Norwegian cultural policy - a civilising mission: An interesting English dissertation about Norwegian cultural policy


In September 2009 Egil Bjørnsen presented his PhD-thesis at Warwick University in England. Although written in an English research environment the thesis comprises an account of Norwegian cultural policy which is of great interest to the audience of this journal. I was appointed member of the examination committee and this review is structured according to the guidelines of the Warwick University.

Since I am well informed about Bjørnsen’s research subject and the empirical material he is analysing, and also well acquainted with relevant previous research in this field, I shall pay special attention to his empirical analysis and his position in relation to existing research. I will take into account and discuss his main research question, theory, source material and methodology, critical power, originality of research and results, structure and form.

The research question

Bjørnsen writes that the main task of the thesis is to make «An assessment of the extent to which the civilising mission has been and still is a key rationale behind Norwegian cultural policy» (p. 12). He adds that a second objective is «to assess how culture is valued discursively amongst elites within the field of culture itself» (p. 13). The main research question is pertinent to the thesis as a whole, which covers a long historical period, from 1814 to the present day, whereas the second question (or objective) is relevant only for the selected material from 2003 onwards. One might argue that the second question is not of the same analytical dignity and not at the same level in the analysis as the first one, or that the second question is an integral part of the first one. Since the two research questions are formulated and presented under the same heading one might expect a more thorough discussion of the relationship between them.

It must be said that Bjørnsen is very consequent throughout his thesis in that he is steadily returning to his main question also in the empirical parts of the thesis. The main research question is guiding him and the reader and he never forgets to remind the reader of the main task he has set out for. For a doctoral candidate with a big empirical material it is very easy to go astray but Bjørnsen has succeeded well in following the line he has drawn in his main research question. The research question has also informed and guided him in what to look for in the comprehensive amount of policy documents he has studied, and the references and quotations he has made seem very relevant in relation to the main research question.
The sources

The source material that Bjørnsen has chosen to study has been subject to analysis in a number of studies (which he also says in his text), so what is interesting to ask is: Is his research question relevant in the Norwegian policy context? Does it produce new knowledge?

My answer to the first question is that Bjørnsen’s research question is absolutely relevant, especially with regard to the strong popular enlightenment tradition in the cultural policy of the Scandinavian countries. One of Bjørnsen’s key concepts is also folkeopplysning (popular adult education outside the ordinary school system), a vehicle for bringing Bildung to large constituencies of the population. My answer to the second question is that Bjørnsen does not bring much new evidence or new source material to the fore but his contribution to knowledge is that he analyses source material from a relatively long time span from a specific and delimited perspective – trying to detect a civilising mission across different epochs in Norwegian cultural policy. To a large extent he confirms, nuances, corrects and supplements previous research on the same source material.

Theoretical issues

Theoretically Bjørnsen draws on normative theorists/philosophers from the 19th century like Herder, Humboldt, Carlyle and Arnold, as well as theorists and researchers from the 20th century like Garamsci, Foucault and Williams. In addition he refers very often to cultural policy researchers of our days like Tony Bennett, Oliver Bennett, Belfiore, McGuigan, Mangset, Vestheim, Duelund, Røyseng and others. He has followed an ‘eclectic’ line – picking the ‘best’ and most relevant from each of them to build a theoretical framework suitable for the empirical material. This is a legitimate strategy but since Bjørnsen does not stick to one or a few principal social theories his own profile as a researcher stands out as quite pragmatic. He does not discuss it on a fundamental level but his choice of a discourse analytical perspective seems to classify him as a social constructivist. As far as discourse analysis is concerned he is working on a general level and does not engage deeply into technical aspects and concepts of discourse analysis as an instrument for text analysis. The relationship between discourse analysis as an epistemological and social theory contra discourse analysis as a technical instrument for text analysis.

Despite Bjørnsen is quite “eclectic” when building his theoretical framework some theorists are more frequently referred to than others. Among them are Herder/Humboldt on one side and Carlyle/Arnold on the other. Those theorists are not used by Bjørnsen to develop a critical analysis of Norwegian cultural policy but he claims that their ideas about culture and the arts and their functions on the individual and the society can be found in the arguments and the rationales of Norwegian cultural policy. We could add: Probably also in many other Western European countries. Bjørnsen does not argue they have influenced Norwegian cultural policy directly so it is not a question about causes and effects. Rather, the relevance of their ideas is that they represent different views on culture and the arts that were well known thoughts in intellectual and artistic circles in Western Europe of the 19th century. So why should they not also be relevant for a study of Norwegian cultural policy history? The interesting thing is that the ideas about the role of culture and the arts from the 19th century – as formulated by these theorists in normative terms – are so resilient and that they have survived shifting trends in cultural policy in Norway (and probably elsewhere in Europe). This fact has been well documented by Bjørnsen. Bjørnsen’s thesis is also an argument against those scholars of cultural policy studies who claim that cultural policy in recent decades has been ‘invaded’ by instrumental economic and social political reason and that the so called ‘intrinsic’ value of culture
and the arts is under threat from economic liberalism and the cultural industries. Bjørnsen’s argument is that in Norway the classical Arnoldian view of professional arts as sacred – being able to transform people’s lives - is experiencing a revival through some recent cultural policy documents directed to the teaching of culture and the arts in primary schools.

By launching Gramsci and Foucault as relevant theorists Bjørnsen is signalling that the phenomenon and concept of power will be of great importance in this thesis. Although the author accounts for the concept of power in the theoretical part of the thesis, and although he mentions it from time to time in his empirical analysis, the power perspective somewhat ‘disappears’ along the road, at least Bjørnsen does not dive deeply into this issue. What I miss is a deeper discussion of the power impacts in his source material.

Methodological issues and results

Bjørnsen’s thesis deals with Norwegian cultural policy since 1814 and up to the present day. However, for the period 1814 -1973 he does not carry out studies based on primary source material. His presentation and description of this period rests completely on texts produced by scholars. So what he has been researching here is not cultural policy proper but research on cultural policy and other related issues in Norwegian history for the period in question. From 1973 onwards his text is based on primary sources. Bjørnsen is fully aware of this and in reality his presentation of the 1814-1973 period gives an extensive historical background to his primary research material from 1973-today. So the question is if the two chapters covering the period from 1814 to 1973 are parts of the empirical research in this thesis or if it belongs to a background description of cultural policy in Norway such as it has been represented by Norwegian researchers of the field. It is a matter of principle whether these chapters should be seen as introductions to the study of the primary sources or whether it should be considered as parts of that study. In the oral examination Bjørnsen could be challenged to discuss this issue.

Bjørnsen argues quite convincingly for his choice of primary source material (1973-2007) and I have no doubts about the relevance of his selection of documents. He also gives good motivations for his priorities and discusses the consequences of his choice. For the latest period of his study (2003-2007) he has supplemented the document material with semi-structured interviews. I find that he has integrated the analysis of the interviews and the documents successfully.

His analysis of the source material is plausible and reveals that he has an intimate knowledge of the material. He has also good historical knowledge of the contexts in which the sources have been produced. He focuses on the ideas and the content of the material and establishes what he calls some different ‘discourses’. The discourse categories are mainly found in previous research texts but Bjørnsen detects a lot of illustrating examples in his material which enables him to discuss to which extent different discourse categories are represented in the material and in which direction the relationship between them is developing.

However, discourse categories serve more as labels for clusters of related utterances than analytical instruments in in-depth analysis of the source material. There is nothing wrong with that but it raises a question: Would the thesis loose in scientific quality and precision if the concept of discourse was not there? Could Bjørnsen have managed well without the (trendy) vocabulary of discourse analysis?
Critical power and originality

Egil Bjørnsen demonstrates that he is familiar with important research works in the field of cultural policy research, in the Nordic context as well as in an international context. He refers frequently to relevant research in his discussion and analysis of Norwegian cultural policy. He presents and discusses previous research in a critical and distanced manner. His distanced and critical attitude pertains to the object of his study - the cultural policy process and corresponding documents - but also to previous and ongoing research in the field. Bjørnsen is for example very critical to the premises of the research of some of his colleagues at Warwick University, especially Oliver Bennett and Elonora Belfiore, who are accused of being advocates of basic values of the cultural field and the field of professional arts in particular. His Nordic research colleagues, for example Duelund, Vestheim, Mangset and Royseng, are also scrutinized, assessed and criticised. But Bjørnson is not offensive or malicious; his critique has a decent and proper academic form. He is also able to acknowledge the scientific contributions made by people that he criticises.

Bjørnsen announces and analyses the discourses of cultural policy research. He concentrates much on a critique of Oliver Bennett’s and Eleonora Belfiore’s research work but at the same time he tends to reason in general categories, and the reader is left with the impression that what he criticises Bennett and Belfiore for is pertinent to a lot of cultural policy researchers. He does not have evidence for such suggestions. An ambition to say something general about cultural policy research and its relation to agents in the cultural field would take an encompassing empirical project. In his eagerness to position himself I think that Bjørnsen here is too quick. But still my conclusion is that Bjørnsen satisfies my expectations to a critical and independent researcher.

The originality of Egil Bjørnsen’s thesis rests with his choice of research perspective. What he has done is to concentrate on studying a potential civilising mission in Norwegian cultural policy across a long time span, from 1814 till the present day. He does not give a broad historical analysis taking into account many aspects of policy, on the contrary, you can say that he has been very selective and narrow in his research approach but at the same time he has managed to be very consequent. On this point his work is different from works by Mangset, Vestheim and Dahl and Helseth who have all written books and articles on cultural policy history of Norway with a more general and broader approach. By choosing one angle when scrutinising material from different periods of cultural policy history, Bjørnsen has been able to test an underlying hypothesis imbedded in his research question – that the civilising mission rationale, rooted in the 19th century popular education ideas and the classical upper and middle class attitude towards enlightenment of the populace, has survived all ideological changes over time and is still vital in Norwegian cultural policy. At least he argues convincingly that this is the case on a rhetorical level in cultural policy documents from 1973 onwards.

Thus Bjørnsen has produced an original contribution to the study of Nordic cultural policy history, and interestingly, his approach might also be fruitful for studies of cultural policy history in other Western (European) countries and beyond.

Structure and form

Bjørnsen’s thesis is structured according to a chronological principle, which is quite reasonable since his ambition is to analyse the development of certain aspects of Norwegian cultural policy as historical events contextualised by general historical conditions. The text might have been somewhat...
shorter, some times the reader gets a feeling that the content of some reasoning ‘blocs’ is repeated but on the other hand there is pedagogical point to it – Bjørnsen expresses himself very clearly and directly, the reader does not forget what he is looking for.

And he is happily free from any kind of academic language exhibitionism – which is a compliment to a promising researcher.

Bibliography