Identity and Economy at the Crossroads of Innovation and Sustainability. Artistic Interaction Combined with Scientific Analyses of Two Small Norwegian Rural Communities

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Abstract

The focus of this article is two small Norwegian rural societies and the adaption to a creative economy at the crossroads of innovation, sustainability, and survival, during centralization, generational change in a welfare state. One of the communities, Etnedal, is an inland mountainous municipality. The other, Solund, is a coastal fishing, fish-farming, and farming municipality. The two municipalities are from point of population among the smallest in Norway. The author discusses, the importance of the identity attached to the traditions of sustainability. The data is published statistical and historical information, as well as oral information and the interaction from two art projects in the communities. Both are ongoing artistic interaction and documentation. The discourse of the article is from the point of critical realism.

Keywords

identity; adaption; sustainability; dislocation; rural heritage; Solund; Etnedal; Landart.

Introduction

The focus of this article is two small Norwegian rural societies and the adaption to a creative economy at the crossroads of innovation, sustainability, and survival, during centralization, generational change, and development of a welfare state. Further, I wish to discuss the importance of the identity attached to local traditions of sustainability and survival for ethics (Moore, 1903; Shafer-Landau, 2010). Moreover, it is a situation with the average age of inhabitants is increasing, the number of children and young people substantially reduced and many of the children and young families come from elsewhere. In the island community of Solund, seven of nine children in the first year of school in 2014 had a family background from another country (BT, 2014, 9/5). Both municipalities emphasize the importance of services to minority language children (Etnedal, 2017; Solund, 2021). Children attend school in an increasingly multicultural school (Haugen, 2000).

The framework of understanding

The framework of understanding and interpretation is Critical Realism. Thus, we acknowledge that the structures and traditions of the past are invisible behind a screen of new terminology and rhetoric. In the tradition of critical realism, we relate to what remains but possibly changed in a chameleon-like way (Bhaskar, 1978, 1986, 1993, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Brante, 2005; Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2005). Figuratively we have the aim to enfold the enfolded (Price, 2019; Hartwig, 2003; Jessop, 2001). We develop a historical interpretation in the tradition of microhistory as well as using both oral and written sources as well as works published by others (Gottschalck, 1950; Kjelland, Krøvel, Teige, & Kaveh, 2020). The perspective of microhistory means that the perspective is from those living or who have lived in the community rather than public

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statistics and official reports (Ginzburg, 2013; Levi, 2013; Magnusson, 2012, 2013; Magnusson & Sziárto, 2013).

Initiating discourse and action through art

In Etnedal municipality, an art project by the two landart artists Egil Martin Kurdøl and Marit Arnekleiv focus on the old local store “Møllers landhandel” (see Figure 1). The shop was closed in 1998/1999 as well as several other local stores. Thus, emptying the local communities of local trade. The two artists, Marit Arnekleiv and Egil Martin Kurdøl, decorated the local store on the outside in the fall of 2021 with reproduced and enlarged wallpapers from the outside and symbolically lifted the shop with an air balloon attached with ropes to the shop. The latter was a photographic project that was later planned to be used as visual support in an artbook, as well as displayed digitally. The media attention, as well as local attention on the project, was great – thus initiating a discourse as well as local reactions communicated to those connected to the project (Arnekleiv, 2021; Etnedal kommune, 2021; Norsk Vegmuseum, 2021; Kurdøl, 2021). The project is ongoing as the wallpaper decorating the outside of the shop will deteriorate. That process will be photo-documented. In the summer of 2022, the wallpaper and the scaffolding currently attached will be removed and the shop repainted.

Figure 1. The old local store in Etnedal

In Solund, an art and historical project focus on the collection of local historical place names in an area of outlying islands. Most of those islands, shoals, and fishing places have names still remembered and the oral history part of the project is collecting the place names as well the stories connected to these places. The artist, researcher, and filmmaker, Siri Linn Brandsøy, has a background in visual anthropology, is active both in the local community as well as nationally, and co-operates with the Memoar Foundation of Oral History (Brandsøy, 2021; Memoar, 2019). The first part of the project was done in 2018, documentation, interviews, and filmmaking have been ongoing since then. Depending on funding, further interviews, filmmaking, and documentation will take place in 2021 and 2022.

In both cases, the co-operation with artists helps to create discourse, adds dimensions of reflection not possible through traditional historical and social scientific analysis as well

as helps to make those connected to the communities contribute with information. Thus, the process of research will benefit from the art dimension and is an ongoing process. The land-art project use methods that operate in a tradition using existing space as well land art (Norberg-Schultz, 1971; Andrews, 2006). The other project is connected to visual anthropology as well as oral history (Collier & Collier, 2009; El Guidi, 2010; Hockings, 1975). Even if approaching rather different methods, both projects use and collect visuals. Admittingly, the land art project is a deliberate interference in the local. Further, all three artists have prior works that might influence the understanding and interpretation of their work.

Since the two projects are ongoing, data collection is also ongoing and further information will be collected and interpreted. This article is a reflection in an early stage of the process. Still, it communicates the thinking behind the two projects from a researcher's point of view.

The two communities

Figure 2. The map of the Norwegian communes, marking the two communities investigated

Etnedal is a small municipality in the inland of Norway (see Figure 2) with traditions rooted in agriculture, forestry, and nature-based sustainability (Aars, 1990; Etnedalguiden, 2016; Etnedal historielag, 2020; Hvattum, 1993). The latter include collecting berries, fishing, and hunting as well as small-scale gardening. The main agricultural products are grass and husbandry, growing potatoes, and small-scale

growing of grain. As the community is far inland with short summers and long winters growing grain is difficult. In 2021 the community numbers 1,255 inhabitants down from 1,964 in 1960; the number of schools have been reduced from 13 to one centralized and the numbers of local shops from 13 to two (SSB, 2021, 25/11a). Roads have been built, most grown-ups have their own cars and a substantial portion of the working population is commuting for work out of the community (Etnedal Bilruter, 2020). There is a high percentage of people living from pensions. Those commuting are working in a variety of positions, but a substantial part in carpentry, building, and as construction workers. School after the 9th grade is outside the community; however, it is possible to travel outside the community by bus or car and live in the community (see Figure 3 for images of this community).

Figure 3. Images from Etnedal

The other community (Figure 2) is the island community of Solund (see Figure 4), the most western of all Norwegian municipalities with traditions rooted in fishing, seamanship, and small size agriculture. Traditionally close to Shetland and Scotland even to the extent of some expressing more an Atlantic than Norwegian identity. After the war, the community has undergone a tremendous change with roads and bridges being built transferring a substantial part of the community from the sea to roads. Though, traveling out of the community still depends upon sea transportation by car by ferry to the inland and by speed boat to the centrum of the large town of Bergen and further north to other Norwegian coastal towns. In 2021 the community numbers 772 inhabitants down from 1,695 in 1960 (SSB, 2021, 25/11b). The number of schools has been reduced from 15 in 1962 to one centralized (Lokalhistoriewiki, 2021). The number of local shops decreased from 9 to two (Allkunne, 2021). Like in Etnedal, a substantial portion of the working population is commuting for work out of the community and there is a high portion of people living from pensions. Although there are differences. Fishing is still important and many of those commuting working in the oil industry work some weeks offshore and commute home. Some of them work on supply vessels others on oil platforms. Fish farming has developed from the late 1980s and continues to be a main part of the economy; fishing has changed from small size boats to large vessels. A substantial part of youth from the community chooses after their final education, which on the high-school or vocational school level is outside the community, to settle outside the community. All education after the 9th grade means moving and living outside the community.

Figure 4. Images from Solund

In both communities, many of those moving out of the community and settling other places maintain their property in the local community for recreational purposes (Farstad, Rye, & Almås, 2008; SSB, 2020 25/3). The latter is a frequent phenomenon; in Norway, many people maintain connections to what they define as home communities even after several generations of living elsewhere. Even those born outside the community emphasize their roots in the family's original community. They still emphasize their identity as rural from the forests, mountainous and valleys of Etnedal, or the Atlantic coastal island community of Solund. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of harvesting the land and pursuing local sustainable activities even when such activities have lost their economic importance. Thus, the well-paid oil-workers or skilled carpenters still pick berries, catch fish for food and make their own firewood. Paying for such services would be no problem, however not acceptable for a person able to do the work himself or herself. "You should do it – that is what it means to be a local" and further that is "the way to behave". It is like what is good is to use nature and natural resources sustainably and traditionally.

The two art projects presented before have been well received and gained support locally. In Etnedal the municipality authorities supported the project financially, promoted it through their website, and gave space for a paid presentation in the local library (Etnedal commune, 2021). The National road museum supported the project through their website as well as with a filmmaker (Norsk Vegmuseum, 2021). Norwegian Visual Artists gave support to the development of the project (NBK, 2021). In Solund, the art project was done with support from the local historical association, the County Administration as well as the Bergen-based national Memoar Foundation of Oral history (Vee, 2018; Memoar, 2019). The project is ongoing the Memoar Foundation has applied in October 2021 for further funding.

Identity and attachment to the two communities

Dislocation of people, but maintaining identity and values

What Karl Polanyi and Eric Hobsbawm could label "catastrophic dislocation of people" (Elliot, 2010; Polanyi, 1945) never really happened in either of the two communities, rather it was a gradual dislocation with people remaining bonded to their home communities, maintaining a presence through a cabin, house or the family farm and whenever possible commuting back. Neither was it a great transformation (Polanyi, 1945), but rather a movement of people continuing many of the activities of the past even if those activities were changed from being work to being leisure and pursued as a proud connection to the identity of being rooted in the community.

However, people relating to the two communities are both those that have family connections, sometimes several generations ago, those that use the communities for recreational purposes, like having a house used for recreational purposes and others some of the visitors and some those traveling through. Both communities have more

recreational buildings than permanent housing. In Etnedal there are 875 houses used for permanent living and 2,520 houses used for recreational purposes (SSB, 2021, 25/11 a). In Solund there are 461 houses used for permanent living and 473 houses used for recreational purposes (SSB, 2021, 25/11 b). Thus, a substantial part of those staying in the community will have their permanent address elsewhere. In periods, like during vacation time, they will be a majority of those staying locally. The reason for the larger number of houses used for recreational purposes in Etnedal is the closeness to Oslo, the capital of Norway. Etnedal has good skiing conditions and is thus an important winter destination. Solund is a substantial journey from the urban centers and is mostly a summer destination.

As pointed out by the sociologist C. Wright Mills: “Neither life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (Mills, 1977, p. 9). What I will label as “rooted identity” connects to the past and often another geographical location than the people have as their place of address. Thus, the population identifying with those two small communities will be far larger than the population having the communities as their legal address. Using the land and sea for recreational purposes can create a strong connection even if no prior history of connection to the municipalities.

The landscape, the soundscape, and the identity

Staying in a landscape means interacting with the surroundings. Seemingly we might isolate ourselves from the landscape and withdraw to a digital world or what is inside in our human-constructed living- or working space. Still, we will always to some extent relate to our surroundings and that relationship might start such a strong bonding that it will last even if moving to another place.

Soundscapes are “aesthetical” in the broad meaning of the term aesthis – graspable only through the senses (Rudi, 2010, p. 176). All relationships to the locals will have a sensory dimension crucial for identity. Being in a landscape no one can avoid relating to the sensory dimension. Using film, visuals and a digital artistic approach deliberately bring the landscape and the changes of human activity to a larger audience than the local. Moreover, the artistic live “a life of its own” interfering and interacting with both the local and those outside the community as long as the material is available.

Asking people about their attachment they emphasize sounds, smells, the shape and look of the landscape and contours of the land, and in the case of Solund coastline and the sea. In Etnedal snow and forests are important; in Solund - the sea, currents, tides, and the rapidly always changing Atlantic weather. “It is the sounds, the weather, and nature” is a repeated statement. Then people get into the specifics about skiing, snow, hunting, fishing, sailing, yachting, and other recreational activities. Activities like harvesting nature are emphasized by several. Examples are hunting, fishing, picking berries, and in some cases harvesting apples, growing potatoes, and garden berries like redcurrants, blackcurrants, and gooseberries. The latter is more common among those who have family connections. I hear statements like “I am still using grandfathers fishing places”, I am growing potatoes like my family always did” and I am picking berries of apples from a tree or bush planted by my relatives in the past.

The importance of activities is often connected to the traditions of the community. The use of the land might have changed still movement in the land and the use of the sea for fishing and transportation is traditional. There is little difference between the use of those being settled in the community and those coming for recreational purposes. Several outsiders emphasize that they identify with and feel at home in the community. Statements like “this is me” or “this is where I belong” are typical.

The adopted identity and the attachment to the local

Both in Etnedal and Solund a substantial part of children in school and kindergarten, as well as working actively, are outsiders, and many of them from families of foreign origin. The two communities are different as it not possible, or at least difficult, to commute from Solund to places outside the community for work. The exception is fishing, shipping, and the oil industry. Though, in that kind of occupation, it is of no importance where you live. People can settle outside the community as well as within out of personal considerations that can be connected to the economy, social contacts, and interests.

Those settling in Etnedal do so because housing is reasonable prices and most often commute to places outside of the community. In Solund it is different families settle for work in fish-farming, shipbuilding/maintenance, public services, and in local enterprises like the local Greek-run local hotel. In both communities, refugees are settled and some of them choose to stay with their families. Both communities have some immigrants: in Solund 14,8% - which is the national average, and in Etnedal 7,7% (IMDi, 2021). In Solund, 79,6 of the immigrants were employed in 2017, and in Etnedal - 51,1 %. The national average in the same year was 63,3 % (IMDi, 2021). How do "outsiders" living in the community relate to the local community and the traditional values of the community is an important question. Even if living in the local community that does not necessarily mean identifying with it and pursuing what others define as common interest (Olson, 1971). The local school and the local municipality actively communicate the traditions of the community as well as invitations to participate in the activities in the community.

Particularly in Etnedal many of those having their permanent place of living outside of the community have no personal connections to locals. In Solund outsiders will have to relate to locals to travel to the community, to move around, and buy food. Shops outside the community are not accessible for daily trade. Regardless they connect and relate to the historical and traditional activities and the history of the community. People seeing the balloon attached to the shop in Etnedal, which was part of the land art project, gave me reactions like "it illustrates how the community is emptied of trade" and then there were reflections of the development not only locally but nationally. In Solund the art project makes people emphasize the importance of local knowledge in order to pursue sustainable activities. Statements like "the place names tell how to use and where to do" emphasize the importance. Speaking to a Dutchman who has settled in the community, he focused on the importance of local historical knowledge.

The cultural heritage of the two communities

The cultural heritage of the two communities is defined by the geographical area of the communities (Etnedal, 2021; Solund, 2020). Still, neither of the communities have not traditionally been without connections to the outside. Rather, they have had strong connections to the outside and in the case of Solund, being an island community in the far west of Norway, to Shetland, Scotland, and even other Atlantic countries. The present boundaries of the communities are administrative boundaries, but artificial from the point of historical heritage as well as cultural traditions.

In both communities, it is a continuous challenge to maintain the norms of the local in a society with great pressure for compliance with norms and laws and the centralization of the greater society (Langford, Rodriguez-Garavito, & Rossi, 2017). The two art projects illuminate the tremendous change to rural societies in general and thus have the potential to interact with a national discourse of the centralization of the country as well as the importance of the local for national identity.

Sustainable local development and cultural framework

The artistic intervention

Siri Linn Brandsøy has a family background from the local community, her grandparents lived there. She uses visualizing and makes collections readily recognized and accepted locally. Marit Arnekleiv and Egil Martin Kurdøl are outsiders and use art techniques rooted in an international tradition that is unfamiliar to the local community.

The Art-historian and former director of the National Norwegian Museum of Contemporary Art, Per Bjarne Boym, reflected in a draft of the latter project and suggested the concept “Pittoresque” (Boym, 2021; OCA, 2011). The concept is pointing to what the community is for outsiders and those passing through the community. For those connected to the community and living in it the phrasing as “Pittoresque” is pointing to one of the main dimensions of the community. It is a place that has turned into “vacationland” and many economic activities are connected to recreational activities.

While the visuals and collection of place names help to enfold the history of the community, the other project sort of forces the community to unwrap their past. Regardless the result is additional information partly because people want to explain and partly because they want to contribute to the historical understanding of their community.

The power of people to act within their world is a stratum of its own like culture and structure (Archer, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2003). The lack of access to the public realm is a serious problem for many small communities and the artistic intervention helps to get access to the discourse of the greater society.

The digital

The digital possibilities for communication mean that many newcomers to the community maintain their connection to their home-communities elsewhere. At the same time, many of those with ancestor connections to the local community maintain their connection. Such links are an important part of identity. Even if communication is through the digital it enables to be connected to practices and values rooted far back in time. Local historical associations in both communities actively use websites and digital communication (Etnedal Historielag, 2020; Solund Sogelag, 2021). An important part for both the local historical associations as well as for the municipalities (Etnedal commune, 2021; Solund commune, 2021) is to connect to values and practices rooted in the two communities.

Even if digital communication vastly increases communication with the outside, there are limitations and particularly so for the transfer of intangible cultural heritage and skills that only can be developed through practice and interaction with the land and sea (Falk & Weihe, 2009). The artistic projects are both very much in the digital world and available to an unpredictable audience. However, many of them probably with some relationship to the communities. However, some have no connection. Land art has very much an international audience. If the local population and economy will profit is another question.

Combining traditions from outside with the traditions of the local

Hardly any society, if any, is without connections and impulses from the outside. The local knowledge is developed as new techniques, insights, traditions as well as technology, animals, seeds, and so on come from the outside. Such influence or exchange might benefit a community, but it might also result in traditions of the local disappearing and valuable traditions and insights disappearing. The school system has back in history

challenged local knowledge and given priority to national priorities and values (Aasen & Telhaug, 1992). The development of schools as arenas for a multicultural community of children pose the danger of further distancing from the local (Haugen, 2000). Artistic projects focusing on the local communicate interest into the local. Thus, such projects both make it important to relate to the outside world and at the same time gain an understanding of the local world.

The importance of (cultural) entrepreneurship

The two artistic projects are by themselves cases of entrepreneurship that illuminate the local communities to a larger and even international audience and might enhance interest that might result in more economic activity. The most obvious is increased value as a travel destination. However, it might also be a more interesting place to live. The projects acknowledge the locals as important and thus might have a positive effect on self-esteem.

Adapting to a changing world with modern communications, markets, and possibilities is a situation of great stress as well as possibilities. An important part is the use of knowledge in Society (Swedberg, 2000). Entrepreneurship utilizing the traditions and the rooted knowledge of the local as well as adapting to possibilities of the contemporary is particularly important. Tourism, which is important in both communities needs to relate to the local landscape and traditional activities. In Solund fish farming and fishing, which both are important for the economy as well as for employment, are strongly rooted in local traditions and knowledge. Fish farming is new to the community but relates to the traditional knowledge of the sea. In Etnedal agriculture and forestry both relate to the modern as well as traditional knowledge of the landscape and the seasons. In both communities, an increasing number of people live in the local as well as work in a digital landscape creating possibilities for a diversity of entrepreneurship. Some of them sustainably and some of them not. What is sustainable has a potential for long-term adaption to a changing world by using locally rooted knowledge.

The solidarity and the sense of community are fundamental values in both communities. That includes respect for the locals as well as for the impulses from the outside. As pointed out by social researchers the sense of community is of crucial importance for the social cohesion in a community and thus for all human activity in the community (Brekke, Høstaker, & Sirnes, 2003). What is ahead is unknown. Yet we need to plan for adaption to new conditions with technological change as well as environmental change (Eriksen, Newth, Ringen, & Smith, 2002). Still, it remains an undisputed fact that we need to find sustainable ways to relate to nature to survive both locally and in the greater world (Falk & Weihe, 2009).

The philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas argues that we need to maintain a possibility for local opinions and initiatives in a world dominated by large-scale state and private structures (Habermas, 1999, 1971). The importance in the case of Etnedal and Solund are the strongly rooted traditions, ability to adapt to local nature-based conditions as well as ability to relate to and use modern technologies and impulses from the outside. The increasingly diverse population forces schools as well as workplaces to relate to greater diversity. Obviously, it is a great difference between the two communities. In the island community of Solund, it is not possible to commute daily. Those living in Solund have another situation than those living in Etnedal able to travel to the outside for work, shopping, and whatever else daily. Those settling in Solund are stuck in the community, while those settling in Etnedal do not need to relate to the community. Thus, seemingly it is easier to maintain local traditions and activities in a community like Solund.

However, a main challenge for Solund is the requirement of education after the ninth grade. In the time past qualifying for trade, fishing, and the sea was on-the-job training.

Nowadays all young people will have to live outside the community to gain qualifications in demand. In Etnedal it is possible to stay on and commute to take higher education. The difference is important, as well as that those are the years many young people meet possible partners and often result in settling outside of the community.

Both communities are faced with the challenge of being heard by the outside. In that process being very different can be an advantage. The very different island community is acknowledged as unique in another way than Etnedal, which is just a short car ride from larger communities.

The two art projects illuminate and visualize the difference as well as illustrate that the two communities are part of the surrounding world. Do we need to ask questions like whose voices are overlooked? and what facts and traditions we regard as valid? (Smith, Booth, & Zalewski, 2002). Those questions should be answered taking sustainability and the local into consideration (Stryken, 2000). The art projects make voices unheard possible to relate to. The shopkeeper who tried to adapt to the modern, the schools that closed and numerous other changes like in communication. The fishermen and farmers and their place names illustrate the past had advanced knowledge being in the process of being lost. Voices overheard are made alive through art. It is not only a question of acknowledging the shared world citizenship but also that knowledge needs to be locally rooted and from the point of sustainable local practice (James, 1995; Falk & Weihe, 2009).

Another aspect was local distrust of academia as well as political processes. The “real truth” is experienced as uninteresting and even unwanted (Freire, 1970/1999). What happened locally had from such a view little or no consequence for the greater society. Art intervention and the resulting media attention gave access as well as illustrated that outsiders found the community of importance. Art is sort of a middle ground and people relate to it in another way than what they do to the world of expertise and politics.

The two art projects are vastly different, still, they have both received considerable media attention from outside the two communities. Thus, the projects have helped to give attention to the municipalities. As one local resident said in Etnedal “the balloon – what an idea – it will be talked about all over”. Asking him about the local shop he told about the shopkeeper and all the functions no longer there. Reactions to the Solund project are similar. The reactions to media attention are positive, however, the resulting discourse is ongoing.

For social scientists, it is nothing special about being part of political discourse. However, for a historian, it is a challenge to be part of a contemporary political discourse at the same time as analyzing the past (Karlegård & Karlsson, 2009). Still, it illuminates why do we need history (Kvande & Nastad, 2013). We need history because it is the foundation for the present as well as part of what is ahead of us. We also need history because it enables us to relate to sustainable activities still important to us to maintain identity. Art, makes us relate to the past as well as the present and is by itself an activity that makes us communicate, discuss and reflect. The two, very different art projects interact with the local community in different ways, but they both illuminate the local for the greater society.

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