CONCLUSION

Inactive State Ownership and the Nordic Model Recast as "Values"

Ståle Knudsen

In the introduction, we posed a number of questions about the relationship between the state, the Nordic model, and corporate responsibility. We asked whether state-owned or parastatal energy and extraction companies can pursue and implement corporate ethics by governance techniques that do not rely on and promote market rule, commodification, and privatization. We considered whether state entities take an active role in shaping the corporate social responsibility (CSR) of transnational corporations (TNCs), be it in their country of origin or operation. We questioned the extent to which the Nordic model actually travels with corporations when they operate abroad, even when the corporations are wholly or partly state owned. Underlying these concerns is the question whether CSR can be claimed "from below."

In addressing these questions, the authors have explored the relationship between transnational corporate capitalism, the Nordic model of welfare capitalism, and state ownership, between global diversification and notions about Norway as the "humanitarian superpower." The case studies do not provide any univocal answer, but two main tendencies can be teased out from the multifaceted stories told in this book. First, the Norwegian state is increasingly an inactive owner and otherwise refrains from sanctioning Norwegian corporations, which on the international scene—but also increasingly at home (see chapters 9 and 11)—are largely left to operate as any other TNCs. Second, in most contexts related to the international opera-

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tion of TNCs based in Norway, the Nordic model is recast as a set of values, ignoring the history of contest through which it emerged and the institutional mechanism that came to characterize it. The main driver of these tendencies is the way the Norwegian economy has become increasingly integrated in the international economy in the neoliberal age.

The agenda of this book has not been to explore CSR in and of itself. Rather, the focus on CSR can be seen as a prism through which we can understand relations between states, capital, globalization, and corporate responsibility. In the introduction we argued for a more nuanced thinking about the dynamics between neoliberalism, governance techniques, and (traveling) models. The Norwegian case shows us the limits of conventional thinking about CSR as a neoliberal technology. What we are seeing here, we suggest, is not some ineluctable impulse of global capital driving Norwegian energy companies abroad according to a neo-Marxist rendering of the logic of transnational capital to escape the confines of the state and vanquish national regulation (e.g., Harvey 2005). Rather, internationalization of Norwegian corporations was a result of Norway's position/role in the global economy, which is characterized by surplus capital based on a prudently managed and technologically advanced natural-resource-based economy and an interest in maintaining an open economy. The state encouraged Norwegian state capital to internationalize through restructuring (read corporatize, privatize). This was matched with the state's own global ambitions as a humanitarian superpower, and the internationalization of capital at times mobilized a national identity as "Norwegian" as a key asset in achieving global expansion.

While internationalization—not a policy shift toward neoliberalism—was the main driver for Norwegian TNCs to seek opportunities abroad, once this process had got going, the way the corporations engaged with CSR was very much shaped by the international discourse about the CSR that they encountered. When we take a closer look, as Maraire and Hugøy do in chapter 2, at the development of the business concept of CSR in Norway, we see how it has evolved from a more locally embedded paradigm (and practice) informed by social values and expectations inherent in the Norwegian concept, *samfunnsansvar* (societal responsibility), to an agenda that has become increasingly aligned with international trends: with time evolving from "philanthropy" through "risk management" to "value creation."

It has been a political choice by Norwegian governments to let (partially) state-owned corporations play to the international tune.

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Adapting to globalization, representatives of the Norwegian state have transferred power to corporate management and boards. In most cases, corporate boards are left to manage their organizations as any other TNC, pursing shareholder value and, in place of the Nordic model, latching on to international standards and frameworks for corporate responsibility, be it "sustainability," "environmental, social, and governance" (ESG), or "Sustainable Development Goals" (SDGs). Governments could have chosen to challenge the international framework and the international working of capital but have instead prioritized international business opportunities, partly to support the Norwegian state's international humanitarian ambitions. The reluctance of the Norwegian government to interfere in the operations and priorities of the corporations it (partially) owns is clearly demonstrated by the way state ownership enacted at arm's length gives Norsk Hydro license to operate as any other TNC in Brazil, focusing on shareholder value and mending problems by invoking the internationally acknowledged tool and language of CSR (chapter 4). It is also visible in the government's reluctance to interfere in Equinor's controversial tar sands and fracking operations in North America (Borchgrevink 2019: 415), and in the government's increasing unwillingness to use allocation of oil and gas licenses as a tool to constrain or punish unethical or problematic conduct of corporations (see chapters 9 and 11). Thus, the state's expectation that the state-owned corporations will be "ambassadors" for Norway abroad is only very vaguely expressed, and in practice the state has accepted that Norwegian state capitalism abroad largely plays to the tune of international capitalism, not to the Nordic model.

In the introduction, we suggested that the Nordic model could be considered one particular "economic-institutional ensemble" (Foucault 2008), characterized by institutional mechanisms such as the welfare state and the tripartite coordination between employers, unions, and the state. The case studies in this book give a mixed picture of the extent to which Norwegian TNCs have tried to transfer the model to its operations abroad. When the Nordic model, or elements of it, is made to travel by the corporations, the major aim has been to set up institutional frameworks that would facilitate long-term operational stability and success. In their factory in China, Norsk Hydro successfully mobilized management techniques informed by Norwegian models (chapter 5), yet only when there was a good business case for it. However, in neither this case nor in Equinor's promotion of a union in Tanzania (chapter 8) was the Nordic model part of the design or strategy from the outset. Rather, the corporations imported

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certain "Nordic elements," made the model travel, only when they confronted particular challenges. In short, the Nordic model was mobilized only when expedient.

What we have seen then is that piecemeal adoption of the Nordic model occurs, but the major trend runs the opposite way: Norwegian TNCs operate as "any other TNCs" on the global scene. This is clearly demonstrated in studies of Equinor's approach to the exploitation of tar sands in Alberta, Canada. In the extreme neoliberal political environment of pre-Trudeau Canada, corporations were given wide leverage for extractive operations, creating conditions under which corporations employed the tools of CSR, stakeholder management, and consultations away from and in place of the state. As governance was to a large extent delegated to industry, Wanvik (2016: 518) argues, Equinor became "an integral part of the new governance structure of Canada through their pragmatic quest for a social licence [*sic*] to operate." With an extremely low royalty rate, the government's "dependency on natural resource revenues lead [*sic*] directly to Northern Albertan's [*sic*] dependencies on CSR initiatives" (Gross 2019: 224). For instance, Equinor funded and operated in Conklin, Alberta, an E-learning center as well as a Local Opportunity Centre, providing, according to Equinor's 2012 sustainability report, "an innovative training and educational resource" used by more than twelve hundred individuals and contractors in 2012 (Gross 2019: 219). Thus, in the case of Alberta we see unfolding the kind of neoliberal CSR often described and criticized by anthropologists, the kind of CSR that bypasses the state and claims "a kind of collective moral guardianship over people" (Rajak 2011: 55). Equinor seemingly made no claim to its approach in Alberta being "Nordic."

Most of the studies in this collection show that, when Norwegian state capital is set to work abroad, there is not much "Nordic" left beyond the state's expectation that these corporations adhere to the highest international standards. There is scant evidence for CSR being used as a major channel or vehicle for the export of the Nordic model. What we do see, however, is the Nordic model recast as being first and foremost about values rather than institutional mechanisms. This matches well with current trends in corporate speak, which tend to accentuate "purpose" and "our values." We may, of course, question whether this emphasis on values casts a veil that disguises the actual institutional mechanisms at work.

Underlying much of Norway's international engagement is the assumption that "Norwegian values" should be the template for (or are consistent with the ideal form of) universal human rights. This

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is one version of the pervasive idea in Norway that "we do it better" (e.g., "our extraction of oil and gas is cleaner than others") (see Sæther 2017: 235, 319; Sætre 2009: 225). Thus, in the promotion of the Norwegian "way" internationally, the sociological understanding of the Nordic model—with tripartite negotiations, welfare state, and so forth—is glossed over, and the model is reborn as resting on certain values (trust, consensus, gender balance, and egalitarianism) that should ideally be universal. The ownership policy's support for global standards and reporting framework is consistent with this, as is the development policy.

The Norwegian state's approach to international relations has developed so "that the meaning of interest has broadened to include the concept of value and idealism" (Stokke 2012: 227). Norway has engaged in a specific kind of "value diplomacy" (Stokke 2012). It is the assumed Norwegian qua universal values that Norway seeks to export, not the Nordic tripartite organizational model. A cynical reading would be that Norwegian humanitarian diplomacy has not so much to do with the Nordic model but more with Norway's desired standing, impact, and reputation internationally.

Nordic energy and extraction companies sometimes deploy the "Nordic model" as a resource in their operations and interactions abroad. Such self-representations are mobilized as part of corporate narratives of sustainability and responsibility, which in themselves constitute key discursive assets in securing national contracts and social consent to land and resources overseas. But they are a double-edged sword, at the sharp end of which companies often find themselves when they are held to account for failing to meet the very standards they claim to export (chapter 4; for how this played out for Equinor in Brazil, see Borchgrevink 2019: 379–80).

While the effects of Norway's quest to be recognized as a "humanitarian superpower" are intangible, they do have some real and concrete implications for how Norwegian corporations proceed abroad. In 2005, the leading Norwegian daily reported that "the internationalization of the oil industry seems to determine where Norway has new embassies."[1] Business and aid/peace/foreign diplomacy are sometimes connected, but not everywhere: the connection is crucial for Equinor's involvement in Tanzania (chapters 7 and 8; Borchgrevink 2019: 381), while the Norwegian embassy in Ankara only learned through news media that Equinor had decided to invest in Turkey in 2016. Hydro's operations in Brazil were impacted in unforeseen ways by the Norwegian government's critique of Brazil's rainforest policies, as I detail in chapter 4.

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The most significant coupling between the pursuit of humanitarian aims and Norwegian capital abroad has been the aid program, Oil for Development, administered by the Norwegian Directorate for Development Cooperation (Norad) and with an annual budget of approximately 20 million euros. Until it was recently discontinued, the program's ambition was to work for "poverty reduction through responsible management of petroleum resources" by supporting "capacity development through institutional collaboration."[2] While for decades Norwegian aid through Norad was not indexed to Norwegian business interests, this seemed to change around 2000. A study of the program argues that "it seems evident that several of the countries in Africa where Norwegian oil interests are present, primarily through [Equinor's] engagement, are also important aid recipient countries. Many countries have also experienced an increase in aid in periods when the Norwegian petroleum interests have appeared strong" (Tollaksen 2017).

The case studies in this book show that neither the Nordic model and the state's "expectations" toward Norwegian corporations nor the international institutional framework nor the way capital circulates globally explain the way the Norwegian corporations handle ethics abroad. There is considerable variation across the case studies: from Statkraft's work in Turkey (chapter 10), which is informed by international standards, to the Brazilian state dictating how Equinor should administer CSR (chapter 6). In Tanzania, Equinor, on the one hand, tenuously replicated the Nordic tripartite model when supporting the creation of a union branch (albeit without perhaps the most important actor, the state; see chapter 8); on the other hand, they somewhat awkwardly adapted to local expectations when designing its CSR program (chapter 7).

It goes without saying that bilateral relations cultivated and maintained by the Norwegian state with other states vary considerably, as the contributions in this book demonstrate. As Lange shows in chapter 8, the long history of donor-recipient relations between Norway and Tanzania is a key factor in the relationship between Equinor and the Tanzanian government as it plays out today. Juxtaposed with this, in Strønen's contribution (chapter 6), we find the same company pursuing divergent practices of CSR to very different effect in Brazil, where the legacies of neocolonial aid relations are absent. The variegated local unfolding of particular projects shows that even under neoliberal international capitalism local actors maintain significant agency in shaping and domesticating the way in which the corporations enact CSR.

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Although state ownership and a Nordic background seem to give gentle nudges toward responsible business, these are no guarantees that corporations will act responsibly. So long as state capital is set to work in a corporate form and mandated to pursue profit, business logic will ultimately trump other concerns. This applies even to the fully state-owned corporation, Statkraft, which has been involved in various forms of tax planning. They avoided paying income tax on dividends to Albania by placing the mother company of their Albanian operations in the Netherlands (Hanssen and Haltbrekken 2014: 57).[3]

An exaggerated focus among corporations, governments, and scholars on CSR, sustainability, SDGs, and ESG can distract from more significant and fundamental ways that TNCs should be held responsible. Reporting, standards, telling stories, and so forth retain importance even as the business world and governance focus is shifting from CSR to new languages and mechanisms that—like CSR—come with nonbinding rules. Thus, a wider take on corporate responsibility should include how corporations are framed by and relate to rules, regulations, and taxation, which, ultimately, are the only mechanisms that can assure that TNCs act responsibly and provide benefits for society wherever they operate. Such regulations may be national, or preferably international. Successive Norwegian governments have striven to have the Nordic model "replicated" at a global level, but given the minimal influence that, for example, the UN Global Compact or OECD guiding principles for responsible business conduct really has on corporations (chapter 11; see also Welker 2009: 145; Welker 2014: 15; Orock 2013; Scholz and Vitols 2019: 239), this amounts to little relative to the power wielded by the TNCs. As seen in some case studies here (chapters 10 and 11), few current international frameworks are binding, and these largely have little effect. The ongoing process to create supranational regulations in the European Union is possibly one exception; another is the recent international agreement on a minimum 15 percent corporate tax, which is potentially more important than all CSR initiatives in total when it comes to TNCs' contribution to society.

As long as international regulations remain incapable of constraining TNCs, mechanisms to restrict the harmful effects of their activities remain equally hamstrung—limited to national laws and regulations, international nonbinding standards and conventions, and, not least, reputation—shame and blame—which very much depends upon public opinion and, ultimately, the news media. The Norwegian public's expectations may have a more significant im-

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pact on the behavior and actions of the Norwegian TNCs than the "expectations" expressed by the Norwegian state. One of the Turkish CSR managers of Statkraft told us that "if it emerged in Turkish newspapers that Statkraft does not treat local people decently, this can potentially explode in Norwegian newspapers, which may have adverse consequences for the corporation." Other case studies in this book (chapters 4, 6, 8) as well as investigative books by journalists (Sæther 2017; Borchgrevink 2019; Sætre 2009) report similar concerns. Nevertheless, it is challenging for journalists to report on Norwegian extractive and energy corporations abroad (Baumberger and Slaatta 2011), and the news media fail to report on important environmental consequences of Equinor's operations abroad (such as flaring in Nigeria) (Sæther 2017: 250).

Still, investigate journalists have published on various problematic aspects of the corporations covered in this book. In 2020, the major Norwegian business daily *Dagens Næringsliv* ran a long story about how Equinor, through bad management and flimsy handling of investments and assets, lost USD$20 billion in the United States before pulling out, raising concerns about whether the international adventure of Equinor actually is subsidized by operations back home (and then, in effect, by the Norwegian society).[4] A decade before this, another story about Equinor made the headlines in Norway. Angola was Equinor's economic success story abroad. But operating in a corrupt country also implied that the corporation paid signature bonuses (in total USD$0.4 billion) that were pocketed by the country's leaders, and USD$40 million in CSR support to an Angolan research center (Sætre 2009: 224–30; Borchgrevink 2019: 383–86).

As indicated in the introduction ("Corrupt Countries Line up for Statoil"), scandals exposed in the media can be an important driver for changes in state policies, and the management of corporate identity and reputation is a major concern for many corporations, especially the largest ones. That Norwegian businesspeople in the United Arab Emirates pay attention to the *VG* rule: namely, that what one does abroad must be able to withstand publicity in the Norwegian tabloid *VG* (Agnese Cimdina, personal communication); that Equinor is careful to respond "to the Norwegian society's demand for openness and information" (chapter 9) while also trying to mold the wider discourse about oil, gas, climate change, and the economy that informs the operational space of Equinor (see Sæther 2017) may testify a preoccupation with corporate reputation. At the end of the day, it is the Norwegian TNCs' reputation with those back home in Norway, rather than with "host" governments or communities in operation

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sites, that counts most. It is primarily in the eyes of the Norwegian public that the Norwegian societal model is considered relevant. But here also the Nordic model is increasingly equated with values (such as human rights) rather than institutional mechanisms.

In this book we have taken an ambivalent approach to CSR. Even as we researched in the field, the corporations themselves, the relevant entities of the Norwegian state, and the public debate moved away from the concept toward new languages and tools, especially "sustainability" and ESG. As I write this in June 2022, CSR is absent from the home pages of the corporations discussed in this book, while "sustainability" figures prominently (though not on DNO's home page). However, the aim of this book was never to contribute to narrow academic debates about CSR. Rather it was a prism through which to explore relations between states, capital, corporations, ethics, and the international economy. And therefore we focused as much on the Nordic model, with which CSR has only a tenuous relation. While the Nordic background is, on the one hand, considered by many in the corporations a mandate for being responsible when managing projects abroad, on the other hand, the "CSR" people with whom we interacted preferred to label their field "sustainability" (Equinor) or "environmental and social management" (Statkraft). CSR is not only a boundary object but also one of several flexibly overlapping concepts that all somehow speak to the same concern: corporate responsibilities. And, in this respect, I believe that our findings have generic relevance: whether they relate to CSR, ESG, or SDGs, corporations are primarily concerned about risk and reputation and are prepared and able to spend more resources than other actors to impact both reporting (and reporting regimes) and news media. While they promote transparency, they also subtly manage what is and what is not available in the public domain (Barry 2013; Appel 2019). This is especially the case for TNCs.

There is an important yet little recognized difference between "classical" CSR and the new concerns about sustainability. While the former was either a continuation of philanthropy with a new label or an approach directed primarily at the immediate impacts of corporations, such as affected communities and the surrounding environment, now, in the "climate conscious" age we have entered, corporations increasingly consider, and are expected to consider, global challenges. This concern about global sustainability makes it more demanding, but also easier for the corporations. Any corporation can document that they contribute to at least some of the SDGs,

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which makes it more difficult to specify relative to what a corporation should be held to account. When it was primarily about CSR, it was easier to define the constituency (although that could also be contested). For sustainability, there is less clarity.[5]

As with CSR, sustainability policies of corporations can be considered responses to critiques and demands from outside, but also to demands from concerned professionals within the corporations. We found many of our interlocutors in the corporations to be genuinely concerned about sustainability issues, and some people we have met make a real difference. One recent study found that energy elites in Norway "re-imagined energy futures and accordingly reoriented their careers" away from oil and gas (Rauter 2022: 1). Yet, "sustainability speak" seems to have become ubiquitous chatter in all kinds of businesses, and the incantation "sustainability is good for business" the new mantra. It is likely so widespread and so celebrated by professionals because it seemingly resolves the dilemma or tension between profit and ethics. You can earn (a lot of) money, and still feel good about it. The claim that "the businesses that are serious about sustainability do better (in the long run)" has advanced to become a taken-for-granted truth but also a rallying call, a statement, an encouragement. There are certainly clear affinities here with the "business case for CSR" (Welker 2014), but the statement "sustainability is good for business" makes an even bigger claim: it is in effect a defense of capitalism as a system. Thus, any anthropological take on this dynamic—Where does this idea come from? How does it operate? What effects does it have?—should be prepared to consider the larger "economic-institutional ensemble" in which it operates. One should also be reminded that it is important to analytically distinguish individual motivation and ethics of professionals in corporations from the real logics of corporate management, capital, and governance.

For anthropologists, it can be difficult to keep track of what is happening in and around the corporate world. On the other hand, we are good at being in the middle of things. But the kinds of projects we need for tracing the ways corporations handle sustainability, guided by the invocation "sustainability is good for business," are particularly demanding (see chapter 1), as they will usually involve multisited fieldwork, require the negotiation of access to risk-averse corporations, and demand considerable resources (for travels, attendance fees, etc.). Corporations have, to a large extent, the power to steer our research: We never received any reply from and were unable to interact with DNO management; Equinor were happy that

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we, after "gentle encouragement" from them, ended up with a case study in Brazil and not Venezuela; Statkraft closed their larger and more challenging project in Turkey to us on "safety grounds." This goes to show how little leverage researchers have relative to corporations and is a sharp reminder of where power rests. Even in the relatively egalitarian Norwegian context, where research is largely funded by the state and social distance between researchers and corporate professionals is short, research is demanding. We end this book with a note on the importance of available research funds "with no strings attached" and the critical assessment of the impact of externally imposed ethics rules (such as GDPR in Europe) on how we can go about studying corporations. With the resources corporations can muster, rigid ethics rules not well adapted to the practice of anthropology can easily become a tool for legitimizing further restrictions on how we can access and write about corporations.

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Notes

1. "Vest-Afrika—Norsk oljekoloni: Oljeselskapene ønsker mer hjelp fra UD" [West Africa—Norwegian oil colony: Oil corporations requests more help from the Foreign Ministry], *Aftenposten*, 3 March 2005.
2. Retrieved 27 May 2022 from https://www.norad.no/en/front/thematic-areas/oil-for-development/oil-for-development-programme/'.
3. I have repeatedly asked our contacts in Statkraft whether their subsidiaries in Turkey pay tax to Turkish authorities, and how much. I have never received an answer.
4. "De hemmelige Equinor-rapportene" [The secret Equinor reports], *DN Magasinet*, 6 May 2020.
5. For ESG, though, the "constituency" is the corporation itself: ESG is about how environmental, social, and governance risks may affect the corporation itself. It is part of the business model.

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