

19. Passenger on the globalisation train

Olga Stokke

The other. Who was the *other*? In the neighbourhood where I grew up, everybody appeared to be part of a quite homogeneous group. Even though some suffered from illnesses, alcoholism, scarce means, the differences were small, after all. At least from the outside, the majority seemed to live a normal life where the men would go to work every day, the women would be homemakers. All shared the same Norwegian history, culture, traditions. All probably shared the understanding of belonging to the same group,

I grew up understanding that those who were different were religious people, those who went to church on Sundays. Ethnicity was not an issue. Conflicts arose if neighbours disagreed on trees or houses growing too high. There was no intrusion of a strange religion or different rules of life and behaviour. Real controversies, wars and conflicts, were elsewhere, caused by others.

However, I remember an old woman teacher who brought the big, exotic world closer to us. She returned after having served as a missionary on the island of Madagascar east of Africa. Although, since she was Christian, and we were not very religious, we were not too curious about her adventures.

More fascinating was the neighbour truck driver who went off to Germany. Wow! I also wanted to become a long distance driver; I also wanted to go abroad.

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There were no immigrants in my hometown. My parents never saw or met a foreigner. Black people were on television and, at that time, there was only one TV channel and one radio station. We were not in the possession of a telephone; if urgent, we were allowed to borrow the neighbour's telephone. I grew up ignorant of the existence of the national newspaper, *Aftenposten*, where I work today.

My mother never left Norway. Sometimes there was little money and even little food, but neither hunger nor war made her flee. She stayed at home, as many others would have preferred to do if they could, instead of becoming refugees.

Around 25 years ago, in 1993, when the American scholar Samuel Phillips Huntington published his article *Clash of Civilizations*, I had already been a journalist for more than 13 years. I had started reporting on migration, integration and human rights. Three years later when he followed up with a book based on his article, I had travelled to distant countries in Africa and Asia. My mother still talked about Africa and Asia as countries, not as continents.

I had been in slight touch with the feeling of being the *other*, not in a hostile way, but by simply experiencing being part of a minority – a white in an African country.

I was a passenger on the globalization train – transcending borders. The initial mantra was connecting people, integration.

These days we hear the whistles: globalization must halt. European countries are again building walls to keep migrants from entering our territories. We are afraid that they – the other – will change, challenge, and destabilize our societies.

Huntington argued that future wars would not be fought between states, but between cultures. Islamic extremism would become the biggest threat to the West. He argued that Western civilizations with individual liberty, political democracy, human rights, rule of law and cultural freedom are unique, not necessary to be forced on other civilisations, but to be preserved, and protected. His views were highly debated. Critics argued that his ideas created an exaggerated gloomy forecast that would widen the gap between people. His supporters blamed the former for being naive ignoring his sharp analysis.

The first immigrants to Norway came from Pakistan, Turkey and Morocco in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They represented some-

thing new and exotic with their black hair and dark skin. They worked long hours, established small mosques in basements and warehouses. Eventually they brought their wives, and children. Even today, immigrants import spouses from the homeland, and thereby to some extent contribute to the cultivation of old, rural traditions.

Many Norwegians were quite ignorant of the immigrant's backgrounds, religious faith, cultures and traditions – until it became clear that they did not intend to forget their roots.

Norwegians are proud of their democracy, human rights, gender equality and female prime ministers. However, the *other* was present in Norwegian society long before the first immigrants arrived from Pakistan. The others were in the shadows, in the dark corners of our playground: For generations the Sami people were discriminated against. Romany travellers were sterilised by force and they were deprived of their children.

Norway had to move on, to be open-minded, generous and tolerant towards the other. The overall focus on immigration in Norway has been integration. *We* expected them to be grateful and willing to adopt our rules and values.

After the Second World War Europe rapidly developed its economies, democracies with freedom of speech and press, standards of living. People were connected! Wars and clashes still took place elsewhere in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Angola, and Eritrea.

However, was the official notion to create a common *we* a naïve concept? Were politicians and journalists ignorant of radical, conservative, patriarchal values that some immigrants were importing? Journalists did, and still do, write about forced marriages, honour killings and parents preventing their youth from becoming too influenced by liberal western values.

More than 20 years ago, nobody would have questioned that a man from the countryside in Pakistan took the role as a spokesperson for all immigrants – regardless of religion and national background. Today this would never work. The ethnic diversity is visible through a global patchwork of organisations. It is taken for granted that women and youth address their own issues.

A few years ago, I interviewed three women with Pakistani and Turkish backgrounds that I had interviewed 20 years earlier. How was

life after all these years in Norway? Well, they had lost some, and gained some. Inevitably, they had experienced aspects of culture-clash, but they had taken advantage of the possibilities in their new country. They had studied, worked and gone public with their struggles. These women carried the torch and prepared the ground for their sons and daughters – in order to harvest a good standard of living and a happy life.

Integration of people and cultures is a continuous process. However, why do some develop radical views, even devote themselves to extreme groups? Why do some Muslims in democratic countries embrace extreme versions of Islam? ISIS has been successful in recruiting thousands of young Muslims, also from Europe, to join their violent project. There is no room for the other in their house.

Due to reports from scientists on terror, such as Thomas Hegghammer (2016) and Western authorities such as the Norwegian Security Police (PST) the reason why young people from Western countries join terror groups such as ISIS, is complex.

They point to different aspects such as low education and degree of employment, a criminal background. These young Muslims do not feel included, not accepted nor wanted by the majority. They are, therefore, easily recruited by extremists who invite them to join a big, warm, global family – the Muslim Ummah (community). Converts to Islam who adopt extreme versions of the religion often have similar socio-economic backgrounds. They also have the feeling of being an outsider. In addition, the role that Western countries play in the Arab world – such as US invasion in Iraq – has influenced many to turn to violent extremism.

Edward Said, the Palestinian-American professor and author of the book *Orientalism* (1978), argued that the terrible events of September 11 was a turning point, for the West, but not least for many Muslims. They experienced hostility and suspicion, as if all Muslims are terrorists in disguise.

Polarisation is a victory for extremists such as ISIS. They want people, civilisations, to clash in order to spread their ideology and establish their caliphate.

The Western world applauded the Arab Spring. Eventually oppressed Muslims protested against dictatorships and hardships. Regimes were overthrown. Nevertheless, it turned out that in several states, there was

no trustworthy alternative to replace the old regimes. In the emptiness after the states had collapsed, extreme Islamists took the opportunity. This also contributed to an increase in right-wing extremism in the West.

Geert Wilders, one of the most popular politicians in the Netherlands wants to ban the Q'uran, shut down all mosques and stop immigration from Muslim countries. At the same time, Muslims are fighting extreme Islam.

Innumerable Muslims enjoy their Western lives, they prefer to live in a Western democracy to a Muslim state. Western Muslims such as the Norwegian doctor and author, Mohammed Usman Rana, who describes himself as a conservative Muslim, asks Muslims to stop the fire in the house of Islam. He calls for a fight for democracy and freedom, against extremism.

Clashes between Sunnis and Shias have erupted these last years. ISIS (Sunnis) have slaughtered their Shia brothers and sisters. They have taken Yezidi women as sex-slaves – or killed them. In Iraq, the tensions between Sunnis and Shias have been high. Ahmadiyya Muslims are fighting oppression in many countries.

According to the Norwegian professor in Middle East and North-African studies, Bjørn Olav Utvik (Utvik, 2014), today's Europe has not been formed by a gradual ascent towards enlightenment, guided by liberal thinkers. The idea of liberal and secular Islam versus a political and fundamental Islam faces problems.

Utvik underlines that political Islamists were in the front row when Muslims were fighting for more freedom and democratic elections during the Arab Spring. He mentions bodies such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and conservative Salafists.

Brexit. Right wing parties attracting large numbers. Thousands of migrants heading for Europe. Trump as president in the US. Collapse of EU ahead? What role will NATO play? Turkey? What will happen in France, in Germany? People are nervous that all this will lead to the destabilisation of Western democracies and change of values. So European countries close their borders, build new walls. How is that really the solution?

Those who want diversity can make a difference. Confrontation – without contempt – could be one of the solutions, by meeting the *other* with curiosity. Confrontations create dialogue – and change.

My mother eventually met an immigrant, at the hospital, shortly before she died. She appreciated the kind service she received, and the migrant woman was happy to be useful, to make a living. Fulfil a dream. We all change a bit by meeting the other.

References

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