Norwegian Anthropologists Study Minorities at Home: Political and Academic Agendas

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**Abstract:** Since the early 1960s, Scandinavian anthropologists have made considerable contributions to the study of ethnicity, an early high point having been reached with the 1967 Wenner-Gren conference leading to the publication of Ethnic Groups and Boundaries in 1969. Later Scandinavian research on ethnicity and social identification more generally has been varied and rich, covering all continents and many kinds of majority/minority relations. However, over the last twenty years, anthropologists have increasingly focused on the study of the relationship between immigrant minorities and the majorities in their own countries. There are some significant general differences between ethnicity research overseas and at home, shedding light on the theoretical constructions of anthropology as well as the ‘double hermeneutics’ between social research and society. It can be argued that anthropology at home shares characteristics with both European ethnology (with its traditional nation-building agenda) and with sociology (which, in Scandinavia, is almost tantamount to the sympathetic study of the welfare state), adding a diluted normative relativism associated with the political views of the academic middle class (to which the anthropologists themselves, incidentally, belong). The article reflects on the consequences of embroilment in domestic politics for anthropological theory, using the experiences of overseas ethnicity research as a contrast to ethnicity research at home, where anthropologists have been forced, or enabled, to go public with their work.

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In Norway, anthropological engagement with domestic political issues has been consistent (and complex) ever since Norwegian anthropologists began to do research among minorities ‘at home’. Even the most meticulously descriptive, or arcane analytic, research monograph on the Sami or on immigrants is bound to be interpreted, largely by non-academic readers, in a political context where issues of minority rights, national cohesion, multiculturalism and problems of cultural diversity have been at the forefront for many years. Anthropological studies are perused by civil servants (many of whom, in fact, have a training in the social sciences, often including anthropology), by NGOs and political interest groups and, occasionally, by a wider readership. The anthropology of Norway is, in other words, public whether the anthropologists like it or not. Some in fact use their position, and their research, in attempting to influence public opinion and policymakers directly. Many Norwegian anthropologists thus write for the press, appear on radio and television, and publish the occasional book intended for the general reader.

No anthropologist writing about ethnic minorities in Norway can afford to be oblivious of the political connotations of their work,
and the boundaries between scholarship and engagement, or between research and politics, are continuously blurred. Naturally, there is considerable reflexive awareness of this among anthropologists working ‘at home’ although we, like any profession, have our blind spots, and besides, anthropologists often feel that they are being misrepresented and misunderstood by non-academics relating to their work. Since research agendas and journalistic or political agendas often differ, a frontier zone of negotiations and mutual misunderstandings, but also occasionally of fruitful collaboration and learning, has emerged in the area of minority research over the last few decades. This essay explores some of the ways in which the political and the scholarly merge, forcing scholars to become public anthropologists whether they like it or not. Let us begin with the indigenous Sami and the anthropologist.

The Sami are an ethnic group numbering roughly 40,000 in Norway (with smaller numbers in the neighbouring countries of Finland, Sweden and Russia). Although they are as diverse today as the majority Norwegians in their ways of life, Sami are symbolically associated with reindeer herding and transhumance (seasonal migration), an economic activity monopolised by (certain) Sami and invested with considerable prestige. Following a centuries-long period of Norwegianization (attempted ‘acculturation’ and assimilation), a modern indigenous rights movement began to develop in the 1950s and 1960s. Since the early 1980s, the Sami movement has achieved political recognition, leading to new legislation on land tenure and language rights, and the formation of a Sami parliament in 1990, with limited but real legislative power over the Sami core regions (notably Finnmark county, the north-eastern corner of Norway).

Anthropologists and ethnologists have been involved with the Sami movement since the beginning of academic research in the country. Professor Gutorm Gjessing at the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo, the last cultural historian to hold this chair (social anthropology took over entirely from the 1950s), was responsible for the decision, as early as 1951, to move the Sami collections of the museum to the open-air Norwegian Heritage Museum (Norsk Folkemuseum), arguing that since the Sami were a Norwegian people, their material culture should be exhibited alongside Norwegian peasant artefacts and buildings (Bouquet 1996: 45). A strong political statement at the time, Gjessing’s decision reflected his view that Norwegians and Sami were ‘brethren peoples’ sharing the same territory, and ought to be treated as equals, notwithstanding their cultural differences and traditional hierarchical relationship.

Engagement with, and direct influence on, Sami ethnopolitics has continued in Norwegian anthropology up to the present day. However, I shall argue that a peculiar ‘homeblindness’ – a lack of reflexivity concerning one’s own cultural background – which is ultimately caused by the anthropologists’ double role as scholars and as citizens, has contributed to this research, as well as that on immigrants, in largely unnoticed ways.

**Stages in Anthropological Research on Sami**

Modern anthropological research on Norwegian Sami, which has chiefly been undertaken by Norwegian researchers (Robert Paine being one prominent exception), can be divided into three stages equally reflecting the intellectual development of the discipline after the Second World War and the political circumstances impinging on it. A representative work in the first stage, to which Gjessing himself was a diligent contributor, was Vorren and Manker’s Samekulturen (‘The Sami Culture’, 1957), a book that went through many reprints and was still on the mandatory reading list for first-year undergraduates in the early 1980s. The book fits into an ethnological discourse where the main objective of the science of culture consists in the
classification and description of presumably clearly bounded cultures. The authors describe patterns of settlement, beliefs, technology (the first hundred pages of the book are devoted to ‘material culture’ – we had just been taught the Geertzian concept of culture and were mildly disgusted by the idea that culture could be material), social organisation and artistic expressivity. Vorren and Manker’s classificatory subdivisions of transhumant Sami, coastal Sami, forest Sami and Skolt Sami (thus named because of their characteristic headdress) are controversial today, both for political reasons and because the categories do not necessarily correspond to sociologically interesting facts; but the most obviously dated part of the book is the short chapter which discusses the Sami as a biological people. The chapters about the coastal and forest Sami have a perceptible element of cultural history since their ‘form of culture proper has been covered up quite comprehensively by the cultural evolution of the last centuries in the Sami homeland’ (Vorren and Manker 1957: 83). This is, briefly, a work of descriptive ethnography, which takes Romantic notions of cultural purity for granted, and which emphasizes the uniqueness of the Sami. It is a work of splendid craftsmanship, and stands squarely in an ‘Orientalist’ tradition typical of Sami studies since the nineteenth century. Although the authors do discuss questions of minority rights and do not see the impact of modernity as pernicious per se, they confirm a common image of the Sami as noble savages, and their book arguably contributed to strengthening a widespread Norwegian fascination for the simple life of the North, as well as a notion of the Sami as being radically different from other Norwegians. In this, Vorren and Manker’s volume was out of sync with the mainstream Anglophone anthropology of the 1950s, which eschewed race and tried to develop a neutral, non-exoticizing language in its ethnographic practice.

At the same time as the newfangled social anthropology, largely an import from the UK, began to phase out the wide-ranging cultural science represented by Gjessing at the Ethnographic Museum, following which Fredrik Barth and his students developed a powerful department of social anthropology in Bergen (see also Eriksen 2008a), there was a shift in focus and emphasis in Sami studies. This second stage in modern Sami studies was defined not only by the shift from a cultural history paradigm to a sociologically oriented social anthropology, but also by the publication of Harald Eidheim’s few but influential articles about Sami-Norwegian ethnicity (see Eidheim 1971 for a selection). Eidheim’s perspective on ethnicity, which was a clear influence on Barth’s (1969) celebrated introduction to Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (where Eidheim’s chapter has the Goffmanesque title ‘When Ethnic Identity Is a Social Stigma’), was initially inspired by symbolic interactionism and the Manchester school (Gluckman, Clyde Mitchell et al.), but was later enriched by Bateson’s system theory (Eriksen 2008b). In his string of articles where he saw ethnicity as a relationship, not as a cultural essence, Eidheim was concerned with the ‘fashioning of identity’ and the phenomenon later known as strategic essentialism, whereby minorities actively overcommunicate and undercommunicate (Goffman’s terms again) aspects of their culture, for strategic reasons. Through this approach, the ‘essence of Sami culture’, hitherto a defining aspect of Saminess, became part of the defined space (cf. Ardener 1989); the cultural needed accounting for rather than accounting for behaviour; it became explanandum rather than explanans.

In parsimonious, precise prose, Eidheim identified the significant relationships defining the Sami-Norwegian space, and showed how ethnicity could be studied semantically, as processes of signification. Key terms were dichotomisation (contrasting with the other), complementarization (matching with the other), opportunity situation (a term from Barth) and stigma (from Goffman). He showed how particular cultural diacritica became authoritative
in early Sami ethnopolitics, and which strategies might be employed in order to achieve symbolic (and consequently political) equity. The focus was now on asymmetrical local power relationships and symbolic relationships, and on ‘the management of identity’.

The semantic core in Sami identity, as it is described in these classic articles, consists in language and reindeer. The ‘impure’ coastal Sami, dealt with in the article on stigma, are depicted here – as in earlier research – as ‘the poor cousin’. In Vorren and Manker’s book, it is apparent that the coastal Sami have little exotic value, and this also indirectly becomes evident in Eidheim’s work, especially if one compares the stigma article with ‘Assimilation, Ethnic Incorporation and the Problem of Identity Management’ (the concluding essay in Eidheim 1971). They regularly interact with ethnic Norwegians, and few visible diacritica distinguish the groups from one another.

Roughly in the same way as the ‘ethnically impure’ Scandinavian travellers (tätare) have been treated with much less romantic interest than Roma (Gypsies), the ‘impure’ coastal Sami have, according to narratives of the Second Phase kind, been offered the worst of both worlds: stigma because they are different, but few if any cultural signs to convert into identity capital.

A veritable flood of dissertations, articles, books and lectures, especially emanating from the University of Tromsø (near the traditional Sami areas, thus attracting many Sami students), use Eidheim’s work as their analytical foundation. His research perspective has also had a perceptible impact on its object, that is Sami ethnopolitics and ethnic relations to the majority. More recent scholarly work reports on how ‘ordinary Sami’ actively relate to Eidheim’s stigma perspective (Hovland 1996, Thuen 1995). Another highly visible consequence of the Eidheim approach is the recognition, more clearly articulated among Sami than in any other indigenous group I am aware of, that cultural identity is dynamic, relational, flexible and malleable, and that group membership is a question of ascription by self and others, not of cultural traits. In this way, Eidheim’s studies have had real-world consequences, many would argue of a liberating kind, in Sápmi. The President of the Sami Parliament from 1997 to 2005, Sven-Roald Nystø, incidentally holds a degree in social anthropology from Tromsø.

A comprehensive standard work summing up this second stage, both in anthropological studies of Sami identity and in the history of Sami ethnopolitics (the two are not always easy to disentangle), is arguably Trond Thuen’s Quest for Equity (Thuen 1995), although others, including Robert Paine and his Herds of the Tundra (1994), also produced important work in the period. Thuen’s book demonstrates the growth of cultural reflexivity and political professionalism among Sami from the late 1950s to the early 1990s, a period culminating in the inauguration of the Sami parliament and, one might add to Thuen’s account, the official apology to the Sami for Norwegian oppression over the centuries, delivered by King Harald V in 1997.

A third stage in anthropological studies of the Sami may roughly be said to have begun in the early 1990s, a period of transition worldwide – one can mention the end of the Cold War, the coming of the Internet and mobile phones, the beginning of the end of apartheid, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Rushdie affair – and also, in the far north, marked by the state’s recognition of Sami autonomy. This period in Sami research has been equally influenced by the legacy of the Eidheim/Barth school of ethnicity studies, postcolonial theory and that kind of ‘deconstructivism light’ often referred to as the ‘Writing Culture’ perspective, where the evocative, rhetorical and creative aspects of anthropological writing are simultaneously examined and openly made a part of the research enterprise.

This phase has been characterised by the increased activity of Sami scholars and by
critiques and countercritiques of the concept of culture. Identity has replaced ethnicity as a dominant term, possibly as a result of the increased influence of American anthropology at the expense of the British tradition, leading to an increased focus on psychological and symbolic processes instead of social organisation, which was the unquestioned basis for even Eidheim’s ventures into semantics. Vigdis Stordahl’s dissertation and book about identity dilemmas in Karasjok (Stordahl 1996) is a central work in this stage (Stordahl being a Sami herself); similarly, Arild Hovland’s (1996) comparative study of identity management in Kåfjord and Kautokeino.

In a certain sense, however, this phase may have been initiated by Ivar Bjørklund’s Fjordfolket i Kvænangen (‘The Fjord People of Kvænangen’, 1985). Bjørklund discovered that the population of this fjord were ‘actually’ Sami, but that their Sami identity had been lost – they had forgotten their Sami origins. Kvænangen was probably one of the communities Eidheim had in mind when he wrote, two decades earlier, about coastal hamlets where most of the population had at some stage been Sami, but had gradually become assimilated into an ethnically Norwegian identity.

In the years following Bjørklund’s fieldwork, a notable ethniciﬁcation of the coastal Sami has taken place. Hitherto, the conventional leftist view among Norwegians associated the Sami ‘quest for equity’ with the ‘authentic’ reindeer herders, and there is a clear continuity between early modern Norwegian conservatives and their romantic attitudes towards the authentic savages of the north and, generations later, the children of 1968 and their wish to salvage authentic Sami culture.

The causes of the ethniciﬁcation of the ‘impure and inauthentic’ coastal Sami are at least partly obvious. From the early 1980s, an ideological situation developed, in Norway as elsewhere in the world, where it became possible and sometimes even politically proﬁtable to promote one’s interests qua ethnic group. Whereas Stordahl (1996) describes the growth of state-sponsored cultural institutions supporting both cultural continuity and careful modernisation in inland Finmark (the reindeer herding areas), most of Hovland’s Moderne urfolk (‘Modern indigenes’, 1996) devoted to the more controversial aspects of the (re-)vitalisation processes in Kåfjord, a coastal area far from the core reindeer herding region. Since very many of the inhabitants of Northern Norway in fact have mixed origins, it is perfectly possible for thousands of North Norwegians to overcommunicate, selectively, parts of their heritage that makes them credible Norwegians, Sami or kvæn (Norwegians of Finnish origin, the third major ethnic group in the area). Thus, Hovland shows, neighbourhoods, circles of friends and even nuclear families risk to be divided in a situation of heightened ethnic awareness and multiculturalist politics.

Arriving in a local community in the coastal North some time in the early 2000s, I was met with the self-mocking greeting, ‘Welcome to the Yugoslavia of the north’.

Like Eidheim in his working paper Stages in the Development of Sami Selfhood (1992), both Stordahl and Hovland describe a condition of reﬂexive modernity, where the ‘natives’ have absorbed anthropological jargon and conceptualisations, using terms like ethnic stigma and identity management as well as constructivist and dynamic concepts of culture actively in their identity work. Although both scholars have produced well-researched work of high analytical sophistication, neither of them critically interrogate the strategic essentialism, sometimes tinged with postmodern self-mockery, which gives ethnic identity the pride of place compared with other possible forms of identiﬁcation.

Whereas the ﬁrst phase in post-war research on the Sami was chief ethnological, the second phase was interactionist and system-theoretical, and the third phase has been characterised by constructivist perspectives on identiﬁcation and deconstructivist approaches.
to culture, inspired by recent theoretical developments in Anglophone anthropology. Nonetheless, there are some clear continuities which run through the entire period.

First, the discourse is almost completely devoid of a class perspective, which must be a result of the strongly politicised situation giving priority to ethnic labels. The NSR (Norske samers riksforbund, The National Association of Norwegian Sami), supported by most of the anthropologists during the Alta dam controversy around 1980, is led by academics, and has been the most important political vehicle for the reindeer herders and ‘authentic Sami culture’. The competing SLF (Samenes landsforbund, The National Sami Caucus) gets much of its support from the coastal Sami, and has been much more oriented towards class questions than the NSR; in practice, the SLF, dominated by social democrats, has often been willing to sacrifice ethnic uniqueness in order to achieve equality (and is, in this respect, more reminiscent of an immigrant minority NGO than of an indigenous movement).

Secondly, exoticism is still perceptible, 30 years after the publication of Orientalism. As Hovland (1996) has pointed out, however, this exoticism sometimes appears through self-exoticization, often informed by earlier anthropological studies of themselves.

Thirdly, most remarkably, Norwegianness is scarcely problematised at all in these studies of Norwegian–Sami relationships. From Vorren and Manker to Hovland and Stordahl, one is given to understand that there exists a Norwegian culture with particular traits, to which Sami relate in a variety of ways (ranging from voluntary assimilation to total rejection). The variation in cultural identity strategies among Sami, thus, does not appear to be a result of associating with different versions of Norwegianness but of mixing the ‘Norwegian’ and the ‘Sami’ in varying ratios. Briefly, the boundaries remain, even in the most sophisticated accounts of Sami identity work, such as Hovland’s discussion of cultural creolization in Finnmark, or Stordahl’s descriptions of Sami modernities lodged between a monolithic ‘Norwegianness’ and a more diverse Sami cultural world. The fact that emic notions and political realities encourage such dichotomies is no excuse – anthropologists have to do better than serve as mouthpieces for their informants if they are to function effectively as critical intellectuals in a public sphere.

**Some Anthropological Contributions to Immigrant Research**

The second important minority discourse in the Norwegian public sphere in general, and in anthropology in particular, concerns immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. In this field, the academic dominance of anthropology has been much less obvious than in Sami research. Both criminologists, sociologists, media researchers and education scholars have produced important contributions to immigrant research. As a result, class and gender have figured more prominently, culture less so, than in research on Sami. I shall nevertheless limit myself here to commenting on a few anthropological contributions to Norwegian immigrant research.

Early anthropological studies of immigration to Norway include, *inter alia*, Grønhaug (1979) and Kramer (1979). Writing at a time when non-Western immigrants were few and recent (total immigrant numbers rose from 20,000 in 1973 to 450,000 in 2008), Reidar Grønhaug explained the internal logic of labour migration from Anatolia to Norway, pointing out how the asymmetrical symbolic power relations between Turks and Norwegians entailed a form of cultural disqualification, in a way not entirely unlike Eidheim’s analysis of cultural stigma. Julian Kramer, himself an immigrant from South Africa, showed how the Indians of a middle-sized Norwegian town tried to combine full integration into Norwegian institutions with maintenance of cultural
and religious identity. So far, culture had not been politicised to any great extent.

Since these modest beginnings, a great number of anthropological studies of immigrants have been produced. Some of this work has been commissioned by local or state government, but even much of that which is not, strictly speaking, applied research, discusses questions of ‘integration’ from a point of view virtually indistinguishable from that of the state.

Typical publications from the first period of anthropological engagement with immigrants are Long Litt Woon’s edited, interdisciplinary Fellesskap til besvær? (‘Community of troubles?’, 1992), which discusses issues of identification, discrimination and integration; Ottar Brox Jeg er ikke rasist, men … (‘I’m not a racist, but …’, 1991), a survey of xenophobic attitudes among ethnic Norwegians; my own Veien til et mer eksotisk Norge (‘Towards a more exotic Norway, Eriksen 1991), a critical essay on the role of cultural relativism in majority–minority relations; and a sprinkling of others with varying, but perceptible public impact. The debate, both inside and outside of anthropology, focused at the time on racism and discrimination on the one hand, and problems of integration on the other. By the mid-1990s, as new groups of immigrants (refugees mostly) entered the country, public and academic interest in the issues grew, and disagreements among the anthropologists became apparent. Increasingly, an impatient public demanded of the immigrants that they ‘integrate’ as soon as possible; the benign ‘colourful community’ rhetoric of the 1980s was suddenly condemned as being ‘politically correct’, and issues to do with enforced marriages and Islam came to the fore. Unni Wikan wrote Mot en ny norsk underklasse? (‘Towards a new Norwegian underclass?’, 1995), which in no small degree implied that patriarchal ideologies among immigrants (especially Muslims) were instrumental in hindering not only the freedom of minority women but also the full integration (participation? assimilation?) of immigrants in Norwegian society. Wikan was duly criticised, by colleagues and others, for not problematising, or even discussing, the ‘Norwegian culture’, but her book had a perceptible impact on the public discourse and official policy over the ensuing years.

The same period saw the publication of a diverse range of academic or popularised books by anthropologists on minority issues, including Øivind Fuglerud’s erudite and thorough book on long-distance nationalism among Tamils (Fuglerud 1999), Mary Bente Bringslid’s study of refugees in a small Western Norwegian community (Bringslid 1996), Torunn Arntsen Sørheim’s work on health and disease among Pakistani-Norwegians (Sørheim 2001) and Inger-Lise Lien’s book on racist attitudes among Norwegians and Pakistani (Lien 1996). Several of these books, especially those by Wikan and Lien, were subject to controversy in the press and in seminar rooms, as they voiced critical views towards immigrants and ‘their culture’. In an earlier article, Lien (1991) had raised critical questions concerning the normative aspects of immigrant research, asking rhetorically if it was the duty of the anthropologist to defend practices and attitudes among ‘their people’ even if they were objectionable. One typical answer to this question would be that the work of the anthropologist consists in translating and analysing social and cultural contexts, not to grade them on a moral scale. However, in the area of immigrant research, just as in Sami research, normative questions seem to be unavoidable; the boundary between the political and the academic is chronically thin, slippery and permeable, and the work of anthropologists becomes public by default. As Aud Talle at the University of Oslo discovered in the early 2000s after having been lampooned as a dangerous relativist in the largest newspaper in the country, doing research on female circumcision among Maasai or Somali is unproblematic as far as the wider public is concerned, but identical research on Somali refugees in Norway is fraught with moral implications.
Of the many later publications on minority issues, Marianne Gullestad’s *Det norske sett med nye øyne* (‘Norwegianness in a new key’, Gullestad 2002) deserves special mention. This book explores the cultural categories and semantics prevalent in the majority, showing how discourse about minorities and immigrants is based on tacit assumptions of cultural superiority and the ‘backwardness’ of immigrants. Drawing on postcolonial theory rather than the Barth-Eidheim ethnicity perspective, Gullestad’s monograph marked, in many ways, a new start.

Inger-Lise Lien’s view, in her important 1991 article, was that a particular political agenda had informed and contributed to shaping research, with the result that academic work on minority issues became partial and partisan. In fact, anthropologists have enjoyed direct influence on Norwegian integration policy, not least Lien herself, for years an active member of the Labour party, and Wikan, whose advice has been sought by several political parties. I was myself a board member of an anti-racist NGO, *Antirasistisk Senter*, in the 1990s.

In order to assess the relationship between Norwegian anthropological research on minority–majority relations ‘at home’ and the public sphere, it is necessary first to describe briefly the role of minorities in mainstream political discourse.

**Immigrants and Sami in Norwegian Politics of Culture**

In general, Sami and immigrant organisations have chosen different strategies in their quest for recognition and equity in Norway. Whereas the Sami organisations (notably the NSR) emphasized cultural uniqueness, history and tradition, immigrant organisations have tended to emphasize equality, giving priority to the struggle against discrimination. With a few exceptions to do with language and religion, their objective has been to achieve formal equality in the labour and housing markets, in the educational institutions and so on. Whereas the Sami represent the Fourth World, immigrants represent the Third World; in academic discourse, the former are an indigenous population, while the latter represent a globalised proletariat. Whereas the Sami lay claim to a unique culture under siege from the modern state, immigrants cannot do so, both because they have their origins in many different countries, and because their culture appears to be perfectly safe and sound in their home country. As a student once wrote, in an exam paper, ‘Why should one protect the culture of 150 Indians in “Rivertown” [Kramer’s pseudonym], when there are several hundred million Indians in India anyway?’

In mainstream Norwegian politics, views and policies on Sami and on immigrants/immigration have not corresponded in a simple way to the left–right continuum. The left have by and large been pro-immigrant, but have been – and are – divided on multiculturalism, the limits of tolerance and issues to do with religion and women’s rights. Regarding the Sami, the attitudes on the left have also been ambivalent, split between a wish to offer equality and full integration into the modern state and the politics of recognition, which would also entail the preservation of Sami culture. These disagreements, incidentally, mirror the dilemmas of liberals and leftists in many countries these days.

The dominant Labour party has by and large been concerned with equality in both contexts, while the Conservative party has tried to define cultural and religious identity as a private matter. Political debates pitting cultural rights against equality have continuously caused controversy both within and between political parties. In 1997, the Finnmark section of the Socialist Left party (SV) was split, and the local party organisation in Karasjok (a main inland Sami town) disbanded itself, following a statement by the top candidate on the Parliamentary list of the party, where he went against the
idea that rights to land and water should follow ethnic lines (an important issue for Sami organisations). His argument was that anyone who lived in Finnmark should have the same rights regardless of ethnic identity.

As a minority group with special rights, the Sami nevertheless have much more credibility in the wider public sphere than do the immigrants, and they have a special legal status as an indigenous group.

Anthropologists position themselves explicitly and implicitly in this political landscape. In spite of the considerable differences between the Oslo region (where most of the immigrants live) and Finnmark regarding minority issues, it is possible to identify some commonalities. In 1996, the Pakistani-Norwegian intellectual Naushad Ali Qureshi wrote a lengthy newspaper article where he accused the social anthropologists of having drifted from an exoticizing to a condemning attitude towards minorities. Both attitudes demarcate sharp boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and immigrants are stereotyped and objectified, regardless of whether the gaze of the researcher is admiring or disapproving (Qureshi 1996). In particular, Qureshi targets Wikan (1995), but his article is a general critique of culturalism in social research: through emphasising cultural differences and/or ethnic boundaries, one contributes to strengthening them. Moreover – and this may be the largest problem in Norwegian minority research ‘at home’ – the Norwegian side of the ‘boundary’ is rarely problematised, but instead stereotyped or neglected (but see Gullestad 2002, 2006). Norway is depicted, in research on immigrants (and one might add, on the Sami), either as a monolithic, liberal society where universalist morality, love marriages and human rights predominate, or as an ethnonationalistic, xenophobic society with little tolerance for cultural diversity.

It must be kept in mind that for many years, academic scholarship on Norwegianness ignored minority issues. Tellingly, the most authoritative collective work on Norwegian identity from the 1980s, Arne Martin Klausen’s edited volume *Den norske væremåten* (‘The Norwegian way of being’, 1984), contains excellent analyses of cultural styles, the rural–urban divide, gender and nature worship, but just one chapter on minorities (by the aforementioned Julian Kramer), and minorities were absent from the analyses of mainstream Norwegian society. Minorities were also conspicuously absent from the work of Marianne Gullestad, the most important anthropologist writing about Norwegians from the mid-1980s until her death in 2008, before she turned to this topic in the late 1990s, which led to the significant (and controversial) 2002 book (see Gullestad 2006). When minorities were finally brought into the analysis of mainstream Norwegian society, it happened largely under the aegis of the Eidheim–Barth ethnicity paradigm.

Conclusions

An ethnicizing framework for engagement with social and cultural phenomena has its costs, whether it is used by politicians or by researchers. An example could be the predicaments inherent in the wide-ranging edited volume *Becoming Visible* (Brantenberg, Hansen and Minde 1995), which offers a representative sample of the discourse on the Sami. The contributors are academics, activists, high-ranking bureaucrats, politicians and artists. The starting point of the book, shared by nearly all the contributors, is the injustice committed against the world’s indigenous peoples for centuries, and it also becomes apparent how many such groups, over the last decades, have made progress regarding recognition for their language, customs and land rights. Five basic predicaments are apparent in the book, all of them indirectly relevant for immigrants as well and, for that matter, recognizable in similar research elsewhere in the world.

1. Indigenous peoples risk building an opinion based on the premise that they are ‘threat-
ened by extinction’ in the same way as whales and pandas. In this case, they risk being accepted as Sami on the condition that they behave like Sami (whatever that entails). Immigrant minorities have nothing to gain from such a rhetoric – on the contrary, their ‘cultural impurity’ signifies their lesser value. Similarly, the very many Sami who cannot credibly pose as ‘authentic’ are placed in a vulnerable and precarious situation.

2. The right to a cultural identity may become a straitjacket for individuals who would prefer not to have one. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) message is that a rooted identity is an unquestionable asset. Here, political debate and actual policy on immigrants take a different route, and the second generation is virtually encouraged (by politicians and commentators, but also by many academics) to distance itself from the parents’ culture.

3. When ethnic membership is made the basis for rights, groups or individuals who cannot lay claim to an ethnic identity are neglected. Thus, the social exclusion of people with no particular ethnic identity – the poor of São Paolo, unemployed people in Oslo – may go unmarked.

4. The emphasis on history (and, not least, prehistory) in indigenous politics makes it difficult for these groups to make a common cause with other ethnic minorities. In Norway, there has scarcely been any collaboration between Sami and immigrants.

5. The relationship between equality and complementarity is unclear in the indigenous discourse. Rights, universal or cultural as the case might be, are claimed situationally, depending on the opportunity situation.

Faced with these dilemmas, anthropological research and public interventions, rather than complementing and critically interrogating identity politics in the public sphere, has tended to reproduce its categories. This voluminous body of research is, in general (there are exceptions), fraught with the following problems:

1. With the exception of ‘native’ researchers such as Anh Nga Longva (who has written about Vietnamese in Norway) and Vigdis Stordahl, very few have learnt the languages in question well. This is nothing short of a professional scandal, considering the centrality of the Malinowskian emphasis on language learning in Norwegian anthropology when fieldwork takes place abroad.

2. Norwegianness is scarcely problematised (except in Gullestad’s aforementioned, recent work). It is either taken for granted, or it remains unmentioned. Thus, the Norwegian obsession with gender equality, for example, becomes an implicit premise for research on, for example, gender roles in the Pakistani-Norwegian family, rather than empirical data to be analysed in its own right. As a result, scholars more or less unwittingly tend to adopt problem formulations originally framed within their own cultural value system. This in turn hampers their ability to ask critical questions to the framing of the issues in the dominant public discourse. Incidentally, this form of ‘homeblindness’ is not unknown in Anglophone anthropology either, where great pains are often taken to describe fine nuances in the local cultures under study, which are then cursorily contrasted with something called ‘Western culture’.

3. There is a tendency to adopt uncritically the classic ethnicity paradigm (which was, in its time, an important advance over earlier models), according to which the social universe is constituted of ethnic groups and boundaries, rather than, for example, kinds of relationship. The dynamic (and suitably fuzzy) concept of culture which has predominated in recent years (in what I have labelled the third phase in Sami studies) has done little to change this approach, which conceals non-ethnic social phenomena and may ultimately lead to reductionist ethnographies.

4. The dominant analytical framing of cultural difference is more indebted to Norwegian debates about culture than to anthropological research on cultural differences. This has made
Norwegian research on ethnicity ‘at home’ more provincial than necessary.

My intention with this brief, but critical exploration of Norwegian anthropology on minorities ‘at home’ has been to show the powerful interrelationship between domestic politics and anthropology at home, rendering public anthropology necessary but also immensely difficult. I have also tried to identify the dangers of not only methodological but also moral homeblindness. The scholar’s gaze, even when critical of government policy and hegemonic ideologies, is shaped by the scholar’s embroilment with domestic affairs, and risks merely reproducing or mechanically negating a hegemonic discourse, rather than establishing an independent approach growing out of professional concerns. One inevitable conclusion is that we Norwegian anthropologists should extend an open invitation to foreign anthropologists to do research on our society and participate in public debates about it.

Similar problems are likely to occur elsewhere, and they do in countries where anthropologists carry out research ‘at home’. What is gained in political influence may be lost in academic relevance, unless anthropologists in their public interventions are more self-conscious about their own role and professional duties as purveyors of the gaze from afar. Anthropologists working at home could, and should in my view, draw more actively on anthropological perspectives developed in other empirical settings. This would enable them to achieve the analytical distance necessary in order to ask questions growing out of the academic discourse rather than domestic political concerns. Since one of anthropology’s tasks, seen in a wider intellectual context, consists in asking the unexpected, but illuminating question, and that question might well first have been raised in South Africa or Melanesia. Through such an act of liberation from domestic public discourse, anthropological interventions might become both intellectually more stimulating and, perhaps paradoxically, more relevant politically.

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