

To be in the mountains to climb or to climb to be in the mountains? -

The notion of competition in Norwegian mountaineering.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on the notion of competition in Norwegian mountaineering and climbing as outdoor sport. Competition is in Norway a crucial element in the distinction between (outdoor)sportⁱ and friluftslivⁱⁱ. The tension that comes along, origins from questions the pioneers in mountain climbing were facing. Questions that in the explicit Norwegian context were linked to important moral and political issues of the time.

By researching the activities of the pioneers in mountaineering and climbing around the change of century, we will investigate why and how competition is the key factor in distributing the way idrettⁱⁱⁱ are understood and organized in Norway

KEY WORDS

Competition, Norwegian mountaineering, nature and nationalism

INTRODUCTION

“But are we – within this nation – content, when Norwegians achieve international reputation in various sport fields, then we also should appreciate it when we are able to assert ourselves through this noble sport [Mountaineering], that is more bodily and morally developing than any other, because it is detached from all competition and prize awarding and only appeals to the better instinct in us” (Tønsvberg, 1914, 315)

This quote is from the 1914 anniversary-book published by the Norwegian Alpine club; Norsk Tindeklub, only a few years after their founding in 1908. The quote entails some interesting information. First, it tells us that the Norwegian mountaineers demanded recognition from their fellow countrymen, stating that mountaineering was an important national matter. Second, it exposes a certain ambivalence regarding the sentiment towards competition. The mountaineers held a strong desire to prove to the Norwegian public and the international fellowship of mountaineers that they could perform at the level of the best. Still, they claimed that mountaineering is exalted above competition. How could they encourage and reject competition almost at the same

time? In the following we will take a look into this question.

METHODS

This presentation is based on a material from Iver Mytting’s Master Thesis Project at the University of Oslo, published spring 2012: *Erobringen av fjellet. Erobringen av fjellsporten. Erobringen av det norske: Om Norsk Tindeklubbs nasjonalisering av fjellsporten.*

(“The conquest of the mountains, the conquest of the mountaineering, the conquest of Norwegianess: about Norwegian Alpine club’s nationalization of mountaineering”)

The thesis is based on a close reading of texts written by the mountaineers, applying interpretational methods commonly associated with intellectual history or history of ideas. This form of literature study emphasizes the placement of texts in their historical context, implying a thorough knowledge of the rhetorical situation, the general debates and the intellectual premises of the time.

FINDINGS

In 1911 the club received an inquiry from the or-

ganizers of the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, asking for candidates to a gold medal on the field of Mountaineering: awarding “the finest performance in mountain ascents”. The board of the Norwegian club debated the matter and found there was some uncertainty connected to the inquiry ; on what premises an ascent should be judged upon: was there only talk of ascents of major peaks, or would one consider the technical difficulties of maybe smaller ascents? They decided to pose the matter on to the general assembly. (Grimeland, 2000, 45) Before we reveal what was decided, we will look closer at the Norwegian context.

When the climbers’ club were established, there already existed a long tradition for mountain touring. The Norwegian Trekking Association was founded back in 1868. But it was no climbers’ club. In fact, very few Norwegians were climbing mountains before the turn of the century. It was the British who in the 1870’s introduced the sport in Norway, notably William Cecil Slingsby. He and other countrymen almost have had the mountain-peaks to themselves. Mountaineering was among the common Norwegian strongly associated with Englishmen, and in addition regarded as extremely hazardous and a meaningless risk of life; “either he’s an Englishman or he is completely insane...” was the saying.

But the founders of the Norwegian climbers’ club stated that the English dominance was the result of Norwegian prejudice against the sport. (Tønberg, 1933, 42) The foreigner’s dominance was deeply unnatural and also quite embarrassing to the nation, the task of conquering untrodden land inside their own country should be carried out by Norwegians. They wanted to persuade their fellow countrymen with this belief.

A NORWEGIAN SPORT?

The mountaineers claimed the sport to be distinctly Norwegian. A recurring argument for that was the character of Norwegian nature, where mountains are a dominating feature. So the inhabitants must have acquired certain skills from living among mountains throughout the ages. (Horn, 1923, 22.) They argued that Norwegians are born with a natural ability for mountaineering, that it has to be deeply rooted in the national character, a concept originating in The Romantic Nationalism and still highly in force. To quote Slingsby’s view on Norwegian peasants, who, although unfamiliar with mountaineering, had their skills.

“Rock climbing, in the path of duty, has nevertheless always to some extent been exercised in every

rocky mountain valley in Norway and there are and have been for centuries hundreds of peasants who have literally toddled out of their cradles on to the rocks, and who are surefooted and fearless before they have learned their alphabet. The best of them become excellent cragsmen and are in great request when a crag-fast goat or sheep has to be rescued.” (Slingsby, 1914, 14)

This sort of statement were frequently repeated by the members of the Norwegian club, arguing that Mountaineering is a sport especially suited for Norwegians, trying to present it as a summertime equivalent to skiing, the national sport.

It’s was of course not an easy task. A revision of history was therefore an important strategy. The historical narratives by the members of the club, is thus a domain where the rhetoric strategies are easily spotted.

COMPETING WITH THE ENGLISH

In their anniversary books, the history of mountaineering in Norway had its obvious place. Also when they published elsewhere, it was variations of the same narrative, and their mission to construct mountaineering as a Norwegian sport. If it didn’t have its origin in Norway, it could have Norway as its destination. Norwegians were portrayed as the legitimate sons of the mountains, born with natural skill. Their embrace of mountaineering was only a matter of time. A teleological story is written, where all history leads up to the point where Norwegians re-conquers the mountains from the English, and at the same time, conquering the sport of mountaineering.

In their own understanding, it is especially their prominent skills as rock-climbers that enables them to compete even with the best. (Backer Grøndahl, 1918, 177.) On rock they are able to get up where others have to give up.

When the Norwegians roped up and started to go vertical, it was in the high alpine-like mountains in the central regions where the foreigners had been climbing for several decades. There were few unclimbed peaks, even few new routes to try. But now Slingsby and others started to go north to explore these parts of Norway, where there were many unclimbed steep walls and mountains. To these areas he also directed the Norwegians who in 1910 went north for the first time, conquering a series of peaks. Among them was Stetind.

In the historical writings the opening up of the northern regions is described as a preparation for some kind of final battle; here were unconquered

mountains on which to measure strength and ability. How would the Norwegians assert themselves there? "And time was short, should not these mountains be conquered by strangers as well. Above all it was Stetind that the interest evolved around. Through the years it had been tried in vain by outstanding climbers. It became the great goal, it had to be the ultimate trial for Norwegian Mountaineering." (Tønsberg, 1923, 103)

Three Norwegians set out for it, and as Tønsberg, the main chronicler of the club, stated: "they came, they saw, they won" (Tønsberg, 1914, 214).

This was the turning point in the history of Norwegian mountaineering, the incident that all evolution led up to. The Norwegian mountaineers were extremely proud of this achievement, and took it as a proof of victory over both the mountains and the mountaineers who had failed to climb them. On Stetind the Norwegians won the battle. After this, they stated, all first ascents were done by Norwegians; they have finally taken the lead on their home ground (Tønsberg, 1933, 48).

WHAT KIND OF COMPETITION?

After this short survey of the history writing, we see that they didn't seem to reject competition as such. To grasp the motivation for representing mountaineering history as a competition against the English, we need to look at the specific Norwegian context.

The country had just become independent from Sweden in 1905, after increasingly striving for its independence since 1814, until when Norway had been a junior partner in union with Denmark some 400 years. The process leading up to the secession and the aftermath of it, contained strong desires for recognition as an authentic nation and to gain the self-confidence that came along with it. Who became heroes and national icons were the polar explorers, men who explored and conquered the unmapped regions of the world: Fridtjof Nansen crossing Greenland in 1888, his attempt on the North Pole in 1893-96, and Roald Amundsen, who in 1912 became the first to reach the South Pole, in what was perceived as a contest with the British empire, represented by Robert F. Scott. Through this narrative the old notion of the great Viking nation was strengthened, as a particularly persistent, strong and daring people when facing nature's dangers and challenges.

The Norwegian mountaineers understood themselves as part of this narrative. In our understanding, a big part of their motivation was to create an imagery of themselves as heroic figures that performed im-

portant deeds on behalf of the nation. The conquest of mountain peaks was no personal matter, rather great achievements in a larger scale, even more so when there were other nationalities that were striving to do the same. In this understanding the English were given the role almost as rivals by coming here and conquering untrodden land. Their dominance had to be fought back.

Here one could remark that history has shown that mountaineering sometimes becomes a field incorporating certain nationalistic attitudes. So it's maybe important underlining that the Norwegian context has little similarity to what we know from the Alps between the wars, where politics and fascistic nationalism was brought into the race for the great north walls. Since the beginning Norwegian mountaineering has had a strong focus on safety, rejecting ideas of death romanticism and heroism. It was emphasized that climbing mountains wasn't worth risking of lives.

Meanwhile, regardless of the nationalistic elements, there was a firm focus on first-ascends and new routes. Every year a list of new ascents were published.

But still they maintained that competition should not occur in mountaineering. Reasons for this were several. First was a fear that elements of competition would endanger the safety of mountaineering. A climber should always keep within his own limits and always be prepared to turn around where the risk was taken to be too great. And competition was also believed to threaten the warm friendship that the sport inevitably had to be built upon. Team spirit and cooperation had to be strong, misconstrued self-asserting would endanger the whole group and therefore had no place. (Horn, 1923, 18.) But all this does not exclude the measuring of strength with others outside the rope-party, which has to be regarded as a form of competition. And exactly this form of competition is what many of the Norwegian mountaineers are devoted exponents of. But the opposition against competition was much a result of the need to distinguish oneself from the realm of modern Sport.

Sport was often regarded as a more trivial activity, containing dubious and unhealthy characteristics, such as excessive individualism, self-assertion, spectacle and entertainment, as opposed to the supposed higher morality of mountaineering. Receiving a medal or admitting elements affiliated with Sport would endanger the autonomy and purity of mountaineering.

An understanding still being found today in the discourse of sport and friluftsliv in Norway.

So we return to the question: what did the club de-

cide regarding to the possibility of an Olympic Medal? There was disagreement among the members. Some would undoubtedly welcome a medal, but others were against it. On the general assembly they determined that The Alpine Club - the mother club of mountaineering - must be consulted. Strangely enough, the British club claimed it had not received the same inquiry from the Olympic Committee. (Grimeland, 2000, 47) The case was thus closed. To stand as recipients when British climbers weren't considered, obviously felt wrong.

But we'll end by saying that all that is written rejecting competition is formulated after this decision was taken. It became constitutive for the mountaineers' self-understanding. In the clubs posterity the opposition against Sport and its elements of compe-

tion was taken to be a natural part of the essence of mountaineering. But if the inquiries from Stockholm hadn't come at this point in time, a decision wouldn't have been compelled to be taken, and the mountaineers would maybe have welcomed elements of competition at an earlier stage.

In Norway, it wasn't until the 1990s that a division of mountaineering was incorporated in the general sport, when Norwegian Climbing Federation (Norsk klatreforbund) was established within the Norwegian Sport Confederation (NIF – Norges idrettsforbund). The point being that if we shall succeed in understanding historical events, we need to study them in their specific context and surroundings, instead of starting with the subsequent development, projecting it backwards.

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