

22 July Centre, Oslo

Alternative Narratives in the Collective Memory about 22nd July, 2011

The focus of this article is the commemoration processes and collective memory in Norway after the terrorist attacks in Oslo and on Utøya Island on 22nd July, 2011. We will mainly relate this to what we call *alternative narratives*, and outline how this subject is addressed in the educational program at The 22 July Centre.

Main and alternative narratives – public response to the terror attacks

On 22nd July, 2011 a bomb exploded in the Government Quarter in Oslo, causing the death of eight people. Later the same day, the perpetrator, a right wing extremist, began a shooting massacre on Utøya Island, where the Norwegian Workers' Youth League was holding their annual summer camp, killing 69 people. 77 people lost their lives in the two attacks. Many more were seriously injured, both physically and psychologically, and the material damages were enormous. The police apprehended the perpetrator on Utøya, and in 2012 he was sentenced to 21 years of preventive detention. This was the worst single attack on Norwegian soil since the Second World War and it left the nation in shock. Commemorative acts for the victims, with expressions of shock and grief, began immediately after news about the attacks started to spread. Spontaneous memorials, dominated by hearts, roses, drawings and condolence cards, formed quickly outside churches and in town squares nationwide, and outside Norwegian embassies all over the world. Both news of the attacks and commemorations for the affected were first distributed through social media, and soon mainstream media reports followed. The media coverage was massive in the days and weeks following the attacks. The term "The 22nd of July" has come to describe both the terror attacks and the collective commemoration and memory processes in the wake of the attacks. So what has this term come to entail?

To elaborate on what we mean by *alternative narratives*, we should first address *the main narrative*. Professor Kyrre Kverndokk (2013, p. 148) describes this term related to 22nd July as: "(...) practices for performing and negotiating the memory of the victims". The purpose of these performing acts is to cope with the shock, uncertainty and despair caused by the attacks. As pointed out by Jørgensen, Skarstein & Schultz (2015, p. 52), *narrative structuring* is our basic cognitive tool for making sense in the world. It can restore coherence and meaning when something unexpected and frightening happens. After the first phase of shock and grief, the main narrative can be described as "the predominant stories in the collective memory". Prominent words in commemorative acts in 2011 (e.g. on social media, speeches and cards) were "love", "unity" and "openness". Trine Anker and Marie von der Lippe (2015)

have described this as a “harmonized rhetoric” – what we describe here as the main narrative of 22nd July. However, not everyone felt included in the unity that this rhetoric created a sense of. This highlights the formation of cultural expectations of how to express grief in the public sphere, with spontaneous, but also ritualized actions, that can put other, alternative stories, related to the same event, in the background of public awareness. The formation of a main narrative is also a process of making “tell-able” and “untellable” narratives, in other words, alternative narratives (Goldstein 2009, Kverndokk 2013, Santino 2006).

Why should we focus on alternative narratives? Because of the rapid formation of a main narrative, the thoughts, experiences and feelings of some groups became marginalized in the public commemoration and in the public debate (Kverndokk 2013). This is highlighted by the first response of some individuals after the bomb exploded: hateful utterances directed against a group in society that they assumed were connected to the terrorist attack. In the first hours after the explosion, before the tragedy on Utøya, many people assumed that this was an attack by an international terrorist group – the main assumptions were directed against extremist Islamic groups. Because of these assumptions, hateful utterances against Muslims were seen on social media, and there were some cases of verbal, even physical, attacks directed against Muslims. None of the attacks were reported to the police, and few of the affected have told their story publicly. This hostile climate changed quickly after it was revealed that the perpetrator was an ethnic Norwegian and a right wing extremist. In fact, the narrative became reversed, from a kind of nationalistic rhetoric to a dominant rhetoric of “unity” and “openness” (Kverndokk 2013).

The perpetrator stated during the trial that his reasons for the attacks were extreme hostility against immigration, and fear of its effects on Norwegian society. The motivation for the attacks was hence xenophobia and racism, leading to an attack on religious and ethnic diversity, and thus on the core values of a democratic society. There has been surprisingly little focus on the perpetrator’s ideology, or on similar thoughts elsewhere in Norwegian society, in the public debates following 22nd July. In addition, even though a majority of people embraced the words of love and openness in the summer of 2011, it is not so easy to define these values and make them applicable after the first phase of public grief (Kverndokk 2013, p. 149). The main narrative can be viewed as a response aimed at countering the motivation behind the attacks – to create distance from the perpetrator, and to gather around core values of democracy and unity. The spontaneous and planned performances of commemoration obviously meant a lot to many people, but as we have discussed, these kind of processes in the public sphere can also create the need to nuance the dominant story about the responses to the terror attacks, and its consequences for society. What does the commemoration process and the public memory of it mean for Norwegian society today?

The education program at The 22 July Centre

Exactly four years after the attacks, The 22 July Centre opened, at the place of the first attack – the Government Quarter in Oslo. The government initiated the founding of the Centre and consequently it is a part of the official response to the terror attacks. The mandate of the Centre is to commemorate the 77 victims, and to provide information about the terror attacks and their aftermath. It is, above all, a learning centre for students, with a mandate to be a part of the on-going dialogue of what 22nd July means for society, and how future attacks can be prevented. The aim is also to nuance the harmonized main narrative, and highlight alternative narratives, in dialogue with students who visit the centre. The Centre's education program is named "What should we teach about 22nd July?" This is an open question, and an important one. This is not just one single, dark day in our history, but an incident that needs to be put in context and challenged in the years to come, in addition to the continuing memorialization of the victims and the support for the bereaved families. 22nd July is not yet part of the curriculum in Norwegian schools, so whether or not the terrorist attacks and their significance are addressed in the classroom depends on the teacher (Anker & von der Lippe 2015). Furthermore, it is not obvious *how* the topic should be dealt with. It is very recent history, and painful for a lot of people. Every county in Norway, except one, lost someone, and many of the victims were very young. The educators at The 22 July Centre receive a lot of questions from students, both about the facts and about the consequences, like national security, the verdict, and how the government support those affected. In the education program, the terror attacks are placed in a broad context, with links to the past, present and future. This is part of the on-going meaning making and formation of history, which will affect how the next generation remembers 22nd July, and what that term will entail. What we call the creation of a main narrative is also a part of the creation of a national identity, but the predominant themes in this narrative from 2011 are not necessarily seen in relation to the current public debates in Norway, or in relation to global developments. Does the memorialization process after 2011 represent any real effects of "more love" and "more unity"? One current example, which shows that this is not necessarily the case, is the public debates and response to the current refugee crisis. Furthermore, 22nd July is frequently not spoken of as *terror* in the same way as 9/11, or the Paris attacks in 2015 – attacks performed by Islamic extremists. The educational program at The 22 July Centre is part of principal discussions and work against hate and fear in our society, with the aim of teaching new generations democratic values and to counter xenophobia. This is done through debates about meaning making, by strengthening historical consciousness, and through awareness of alternatives to predominant stories about the past. How we remember and reflect on past events, and how individuals and groups are given a voice to tell their story, have implications

for how the attacks and their aftermath affect our society in the years to come. Through critical thinking and knowledge, the aim of the education program is to equip students with the knowledge and tools to be active citizens in a democratic society.

References:

- Anker, T. & von der Lippe, M. 2015, "Når terror ties i hjel – En diskusjon om 22. juli og demokratisk medborgerskap i skolen" in *Norsk Pedagogisk Tidsskrift*, 2015:2.
- Goldstein, D.E. 2009, "The Sounds of Silence. Foreknowledge, Miracles, Suppressed Narratives, and Terrorism – What Not Telling Might Tell Us" in *Western Folklore* 68:2-3 2009, Western Folklore Society.
- Jørgensen, B.F., Skarstein, D. & Schultz, J.H. 2015, "Trying to understand the extreme: school children's Narratives of the mass killings in Norway July 22, 2011" in *Psychology Research and Behavior Management* 2015:8, s. 51-61.
- Kverndokk, K., "Negotiating Terror, Negotiating Love – Commemorative Convergence in Norway after the Terrorist Attack on 22 July 2011" in Ingemark, C.A. (red.) 2013, *Therapeutic Uses of Storytelling – An interdisciplinary Approach to Narration as Therapy*, Nordic Academic Press, Lund.
- Santino, J., "Performative Commemoratives: Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death", in Santino, J. (red.) 2006, *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, Palgrave Macmillian, New York.