

Humor as a political force, or how to open the eyes of ordinary people in social democratic countries

Jörgen Johansen

One form of state violence is punishment and imprisonment of opponents of the state. This is a case study, described by one of the participants, from a country which is always eager to criticize inhuman treatment in other parts of the world.

Norway is one of the most democratic countries in the world. No matter which definition you use, no states have the combination of democratic freedoms and rights as do the Nordic countries. That has some very important implications.

Background

First of all it is easy to believe that the struggle for democracy could end when a country is "on the top of the list". But that is not at all the case. The struggle has gone on the last four hundred years with two main characteristics: nonviolence and civil disobedience. The Norwegian history of the development of democracy is exceptionally free from violence. The few cases involving violence you can find are situations when the groups demanding freedom and democratic rights were met by armed forces, not vice versa. Through nonviolent actions and disobeying the law when the law was found to be unfair, the people in opposition have, step by step, taken the path to the relatively democratic system we have today.

The second implication is that the social security system and high wages have created an overflow of material goods. People who are "drugged" with Volvos, videos, spiritually "empty" weekly magazines, hamburgers and American soap operas do not care to struggle for others and cannot see the need to fight for a meaningful life for themselves. Like alcoholics, their main interest is to ensure their access to more of their drug.

One reason why Norway has a leading position is the miserable situation in the rest of the world. In a social democratic country the majority always gets its way. But the parliamentary system doesn't give any power to minorities. Homosexuals, the Samic people (the native

people living in the north of the country) and those who refuse to accept any form of conscription are examples of groups which have few if any possibilities to let their voices penetrate the wall of the decision-making bodies. These individuals and groups still have to fight for their human rights. No one in the parliament speaks on their behalf and there is no other group supporting them.

Until few years ago, Samic children were forbidden to speak their own language at school. Homosexuals still have problems in getting jobs. Total resisters get 16 months in prison without a trial.

Total resisters

I will in the following pages concentrate on the small, but growing, group of total resisters in Norway and their struggle to get their demands recognized as fair.

Total resisters are persons who refuse to accept any form of conscription. Even in the cases in which they are offered the opportunity to do civil service outside the army they refuse to accept that service. The reasons for their stands vary, but most of the resisters look at the system of conscription as having the main function of creating discipline. From that point of view it doesn't matter if the system includes weapons or not. They refuse to serve a modern form of slavery or accept a hard labor camp.

Their behavior has always been and still is a threat to the power of the state. If people refuse to do as they are told the parliamentarians will lose their power. In order to secure their obedience the Parliament passed a new law in 1965 stating that individuals who refused civil service should "serve their service in a special camp or in an institution under the administration of the Prison Authorities". The special camp is only accepted by members of Jehovah's Witnesses. They serve 16 months there. All the other total resisters "serve their service in an institution under the administration of the Prison Authorities". That is a somewhat complicated way to say that they have to go to prison.

The reason for this way of doing it is the unwillingness to accept that Norway has political prisoners. By defining the imprisonment as "serving the civilian service" they avoid the terms "punishment", "prisoner" and "trial". The state hopes that the image will hide the reality.

In practical terms the individual who refuses is called up to a court. The judge asks if he¹ is the right person and if he really refuses to do any form of service. When that ceremony is over it is up to the

1 In Norway as in all countries with a system of compulsory conscription, except Israel, only men are called up.

Department of Justice to send him to prison for 16 months. He is never accused of anything, and whatever he or his lawyer says, the result is always the same. He is not called a prisoner or even a criminal! What he does is not illegal! The Government just makes sure that he does his service, if not by free will, then by locking him up. The prosecutor has quite an easy job in these cases. In the beginning of the eighties they even began to stay in their offices during the trial. Whatever happened the result always was 16 months in prison.

Every other prisoner has done something illegal. The total resister only serves his duty. Since many of the total resisters in Norway are anarchists they often tell the joke that anarchists in this country have to sit 16 months in prison as a duty to the government. Other prisoners in Norway normally get out after 2/3 of their sentence. Total resisters, since they are not prisoners, don't get that early release.

Since the law was passed in 1965 very few individuals refused conscription. Just a handful was known when the Campaign Against Conscription (KMOV)² was started in 1981. The group was a small minority of war resisters in Norway who themselves were a minority of those undertaking national service. No one outside the very inner circle knew anything of their situation or their demands. Even among war resisters, knowledge of the situation of total resisters was almost nonexistent. Among the political left the demands for a better civil service and for the abolition of the "test" of each individual conscience were well known, but few had ever heard of those who refused the whole system.

Laughter as a tactic

A group of 20 individuals, most of them anarchists and critics of parliamentary democracy, had the task of putting total resisters on the agenda of the majority of parliamentarians in Norway. What to do? Few know about their existence, even fewer would ever support their case. They were sent to prison after a short trial with no possibility to defend themselves.

The Norwegian media are eager to write headlines on spectacular actions. But their willingness to inform people about *why* the actions are done is not on the same level. Journalists in the evening papers look at information as an evil that is hardly necessary; their main interest is to write articles which will sell well.

Activists in KMOV knew that they could do actions which would be spectacular enough to create headlines on the front pages, but how could they combine this with information? If the message on how total

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resisters are treated did not come through, the actions would be meaningless.

One of the few topics of interest in the media, besides sex and violence, is entertainment. People living a typical western lifestyle are willing to pay for excitement and laughter. Could radical political questions create the same interest as conventional entertainment? Would it be possible to use humor as a political force? Could information be spread and a debate started by getting people to laugh at the crazy system of treating total resisters in Norway?

In 1983 lawyer Öyvind Solberg was called to the City Court in Oslo for refusing to do his civil service. As one of his friends I was asked if I could help him to use the case to promote a discussion on total resistance. The idea Öyvind had was to impersonate the prosecutor. As mentioned earlier the prosecutors now and then didn't appear in the Court, mainly because they were not needed there. Whatever happened during the trial the result was the same: 16 months in prison.

The plan was for me to dress like a prosecutor and to tell the judge that I came because the "accused" was a lawyer. We wanted to use a video camera in order to make a documentary of the action and on how the opposition are treated in Norway. What looked like a normal trial was just a play where everyone knew the result. If the State wanted to play, we wanted to take part on our own conditions!

We wanted to show the country the illusion of justice in these cases. We planned to "wake" the people by laughter and make them to think about what they saw. We hoped to get a balance of spectacular play and political arguments in order to, via headlines, put the whole question of conscription on the political agenda.

Early in the morning I dressed properly to look as serious as possible. With the large black coat it was difficult to see me as an anarchist preparing for direct action. We had planned what to do when the judge understood what was going on. The video film should document the retreat and end up in some political statements on the conditions of total resisters in Norway. To take photos or film in the courtroom is forbidden, but a friend of ours did it by hiding the camera. To have asked for permission would have been suspicious and probably not allowed.

When I went to the judge and presented myself as the prosecutor for the day he only asked if I was new. I admitted that I was quite new, before he asked me to take my place. A little astonished, I sat down and took a look at all my friends smiling from the public bench.

Asked by the judge to present the case, I relied on my experience from my own cases. Since the early seventies I have been involved in a lot of civil disobedience and as a consequence several times spent time in the courtroom as the accused.

This was the first time as prosecutor. I decided to overplay the part and behaved like a rude, hard and old fashioned prosecutor. "When we today have a man of law as the accused, a lawyer refusing to do his service to the country, we cannot have any leniency. The punishment must be the hardest possible!" and things like that. The judge nodded as if he agreed.

After some hours the trial ended and the judge had still not understood what was going on. We left the courtroom and waited one week before we told the media what had happened. It was like an explosion. The national radio interviewed me on a direct line from my workplace three times during the day, the television news bought parts of our video and made a main news item out of it, and almost every national paper had the story on the front page.

Everyone laughed. Even old conservative lawyers had to smile after the modern charade. A lot of people asked how it could be done. Where is the justice within our judicial system? Could anyone just walk in from the street and play prosecutor for a friend? Where was the real prosecutor? Why hadn't he bothered to come?

After the interviews with me and Öyvind Solberg the questions were slightly different. Who are these total resisters? Why don't they get a real trial? How could it be that the state doesn't look at 16 months in prison as punishment? Do we really have political prisoners in Norway?

The debate started and seven years later the situation is quite different. KMV has been in contact with more than 200 people who have refused their service in recent years, everyone interested in peace issues has some knowledge about total resistance and the government has made a proposal for a new law. The new law proposes that there be a real trial, with possibilities to argue and get shorter imprisonment, that total resisters get the advantages of being "real" prisoners (like remission after 2/3 of the sentence) and that the maximum imprisonment be far shorter.

The judge was one of those loyal lawyers who had worked in the Department of Justice most of his life. Before ending his career he wanted to be a judge for a few years. In one of his first cases this happened to him. Every colleague, "the person on the street", most journalists, his friends, everyone suddenly saw him as a representative of a very unjust system. As if that were not enough, they laughed at him as an idiot for not realizing the play acting going on in his court case.

The way he was treated was not intended but unavoidable. No one in the group doing the action saw him personally as the "enemy", as responsible for the evil system. It was like kicking the man not the ball in football.

One of the very few negative reactions from the peace movement was from a pacifist calling the action "a non-Gandhian behavior". He was probably right, but the action was still a success!

In a system of state violence, the next step after the trial is the imprisonment itself. Could humorous actions be used here too? That was a question for KMV after the success in court.

Once more the aim was to open a debate through the mass media. But how to put the prison in a humorous context? Few institutions are less humorous than the prisons: locked doors, barred windows, isolation, high walls and loneliness.

We decided to plan for a "jail-in" action. Our friends sat in prison as a result of their attitudes against the state; we had the same attitudes. What would be more just than us sitting in the same place? With ladders and ropes we climbed over the walls and demanded either to let all war resisters be free or imprison all of us! The guards looked very surprised when one after another of us jumped down on the inside of the prison and demanded to be imprisoned! The alarm bells rang, dogs and police arrived, the prisoners encouraged us with shouts and songs, the guards scratched their heads and we had a good time.

After hours of discussion with the director of the prison, a press conference with one of the war resisters and heavy media coverage all over the country, we were arrested when we went out of the gates of the prison. To be carried from the outside in is not that uncommon, but police carrying activists out of the prison once more brought smiles to thousands of people.

We were charged over the action. The case was dismissed after one year of investigation. The reason is quite obvious: What could the judge threaten us with? Imprisonment?

In one way we had resisted state violence by making ourselves unpunishable. The means was humor and fantasy. No media outlet could avoid reporting the actions without losing in the competition with other outlets. None of the activists was punished as a result of either of these two actions.

An evaluation

A modern democratic society of the Norwegian type does not listen to minorities. One of a minority's few ways of being heard is by creating public support for their case through the mass media. Since the main media are all owned either by the state or large corporations and are dependent on selling their product, freedom of speech is an illusion. In addition a large majority of the population do not care about much else than how to increase their own wealth.

Total resisters in Norway tried through humorous direct actions to break the media walls, establish support for their case and in the end force the Parliament to write a new law giving them a fair trial,

accepting them as prisoners and giving them a punishment which is in proportion with similar "crimes" in the country.

The form of humor was new in left political struggles in Norway. The media reacted strongly and mainly in favor of the activists. The means was both strong enough to reach the headlines and politically potent enough to create a wave of debate within the broad political movements. The actions enabled a very small minority to be heard. The humor was also an important reason for not taking the activists to trial. It would have been too embarrassing for the court and prison authorities if the media had once more concentrated on what had happened. They had had enough of laughter.

By fantasy, humor and direct actions, minorities can spread their message widely. We have the freedom to act. The challenge is just to start using it!

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*Managing Editor
Philosophy and Social Action*
