibilities of the universal welfare state, freeing women in the workforce to enjoy both their jobs and their families.

Paradoxically, setting women free made family life more genuine. Many in Norway say it has made both men and women more themselves and more alike: more understanding and happier. It also helped kids slip from the shadow of helicopter parents. In Norway, both mother and father in turn take paid parental leave from work during the child’s first year or longer. At age 1, however, children start attending a neighborhood *barnehage*(kindergarten) for schooling spent largely outdoors. By the time kids enter free primary school at age 6, they are remarkably self-sufficient, confident, and good-natured. They know their way around town, and if caught in a snowstorm in the forest, how to build a fire and find the makings of a meal. (One kindergarten teacher explained, “We teach them early to use an ax so they understand it’s a tool, not a weapon.”)

To Americans, the notion of a school “taking away” your child to make her an ax wielder is monstrous. Yet though it’s hard to measure, it’s likely that Scandinavian children actually spend more quality time with their non-work-obsessed parents than does a typical middle-class American child being driven by a stressed-out mother from music lessons to karate. For all these reasons and more, the international organization **Save the Children** **cites** Norway as the best country on earth in which to raise kids, while the United States finishes far down the list, in 33rd place.

DON’T TAKE MY WORD FOR IT

This little summary just scratches the surface of Scandinavia, so I urge curious readers to Google away. But be forewarned: You’ll find much criticism of all the Nordic-model countries. Worse, neoliberal pundits, especially the Brits, are always beating up on the Scandinavians, predicting the imminent demise of their social democracies. Self-styled experts still in thrall to Margaret Thatcher tell Norwegians they must liberalize their economy and privatize everything short of the royal palace. Mostly, the Norwegian government does the opposite—or nothing at all—and social democracy keeps on ticking.

It’s not perfect, of course. It has always been a carefully considered work in progress. Governance by consensus takes time and effort. You might think of it as slow democracy. Even so, it’s light-years ahead of us.
