

## The Power of the Periphery

What is the source of Norway's culture of environmental harmony in our troubled world? Exploring the role of Norwegian scholar-activists of the late twentieth century, Peder Anker examines how they portrayed their country as a place of environmental stability in a world filled with tension. In contrast with societies dirtied by the hot and cold wars of the twentieth century, Norway's power, they argued, lay in the pristine, ideal natural environment of the periphery. Globally, a beautiful Norway came to be contrasted with a polluted world and fashioned as an ecological microcosm for the creation of a better global macrocosm. In this innovative, interdisciplinary history, Anker explores the ways in which ecological concerns were imported via Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, then to be exported from Norway back to the world at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

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# The Power of the Periphery

*How Norway Became an Environmental  
Pioneer for the World*

PEDER ANKER

*New York University*



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– Europe’s Tibet, heavenly high, silent  
And almost infinite, as thinking.  
Rolf Jacobsen, “The Alternative Nation”

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## Acknowledgments

This book grew out of debates I have had with students, friends, and colleagues, both in Oslo and in New York, who share my sense of helplessness in facing our global environmental crisis. Is it possible for a single, unheard-of scholar or for a tiny group of middle-of-the-road researchers at non-prestigious universities to reach an international audience? Is it feasible for students speaking an odd, non-academic language or for unknown thinkers from the world's periphery to raise global environmental debates? Judging from the story I am about to tell, the answer is yes. And that above all is what motivates this book. In revisiting Norwegian environmental debates from the 1970s, I have been awed, amused, bewildered, appalled – and have even burst out laughing – at the various ways in which activists and scholars of the period managed to reach an audience with their environmental concerns. Yet I have never stopped being impressed by the various ways in which they took Karl Marx's famous thesis to heart: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it."<sup>1</sup>

My first round of thanks therefore goes to all the people I write about in this book, most of whom I have met, and many of whom I have had the pleasure of sharing my thoughts with over the years. As a child I came to witness one of Helge Ingstad's stunning lectures. Then as a young environmental activist (and faithful ecophilosopher), subsequently as a critic, and finally as a historian of science, I have benefited from conversing with Per Ariansen, Ottar Brox, Nils Faarlund, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Harold

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" (1888). In D. McLellan (eds.), *Karl Marx: Selected writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 158.

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<sup>2</sup> Helge Høibraaten, “Norway in 1968 and its aftermath; Maoism, the power of the periphery and the cultural upper class of the sixty-eighters,” in Guri Hjeltnes (ed.), *Universitetet og studentene* (Oslo: Forum for universitetshistorie, 1998), pp. 184–91.

<sup>3</sup> Peder Anker, “Den store økologiske vekkelsen som har hjemsokt vårt land.” In *Universitetet i Oslos historie*, vol. 7 (Oslo: Unipub, 2011), pp. 103–71, 461–79; “The call for a new EcoTheology in Norway,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 7, no. 2 (2013), 187–207; “Science as a vacation: A history of ecology in Norway,” *History of Science*, 45 (2007), 455–79.

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Finally, there is an element of self-reflection in this book, as I grew up in Oslo where I also attended environmental study and philosophy seminars at the University of Oslo. I spent much of my spare time at many of the peripheral sites discussed, including going cross-country skiing and hiking at Hemsedal, Hardangervidda, Finnmark, Finse, and Ustaoset. I have climbed the Hallingskarvet peak, visited Budalen, sailed at Vesterålen, admired the Vøringsfossen waterfall, and spent my life's happiest moments in the beautiful Larvik fjord and at Tjøme. More recently I have brought my two incredible boys, Lukas and Theo, to these places so that they too, perhaps, may be inspired to care for the natural world. It is in that spirit that I dedicate the book to them.

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