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CONTEMPORARY NORWEGIAN HISTORIANS  
ON NORWEGIAN NATIONAL  
CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE EARLY MODERN ERA<sup>1</sup>

In the last two hundred years Norwegian historiography has been paying great attention to the genesis and circumstances in which Norway regained its state independence in 1814 after a centuries-long union with Denmark. Fascination with this subject as well as attempts to examine the individual aspects of this question in order to provide an historical explanation have witnessed ebbs and flows during that time. In order to explain the genesis of independence, historians had first to analyse the shape of the Norwegian community and the state of its consciousness before 1814. Did the Norwegians work out a plan for winning independence and gained it sword in hand or was it a gift of fate, a happy coincidence, a result of the policy of the European powers which simply took decisions that were advantageous to them? The catalogue of questions has been extended all the time, for it turned out that the subject required an evaluation of the whole period of the union with Denmark, i.e. from 1380 (personal union as the first step to the Kalmar Union concluded soon afterwards) to 1814, with stress on the period of subordination, from 1536 to 1814. The questions concerned the sense and significance of what is known as the Norwegian paragraph, that is, the provision in Christian III's constitution of 1536 which changed the country's status as a result of the liquidation of the Norwegian Council. This was connected with the interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to Professor Øystein Ri an of Oslo University and Professor Grażyna Szelałowska of Warsaw University for their help in collecting the necessary materials.

of the activities of Bishop Olaf Engelbrektsson<sup>2</sup>, who took up an uneven struggle against the Danish king Christian III's plans to subordinate Norway to Denmark. Historians have examined the legal and political theory and practice which dominated in the 16th–18th centuries and tried to evaluate the union from the economic and social points of view, to find out whether the union was a sheer exploitation of Norway by Denmark. On the other hand, the independence regained in 1814 posed new questions: how to defend independence in view of Swedish endeavours and aspirations “to amalgamate” the two nations linked by a personal union. How to build (develop) Norwegian identity in view of the strong influence of Danish culture, a natural result of centuries-old ties. During the next two hundred years historical events, changes in national culture, in the state and society as well as historical events outside the country have influenced scientific discussions, provoking new questions, making old interpretations outdated, making certain attitudes obligatory. In this way questions concerning the nation and nationality, which have attracted the attention of scientists of various specialities from the end of the 18th century until the present day, have become an indispensable element of intellectual life in Norway.

In addition to intensified discussions, the debates held by professional historians have been reported in specialist studies<sup>3</sup> which have also shown how the question has been reflected in school curricula and in the history popularisation programmes<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the subject has been presented from various points of view in many polemical publications brought out in Norway. The aim of the following study is to present this discussion against the background of the development of Norwegian historiography

<sup>2</sup> An examination of how the bishop's policy has been interpreted in Norwegian historiography during the last 200 years has been recently presented by Ø. Riian, *Olav Engelbrektsson, den store taperen i den norske historie. Synet på ham i ettertida*, in: *Nytt søkelys på Olav Engelbrektsson*, ed. S. Supphellen, Det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskabs Skrifter, Trondheim 2004, pp. 7–19.

<sup>3</sup> O. A. Storsveen, *Litteraturen om 1814 — en historiografi av ...*, <http://www.nb.no/baser/1814/histori/html>; 24 April 2004; S. Bagge, *Udsigt og innhogg. 150 års forskning om eldre norsk historie*, “Historisk Tidsskrift”, vol. LXXV, 1996, N° 1, pp. 37–77.

<sup>4</sup> S. Tønnesson, *Norden speiler seg: identitetsdebatten 1986–1993*, “Historisk Tidsskrift”, vol. LXXII, 1993, N° 3, pp. 360–397. It is the Norwegian periodical “Historisk Tidsskrift” published in Oslo that is referred to throughout this article. It should not be confused with the Danish periodical of the same title published in Copenhagen.

in the last two hundred years and to show the opinions expressed during that discussion.

The 19th century witnessed the formation of two schools whose opinions were formulated also by participants in the 1814 events. These schools wanted to find out to what extent the regaining of independence was due to the existence of national consciousness before 1814 and to the formulation by the nation of an independence programme. In the 1840s, Henrik Wergeland, a prominent Norwegian poet and writer who also penned historical works, said in his *Norges Konstitutions Historie (1841–1843)* that the 1814 events had a genesis which went far back, into a remote past. In his view the 1814 events were a result of the Norwegian nation's age-long efforts to free itself from Danish rule. Wergeland's opinions enjoyed great popularity and influenced also professional historians. Wergeland's writings helped to create an intellectual climate which gave rise to a national romantic historical school<sup>5</sup>, traditionally regarded as the first professional stage in the development of Norwegian historiography. The model of historical thinking represented by such scholars as Rudolph Keyser and Peder Andreas Munch was akin to German individualistic historicism, both as regards its methods and philosophy of history. The Norwegian scholars of those days did not doubt that the Norwegians had been a separate nation throughout their history. Fascinated with the Middle Ages in a way typical of Romanticism, they stressed the connection between the medieval epoch, regarded as a period of a flourishing development of the Kingdom of Norway's national culture and might, and the present epoch. In their view the regaining of independence in 1814 was a return to the eternal tradition of Norwegian independence and democracy. Munch wrote that the existence of free Norwegian peasants constituted a fundamental difference between Norway and its neighbours, a difference which resulted in the Norwegians' inborn democratic trends. Wergeland added that in this historical development the period of the union with Denmark was, because of its unnatural character, an artificial link connecting two epochs of national development<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> G. Szełągowska, *Naród i narodowość w romantycznych koncepcjach norweskiej szkoły historycznej (Nation and Nationality in the Romantic Concepts of the Norwegian Historical School)*, "Przegląd Zachodni", vol. XL, 1984, N° 1, pp. 63–85.

<sup>6</sup> S. Bagge, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–41.

In the second half of the 19th century the view that Norway had always had a distinct national character was represented by Johan Ernst Sars<sup>7</sup>. Inspired by European positivism, Sars treated the historical process as a whole and the period of the union with Denmark was for him a consequence of Norway's specific social development in the Middle Ages. The period of the union was not a "positive" period in Sars's view, but it offered conditions for improvement. In particular the end of the 18th century was depicted by this historian as a period of development, also national development, rather than decline. But Sars was cautious in drawing the final conclusion; he wrote that the regaining of independence had undoubtedly been the crowning point in the long development of national consciousness but that it was due to external circumstances that it occurred when it did<sup>8</sup>.

But at the same time an opposite theory proclaimed that the regained independence was a consequence of a happy course of events, a result of the conflicting interests of the great powers, on which the Norwegians had no influence, and of the political situation after the Napoleonic wars. This was the opinion of Jacob Aal, one of the principal activists of the national assembly in Eidsvold in 1814, and of the conservative current of 19th century historiography represented, among others, by Yngvar Nielsen, author of classic works on the year 1814 and of the biography of Count Wedel<sup>9</sup>. This school focused its historical explanations on political changes and on the role played by important personalities in the historical process. The conservative school also dispassionately showed the Norwegian Middle Ages as a period of general poverty and in its interpretation the country preserved

<sup>7</sup> J. E. Sars, *Udsigt over den Norske Historie*, vols. I–IV, Christiania 1871–1891.

<sup>8</sup> This is what Sars wrote about Norwegian 16th century patriotism in a study published in 1891: "Patriotism was a practice of looking back to the past, a kind of romanticism, a festive feeling which had no influence on everyday life; from time to time it was expressed by a sigh breathed deep from the heart of a well-read intellectual", J. E. Sars, *Nationale Stemninger og Tilstande. Tidsrummet 1536–1660* (1891), in: *Norske historikere i utvalg*, vol. VII: *Studier i norsk historie 1537–ca. 1800, Lydriktet 1537–1660*, ed. S. Imsen, S. Supphellen, Oslo 1981, p. 20. Sars then depicted the changes which took place in this patriotism in the 17th century: its consolidation, the Norwegians' growing dissatisfaction with the union and the formulation of the first political demands aimed at increasing the country's independence of Denmark, *ibidem*, pp. 23–24; S. Bagge, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–44.

<sup>9</sup> Y. Nielsen, *Norge i 1814*, Kristiania 1905; *idem*, *Lensgreve Johan Caspar Herman Wedel-Jarlsberg*, vols. I–III, Kristiania 1901–1902.

independence because it lay far away, on the peripheries, rather than because of its inborn greatness and love of freedom<sup>10</sup>. This school, connected with Norway's official elites which stemmed from Danish-Norwegian families with many family ties with Denmark, had a favourable attitude to the union with Denmark. It rejected a confrontational attitude to Denmark or Sweden, fearing the growing leftist movement. As regards its political stance, the school was conservative, as could be seen in its treatment of the peasants; its historians did not regard that class as the natural bearers of Norwegian identity, on the contrary, they pointed out that the peasants were passive and lacked patriotic feelings. But it can be said that the conservatives had a patriarchal attitude to the common people<sup>11</sup>.

The "national" line represented in historiography by Sars came to the fore in the 20th century owing mainly to the dissolution of the union with Sweden and the regaining of independence in 1905; it predominated up to 1945. However, it underwent changes under the influence of Marxist historical philosophy and historical materialism. In their explanations of the reasons for Norway's decline in the late Middle Ages representatives of this line paid more attention to economic and social history. The main representative of this line was one of the most famous Norwegian historians Halvdan Koht, a politician and minister in the Norwegian government in exile during World War II. His attempt to combine Sars's national point of view with the Marxist class point of view increased interest in the union with Denmark. In his classical work on the development of Norwegian peasantry<sup>12</sup> Koht expressed the view that the union was an ideal combination of two historical currents. Koht presented the peasantry as a group submitted to both class and national oppression, thus stressing the role which the lower social strata played in the regaining of independence.

However, the influence of historical materialism naturally strengthened the tendency to depart from national thinking in historiography; the aspiration to concentrate on the history of society, culture and economy deepened; the state was presented

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<sup>10</sup> S. Bagge, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Ø. Rian, *Norsk identitet i den danskdominerte oldenborgstaten. Svar nr 2 til Harald Gustafsson*, "Historisk Tidsskrift" vol. LXXX, 2001, p. 525.

<sup>12</sup> H. Koht, *Norsk bondereising*, Oslo 1926.

regardless of its national character. In his voluminous synthesis *Det norske folks liv og historie*, published in the 1930s, Sverre Steen, author of a four-volume history of Norway during its union with Denmark, pointed out that the Norwegian nation had been for centuries advancing towards independence. His views in this respect evolved after World War II, coming nearer to the views of the conservative school. Steen presented the events of 1814 as a result of European powers' endeavours and the activities of a narrow elite of Norwegian society. He became sceptical about the theory that independence was the result of many years of the nation's efforts and that national consciousness had existed long before 1814<sup>13</sup>.

This change was connected with the change in historical thinking after 1945, with the rejection of national categories and the criticism of nationalism (as an ideology and worldview which placed the national criterion at the front in an analysis of reality). According to the new ideas, science should focus on social and economic questions, promote the ideas of cooperation and friendship among nations, showing rather what they shared in common than what divided them. This was not an atmosphere for stressing and studying the development of specific national characteristics. This trend was very strong in the Scandinavian countries but it did not make the Norwegians abandon their interest in the year 1814. The Norwegians turned out to be resistant to the new fashions. Such ideas as for instance the view formulated by Arne Bergsgård in the 1940s that at the root of 1814 lay "above all the vital force inherent in the Norwegian nation, its ancient sense of freedom, respect for the law, responsibility and demand for justice"<sup>14</sup> were quite exceptional. More cautious views predominated, to mention an article published by Jens Arup Seip in "Arbeiderbladet" in 1952 under the significant title *Freedom as a Gift*. This line has been continued since the 1960s by Knut Mykland, who has later slightly modified his opinions; in a synthesis published in 1987 he accepted the view that national trends and independence aspirations had existed in the second half of the 18th century, and tried to evaluate the influence of internal and external factors (he had mainly the foreign policy pursued by King Frederick VI in 1809–1814 in mind)<sup>15</sup>. This

<sup>13</sup> O. A. Storsveen, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem.*

modification of views was accomplished by a larger group; both Sverre Steen and Jens Arup Seip quickly realised that the events of 1814 would have followed a different course had it not been for the development of national consciousness in the second half of the 18th century and the launching of a national programme. But they both strongly emphasised that the word "nation" had a different meaning before 1814 and that the development of national consciousness cannot therefore be regarded as a continuation<sup>16</sup>. Both Seip and Mykland held the view that Danish absolutism was a system open to social opinion, a system that also took into account the needs and views of the Norwegians<sup>17</sup>.

Research on the concept of nation and on national consciousness was revived in the 1980s and in the last decade of the 20th century. As regards Scandinavia, this applies in particular to Sweden where a supranational approach to history and culture had predominated before. The change was connected with the crisis of the social democratic welfare state, with a radical increase in the offer of international media, which ended the monopoly of the local media, and also with the activation of national minorities and the inflow of immigrants from southern Europe and Third World countries. A certain role was also played by the process of European integration and the consequent attempts to create a common European identity. This process assumed the largest proportions in Sweden. In view of the fact that the ruling social democratic party had for decades consistently tried to oust national ways of thinking from social consciousness, the Swedes' behaviour after the fall of the socialist welfare state model was by no means surprising. A renaissance of national and nationalistic trends was an understandable reaction<sup>18</sup>.

Historical science responded to the challenge. In the case of Norway this meant, to some extent, a return to the historical

<sup>15</sup> Vide Ø. Rian, review of the work by S. Bagge, K. Mykland, *Norge i dansketiden, 1380–1814*, Oslo 1987, "Historisk Tidsskrift" vol. LXVII, 1988, N<sup>o</sup> 2, p. 203.

<sup>16</sup> K. Tønnesson, review of K. Lunden's study *Norsk grålysning. Norsk nasjonalisme 1770–1814 på allmenn bakgrunn*, Oslo 1992, "Historisk Tidsskrift" vol. LXXII, 1993, N<sup>o</sup> 3, p. 407.

<sup>17</sup> Ø. Rian, *Maktens historie i dansketiden*, Oslo 2003, p. 7. J. A. Seip's *Teorien om det opinionstyrte enevelde*, "Historisk Tidsskrift" 1958, N<sup>o</sup> 2, pp. 397–463 is still regarded as a classic study.

<sup>18</sup> S. Tønnesson, *op. cit.*, pp. 377–381.

school of Sars, to the view that independence was regained thanks to internal factors, thanks to the fact that national consciousness had developed in the 18th century.

The book by Sverre Bagge and Knut Mykland *Norge i dansketiden 1380–1814* (Oslo 1987) provided one of the first opportunities for discussion. Mykland presented in it the years 1536–1814 in favourable colours, drawing attention to the fact that the Norwegian peasants had been the least encumbered by taxes in the whole of Europe. He also stressed that one could hardly find any national elements in the social views of peasants or miners — their opinions had an economic background — and that the Norwegian people were deeply attached and loyal to the Danish Oldenburg dynasty. Like Sars, Mykland held the view that the period of the union was a natural preparatory stage for the changes introduced in 1814, for it was then that social premises (civil service, and the bourgeoisie) and economic conditions were created for the independence programme<sup>19</sup>. One could not therefore regard that epoch as an historical error. In one of his earlier works, a study published in 1967, Mykland analysed in detail the events of December 1813 and January 1814 to show that the independence uprising in Norway which broke out at the news of the treaty of Kiel had been not only supported but even inspired by the Danish king Frederick VI. In any case the independence activity launched by the governor, Prince Christian Frederick, was in accord with the interests of the Danish monarchy<sup>20</sup>. Let us point out that the term “uprising” is an exaggeration — especially in comparison with Polish experiences; it was rather a social mobilisation — for no military operations took place.

In a review of Mykland's and Bagge's book, Professor Øystein Riian of Oslo University, an expert in modern Norwegian history, presented a balanced point of view, but he himself favours the theory that national consciousness had existed in Norway before 1814. This view was clearly expressed in a four-volume synthesis of the history of Norway's union with Denmark<sup>21</sup>. This was probably the first attempt to present the state's joint history as

<sup>19</sup> Ø. Riian, review of the study by S. Bagge, K. Mykland, *Norge i dansketiden*, pp. 195–204.

<sup>20</sup> K. Mykland, *Frederik VI og beslutningen om å avstå Norge* [1967], in: *Norske historikere i utvalg*, vol. IX: *Studier av norsk historie omkring 1814*, ed. S. Supphellen, Oslo 1983, pp. 106–121.

a union of two countries (in fact three, for the authors also took Schleswig–Holstein into account). The book was discussed in the Norwegian historical periodical “Historisk Tidsskrift” in 1999–2002.

Characterising Norway’s situation after 1536, Rian wrote that contrary to the Norwegian paragraph in Christian III’s constitution, Norway continued to be treated as a separate state; the names Kingdom of Norway and the Crown of Norway were used officially, and references were made also to Norwegian law. The coat of arms of the Oldenburgs included the Norwegian emblem: a lion holding St. Olav’s axe. In international agreements Norway appeared as a legal subject separate from Denmark<sup>22</sup>. Rian also referred to sources which often reflected ties with the Norwegian nation, its separate existence and the geographical unity of the country. This feeling was based on attachment to historical law (Rian says that there have survived eighty 16th century manuscripts of the medieval law issued by king Magnus the Lawmender (Lagabøter) translated into modern Norwegian strongly influenced by Danish, a nostalgic reminiscence of Norway’s old glory)<sup>23</sup>.

The fourth volume of the synthesis (covering the years 1720–1814) was written by Ole F e l d b æ k, a Danish historian, professor at Copenhagen University, who had for some time studied the question of the Norwegians’ national consciousness in the 18th century. Finally he came out in support of the theory that the Norwegian elites were aware of their national identity in the modern sense of the term<sup>24</sup>. This is what he wrote about the discussion held in the second half of the 18th century: “The

<sup>21</sup> *Danmark–Norge 1380–1814*, vols. I–IV, Oslo 1997–1998, vol. I: E. Albrechtsen, *Fælleskabet bliver til 1380–1536*; vol. II: Ø. Rian, *Den aristokratiske fyrstestaten. 1536–1648*; vol. III: S. Dyrvik, *Truede tvillingriker, 1648–1720*; vol. IV: O. F e l d b æ k, *Nærhed og adskillelse 1720–1814*.

<sup>22</sup> Ø. Rian, *Den aristokratiske fyrstestaten*, pp. 21–23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 26–28; similar views were recently expressed by Rian in a lecture at a conference *Cultural Changes in the Danish State during the Long 18th Century*, which was held at Hillerød in April 2003 (Ø. Rian, *Huordan ble Norge og Nordmennene oppfattet av seg selv og av andre under eneveldet 1660–1814*, <http://www.Landsarkivetbh.dk/multikulturel/aktiviteter/kulturellepapers/Nordmennene%20under%20eneveldet.pdf>, 19 October 2004).

<sup>24</sup> In a synthesis of Norway’s history, *Aschehougs Norgeshistorie*, the publication of which was started in 1994, F e l d b æ k came out on the side of the modernists as late as 1996 (vol. VII, Oslo 1996). He categorically denied that modern national consciousness could have existed in Norway before 1800 (E. Opsahl, “Norge ...thette rige som vort federne rige og land”, *Norsk identitet i lydiketide 1536–1660?*, “Historisk Tidsskrift”, vol. LXXXI, 2002, p. 102). But in an article published

national identity expressed (by Norwegian publicists) directly or indirectly in their critical writings concerned the whole of Norway and not a part of it. It covered the whole population, not only their own class. The Norwegian peasant is referred to with a respect which seems to be authentic, and communion with Norway's magnificent nature is presented as a characteristic feature of the Norwegians. A heroic past, the early Middle Ages, and memory of old kings figure much more strongly in Norwegian identity than in Danish identity"<sup>25</sup>.

The discussion which soon started in the columns of "Historisk Tidsskrift" concerned more general questions, namely, the character of the state and especially the status of Norway. The question arose whether there was any justification for using the term Denmark-Norway, which implied a union of two equal partners. This question was taken up by a Swedish historian, Harald Gustafsson, lecturer at Lund University, an expert on early modern history<sup>26</sup>. According to him, the conglomerate state, as he called it, should rather be depicted as Danish for Norway constituted a part of it, having a status comparable to that of Jutland, that is a part which had never been a political organisation in history. Gustafsson expressed scepticism about Rian's theory that the Norwegians were aware of their ethnic-national identity as early as the 16th century. He wrote that one could rather write about the Norwegians' identification with the state, with the local community and with their legal position (privileges) than about an awareness of cultural and linguistic ties with the population of the whole country. Besides, in his view "patriotism" better describes that identity than national consciousness. But the reviewer toned down his modernistic attitude by accepting

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almost at the same time in "Historisk Tidsskrift" he presented a striking analysis of a series of texts published in Copenhagen during the press freedom period started by Struensee (1770-1773), texts which on the whole, critically presented Norway's situation in the Union. Feldbæk repeated his conclusions in the four-volume history of Denmark-Norway, and lately in his popular book *Norges-billeder. Dansk-norske forbindelser 1700-1905*, ed. M. Skougård, København 2004.

<sup>25</sup> O. Feldbæk, *Nærhed og adskillelse*, pp. 169-170. Ole Feldbæk was also editor and co-author of a four-volume work on the formation of Danish national consciousness: *Dansk identitetshistorie*, vols. I-IV, København 1991-1992 which provoked a discussion in the Danish press at the beginning of the 1990s.

<sup>26</sup> H. Gustafsson, *Reflexioner over Danmark-Norges historia*, "Historisk Tidsskrift" vol. LXXVIII, 1999, N° 4, pp. 540-551.

Feldbæk's opinion about the 18th century. Gustafsson wrote that this was a justified view.

It was above all Rian who reacted to the Swedish historian's review. In his reply he repeated the arguments that national consciousness had existed in Norway, especially among the official elites<sup>27</sup>, stressing that it was not only the Danish authorities who in the modern era realised that the Norwegians were a separate nation but also the rulers of Sweden who, wishing to implement their expansionist programme, stressed this fact in their appeals to the Norwegians. Rian emphasised that he had not identified the early modern sense of national identity with what the term meant later, but he had no doubt that at that time the Norwegians were aware of being different<sup>28</sup>.

In reply Gustafsson defined the notion of national identity more precisely. He did not question the fact that collective identity may have existed in the pre-industrial epoch but insisted that its meaning was different. He referred to Anthony Smith's theory that ethnic identity was one of many identities during that epoch. The main difference was, first, that national identity was a term that referred to the whole population and secondly, the term signified the conviction that national ties were the most important in the make up of a community. Finally, no less important in his view was the idea that the creation of a separate political structure was indispensable if national cohesion was to survive. But people in the early modern era also had other, equally important identities. (religious ties or loyalty to the monarch). In Gustafsson's view a conglomerate state was not linked to any concrete nationality or, to be more precise, there was no connection between ethnic and state identity. Although Rian did not say that the term "national" had meant the same at that time as it meant now, the reader could interpret the word in the way he was used to owing to habit<sup>29</sup>.

In his next reply Rian drew attention to some more general questions. Negation of the existence of national identity in the pre-industrial period may, in his view, be connected with a spe-

<sup>27</sup> This problem has been discussed in greater detail in his work *Embetsstanden i dansketida*, Oslo 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Ø. Rian, *Danmark-Norges historie. Refleksjoner över Harald Gustafssons refleksjoner*, "Historisk Tidsskrift" vol. LXXIX, 2000, N° 3, pp. 376–384.

<sup>29</sup> H. Gustafsson, *Identiteter i Danmark-Norge. Reflexioner över Øystein Rians refleksjoner over mina reflexioner*, "Historisk Tidsskrift" vol. LXXX, 2001, pp. 267–270.

cific interpretation of "politics" According to Rian, the notion is now frequently interpreted as a functional organic category (which often eliminates conflicts) while in his view, the problems of power were connected with a struggle for domination, with attempts to subordinate some groups to others. It is in this context that a conglomerate state's activities against the centrifugal initiatives of nationally different groups should be considered. Such was the policy which Denmark adopted towards Norway after 1536; it was in Denmark's interest to tame and prevent activities aimed at increasing Norway's independence in the union. Rian says that the Danish authorities, realising that Norway was a different country and that its inhabitants were a different community, did their best to prevent the development of any kind of separatism. There were also other reasons for this policy but, according to Rian, the national factor was the most important.

Rian emphasises that national identity differs from nationalism, but that if Gustafsson maintains that "national" meant something different in the early modern period from what it means now why does he not explain what this word then meant? If he negates that a group which was distinct may have been a national group, while agreeing that it may have had a feeling of some kind of identity, why does he not explain what that feeling consisted in? Patriotism (love of one's homeland) is insufficient according to Rian for it refers mainly to territory while identity implies a specific attitude to people, to the inhabitants of that territory. National identity implies that we feel different from other communities, but are linked by ties with people of the same identity, and this turns us into a community. This feeling was general and obvious in the European countries in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period<sup>30</sup>.

This discussion was summed up in "Historisk Tidsskrift" in 2002 by Erik Opsahl<sup>31</sup>, lecturer at the Higher School in Vestfold, co-author of a new synthesis of Norway's history, *Norsk Historie*. The author starts his reflections with a description of an event which occurred on the Swedish-Norwegian border during the wars of the 1640s. In 1644 the inhabitants of two places, Idre

<sup>30</sup> Ø. Rian, *Norsk identitet i den danskdominerte oldenborgstaten. Svar nr 2 til Harald Gustafsson*, "Historisk Tidsskrift" vol. LXXX, 2001, pp. 517-529

<sup>31</sup> E. Opsahl, *op. cit.*

and Særna, were persuaded by a unit of Swedish forces to take an oath of loyalty to the Swedish queen Christina. Two years later the Danish governor in Norway, Hannibal Sehested, appealed to the inhabitants to come back under the Danish king's rule, for neither place was returned to Denmark in the peace treaty of 1645. The inhabitants said that they would willingly take an oath of loyalty to the Danish king if he defended them against the Swedes. The Swedish authorities refused to return these territories. The new Danish king (from 1648) Frederick III proposed to the Swedes that a commission should demarcate the frontier. The German officer von Reichwein sent by him drew up a report in which he argued that the inhabitants of Idre and Særna were of a different nationality, he wrote about their Norwegian customs (clothes, building traditions), the Norwegian language, the age-long inclusion in the Norwegian (and Danish) state. Let us stress that the author of the report drew attention to the inhabitants' national, not regional, identity. It was not said in the report that the two places were in the Norwegian Østerdalen province which had rich, old traditions. The author emphasised their links with Norway, with the Norwegian crown. In his view this proved that the Danish demands for the return of these territories were justified<sup>32</sup>.

In his article Opsahl, repeating some of Rian's arguments, drew attention to many elements of Norway's political position in the period 1536–1660, which made it possible for the Norwegians to feel they were a distinct group: the Norwegian ceremony of paying homage to the kings who in the oath of allegiance were called kings of Norway, not of Denmark, the Norwegians' own law (traditionally called the law of St. Olav), the consistent use of the name "Kingdom of Norway", and the treatment of the state as a subject in agreements with other countries<sup>33</sup>. These were the arguments on which the Norwegian elites based their demands for greater independence for the country. The nobility demanded the same privileges as those enjoyed by the Danish nobility and stipulated that only Norwegians should be appointed to posts in Norway. In 1661 townsmen and the clergy applied for permission to set up their own financial institution (bank), commercial organisation (college for questions of trade) and cultural institu-

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 99–101.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 108–111.

tions (university)<sup>34</sup>. Both Rian (in his text of 2003) and Opsahl presented the view that the peasants, too, could have been conscious of their national identity; they stressed that what they meant was not regional identity but ties with the whole country. Rian pointed out the elements of this national identity: the general assemblies, distinct laws, many references to Norway and Norwegianness in folk songs, the cult of St. Olav. He stressed that prosperous Norwegian peasants could be bearers of these traditions. He also drew attention to the fact that during the crisis with Sweden the Danish authorities appealed to the patriotism of Norwegian peasants, being convinced that they were a distinct group. The peasants took part in state ceremonies, e. g. in the ceremony of homage, rather as dummies, but even such passive participation could strengthen their sense of national identity. The appeal issued by the Norwegian nobleman Jørgen Bjelke in 1658, in view of an impending war with Sweden, contained some characteristic formulations. Appealing to their love of their fatherland, loyalty to the Crown and "the brave Norwegian blood", he called on the inhabitants of the territories lost to Sweden in previous wars: "We are one people, one nation which for many centuries has lived under the reign of the same king, jointly managing things and doing trade: being linked by friendship, we cannot be divided without damage to ourselves and without prejudice to our honour"<sup>35</sup>.

Opsahl has pointed out that the main mistake of the modernists is that they identify nationalism with national identity; this is a problem which is very difficult to interpret. Ernest Gellner has said that nationalism is a state's legitimisation theory according to which its frontiers should follow national frontiers. In other words this is the theory of a nation state. It might seem that if we accepted this meaning of the word nationalism it would be difficult not to agree that nationalism is a post-French revolution phenomenon. A lecturer at Oslo University, Anna Minken<sup>36</sup>, joined the discussion on this question. Like Opsahl she also tried to sum up the discussion. She pointed out that it had been free of extreme theories: the modernists (Gustafsson) accepted that nationalism may have existed before

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 112, 114.

<sup>35</sup> Ø. Rian, *Hvordan ble Norge*; E. Opsahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 114, 117.

<sup>36</sup> A. Minken, *Norsk og svensk identitet før nasjonalismens epoke*, "Historisk Tidsskrift" vol. LXXXII, 2003, pp. 75–87.

1800 (but not earlier) while the anti-modernists did not maintain that “nations are eternal”. In her polemic with the modernists Minken has examined a recent study by Monika Edgren, a Swedish author, on the population policy of the Swedish state in the 17th century. The Swedish author says in her study that before the 18th century Swedish identity denoted ties with the state. According to her, a 17th century Swede was “a subject of the Swedish king”. But, as Minken asserts, the policy pursued by the Swedish state towards Scania after 1658 (incorporation of the province after the peace of Roskilde) shows that the contemporaries knew that its inhabitants were different from the linguistic and cultural points of view. What is more, the government held the view that these differences were harmful to the interests of the state; the result was the adoption of a policy intended to make the province Swedish. A similar policy was in the 17th century adopted towards Finland, where attempts were made to combat the Finnish language (as far as this was possible in the 17th century). The author also recalls the incident described by Opsahl. In her view it proved that the Danish representatives of the king were convinced that people who shared a language and a culture should remain under the rule of one monarch<sup>37</sup>. Which means, as Minken states ironically, that they professed ideas which were to be born a hundred and fifty years later<sup>38</sup>. It may therefore turn out that nationalism, even in Gellner’s interpretation, had existed long before the birth of the idea of a nation state, especially if we stress the difference between nationalism and national consciousness.

In his *Norsk idéhistorie* published in 2002, Østein Sørensen analyses the development of Norwegian national ideas in 1770–1814, showing the formation of a specific synthesis of Enlightenment and Romantic concepts. It focuses on the Norwegian symbol: the free peasant as a mainstay of the tradition of freedom and democracy<sup>39</sup>. It also emphasises that there was no movement for political separatism prior to 1814, on the contrary

<sup>37</sup> The author also points out that contrary to appearances Reichwein’s report does not entitle us to say that the people living on the Swedish–Norwegian border differed ethnically: the differences were insignificant (they still are), rather imperceptible to a foreigner. Moreover, the report was to be used for concrete political purposes and is therefore not very reliable. It is striking, however, that such arguments were used.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

<sup>39</sup> Ø. Sørensen, *Norsk idéhistorie*, vol. III, Oslo 2002, pp. 20–21.

loyalty to the Oldenburg dynasty was a typical element of national consciousness<sup>40</sup>. In this sense the Norwegian national ideas of those days cannot be said to have been crowned by the independence achieved in 1814. On the contrary, the events of that year were rather a severance with the traditional interpretation of patriotism. The new contents of the patriotic programme proclaimed by Count Wedel contained two essential elements, which contradicted 18th century ideas: not only a termination of the union with Denmark but also a change in the state system, the introduction of a constitutional monarchy and severance with absolutism in Danish style<sup>41</sup>.

A similar way of thinking was presented earlier by Odd Arvid Storsveen who wrote that the historians' teleological presentation of the development of Norwegian national consciousness before 1814 as a process leading to independence was not quite right, for national consciousness should be analysed "in the framework in which it functioned. The events of 1814 were not within the mental horizon (of that time)"<sup>42</sup>.

Contemporary Norwegian modernists tend, on the whole, to accept the view that there was a certain continuity between the achievement of independence in 1814 and the development of national consciousness (especially the elites' consciousness) in the period 1770–1814. They stress, however, that the connection is neither simple nor organic: we are dealing with a different understanding of the concepts of nation and patriotism, and identity, too, contains different elements. The Norwegian anti-modernists are more aware of the existing connections: in their view the Norwegians were conscious of their nationality throughout the whole period of the union and they regard this national consciousness as the natural ground on which the independence programme was based in the years 1809–1814. One could add that this development led to a gradual politicisation of the programme, including the concept of identity, which thanks to this could draw on the ideas of the Norwegians' legal and political distinctness, ideas present in the early modern period.

*(Translated by Janina Dorosz)*

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 50–51.

<sup>42</sup> O. A. Storsveen, "Fornuftig Kierlighed til Fædrelandet". *En analyse av norsk patriotisme mellom 1784 og 1814*, in: *Norsk patriotisme før 1814*, Oslo 1997, p. 10.