

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Aage Borchgrevink. 2013. *A Norwegian Tragedy: Anders Behring Breivik and the Massacre on Utøya*. Translated by Guy Puzey. Cambridge, UK: Polity. 299 pp. \$30.00 Hardcover (9780745672205)

Aage Borchgrevink's *A Norwegian Tragedy* is part of a growing body of literature surrounding the devastating events of July 22, 2011, one of the darkest days in modern Norwegian history. On that Friday a lone perpetrator, Anders Behring Breivik, set off a car bomb outside a group of government buildings (Regjeringskvartalet) in central Oslo. He then travelled to the nearby island of Utøya, where the youth branch of the ruling Labour Party was holding its annual summer camp, and went on a shooting spree. In the span of the 189 minutes during which these consecutive terrorist attacks took place, Breivik murdered 77 people, physically injured over 300 and traumatized countless others. His actions were met with disbelief, horror and shock, massive public demonstrations of solidarity, and the unsettling question of *why*. Why would and how could a young, middle-class Norwegian from Oslo's west side commit such atrocities? Borchgrevink's account, originally published in 2012 shortly after the conclusion of Breivik's trial, is one exploration of this question. Borchgrevink looks closely at Breivik's family life and background in an attempt to understand his motivation and actions.

Borchgrevink, a Norwegian literary critic, writer and journalist who has a postgraduate degree in literary studies from the University of Oslo, interweaves descriptions and eyewitness accounts of the events of July 22 with a detailed look at Breivik's familial background, as well as social forces and events that shaped his personality and thinking from a very young age. Breivik's early childhood with its contentious custody dispute, social services assessments, unstable home life and deficit of care; his involvement in Oslo's prolific youth tagging culture of the 1990s; and his later obsession with gaming are given their own chapters. Borchgrevink convincingly outlines the link between these events and activities and Breivik's alexithymia, attachment disorder, lack of empathy, status as outsider, desire for fame and construction of facades, aliases and avatars; all of which played a role in Breivik's planning and carrying out the events of July 22. In addition, Borchgrevink places Breivik's life story in the wider frame of post-war Nor-

way, outlining the pivotal role of the Labour Party in this era, as well as issues of class, social privilege, immigration and multiculturalism. This wider framing, which includes a discussion of prominent Labour party politicians such as Jens Stoltenberg, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Hadia Tajik and Jonas Gahr Støre's inclusive notion of "the new Norwegian we" (quoted in Borchgrevink 2013, 54) provides an especially informative context for international audiences.

Breivik's lengthy manifesto 2083-A European Declaration of Independence, referred to here as his compendium, is highlighted in a chapter entitled "The Book Launch", and Breivik's anti-Islamic, anti-Marxist and anti-feminist statements and views are noted throughout the narrative. Borchgrevink points out the ways in which Breivik's thinking is often inconsistent, though he acknowledges some coherence in his world view, and he also draws parallels between Occidentalism and Breivik's hatred of the city, the bourgeois, and globalization. Despite Breivik's assertion that he has been motivated to commit his "cruel but necessary" (quoted in Borchgrevink 2013, 240) acts for ideological, counter-jihadist reasons, Borchgrevink argues that the root cause of Breivik's hatred and radicalization was "the dark impulse... from his childhood" (267), and he outlines how his early life circumstances created attachment and empathy deficits which contributed to Breivik's transformation into a mass murderer. Borchgrevink also makes it clear that he is not minimizing the political nature of Breivik's acts or our individual and collective responsibilities to challenge extremism in our societies with his argument.

Borchgrevink's dense analysis is meticulously documented, drawing upon a broad range of sources including blogs, website forums, newspaper articles, eyewitness accounts, interviews with Breivik's family members, acquaintances and former classmates (many of which Borchgrevink has conducted himself), trial testimonies, the 22 July Commission's report, forensic psychiatric reports and Breivik's compendium. Borchgrevink also brings his own personal experiences into the narrative—we learn where he was, for example, when the first attack took place—as well his background as a literary scholar and critic. He draws some striking parallels between Breivik and several literary figures and works, most notably the troubled and detached boy Lillelord from Johan Borgen's classic novel trilogy from the 1950s.

When *A Norwegian Tragedy* was first published in Norway, it received substantial critical attention, garnering a nomination for the prestigious Norwegian literary Brage Prize, receiving the 2012 Norwegian Critics Prize for the best work of nonfiction for adults, and

sparking debates surrounding the causes of radicalization as well as the ethical responsibilities of writers. Borchgrevink revealed previously unpublicized details surrounding Breivik's personal life and family, and he defends this choice in the preface to Guy Puzey's 2013 English translation, maintaining that openness is necessary for completeness and truth. (Borchgrevink 2013, vii-viii) Borchgrevink also points out that no single book can adequately cover a tragedy of such magnitude, and indeed, myriad books and articles — both popular and scholarly — have appeared since July 22, 2011, representing a wide variety of perspectives and approaches. These range from comprehensive minute by minute descriptions of the day's events, to first-hand accounts by survivors and rescuers, academic responses, and a recently published children's book. Researchers such as Audhild Skoglund in her book *Sinte Hvite Menn: De ensomme ulvenes terror* [Angry White Men: The Lonely Wolves' Terror] (Oslo: Humanist Forlag, 2013) have drawn on Borchgrevink's work in their studies.

From its abrupt opening — “The bomb exploded at 15:25:22.” (1) — to the concluding chapter “Hatred” which discusses the aftermath and lessons of July 22, Borchgrevink uses temporal and spatial shifts in the narrative to effectively explore how and why this tragedy occurred. He answers some questions and raises others. He points out the overall strength of Norwegian society with its extensive social safety net, civil rest, and with its sense of solidarity as seen in individual and collective acts of heroism on July 22 as well as in the orderly mass demonstrations which followed. He also challenges some of the weaknesses, particularly those related to integration and child welfare policies — describing some individuals who have fallen through the cracks — and he points out that the line between strengths and weaknesses is not always clear cut. Though Norwegians have a great deal of well-placed trust in their police forces, for example, these forces have been criticized for a slow response time on July 22. Borchgrevink outlines some of the reasons for this as well as the way in which Breivik exploited this general trust by disguising himself as a law enforcement official. Borchgrevink concludes that the most valuable lesson from this Norwegian tragedy is about welfare policy surrounding children and families, rather than “integration policy, the Internet, ideology or the police's operating methods and resources.” (268). Whether one agrees with this conclusion or not, this book is a valuable contribution to the July 22 literature, and lends itself to discussions and debates surrounding radicalization, societal outsiders and isolation, as well as family and child welfare policy in Norway and beyond. While this

work will be of interest to sociologists, historians and scholars working with issues of radicalization and extremism, its journalistic style and personal tone make it accessible and of interest to a general audience as well.

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