

# Two tales of cultural diversity

By Thomas Hylland Eriksen

Virtually any comparison between the UK and Norway has to begin with an assessment of difference. In few domains do the differences between our two countries appear to be more evident than in the area of cultural and ethnic diversity. Consider some historical facts.



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Britain is not a nation-state, but an imperial state founded on four historical nations and, for the greater part of its modern history, the centre of a transnational empire. Networks of trade, conquest and communication extending across the planet formed the spine of the British identity and the key to its wealth. As a result, British subjects (who could, under certain conditions, become full citizens) have trickled into the country for centuries. Bristol, a main port of transit during the slave trade, had a substantial Afro-English community as early as the late 17th century.

Britain thus has a long history of cultural diversity, but also of oppression and subjugation, racism and discrimination. Norway, by contrast, was for centuries economically marginal, thinly populated and mostly ethnically homogeneous except in the far north. Only since around 1970 have substantial numbers of non-European migrants begun to arrive in the country in search of work, protection, love or a mixture of the three.

Considering the deep differences in history and demography between the two countries, it is a matter of some interest that policies and public debates relating to cultural diversity are in many ways similar in the UK and Norway.

During a conversation with a friend, who is also a scholar of cultural diversity, the term "super-diversity" was brought up. My friend, who worked in England at the time, described the recent changes in the ethnic composition of London. In the past, ethnic minorities tended to originate from former colonies, from India to Jamaica. They lived in particular, known parts of the city and were reasonably well established.

Recently, he pointed out, the ethnic composition of London had changed palpably: The largest new

groups had no connection to the Empire and were in many cases not English-speaking. They were scattered across the city in apparently unsystematic ways. Moreover, many of them were transient and lived there under unclear circumstances: They might be tourists who had forgotten to return to their home country, students who had finished their studies but stayed on to work at Sainsbury's, temporary workers who might just stay in Britain given a steady job, paperless refugees, and so on. The total number of languages spoken in London now, he concluded, was over 300.

Interestingly, a similar description would to a great extent hold true for Oslo. The influx of migrants, or temporary workers, has grown at an exceptional rate since the late 1990s. In one particularly diverse suburb of Oslo, Søndre Nordstrand, more than 140 languages are represented, which is quite impressive considering the isolated location, the harsh climate and small total population of Norway.

Several common themes recur in Norway and the UK. First, ethnic and cultural diversity is largely an urban phenomenon. The differences between the main cities and the rest of the country are growing. Even Surrey and Sussex remain predominantly white and Christian, as are Hedmark and Oppland. Cities have always been crossroads of complexity, and are so more today than perhaps ever before in history.

Second, concerns with Islam loom large. In Britain, the main anxiety may be with terrorism, while Norwegians are concerned with traditional gender roles as an affront to Norwegian women and gender equality. However, the notion that Islam is incompatible with democracy and modernity is the backbone of debate, with both supporters and detractors, in both countries.

Third, multiculturalism is a hot potato in both countries. Strictly speaking, multiculturalism is the view that complex societies consist of several bounded "cultures", and that they are

entitled to equal treatment by greater society notwithstanding their differences. Severely criticised on both sides of the North Sea, it has been argued that multiculturalism tends to place group rights before individual rights and to relativise values. On the other hand, certain forms of multiculturalism – such as teaching of vernacular languages in schools (Norway) or culturally adapted health services (UK) – are defended with reference to human rights and the view that equality should not be conflated with similarity. There are also, in both countries, those who point out that it is perfectly possible to be in favour of diversity without defending multiculturalism.

Fourth, there is a concern with the future of national identity, and both in the UK and – somewhat later – in Norway, the influx of immigrants has arguably stimulated domestic reflection on the nature of one's national identity, as one has increasingly been confronted with foreigners.

All these themes, which concern social cohesion, integration and national character, are common to the UK and Norway, although emphases naturally differ. However, there are also some important differences.

In the UK, the economic aspect of immigration has been a main topic and remains so today, and there are concerns about the costs and benefits of immigration. Put bluntly: Does the country gain or lose economically by opening its borders to foreigners?

In Norway, this economic approach has been conspicuously absent from the agenda for nearly two decades. A main explanation is the immense oil wealth of Norway and the widely recognised need for foreign labour in many sectors of society.

Instead, the Norwegian debate about immigrants and their integration into Norwegian society has taken a stronger cultural turn than in Britain. Especially cultural practices and norms which may be seen as being opposed to gender equality are condemned in the media and by politicians who fund ambitious projects intended to end, for example, enforced marriages.

In sum, Norway and the UK, with hugely different histories and demographics, are confronted with similar challenges in the area of cultural diversity, and are dealing with them in similar, but not identical ways, attempting to strike a balance between inclusion and exclusion, between tolerance and bigotry, between difference and similarity.



Tøyen in inner-city Oslo, renown for its multi-ethnic population.  
Photo: Inge Knoff