



Cultural Radicalism versus Christian Conservatism: Political Controversies in Literary Nation Building in Norway, 1863-1938

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Abstract

Contemporary cultural policy programmes in Western Europe and in the Nordic countries have their direct origin in the welfare state after World War II, and in some countries they can be traced back to the 1930s. However, also in the Nordic countries, the states supported heritage, cultural institutions and even single artists long before the concept of “cultural policy” was coined. From the mid-19th century the state in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway engaged in supporting heritage and the arts. Nation building was a strong driving force in the states' intervention in culture, and artists were supposed to be bearers of national characters.

But in liberal states of the 19th century, with individual democratic rights, and among them was the freedom of expression, artists were no longer loyal to state power and religious dogmas. On the contrary, many became critics and rebels who made themselves spokesmen for radical ideas beyond bourgeois establishment and the Christian belief. Artists' and intellectuals' attack on traditional values and institutions was later called “cultural radicalism”. Often cultural radicalism was associated with left wing liberal ideas in art worlds and academic circles. And one of the cultural and political issues of the time was the conflict between cultural radicalism and Christian conservatism.

This article, which rests on a historical study of state support for literature in Norway 1863–1938, demonstrates that conflict. My study has a specific focus on an arrangement of state grants to writers of fiction called “writer's salary”, which meant that the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget) assigned lifelong salaries to selected and “distinguished” writers who were expected to contribute to cultural nation building. In the period 1863–1938 there was a lot of political controversy in the parliament about writers who were typically critical to the Christian faith, to the Lutheran State High Church and the clergy, and even to the Low Church laymen movement. They criticized the bourgeois family and marriage as institutions, and were politically and culturally radical in attitudes and values.

The structure of the policy model for state support to literary fiction made political confrontations inevitable since the parliament made its decisions mainly on political and moral grounds, not on aesthetic ones. There was no “arm's length body” of literature experts between the writers who applied for state support and the politicians of the government and the parliament. Single decisions followed ordinary political procedures, so even in cases where the parliament rejected a controversial writer's application for economic support, it was formally not a political censoring. State support for cultural purposes, like any other purpose, was practiced according to general political procedures.

Keywords

Writer's salary, literature policy, nation building, cultural radicalism, Christian conservatism

Introduction: Research Issue, Source Material and Research Questions

In 1863 the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget) decided to award the most outstanding Norwegian fiction writer of the time, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, a lifelong salary. By this grant the parliament *de facto* established a model for financial support of artists. Through this arrangement artists themselves, their colleagues, government officials, members of parliament or other citizens could propose candidates to Stortinget (Dahl and Helseth 2006:100–112). The salary, although it was not big, was a generous offer to artists who were selected and therefore of great importance as a financial base for an artist career. Much cultural and political prestige was associated with such a salary.

Artists who received such a salary were supposed to contribute to nation building, to give a positive image of the country, its culture and its citizens. They did not receive the salary for what they *had* produced but for their talent and what they *might* produce during their lifetime. The scheme was accessible for different groups of artists – for example musicians/composers, painters and writers. But writers received most public attention, possibly because written language as an artistic medium reached broader groups of citizens. The Norwegian elementary school of the second half of the 19th century focused on basic reading and writing, and made all children a bit familiar with the written word.

The specific arrangement of state support to writers of fiction was termed “writer’s salary”, which meant that the Norwegian parliament supported writers of fiction by offering permanent life grants to a selected group of writers who were found sufficiently “distinguished” to deserve an economic reward from the nation state.

Grants to controversial writers often caused much political debate. There were often political controversies about the selection of candidates – controversies which reflected more general cultural and political conflicts in Norway of the time. The harshest debates took place in the negotiations of Stortinget, the parliament. Therefore documentation and analysis of the political debates and conflicts in the parliament in connection with the selection of candidates, is the empirical basis of my study.¹

Since this is a study of the political process of literature policy on a national level, my primary source materials are government bills, recommendations and reports from parliamentary committees and the minutes of parliament debates.² The source material even includes selected articles from public debates in newspapers and journals.

I will concentrate on four cases of controversy which are of special interest since they demonstrate the principal problems of the model of state grants to writers. The cases are: 1) The 1860s and the introduction of the system by the approval of a life grant to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Henrik Ibsen, the most prominent Norwegian writers of the time, 2) the 1880s, when Stortinget refused to give the controversial writer Alexander Kielland a state grant, 3) the 1890s, especially when Stortinget in 1898 discussed a writer’s salary to Arne Garborg, and finally 4) the 1930s, when the controversial poet Arnulf Øverland, after a harsh debate in Stortinget, was assigned a writer’s salary in 1938.

The principal research questions are the following ones:

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1. The empirical material of this paper is based on a report from a research project on Norwegian cultural policy history, edited by Dahl and Helseth (2006). My contribution was a study of Norwegian literature policy 1863–1962 (Vestheim 2005).
 2. In the notes of this article referred to as *St. Prp. Nr.* (government bill), *Indst. S.* (report from parliament committee) and *Storthingstidende* (minutes of parliament debates).

- Why did the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget) establish a system with life grants from the state to selected fiction writers? Which were the driving forces?
- Which were the arguments put forward by members of Stortinget for and against proposed candidates?
- Which cultural and political conflicts were provoked when members of the Norwegian parliament debated grants to writers who were morally and politically controversial?

The structure of the article is as follows: Section I gives a presentation of the historical and cultural background of the subject and presents the main perspectives of my analysis: nation building and cultural radicalism. Section II is the empirical part of the article and consists of presentation and analysis of policy documents and debates from the controversies in Stortinget. Section III contains a final discussion of my findings and the main conclusions I draw from my study.

I

Historical Context: Nation building meets Cultural Radicalism

Nation Building and the Arts in Liberal States

When modern democratic governments support the arts – like music, literature, visual arts, etc. – it is often at an “arm’s length distance”, in the form of expert groups between government bodies and artists in decisional procedures. This principle is a result of a democratic development of liberal political systems, but also of professionalization of the art world as well as of arts support and management. According to Hans Abbing (2002), government support today is more general, abstract and indirect than it was in earlier times when kings, aristocrats and rich private persons were the dominant patrons. The relation between the artist and the state as patron is more impersonal, the state represents an abstract political system where mutual dependence is less visible and less bound to personal relations between artist and benefactor. The charity principle has been replaced by a principle of rights and duties for the citizen vis à vis the state.

In many Western European countries, the transition from old to modern patronage took place during the 19th century. Sébastien Dubois (2018) describes this as a shift from a royal and aristocratic patronage system to a market-based organization in which experts and peers along with the public as “customers” became the instances of consecration. In addition European nation building regimes started to intervene in and support artistic production with financial help to compensate “distinguished” artists for economic losses because of market failures. The artists of late 19th century therefore ended up with two patrons – the market and the nation state.

But states represent interests and may support the arts for different purposes – aesthetic and cultural developments, political mobilization like nation building, protection of property rights like copyrights, economic rights, etc. Depending on the character of political regimes, ideologies and historical backgrounds, state intervention may in some cases be motivated by control and censoring, in other cases by cultural welfare programmes and protection of democratic rights for the citizen as well as for the artist. States behave differently in cultural policies as in other policy areas (Becker 2008).

Parallel to the development of liberal, constitutional states, one outstanding aspect of European political history of the 19th century, was the *nation building* process. Nation building as a process was then a conscious creation of images of commonness – embodied in national institutions, symbols, education and culture (Rokkan 1987). National identity is much about how people understand themselves – or how they want to understand them-

selves and how they want to be understood by others. European politicians of the 19th century were therefore occupied with creating nations with two faces – the political nation state and the cultural nation. This was also the case in the Nordic countries.³

Whereas the aristocracy and the absolutist kingdoms of the 18th century were European in their cultural preferences, the upcoming merchant and industrial bourgeoisie and the civil servant class in the Nordic countries of the 19th century were nationally oriented. The bourgeoisie made the idea of the independent nation state a fundament of their ideology (Larsson 2003, Duelund 2003).

Political scientist Li Bennich-Björkman (1991: 14–19) argues that the 19th century image of an independent, truth-seeking writer presupposed an independent and discussing bourgeois public sphere. Another necessary social condition was that there existed political rights like the freedom of expression and the freedom of the press. Protected by such rights writers could claim to express themselves as free citizens, regardless of belief, morals, values and political standing. And they could argue that they represented not only themselves but even broader publics. When bonds to the king, the Church and the aristocracy were broken, writers turned to new publics – primarily the bourgeoisie, but in the Nordic countries of the late 19th century, even to reading farmers and workers. Professions like teachers and officials in private business and public administration were also upcoming publics.

The changing society of the 19th century brought about new and more specialized social fields in the cultural sector. Pierre Bourdieu (1992) describes how a specialized literary field grew up in 19th century France, with its aesthetic norms, its structure, processes and its agents and their power positions. Changes in the cultural fields of liberal political systems also meant that the consecration process was moved from closed representative public spheres to an open public sphere. Norms for judgement of content and aesthetic styles – or taste – were formed by journals, newspapers, academics, artists and art organizations. But in the open public sphere there was much controversy about which taste should prevail. Bjurström (2008) argues that the “Great Reformation of Taste” in the mid-19th century, advocated by people like Matthew Arnold, was a movement to establish universal norms for “good culture”. It was an elite movement whose mission was to “educate” people and bring them to a “higher” cultural level and thereby make them “better” humans and citizens. The idea of “bringing up” the people was also an integrated idea of the *Bildung* movement, which was strong in Germany, Denmark, Norway and in Sweden (Frenander 2014).

Cultural Radicalism – A Bourgeois Rebellion within the Frames of a Bourgeois World

The progress of Enlightenment ideas, the downfall of absolutism and a declining aristocracy, the rise of constitutional liberal political systems and an upcoming bourgeois class, technical and industrial progress combined with liberalism and homage to the free market – all these changes were followed by deep changes in values and attitudes towards traditional social institutions in Western European and Nordic countries. French sociologist Edgar Morin (1987:147–155) claims that “turbulent dialogues” like the antagonism between religion and reason; belief and doubt; reaction and revolution; individualism and collectivism; science and myth; etc., is typical of Western European identity and history. According to this philosophical perspective, there is no such thing as a sacred idea, concept or image that cannot be fundamentally questioned. The typical European identity, according to Morin, is the capability to *problematize*, to ask critical questions. That was typically also the case with cultural radicalism of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries.

3. Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark (Iceland was until 1944 in a personal union with Denmark).

Leif Longum (1986 and 1998), Bertil Nolin (1993) and Carl Erik Bay (1993) describe and analyze cultural radicalism of the literary field in the Nordic countries in two phases: The first phase covered the period 1870–1900, and the second phase was the interwar period 1920–1940. There was a continuous intellectual connection between them, represented by two generations of fiction writers.

In its first phase, cultural radicalism can be seen as a defense of newly acquired rights for the artist and the citizen of the liberal state. Cultural radicals considered themselves independent intellectuals. As rebels they were tolerated, although detested, by the establishment of liberal political systems. Therefore, from a sociological and ideological point of view, it was a liberal and bourgeois phenomenon. Its ideal was the free individual in a free and truth-based society. Bearing elements were confidence in enlightenment ideas and science, like positivism and Darwinism, and also a strong belief in progressive and linear developments of societies and human conditions. The targets of the critique from cultural radicals were religion and the Church, the Christian authoritarian discipline of the school, the bourgeois Christian marriage, the dominating and discriminating sexual morals, etc. Power holders and administrators of the nation state, the class of civil servants, were also heavily criticized.

The central figure of Nordic cultural radicalism was the Danish critic and researcher of literature Georg Brandes (Longum 1986, Duelund 2003), who was a spokesman for radical realism and naturalism of European literature. By conservatives in politics, the arts and the Church, his message was considered to be “dangerous” for the people’s individual and social morality.

Finland was in a different position than the other Nordic countries (Kangas 2003:80–82). Since 1809, Finland was an autonomous Russian Grand Duchy. But the Grand Duchy had its own Senate, a governing body populated by Finns. For the Finns this meant that they escaped centralist Swedish government from Stockholm and they obtained a certain level of self-rule. In practice this laid the foundation of a Finnish nation state. The Senate granted scholarships to art organizations and single artists from the 1860s and onwards. The motivation was to create a specific Finnish art and to strengthen Finnish as the main written language in the country besides Swedish, which was a cultural heritage from Sweden’s former annexation. Thus Finland did not experience the liberal democracy of Western Europe, and the conflict between cultural radicalism and religious conservatism was not so visible in public debates. The overarching issue in Finnish public debate was nation building, in which cultural identity through development and protection of the Finnish language was a leading strategy (Sokka and Kangas 2007:186–190). It rested on a close cooperation between the state and organizations of civil society.

Cultural radicalism of the interwar period, the 1920s and the 1930s, was a more complex movement: This generation of writers was inspired by the radical liberal ideas of the late 19th century, but they also had experiences which seriously challenged the optimism of liberal democracy: World War I with the humiliating Versailles treaty and the collapse of the German economy in the 1920s, followed by the outbreak of the economic world crisis in 1929. They also witnessed the growth of fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany and Franco’s victory in the Spanish civil war. Liberal democracy seemed to be a political system in a deep crisis. For some radicals the Russian revolution of 1917 gave new hopes. Cultural radicals in Denmark and Norway were inspired by Marxism and the communist parties (Bay 1993), whereas Swedish cultural radicals went in a more moderate direction and supported the social democrats (Longum 1998). However, after the Moscow processes in 1935–1936, a majority of those who had believed in Soviet communism turned to the social

democrats, the Labour parties. Still Marxism as a scientific theory of society continued to influence academic and artistic circles. In addition, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and Wilhelm Reich's psychotherapy influenced left wing intellectuals (Dahl 2001).

Again Finland experienced a different reality. The Russian revolution gave Finland full independence but independence was followed by a bitter civil war in 1918 between the Reds (socialists) and the Whites (conservatives). The civil war divided Finland into two parts, on one side the Whites and the fascist like Lappo movement in the north, on the other the Reds, i. e. the communists, in the south and in the cities. But the two political wings were reconciled when they faced a common enemy, when the Soviet Union attacked Finland in November 1939 (Kangas 2003). The Winter War went on until March 1940. The Finns fought desperately and received much sympathy and even troops from other Nordic countries, but Finland lost Eastern Karelen and the city Vyborg to the Russians.

A concluding comment to the Finnish position could be that since Finland was a neighbour to and a former Grand Duchy of the powerful Russia, politically it remained a part of Eastern Europe. It was less influenced by liberal bourgeois individualism compared to Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

Cultural radicalism was a bourgeois phenomenon, it was a child of bourgeois liberal democracy and liberalist capitalism. By tolerating cultural radicalism power elites could control social conflicts and prevent revolutionary rebellions. As long as such movements did not threaten the system itself, it legitimized the system by proving its inbuilt tolerance. This was what Herbert Marcuse (1968) called "repressive tolerance" – a mechanism in advanced liberal capitalism that brings everything in line with the established power structure.

With the ideas of nation building and cultural radicalism in mind, we shall now turn to presentation and analysis of the empirical material of this article.

II

The 1860s: Establishment of a Model of State Grants to Writers of Fiction: Lifelong Salaries to Bjørnson and Ibsen

It was a constitutional right and duty of the members of parliament to approve the annual state budgets, and part of this work was even to approve government proposals concerning appointment of civil servants. So if the government and the parliament wanted to reward outstanding artists, one possibility was to give them positions as civil servants. This was done in 1860 when a popular writer, Andreas Munch, was appointed docent at the University of Oslo,⁴ and in 1866 he was promoted to a professorship. Although he was not an ordinary professor with clearly defined obligations at the University, the members of parliament could defend such a decision since it was within their constitutional rights to appoint civil servants.

Andreas Munch was the third Norwegian writer who was rewarded by the state by becoming a civil servant.⁵ This showed that both the legislative and the executive bodies, Stortinget and the government, were willing to pay salaries to artists who were supposed to bring honour and prestige to the country. The selected artists received a regular income since civil servants were guaranteed to keep their positions for lifetime, unless they broke the law or neglected their duties severely. But their duties were vaguely formulated.

4. Indst. S. No. 3 (1859), Indst. S. No. 74 (1860) and Stortingstidende (1860), p. 743–744.

5. The two others before him were Henrik Wergeland (1840) and Johan Sebastian Welhaven (1840).

A more complicated situation arose when in 1863 the members of parliament were faced with a government bill that proposed Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson to receive a lifetime salary directly from the state budget, not as a civil servant, but as an author, “hired” by the state.⁶

The parliament committee which prepared the plenary debate in Stortinget was split in the issue so the committee report to Stortinget was not unanimous.⁷ A majority wanted to reject the government bill. They argued that the country was in a difficult economic situation and they were doubtful about the usefulness of supporting writers. Members of parliament voted in by farmers found poetry to be a luxury for the educated class, and they feared the consequences if they approved the government bill: How many writers should the state pay for? Would not a vote for this grant increase the taxes and make the tax burden of the people even heavier?⁸

Members of parliament who came from the educated class of the cities were of the opposite opinion. Several of them argued that the fiction writers were part of “what is progressive and honourable for the nation”, the citizens had not only material needs but also intellectual, spiritual and emotional ones.⁹ And they argued that the national assembly of a small nation ought to support cultural as well as material developments. When the question was put to the vote a large majority voted yes. Bjørnson received a modest annual salary from the state for three years, but in 1866 it was renewed and prolonged to run for the rest of his life.

In 1866, the government, in a bill to Stortinget, argued that Henrik Ibsen deserved the same honour as Bjørnson. He was considered a promising poet and play writer, he had obtained a high status in literary Europe but lived under modest economic conditions in Rome with his family. Some of Ibsen’s friends mobilized to influence Stortinget, and even Ibsen himself sent several letters to the government and the Swedish king to apply for a state grant.¹⁰ 28 members of parliament also argued for Ibsen in a letter to Stortinget.¹¹ And an overwhelming majority of the representatives voted for Ibsen at the final ballot.¹²

With the formulas and procedures used in the cases of Bjørnson and Ibsen, and even in three other cases in the 1860s and 1870s,¹³ Stortinget had in fact established a model for state salaries to writers of fiction which came to last for one hundred years, until 1962.

All writers who had received a salary so far, wrote in Danish, the official written language in Norway, and their books were published by Danish publishers. Therefore the literature that Stortinget supported was a Danish literature written by Norwegian authors.¹⁴

So which were the principal implications of the model for state support to literature in Norway?

One important aspect of the model was that the salaries to the selected group of writers were not limited in time, they should receive an annual amount of money from the state for the rest of their life. Formally, Stortinget had the right to reconsider its decision and stop the payment but that was problematic from an ethical point of view, and it never happened. At

6. The relevant source materials are: Indst. S. No. 66 (1863), Indst. S. No. 98 (1863) and Stortingstidende (1863), p. 526–534.

7. Indst. S. No. 98 (1863).

8. Stortingstidende (1863), p. 525–528.

9. Stortingstidende (1863), p. 528.

10. J. B. Halvorsen. 1892. *Norsk Forfatterlexicon 1814–1914*, p. 11–12 and p. 16–17.

11. Stortingstidende (1866), p. 892.

12. Stortingstidende (1866), p. 894.

13. Camilla Collett (1866), Jonas Lie (1874) and Kristofer Janson (1876).

14. The language situation changed a lot towards the end of the 19th century, a matter I will return to later in this article.

this point there was a clear difference between the *salary* and the state *scholarships* assigned to promising writers, which were normally for one year, sometimes for two or three years.

Another important implication was that to receive a lifetime salary was not only a matter of money. First of all, it was a matter of national honour and prestige, for the writer and for the nation. The salary should only be given to writers who were acknowledged and who “deserved” the honour to be paid by the nation, they should be protected against future economic problems so they could concentrate on their calling and continue to create works for the people and the nation.

And a third principle: The members of parliament decided directly which writers should be honoured with a salary, and their approvals were *political* decisions. Members of parliament were by principle amateurs with respect to aesthetic or artistic quality, and there was no body of independent experts who advised them. Norway did not have an academy of letters, the country was too small and did not have a strong upper class which could hold up such an institution.

The members of parliament took a personal stand in single cases, they judged about the literary quality, the morals and the social values of each writer. Structurally there was in this model a high risk for political and moral censoring. If the selected writers were in line with established morals and social and political values, there was no problem. But what would happen if a writer rebelled against basic moral values, attacked the political establishment and became a spokesman for “dangerous” attitudes?

The majority of Norwegian members of parliament, however, were optimistic and believed that the dog does not bite the hand that feeds him when in 1863 they gave a state grant for the rest of his life to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. But, as we shall see, in the decades that followed they had to learn a new lesson. This problem was fully highlighted in 1885–1886 when Stortinget discussed a proposal about a state salary to the novelist and short story writer Alexander Kielland (1849–1906).

The 1880s: The Alexander Kielland Case

The political context of the Kielland case

The Kielland case is of special interest since it created political and cultural conflicts that had decisive consequences for Norwegian politics on top level. Norwegian politics and literature were deeply intertwined, and the case demonstrated the structural conflict implied in the Norwegian model of state support to artists.

To make the Kielland case understandable for an international public I will give a brief presentation of the main political conflicts of Norway in the 1870s and 1880s.¹⁵

In 1884 the two first political parties in Norway, the Liberals and the Conservatives,¹⁶ were established. Before 1884 the government and its ministers were defined as civil servants and were not responsible to a majority in Stortinget. The two parties were the result of two different political alliances in the parliament.

The Conservatives were an alliance between members of the government and members of parliament who by social background were civil servants with a university education or they were businessmen. The class of civil servants constituted the majority of the Conservatives and held a hegemonic position in the party.

The civil servants as a social class were conservative in social, religious and moral values. They stuck to the Danish written language and were culturally oriented towards upper class

15. For an overview of Norwegian history this period, see Anne-Lise Seip (1997), Gro Hagemann (1997) and Jostein Nerbøvik (1973).

16. Venstre (Liberals) and Høire (Conservatives).

traditions from the European continent and England. In economic affairs they were liberalist. They did not want to extend the right to vote to the working class or people without property – and of course not to women. Further, they did not want to make the government dependent on a majority of Stortinget, i.e. parliamentary system of government.

The Liberals were an alliance of farmers and urban intellectuals – artists, academics and people in liberal professions. What united these two groups, which were very different with respect to cultural capital and social background, was a common adversary – the Conservatives.

Constitutionally the Liberals spoke for parliamentary control of the government, decentralization of political power, extension of the suffrage and a national language policy, which meant to strengthen the position of a new Norwegian written language (“*landsmål*” – “language for the whole country”).

The Liberals aspired to represent the broader masses of the people. But the electorate and the representatives of the two wings of Liberals were deeply split in cultural and religious matters: The farmer wing of the party was orthodox and traditional in religious and moral issues, many of them came from western and southern Norway, where the Christian layman movement was strong. They were conservative in values but liberal-radical in economic policies and opposed the hegemonic position of the civil servant class.

The urban wing of the party, with intellectuals, academics and artists, were cultural radicals, strongly influenced by modern European philosophy and science. They were skeptical about or hostile to Christianity, they were critical to institutions like the church, the school, and the bourgeois family and marriage as institutions. They were also liberal-radical in economic policies.

The overall objective of their political work was to reduce the power of civil servants in the government by introducing a parliamentary system which would make the government dependent on a majority in Stortinget. Two of their most outstanding leaders were Johan Sverdrup, a lawyer, and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson – the popular writer.

What is important to bear in mind in when reading the following sections, is that the Liberal party was a fragile alliance of people, and since the party was a new organization in 1884, the party discipline was weak.

“ (...) there is poison on his pen”

In February 1885 Bjørnson and a colleague, the writer Jonas Lie, wrote a letter to Stortinget, in which they proposed that Stortinget should approve the writer Alexander Kielland a writer’s salary. They argued that Kielland deserved economic support and wrote that in a small nation the writers needed state grants to be able to develop themselves as artists and to “stand for new attitudes to life and to defend opinions independent of the opinions of the masses”.¹⁷

Alexander Kielland was a controversial writer, in his short stories and in his novels he had attacked the clergy and the Christian Church, the school, the civil servant class and the bourgeois family. To many members of parliament Alexander Kielland was a rebel, not a national hero. Bjørnson and Lie knew it was necessary to put forward the argument that the writer ought to be independent in relation to power holders, otherwise he could not live up to the principle of artistic freedom and the ideal of artistic truth. This was an appeal to the Liberal party that was supposed to defend liberal freedoms and rights.

17. Dokument No. 66 (1885): “ (...) hævde Livssyn og Meninger uafhængig af Mængdens”.

And since the letter was directly addressed to Stortinget, and not to the government, it was first handled by a parliament committee.¹⁸ A majority of the committee – 8 of 9 – did not recommend a state grant to Kielland, and their principal argument was that Kielland was a writer who “is in conflict with the moral and religious concepts that are supported by a majority of the nation”.¹⁹

The debate in Stortinget that followed lasted for two days and became a bitter confrontation between the two wings of the Liberal party. What made the situation even more complicated for the Liberals, was that Johan Sverdrup, now Prime Minister and leader of the Liberals, did not say one word in the debate. He had even tried to stop the proposal before it reached Stortinget since he knew that this was explosive stuff and he feared that the party could fall apart. If the party conflict was demonstrated in Stortinget by a ballot where one of the wings of the party voted against its own government, the parliamentary basis of the Liberal government would be in danger. Sverdrup wanted to avoid this situation and his strategy was to remain silent. Nobody knew the opinion of the government and the Prime Minister!

The representatives of the Conservatives also remained silent – for tactical reasons: They were all against Kielland, and it was clear that in the final ballot they would vote no, but the question was how many of the Liberal representatives would follow them. With a majority against Kielland the Conservatives would obtain two things: They could deny an anti-Conservative writer the honourable state salary, and they could demonstrate the internal problems and conflicts of the governing Liberal party. So they kept their mouth shut and listened to the verbal fight between the Liberals.

The members of parliament from the Christian wing of the Liberals mobilized all their efforts to convince those of their party colleagues who were in doubt whether Kielland represented values that could break down the moral fundament of the nation – which was Christianity, the Church and the traditional family. They said Kielland was “dangerous” to young people, his seductive and destructive moral attitudes could lead them and the country into a moral crisis that even threatened the state. As one of Kiellands strongest adversaries in Stortinget put it: “ (...) there is poison on his pen”.²⁰

And one of the Christian members of parliament called Kielland “an enemy of the people” and said that his works were “an insult to the Norwegian people”.²¹ Kielland was even accused of being aristocratic and arrogant. It was well known that he came from the upper class and his habitus and lifestyle were according to his social position. He belonged to the cultural and economic elite, which was also the case with his defenders, Bjørnson and Lie.²² So there was a point in the argument that he represented a class and a culture that was far from everyday life of the people. The class dimension was strengthened by a centre-periphery dimension (Bakke 2003) – many members of parliament who voted against Kielland, were farmers from the countryside. And several of the representatives of the Liberals came from the layman movement, especially those from the southern and western coast districts. As Christians they were orthodox and interpreted the Bible to the letter.

But none of Kielland’s adversaries would deny him the right to write publicly what he meant. On the contrary, several of them underlined that they would defend his right to use the

18. Before a subject matter is put under debate and is voted for in the plenary of Stortinget, it is prepared by a parliamentary committee which makes a report and a recommendation to Stortinget.

19. *Indst. S. No. 187 (1885)*: “ (...) i Modsætning til de inden Nationen herskende moralske og religiøse Begreber”.

20. The quotation is from Edvard Liljedahls address to Stortinget, in *Storthingstidende (1885)*, p. 1211: “ (...) der er Gift paa Pennen hans”.

21. Lars Oftedal in his address to Stortinget, see *Storthingstidende (1885)*, p. 1218.

22. Kielland was born in a rich business family and his lifestyle was marked by his social background. About that, see for example Tore Rem (2002).

freedom of expression and speech. Some of them even pointed to Kielland's literary qualities and praised his attacks on injustice and hypocrisy. But that was one thing, it was quite another to give a national *reward* to a writer who publicly had demonstrated his contempt for Christian values and institutions. Their argument was that if Stortinget assigned the writer's salary to a writer, the state would acknowledge and legitimize his or her works. If Stortinget approved a grant to Kielland, they would even approve his idea that the moral of the people and the state should be based on human reason and will alone – not the Christian faith.

In their turn the cultural radical wing of the Liberal party – often called “the Europeans” – argued that Kielland was not an anti-Christian but a writer who attacked religious hypocrisy, “a man who is fighting for the truth and who is struggling for a better position for the truth in society”.²³ And they asked: Should the state only reward artists who had a Christian faith? No, they answered, it is not better that a majority does injustice to a minority than the opposite. They argued for tolerance, respect for the freedom of expression and tried to convince their party colleagues that modern writers of the Realist and Naturalist school must be free to express whatever they mean and they should not be obliged to pay respect to established morals and religions, be they Christian or not. If Stortinget denied Kielland a state grant, that would be a political censoring, according to their opinion.

The two wings of the Liberal party had very separate views on the social role of a writer. The Christian representatives were of the opinion that a writer who received a lifelong grant from the nation state should represent moral attitudes that were approved by a majority of the population. “The Europeans” saw the writer as an independent, free individual, a rebel and a national hero at the same time, but no politician should tell the writer which moral values he or she should express.

When the question was put to ballot, the proposal to assign Kielland a writer's salary was rejected by 60 versus 49 votes. The cultural radical wing of the Liberals lost because their Christian colleagues formed an “unsacred alliance” with the Conservatives, who unanimously voted no.

The “no to Kielland” caused an intense debate in newspapers and journals. The larger part of the liberal press criticized Stortinget, and the Prime Minister Johan Sverdrup was accused of having let his party, his own ideals and his party colleagues down in a situation that called for leadership and courage. Gradually Sverdrup lost control over the party, and by 1888 the Liberal party was split in two. The Conservative party won the election that same year. The Kielland case was of course not the only reason, but it contributed substantially to the division and the political defeat of the Liberals.

A leading Norwegian historian of the time and even the ideological leader of the Liberals, professor J. E. Sars, wrote in an article that “During the struggle with the Conservatives the liberal clericalism has turned out its *liberal* nature, now is the time that it turns out its *clerical* nature”.²⁴ With these words, Sars expressed the general disappointment of the radical wing of the party. The case was even discussed by Stortinget in 1886 and 1887, with the same negative result after each voting.

So Stortinget said no to Kielland three times, but was their decision an example of political and moral censoring?

From a formal and legal point of view the answer of this question must be no. Kielland was never denied to express his attitudes and opinions publicly, and no writer had a legal

23. Halvor Bentsen in his address to Stortinget, see Stortingstidende (1885), p. 1208: “en Mand, der søger Sandheden, vil stræbe at fremme Snadheden i Samfundslivet”.

24. J. E. Sars. 1885. “Stortingsbeslutningen vedkommende Alexander Kiellands digtergæge”, *Nyt Tidsskrift* (1885), p. 327–336.

right to a state salary. Stortinget was in its right to decide who should be assigned such a reward, and it was up to each member of parliament to vote according to his own conscience. Whether such individual decisions were made on moral, political or aesthetical grounds, was impossible to say. The formal procedures were democratic and did not deviate from ordinary political decision-making. Debates on grants to artists could by principle be compared directly to discussions on money for a piece of public road, for example. Politically the artist was not considered to be more “specific” than people in other professions.

My conclusion therefore is that the decision made in the Kielland case was a consequence of the *structural* character of the arrangement with the writer’s salary. Since there was no intermediate body of experts between the writers and the politicians who could give advice on other than moral and political criteria, the decisions were completely dependent on the moral and ideological attitudes that dominated Stortinget. In cases where the candidates were not controversial, this did not cause any problem and the political parties could easily reach a consensus.

The 1890s: Language Nation Building and Cultural Radicalism – the Arne Garborg case

As mentioned before, the Danish written language dominated the literary as well as other social fields. But at the turn of the century Danish was no longer in a monopolist position. Around 1850 a self-educated language genius, Ivar Aasen, had reconstructed the old Norwegian (Norse) written language from the High Medieval Ages and modified it by adapting it to the basic structure of contemporary Norwegian dialects. Aasen named his language “landsmål” – which meant “the language for the whole country” – and it should be a Norwegian alternative to Danish. Aasen’s written language was rooted in a Norwegian historical language tradition, and therefore its adherents argued that it was “more national” and “genuine” than Danish. In addition, they argued that it was more democratic since its modern normative basis was the spoken language of ordinary people. At the time this was unusual since written national languages normally were constructed on the spoken language of the upper classes in the capital cities.

Thus the language issue became part of the political agenda of the time. The Conservatives, representing the social and economic elite, defended the Danish language since the Danish written language was a symbolic expression of their power. On the opposite, the “landsmål” became a matter of democratic principle for the Liberal party. During the 1880s and the 1890s, when the Liberal party had a majority in Stortinget, “landsmål” was made legally equal to Danish by law²⁵ – in the schools, in public administration and in the Church.

The most famous writer of the “landsmål” – of novels, of poetry but also of essays and non-fiction prose – was Arne Garborg (1851–1924). In the 1880s he was liberal and radical – a “European” in moral and political questions, and he sympathised with Bjørnson, who was a leading figure on the left wing of the Liberals. In 1882 Stortinget denied Garborg a scholarship because he was a controversial writer. His novels in the 1880s confirmed this impression.²⁶ Several times in the

1890s he was proposed to receive a writer’s salary but it was not until 1898 that there was a majority for him in Stortinget.²⁷ At this stage Garborg had to some extent distanced himself from cultural radicalism and turned to national cultural questions, in the first place the

25. At that time often termed “Danish-Norwegian” or “Norwegian-Danish”.

26. *Bondestudentar* (1883) and *Mannfolk* (1886).

27. *Storthingstidende* (1898), p. 479–483.

language question. He was the foremost spokesman of the “landsmål” movement which by now had become a powerful lobby in Stortinget and in the Liberal party. And when Stortinget discussed the issue of a writer’s salary to Garborg in 1898, it was his contribution to promote the “landsmål” that gave him the national reward that a writer’s salary was esteemed to be. In the debate some members of parliament argued that this should be the *only* reason for supporting Garborg. Despite that Garborg was honoured *both* as a fiction writer *and* as a language scholar.²⁸

Compared to the Kielland case the debate on Arne Garborgs salary was modest. Although he was influenced by “European” and radical ideas, national and democratic values and issues prevailed in his texts. And unlike Kielland he was a man of the people: He was born on a small farm in Southwest Norway, his father was a Christian layman who ended up in religious contemplation and in the end he committed suicide. This family tragedy was also the subject of one of Garborg’s novels, and his solidarity was always with the small farmers and underprivileged layers of the people.

In addition to Garborgs’s social background and his move towards national political and cultural questions, one can notice that the literary climate in Norway changed in the 1890s – from Realism and Naturalism to New Romanticism, depth psychology and cultural regionalism. The new and leading writer of the decade was Knut Hamsun with his novel *Hunger* (1890).

The 1930s: The Second Phase of Cultural Radicalism: Political Controversies about Arnulf Øverland

We are now making a jump in time to the interwar years, the 1920s and 1930s. The most controversial Norwegian writer in these years, especially in the 1930s, was Arnulf Øverland (1889–1968). When the Norwegian Labour government proposed to reward him as an outstanding poet in 1938, that created a veritable storm in Stortinget, which of character and strength reminded very much of the Kielland case. Like in 1885 the Christian and conservative members of parliament were challenged since they were asked to approve state support to a writer who for many years had publicly attacked all they represented – morally, culturally and politically. And Øverland was not only openly anti-Christian, he even supported communism.

From the early 1920s, Øverland and several Norwegian writers²⁹ were influenced by Freud’s psychoanalysis, which was introduced in Norway by intellectuals in cultural and literary journals.

Freud’s works were translated into Norwegian in 1929. The other source of influence in radical circles was Marxism. Øverland was politically active in the Communist party from 1923 to 1937, and supported a pro-socialist organization of academics called *Mot Dag*³⁰ until 1936. But when Stalin’s Moscow processes became publicly known, he turned to the social democrats, i. e. the Labour party. He was a devoted anti-fascist and never missed an opportunity to warn about the Nazis in the 1930s.

The psychoanalysis and Freud’s theories about sexuality convinced him that the Christian faith, the bourgeois family, the Christian school and the Church were oppressive institutions that underpinned class differences and that they were ideological instruments in the hands of the power elites. The Christian faith made it impossible for individuals to become free, he argued. In a sarcastic and ironic style, he wrote articles and gave public speeches

28. Stortingstidende (1898), p. 483. Garborgs’s salary was also bigger than the ordinary writer’s salary.

29. Among them first of all Sigurd Hoel and Helge Krog.

30. Directly translated “Towards the Day”, an allusion to the socialist idea of the dawn of a new socialist society.

where he attacked all Christians and accused them of suppressing sexual feelings and thereby creating a social neurosis.³¹

When the Labour government in 1938 proposed that Øverland deserved to receive a permanent salary from the nation state,³² Stortinget was immediately split in two blocks: A pro-Christian wing, which this time consisted of representatives of the Christian Democratic party (Kristeleg Folkeparti), the Conservatives (Høire), the Liberals (Venstre, now being a party in the political centre) and the Farmers' party (Bondepartiet) – were against Øverland. The Labour party and a few representatives of the Liberal party and the Farmers' party argued for him. The arguments put forward in the debate were quite similar to the ones in the Kielland case: Christian values and morals together with right wing conservatism versus pro-socialist radicalism combined with liberal artistic freedom and tolerance.

But there was one important difference between the outcome of the Kielland case and the Øverland case: A slight majority of 77 versus 71 approved a writer's salary to Øverland.³³ This time it was the party discipline of the Labour party that saved the liberal principles of artistic freedom and tolerance. All Labour party members of parliament – 70 representatives – voted for, in addition to 7 “traitors” from the bourgeois block. This time it was not left wing liberals who defended cultural radicalism and the principle of artistic freedom, it was the social democrats.

III

Final Discussion

The Writer as loyal citizen and social rebel

The cases that I have presented and analyzed in this article, demonstrate that writers in Norway from the second half of the 1800s and onwards took on a social role with opposite expectations:

On one hand, writers of fiction and other artists were expected to play a key role in the construction of a cultural nation. According to a myth created by Romanticism they should be spiritual and intellectual leaders of the people. The artistic talent was considered to be “sacred”, the artist was an independent genius, born to give representations of the highest morals and truths of the people in the form of artistic works.

On the other hand, as free intellectuals, they were also expected to be independent critics of power institutions and power holders, public as well as private. During the second half of the 19th century, when Realism and Naturalism became dominant aesthetic programmes in Europe, it became a risky business to call upon writers to build a cultural image of the nation: Power elites hoped for artists who were loyal to established moral values, but at the same time they risked to give state support to moral and political rebels. To select writers for state support was a sword with double edges – politicians and bureaucratic power elites risked to be attacked by their own protégés.

This was clearly demonstrated in the Kielland case but the contradictory expectations to the writer were in force also in the Øverland case in the 1930s – and as we know, even today. The inbuilt contradictions in the social role of the modern writer inevitably led to conflicts when the writer appeared in the literary public sphere.

31. About Øverland and cultural radicalism, see Leif Longum (1986).

32. St. Prp. Nr. 1 (1938), kap. 227, p. 45.

33. Stortingstidende (1938), p. 844.

A problematic policy model

The political and cultural controversies which followed the writer's salary as cultural policy model, were partly a result of the structure of the model. The main problem was that there was no arm's length body of literary experts between the politicians and the writers who could advise politicians on other grounds than political and moral values. The power to decide was laid in the hands of the elected politicians, and they were literary amateurs. Single decisions were made according to ordinary political procedures. Despite the fact that many members of parliament as individuals declared they believed in the arts as something "higher", their decisions were made within the rationality of morality, politics, bureaucracy and economics. Some of the politicians might have knowledge of literary and aesthetic qualities but they were few.

However, the policy model should be understood in a historical context: Political controversies about the salaries to fiction writers were from time to time inevitable since in some cases the proposed candidate represented an extreme challenge to the tolerance of Christian and conservative values. This was partly due to the system: There was a lack of distance between the members of parliament and the proposed candidates. There was no arm's length body of experts who could decide for single cases.

If we relate the policy model to the development of literature as a social field, we can observe a paradox: In 1893 The Norwegian Association of Writers (Den norske Forfatterforening) was established (Ringdal 1993). That same year a new law on the rights of writers and artists was approved by Stortinget, and in 1896 Norway signed the Bern Convention, which guaranteed the legal and economic rights of Norwegian writers when their works were translated and published abroad. In 1895, the Norwegian publishers organized The Norwegian Association of Publishers (Den norske Forleggerforening) (Ringdal 1995). In 1906–1907 The Norwegian department of the Danish publishing house Gyldendal in Oslo "bought home" "The four great" among Norwegian writers – Bjørnson, Ibsen, Kielland and Lie – who had published their books at Gyldendalske boghandel (Gyldendal Publishing House) for more than three decades (Grieg 1971: 359–360). H. Aschehoug & Co. (Aschehoug Publishing House) was founded in 1872 and in the 1890s Aschehoug reached a professional level and became attractive for young talented writers (Tveterås 1972:55–117). Det Norske Samlaget (The Norwegian Publishing House) was established in 1868 with the purpose to publish books written in the new Norwegian language (Landsmål), which by law became equal to Danish as an official written language in 1885.

All together, this indicated that the social field of literature became modernized and professionally organized. In contrast, the policy model for the arts lagged behind and remained unchanged until 1962, when it was abandoned. It should not be a surprise to anyone that this situation set off conflicts.

The Øverland case was the last really harsh and bitter debate about a writer's salary in Stortinget. Some smaller quarrels took place also in the 1950s but compared to the Kielland and Øverland storms they were only weak breezes. The whole arrangement was replaced by a new organization of the state grants to writers of fiction in 1962, in which members of parliament no longer handled single applications. Stortinget just allocated a lump sum of money on the yearly state budget. The life salary was replaced by working scholarships of three years, and single candidates were decided for by external expert groups and representatives of the Norwegian Association of Writers.

Literary nation building was not a harmonious process

Nation building was a political project that rested on an idea of harmony and commonness, but as we have seen, in concrete cases it ended up in conflict and struggle. Fundamental interests and values were at stake. What kind of literature should the state support to serve national cultural interests? When members of parliament from the Labour party fought for a national literature in the 1930s, they had other views on what should be included in a national literary canon than bourgeois Christians and Conservatives. Class interests of the Labour movement were underlying in the parliament debates. For example, party discipline and the opportunity to defeat Christians and Conservatives in Stortinget secured a majority for Øverland, who was a middle class intellectual who sympathized with the labour movement, but he was never “their man”.

At an earlier stage, the class dimension of cultural radicalism was rather an “integrated” element of the bourgeois society, cultural radicals were in practice accepted, but at the same time disdained, in the bourgeois world. Some of the members of parliament who refused a writer’s salary to Kielland, understood that intuitively because they came from the farmer class and their habitus was quite different from Kielland’s. But what united them with the political upper class Conservatives was the cultural radicals’ attack on the Christian religion and its institutions.

Looking backwards one can say that the hardest debates in Stortinget took place in periods when social, cultural and political conflicts were sharp in Norway. But during the last half of the 1930s the conflict level was phased out: The Labour party, supported by the Farmers’ party, hold a majority in Stortinget and conquered the government offices from 1935 onwards. The layman movement had less influence on national politics in the 1930s than in the 1880s. The main conflict in politics in the 1930s was between the Labour movement and the Conservatives. Christian politicians were fighting a losing battle, all parties were gradually influenced by secular ideologies.

The citizens of Norway gradually developed a strong confidence in the state as institution. And trust in public agencies and the political system increased after the Labour party obtained a majority and took political control of Stortinget in 1935. State support to literary production and distribution was integrated in general welfare policies after World War II, and welfare policy ideology and arguments legitimized public financial support to writers of fiction.

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