

Knut Kjeldstadli, Historical immigration to Norway¹

The Norwegian satirical singer Odd Børretzen once claimed that the first Norwegian was the craziest member of the tribe; the one who followed the glacier northwards as it melted, while all the sensible members stayed on in a more temperate zone. Anyway, this first Norwegian was not the first immigrant. Immigration presupposes a resident population into which one may wander, and a kind of power – a state or a precursor for a state – which says that this is *our* territory. Based on these criteria, we may speak of immigration to the area, which today is Norway, from around AD 900.

”Settlers” and specialists in the era of agrarian society

Immigration may be divided according to several variables – such as the length and direction of the migration, the causes of migration or the type of state and attitudes in the receiving country. Additionally, one may emphasize the kind of society the migrants meet.

Peasant society or agrarian society has dominated Norway from the time when hunting and fishing was abandoned as the primary source of living. In the so-called Neolithic Revolution, men and women started to actively cultivate the soil, to till and to sow – not simply reaping what nature offered on its own. Seen as a distinct, separate form, agrarian society lasted until the last third of the 19th century.

¹ For a comprehensive version of Norwegian immigration history, see *Norsk innvandringshistorie*, ed. K. Kjeldstadli, volumes I–III, Oslo 2003. For a synthesis in English, see G. Brochmann, K. Kjeldstadli, *A History of Immigration, The Case of Norway ca. 900–2000*, Oslo 2008. For a short overview, see K. Kjeldstadli, *Fra innvandrere til minoriteter*, [in:] *Nasjonale minoriteter i det flerkulturelle Norge*, ed. A. Bonnevie Lund, B. Bolme Moen, Trondheim 2010.

The agrarian society in the Norwegian area had some characteristics. The landscape was made for scattered farms, partly under rather meagre conditions. Therefore, Norway developed few manors with geographically concentrated properties and no villages, as opposed, for instance, to Poland. Many became tenant farmers, leaseholders who rented land from the landlord, but Norwegian peasants were never slaves, men without judicial freedom. Yet, slaves existed in abundance, one estimate says between one fifth and one third of the population did not enjoy freedom in the early medieval period.² As the names indicate, some of these were Irish thralls, slaves, mostly involuntary immigrants, taken in Viking raids. But the very extent of thralldom indicates that many slaves had indigenous ancestry. Put simply, it was not possible to transport so many human beings so far through coercion.

The landscape made agriculture hard; accordingly, the Norwegian peasant population was poor rather than rich. Although they had to acquire commodities in addition to the products of the farm, such as iron, salt and also grain in many parts of the country, agriculture was based on subsistence; people produced much themselves. The combination of scarceness and subsistence tied people to their home area, although one should not over-emphasise how local and limited the mental horizon of the Norwegian peasant was.³

Now, what did this imply for immigrants? Which possibilities might humans outside the borders see in this kind of society? There were no tracts of easily arable land,

² E. Opsahl, *Del I. 900–1537*, [in:] *Norsk innvandringshistorie*, ed. K. Kjeldstadli, Oslo 2003, vol. 1, p. 53.

³ According to some sociological theories, traditional society with a local horizon, the local rural community, is the contrast of modern society, which, one says, has a national or even global horizon. However, Viking expeditions, Hanseatic trade and later an extensive warfare and shipping industry outside national borders, particularly from the 18th century, show that this is a far too general distinction. In addition, the Catholic Church before the Reformation contributed to the creation of transnational networks.

as was the case in parts of Eastern Europe, and a scattered population. In the so-called *Ostsiedlung*, the German expansion eastwards from approx. 950 to 1350 into today's Czech Republic and Slovakia and further on to Transylvania, there were not only aristocrats, merchants and artisans, but many peasants as well. Yet two groups of immigrants to Norway may be categorized in a similar way, as *settler migrants*.

The group called *Forest Finns* came from the region of Savolax in Finland from the 17th century and kept coming until around 1700. They settled in the border areas between Norway and Sweden, where huge tracts of forest made slash and burn-farming feasible – i.e. to cut and set fire to trees, and then sow rye in the nutritious ashes.

In addition, the *Kvens* came from Finland or from the Finnish speaking district of Tornedalen in the north of Sweden to the northernmost Norwegian counties of Troms and Finnmark, mainly from the 18th to the end of the 19th century.

From the medieval period, society also comprised institutions with power over the everyday life of the peasants: the Crown and the Church. These institutions offered considerable opportunities to immigrants of another kind than the settler migrants. Norway was a peripheral country in Europe, and also a small country. Thus the kings needed various kinds of specialists that were scarce in Norway – Christian clergy, literate monks, diplomats who knew foreign languages and cultures, mint-masters and stone masons who built churches and castles. These *career migrants*, as such specialists are called, were brought on the initiative of an employer, such as the king, because of their know-how. In order to entice them to move, their pay and fringe benefits had to be favourable. Hence, most of them entered the upper strata of society. Additionally, for the clergy a transfer to a position in Norway might imply an upward career; generally however, clergymen were recruited from the natives.

Careers were also pursued by those *aristocrats* who had Danish or North German backgrounds and married into Norwegian noble families, or obtained land holdings and positions as a reward for services rendered to the Crown. This influx became most important as the Norwegian Kingdom ended in 1319 with no living royal heir. Norway then entered a realm dominated by the Danish crown and in the main by the Oldenburg dynasty, lasting until 1814, a structure reminiscent of the Polish-Lithuanian union from 1386 to 1795. Those aristocrats who chose to remain in Norway, after the term of their service, developed into a dominant part of the Norwegian aristocracy.

From the peasants' point of view, there was no particular reason to welcome these specialists and aristocrats. Yet the peasants did not show any xenophobia – on the premise that their new masters adhered to “Norwegian” – i.e. traditional or customary – laws and agreements, without trying to force new duties and burdens onto the peasantry.

Merchants and mercantile capitalists

Another group of immigrants, who also placed themselves in an elevated place in society, and to whom the ordinary population had ambivalent relations, consisted of merchants. They functioned as middle-men between Norway, the Continent and the British Isles. First and foremost, there were the merchants from the Hansa, the union of cities along the Baltic Sea, such as Danzig, but Scottish and Dutch merchants were also prominent. The core of the trading system that opened for this mercantile immigration was the exchange of fish from Norway and grain from Europe further south, in addition to other commodities, such as textiles and beer. The first historically known Hanseatic merchants came to Norway in 1186, the last became a Norwegian citizen in 1776, and in the period from 1250 to 1500 they dominated trade in Norway. To the population, the

Hanseatic merchants were necessary – because of their contacts in markets abroad, because they guaranteed a stable provision of grain, and because they had the economic resources that allowed them to offer loans to the northern fishermen. One should add, however, that these fishermen-peasants also entered a relation of debt to the Hansa, a dependence that was perpetuated from generation to generation and proved almost impossible to break. The Hanseatic merchants also had such power in their relations with the Crown that they were more or less free to do as they wanted.

From the 16th century onwards, trade grew, not only in the traditional fisheries, but also with new branches of the economy, such as wood and metal products and other slightly refined raw materials, and a number of iron and glass works. Outside, or at the margin of, peasant society, a strong mercantile capitalist sector sprouted. The profit in this sector was generated from buying and then reselling commodities at higher prices. As times went by, these originally foreign merchants and industrialists changed, as did the aristocrats – they became the Norwegian urban bourgeoisie, along with some individuals of Norwegian descent.

The 16th and 17th centuries have been dubbed the period of the power state. Denmark-Norway was, along with other European states, frequently at war. An instrument of power was needed for conscription and taxation. This once more opened possibilities for foreign specialists – officers, fortress constructors, civil servants, Protestant clergy after the Protestant Reformation in Norway in 1536, and local magistrates. These came from various parts of the Oldenburg realm and were most important. For instance, not until the last decades before 1814 were a majority of generals born in the country.

Along with these elite immigrants, there were other “itinerant people”, mobile groups rambling along the high roads. Some came from rural communities in Norway, individuals who had been pauperised and then started to roam the countryside to see if they were able to make a living – from day jobs, selling some small wares, begging or stealing, if necessary. The relations between the residents and the mobile people were ambiguous. The residents might have found the others dangerous and immoral, but they also enjoyed the encounters as the travellers brought with them news and sometimes useful services, such as shoeing or gelding horses. And the travellers had to rely on peasants for food and shelter, but were also anxious of persecution.

Into these mobile groups came a new itinerant people or ethnic group of foreign origin – the *Rom people*, Gypsies. From this group and probably also from individuals separated out of peasant society, the *Romany people* or the Travellers developed (*tater* in Norwegian).⁴

In this long time period from approximately AD 900 to the end of the 19th century – the epoch of peasant society – individuals born in another country probably did not exceed one percent of the population at any time. Yet, such figures for the whole country does not tell all there is. In some areas, such as Finnmark or Østfold in the south-east, the foreign element constituted a far larger share. Immigrants also played a disproportional role in the elites of society. Finally, various immigrants brought along cultural elements that proved to be important and lasting – such as Christianity, mining technology and an urban trading culture.

The need for migrant workers in industrial society

⁴ For terminology, see B. Hinden, *Innledning. Fra fordømmelse til respekt og verdighet*, [in:] *Romanifolket og det norske samfunnet*, ed. B. Hvinden, Bergen 2000, p. 12f.

Modern industry started in the 1840s–1850s, made a breakthrough in the decades around 1900, grew to a dominant position after World War II, and culminated in the first part of the 1970s. Additionally, in the epoch of *industrial society* Norway had characteristics that made the country interesting for immigrants. In the 19th century, Norway was one of the so-called second round countries in industrialization, those that were industrialized after the pioneer, Great Britain. A peaceful society kept its strength long into the industrial epoch. A small sign of this is the fact that, although there were technical schools, the first Norwegian technical university was opened in as late as 1910. Accordingly, there was a need to learn from the countries in the lead, not least from Great Britain, but also from parts of France and Germany. Contemporary technology, mechanical technology, was to a large extent *embodied*, based on experience and practical training. Knowledge was not formal and expressed in theories; so it could not be learnt from a book. Therefore, there were only two effective ways to transfer technology – to travel abroad or to bring people who had the necessary know-how to the country.⁵ Once again, specialists, career migrants, played an important role – engineers, supervisors, foremen and skilled workers. Skilled workers were needed to install new machinery, to ensure it ran smoothly and to train Norwegian workers. On the whole, native workers were able to cope; and the system of technical education also expanded. This way of learning was employed later, at the time of the new oil industry in the North Sea, when American experts not only taught technology, but also tried to introduce the American style of workplace culture, without success. The same fate was met by foreign engineers in earlier times. Norwegian workers reacted negatively towards efforts to introduce stricter discipline and an authoritarian style of leadership. In 1911, a Swiss engineer was

⁵ K. Bruland, *British technology and European industrialization. The Norwegian textile industry in the mid nineteenth century*, Cambridge 1989.

threatened by the female workers at a local textile plant outside Oslo; they wanted to throw him into the river. One of the workers said: “He believed he could pound us into becoming Germans; he ought to have realized that he could not pound us into anything.”⁶

This relative freedom for workers in Norway was one motive for going to Norway for another type of immigrant – not the specialist, but the *migrant worker*. He or she did not come because they were actively brought by an employer, although there are examples of active import, such as Finnish workers to a huge copper mine in Finnmark in the 1820s, or Finnish workers in the fishing industry in the same county from the 1960s. Most migrant workers came, however, because there was an open door for them into the labour market. Despite mechanization, there was a need for huge amounts of manual labour during industrialization – to crush stone, to lift, shovel and carry materials, on roads, railway lines, construction sites and factories. In general, these newcomers entered the working class on a par with native working men and women. In addition to its relative freedom, Norway could offer jobs and comparatively high wages. In particular, this was the case when compared to Sweden and its border counties, from where the bulk of the migrant workers came until around 1920.

In contrast to overseas emigration, primarily to the USA, this mass immigration has not received much attention in Norwegian history. While 750,000 left Norway in the epoch before World War I, as many as 150,000 entered the country. Norway constituted a particular type of country where both emigration and immigration were extensive, as opposed to France, which mostly imported immigrants, or Ireland and Italy, which were countries where emigration was prevalent. Among the 150,000 immigrants who came to

⁶ S. Larsen, *Norsk folkemuseum's collection of workers' autobiographies and memories*, no. 2014, quoted from Kjeldstadli (ed.) 2003, vol. 2, p. 344.

Norway, many were young women, who became dairy maids, servant girls or factory workers. Along with the Swedes, came people from Germany, Denmark, Finland and Russia. At its peaks, in 1900 and 1920, almost 3 percent were born outside Norway, a figure not reached again until well into the 1980s. When the economic crises hit in the inter-war period, there were no jobs to migrate to. Immigration and the share of foreign-born inhabitants sank.

Migration resumed within and to the Nordic countries after World War II. A common Nordic labour market was launched in 1954. Later, South Europeans and Yugoslavs arrived. From 1971 onwards, groups that were typical labour migrants came – Turks, Moroccans, Pakistanis and some Indians. A new wave of Swedes arrived in the 1990s, and Norway's agreement with the EU from 2000 opened the door for Poles and Lithuanians. Polish workers were recruited as strawberry pickers or in the building industry and ship yards. Polish women entered the cleaning business in particular. Polish became the most rapidly growing language group in the schools of Oslo

Conflicting interests in the labour market

Large numbers of migrant workers offered – from the point of view of the employers – access to sufficient, readily available, economically favourable and often submissive labour. Seen through the eyes of the resident, local working class, the situation might have seemed different. In a given labour market at a given time, a supply of newcomers might depress wages and deteriorate the conditions of work, particularly for those who did not possess special skills. However, in times of strong demand, a supply of new workers did not necessarily carry such negative effects. Those who immigrated could produce and consume, and thus contribute to economic growth; they

functioned in a similar way to the numerous generations of natives born in the 19th century.

To a large extent, the effect of labour migration has been linked to the way indigenous workers and the unions reacted. Over time, this reception has varied strongly. On one hand, a liberal labour union in 1898 sent a letter to the Parliament, demanding a higher barrier against all the "needy and crooked" that came to Norway; otherwise the Norwegian people would meet its "ruin".⁷ The individuals they had in mind were Swedes, on the social borderline between ordinary manual workers and poor people. At the other end of the scale, a meeting of workers in the industrial town of Rjukan protested against the expulsion of foreign workers, stating that they stood side by side with their comrades, "who just happened to be born in another country".⁸ And, for the last ten years, the unions of the construction workers in Oslo have met considerable success in organizing Polish construction workers.

In the era of the industrial society, groups who did not enter the capitalist labour market have existed or arrived. To the ethnic minority of the *Romany* people, the Travellers, capitalist modernization brought disaster. Whereas they had earlier delivered services demanded by the peasant society, the niche for these services narrowed along with the industrialization and specialization of work. And when the *Romany* people no longer satisfied such a need, the authorities and the population increasingly saw them as social clients to be handled, not as a people in its own right. This paved the way for efforts to settle them in 'colonies', to separate the children from the parents, even sterilize some women (although one should add that the argument behind this atrocity

⁷ Quoted from Kjeldstadli (ed.) 2003, vol. 2 , p. 336.

⁸ E. Tollevik, "*Saaheimkonflikten*". *Streiken på Rjukan Salpeterfabrik i1912*, Cand. Philol Thesis in history, University of Oslo 1996. p. 82.

was social, the itinerant lifestyle was the target, not ethnicity in itself). Similar reactions, but even more violent, were directed against the *Rom* (or ‘Gypsies’), from the Kalderash group from Romania, who came to Norway in the 1870s and 1880s. The Roms were seen as less pliable, resistant to efforts from the majority of society to regulate behaviour. Additionally, the *East European Jews*, who came from the 1880s to 1920, relied on more “old-fashioned” forms of economic adaptation. Many had been ejected from old trades and pauperised during economic modernization in Lithuania and other parts of Tsarist Russia. They tried to survive by finding a new economic slot for their itinerant peddling, first in Sweden, and then in Norway. During one or two generations many took the step into industrial work or forms of education.

Does the refugee fit into the information society?

The Jews also had another reason for moving to new countries; they were *refugees* from economic harassment and political and religious persecution – pogroms. Refugees are known from Norwegian history way back to 1250 when King Håkon Håkonsson allowed a group of ‘Bjarns’ to settle in Malangen up north. (They were probably Vepsers, Finnish people living near the Baltic Sea fleeing from Mongol invaders from the east). What the indigenous people, the Sami, who lived there and considered it their land, thought about this solution, is not told in the sources.⁹ Later on, some minor groups of refugees arrived, such as Finns who fled from the fighting between Sweden and Russia, Saxony-Poland and Denmark-Norway during the Great Nordic War from 1700 to 1721. Individuals came from failed revolts and social and national revolutions in Europe in the 19th century, with some Poles among them, such as Aleksander Jozef

⁹ Opsahl 2003, p. 98.

Waligorski. Refugees arrived in greater numbers after the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1918, from Nazism after 1933 and from the Cold War. Czechs and Slovaks came after 1948 and 1968, Hungarians after 1956, and some Poles in the years preceding Solidarity and the political transition. From the 1980s, refugees and people seeking asylum became the most important category of immigrants in Norway.

Among the most typical refugee nationalities in Norway are Chileans and other South Americans, Vietnamese, Tamils from Sri Lanka, Bosnians, Iranians and Iraqis – often Kurds, Afghans, Eritreans and Somalis. Immigrants from 214 countries and independent areas lived in Norway in 2009.¹⁰

Industrial society was still a work society in the sense that there was a need for great quantities of general labour, without particular qualifications. In the information and service society of today, this is somewhat different. Many jobs in the information sector – gathering, processing and spreading data, be they ciphers or words – demand a formal education or a real technical competence. Other jobs, such as waiter or sales assistant in posh stores, demand what is seen as a particular social and cultural competence. The specialists in the agrarian or industrial societies were brought because they (most often males) possessed a know-how that was scarce and in demand. The settler migrant immigrated because there was an economic niche for him. The migrant worker came because there was a demand for his or her labour. When it comes to the refugee in the current information and service world, it is more uncertain whether there is a demand for the knowledge he or she may offer. Many have qualifications which ease their passage into society, perhaps with some additional training or courses. Others may have extensive knowledge; yet their knowledge is not seen as relevant by the majority in

¹⁰ www.ssb.no/innvandring [1st January 2009]

the receiving society. Several groups of refugees have experienced a downward turn in their social status. This was the case for the politically “White” Russian officers who fled after the Bolshevik revolution in 1918. This is also the case for many in contemporary Norway.

In the decades around 1900, many people experienced the great transformation from agrarian to industrial society. In the same way, many Norwegians have experienced the new great mutation from an industrial society during the last generation. Industry culminated in 1973 and transformed into today’s information and service economy. Globalization of the economy has led to transnational corporations relocating their plants to other countries. The modern influx of refugees and asylum seekers has taken place in the same period as these deep and dramatic processes. From a rather stable and predictable society, where boys could look forward to a job for life at the local factory, many have been pushed into insecure, low status jobs.

In the same way as the liberal labour union in 1898, when individuals and groups saw the immigrants as a cause of, or at least as an expression of, the problems of social and mental insecurity stemming from a huge transformation, people blame immigrants today. Some problems that are ascribed to immigrants are real – such as the crime rate in some areas. In other cases, immigrants have become a kind of universal explanation and scapegoat for trouble generated in society at large.

If there is one lesson to be drawn from Norwegian immigration history, it is the need to find a place in the economy for newcomers. If there are no functions, they may feel they are marginalized, as was the case with the Romany people. If there is work to be had, there are reasons for optimism with respect to the future.

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