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# Defending the Nordic model: Understanding the moral universe of the Norwegian working class

Ove Skarpenes

Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway

## ABSTRACT

In recent years, much attention has been paid to the white working class' concern with their declining position in the neoliberal era. The hypothesis that social and economic insecurity provoke anger and xenophobia are unable to account for the Norwegian case. The Nordic model still acts as a buffer against neoliberal capitalism, making the white Norwegian working class less vulnerable than in comparable countries. This paper will argue that the Norwegian working class has defended the Nordic model by utilising a range of moral values. I use 56 qualitative interviews to examine the morality of the white Norwegian working class. The study is theoretically and methodologically inspired by Boltanski and Thévenot's work on ranking and legitimisation. The cultural configuration observed here deviates in certain ways from previous accounts in the USA, the UK, and France. The substance of Norwegian working-class morality emerges as different cultural repertoires which can be represented by three moral ideal types: the *Good Samaritan*, the *socially responsible citizen*, and the *hardworking person*. Furthermore, this paper suggests elements of cultural–historical continuity to explain the patterns observed.

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**KEYWORDS** Cultural continuity; ideal types; morality; Nordic model; working class

## Introduction

Within the study of class, morality is often analysed as an embedded part of national culture and sociologists have tended to compare moral identities and practices between groups, classes, and nations (Harrits & Pedersen, 2019; Jarness, 2017; Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Kantola & Kuusela, 2019; Kefalas, 2003; Lamont, 1992; 2000; 2018; Saksliind & Skarpenes, 2014; Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2001; Sayer, 2005a; 2005b; Skeggs, 1997). This article examines the morality of the Norwegian working

**CONTACT** Ove Skarpenes  [Ove.Skarpenes@uia.no](mailto:Ove.Skarpenes@uia.no)

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class. The substance of Norwegian working class morality emerges from different cultural repertoires that can be represented by three moral ideal types: the *Good Samaritan*, the *socially responsible citizen*, and the *hard-working person*. Morality can be seen to emerge from the cultural expression of organic solidarity associated with the Nordic model. Moreover, elements of cultural–historical continuity can help to explain these observed patterns.

Previous studies on the Norwegian working class reveal a cultural configuration that deviates in certain ways from those reported in comparable studies in the USA, France, and England (Skarpenes, 2018; Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2019). When we compare (Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2019) the Norwegian working class with the working class in the USA (Hochschild, 2016; Lamont, 2000; 2018), France (Lamont, 2000; Lamont & Duvoux, 2014), and the UK (Savage et al., 2001; Skeggs, 1997), the findings suggest that individuals within the Norwegian working class do not strive for social mobility, as is the case in the USA, nor do they criticise the education system, as in the case in France. Finally, anxieties about respect (Skeggs, 1997) and fears of collective labelling (Savage et al., 2001) do not capture the salient concerns of the Norwegian working class. Lamont (2018) argues that in our neoliberal age there is an increasing gap between what workers feel is their legitimate social value and the lower status that they perceive themselves to have been assigned by society. This disparity has created a *recognition gap* and generated resentment as well as a loss of self-worth (Lamont, 2018) within the working class. Findings from the Norwegian case do not show the same experience of shame or loss of self-worth. On the contrary, these findings point to the existence of a certain collective confidence still present in the working class. Members of the working class want to be what they are and they want to be appreciated for simply being that (Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2019, p. 14). There are, of course, some deviations from this picture. For instance, increasing inequalities are emerging in Norway, especially noticeable is the contrast between east and west Oslo, a fact many of the interviewees themselves mentioned. Some of the women working in health care and services are – if not shameful and servile – angry, exasperated, and even sad (see Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2019). However, egalitarian principles and rules of conduct still affect the *modus operandi* of institutions like education and labour in Norway, as well as how people perceive them. Moreover, the Nordic model (with its political emphasis on full employment, collective bargaining, wage compression, a common comprehensive school system, and free universal welfare rights) still manages to keep the recognition gap narrower than in comparable countries. There seems to be a continuing

trust in the Nordic model and in its institutions among the Norwegian working class. The aim of this article, since no broad attempt of the kind currently exists, is to explore the substance of working-class morality and to examine the hypothesis that these values can be interpreted as a cultural expression of the observed trust and solidarity within the Nordic model. Given the fact that the Norwegian working class is as an anomalous case, when examined against comparable countries, such an inquiry may contribute to developing an understanding of class cultures in different social formations.

In addition, this paper hopes to contribute to the literature on morality and class, adding theoretical vigilance by adopting Boltanski and Thévenot's pragmatic approach (2006) to the construction of moral ideal types based on the values listed by our participants and through interpreting these moral ideal types as a cultural expression of the Nordic model. Finally, the cultural dimensions of morality have to be made and remade by human beings through a historical process, a logic that points towards the necessity of searching for forms of cultural continuity. In contrast to the majority of contemporary sociological inquiry, which seldom engage in historical analysis (Inglis, 2014), this paper presents findings from social and cultural history to map the emergence of working-class morality in Norway.

### **Data, methods, and analytical framing<sup>1</sup>**

The study is based on 56 semi-structured interviews in Oslo (capital), Bergen, Kristiansand (Norway's second- and sixth-largest cities, respectively), and two small municipalities that represent typical Norwegian industrial communities. The sample consists of individuals who have no education beyond vocational training and who are employed in industry, artisanal occupations, healthcare (including nursing homes, kindergartens, as well as before- and after-school programmes), the service sector (cleaning, retail stores, warehouses, hotels, and restaurants), the petroleum sector, and the transport sector. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. Interviews were conducted at the participants' workplace, in their homes or at cafés. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The youngest informant was 22 years old and the oldest was 64. The average age was 43.9 (Table 1).

This table shows the distribution of participants (who were recruited from both the private and public sector) according to occupation, gender, and residential location. To follow up previous studies on the

**Table 1.** Distribution of participants according to sector, region, and gender.

	Industry		Artisanal		Healthcare		Sales and service		Transport		Petroleum	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Oslo	6		5		3		6	4	2	1	2	
Bergen	1		5		3		1		1	1		
Kristiansand								4				
Two industrial communities	8	2						1				
<i>N</i>	15	2	10		6		7	9	3	2	2	56

middle class, we want (in future research) to explore hypotheses about the function of interactions between classes in the Norwegian process of modernisation, thus for this paper the main target groups were male manual workers in industry and artisanal occupations. Therefore, the sample includes more men than women. The motivation behind this emphasis on Norwegian men in industry and artisanal occupations is due to their centrality in the modernisation process in Norway. It is reasonable to assume that this group, given its central position, represents various forms of historical continuity. In addition, our focus has been to highlight the ethnic Norwegian majority culture. Thus, the moral values of immigrant were not part of the research design. However, immigrants make up a significant portion of the working class in Norway today. It has been argued that leaving race out of the discussions of class indicates a certain methodological whiteness (Bhambra, 2017), and hopefully we can expand this project's focus in the future, but the analysis offered here is limited to the study of those of Norwegian heritage.

The end of the previous century saw a radical deindustrialisation of the labour force. The traditional segment of the working class employed in industrial production, which for decades held an ideological hegemony in the labour movement, now represents no more than approximately 10% of the Norwegian labour market. However, if a broader definition is used as a basis for paid labour, one that includes all sectors of society, we see that the working class still represents a significant segment of Norwegian society. Data from *Statistics Norway* shows that in 2015 managers made up 7.7% of the workforce, professionals 26.8%, and technicians/associate professionals 17%. Overall, 51.5% of employees had some higher education. The remainder (clerical support workers 5.9%, service and sales workers 19.9%, skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers 1.9%, artisanal occupations and related trades workers 9.3%, machine operators and assembly workers 6.2%, and other occupations 5.3%) comprises a total of 48.5%.<sup>2</sup>

We found participants by using company web-sites. In cases where we found employees who had made both their name and position available online (on company or government agency websites, in trade magazines, etc.), we first sent letters then followed up with a personal phone call. In other cases we first approached a manager or public relations executive and asked them to contact their employees. We also used the snowball method and used trade unions to recruit a certain number of participants. Although Norway still has a high level of trade union membership, in some sectors this membership has been declining. As a result, barely

half of the Norwegian labour force (salaried employees) belongs to a trade union or an employee organisation (Nergaard, 2015, p. 38). In our sample, 71% (40 participants) reported that they were union members (although this number may be slightly higher because a few participants did not respond to this question). What kind of bias might the recruitment methods imply? It is possible that organised workers may have been socialised into a collective, characterised by actual negotiation experience with employers and thus informed by the political (and moral) struggles against those in power. If the selection had had a greater share of unorganised workers, then the results may have been different to those in this paper. Women employed in cafeterias or cleaners were most often those who declined to take part in the study. It cannot be ruled out that those who did not wish to participate would have expressed values and attitudes different to those who took part in this study. If the sample had included even more participants from construction and healthcare, the topic of social dumping (and immigrant scepticism based on individual economic-rational arguments) might have been more prevalent.<sup>3</sup>

This article is part of a larger cultural–sociological analysis of the ethnic Norwegian working class. The study is theoretically and methodologically inspired by Boltanski and Thévenot’s works on ranking and legitimisation (1983, 2006), Lamont’s comparative cultural–sociological work on valuation and evaluation (2000, 2012) as well as Lamont and Thévenot’s cultural–sociological comparative studies of different national evaluative repertoires (Lamont & Thévenot, 2000). The interview guide has been designed to allow comparison between Norwegian low-skilled groups and similar groups in the USA and France (Skarpenes, 2018; Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2019). It has also been important to gather data so as to allow us to compare the Norwegian working class with the Norwegian middle class in our previous studies. More specifically, this was operationalised in order to talk about their education and attitudes towards school, work, personal ambitions, class, family, leisure time/vacations, politics and cultural preferences. We discussed issues they were passionate about, their ambitions, groups that irritated them, groups they admired, people they liked/admired or disliked/looked down on, who their friends were, child-rearing values, etc.<sup>4</sup>

The analytical strategy in this article draws on the pragmatic sociology associated with the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006). They are concerned with exploring how people construct and use categories to legitimise their own arguments and social behaviour as well as criticising

those of others. In practising legitimation, social actors refer to certain moral values, rules, and categories that represent a *common good*. By referring to different repertoires of the common good, or Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) *orders of worth*, social actors seek to justify their arguments. In modern society, these orders are expressions of shared values that have emerged over time and that enjoy high legitimacy. Each order of worth contains a principle expressing something shared by humans, but it also contains a ranking of people and things according to low and high value. This approach demonstrates different ways in which people justify their standpoints, by pointing towards the collective benefits for society to be accrued from their particular position. Making such hierarchies relevant in diverse situations, whether at work or during leisure time, is a matter of the actor's ability to mobilise arguments, values, people, and things. From this perspective, justifications always move beyond a particular or personal idiosyncratic standpoint. The data in this study was organised and analysed by applying this theoretical framework and through exploiting the concept of different repertoires of the common good (see also Lamont & Thévenot, 2000).

The analysis in this article is based on the answers given to specific questions. The participants were asked (inspired by Lamont, 1992, 2000) whom they were fascinated by, admired, looked up to, had respect for or had sympathy for. From a negative angle, we asked them whom they did not respect, did not want to be associated with or lacked sympathy for (we varied the way in which this question was asked). The analysis follows Lamont's inductive, interview-based approach to the study of different boundaries or repertoires (socioeconomic, moral, cultural). Our understanding of the concept of morality is closely related to Lamont's and it is used in order to separate moral values from cultural and socioeconomic values.<sup>5</sup>

A conventional qualitative analysis would typically discuss differences between gender, geographical regions, generations, and occupations with the ambition of presenting differences within (the) Norwegian working class culture(s).<sup>6</sup> In this paper the approach is different. This study is searching for general patterns, common characteristics across occupations, gender, generations, and places of residence. Following the pragmatic framework, three repertoires have been identified with different conceptions of the common good. According to Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), the idea of the common good varies within the different orders of worth and justifications based on what they call qualification. Within an order of worth some people (and objects) are qualified as 'great' and other



people (and objects) are considered ‘small’. I have followed this logic in the construction of the moral ideal types. Each repertoire contains highly valued and lowly valued people. In the presentation of the findings, I use quotes from the interviews, but in order to illustrate the breadth of the Norwegian working class culture of morality, I will in addition present lists of names and words used by the participants themselves. In this (unconventional) way, the elements and characteristics from which the moral ideal types are constructed are rendered visible and the analytical strategy based on Boltanski and Thévenot’s framework more transparent. I use the term *summary* when presenting these lists with direct short quotes from the interviews. After presenting the findings, in the discussion I use moral ideal types in an abductive historical analysis, formulating hypothesis based on cultural–historical continuity to explain the pattern observed.

## Findings

### *Moral ideal types in the Norwegian working class*

In our previous analysis of the Norwegian middle class, we used the same questions as outlined above (Sakslind & Skarpenes, 2014). We attached significance to the fact that the majority of our participants were primarily concerned with morality in their answers. Two different moral repertoires were mobilised when participants answered the aforementioned questions. We can speak of a *Christian-humanist moral repertoire* (altruism) and a second repertoire geared more towards *social responsibility*. In the latter we found that values such as equality and solidarity were important for the middle class. Both of these repertoires are also present amongst the Norwegian working class. However, a third repertoire is also important amongst the working class.<sup>7</sup> Work ethic and diligence are important values in this repertoire. These repertoires can be represented by three moral ideal types: the *Good Samaritan*, the *socially responsible citizen*, and the *hardworking person*.

The paramount values in the Christian humanist repertoire are altruism and compassion. Within this framework, people are rated highly if they resemble the moral type of the *Good Samaritan*. A male electrician in Bergen was full of admiration for people who help others in need. His view was typical:

A<sup>8</sup>: People who travel around the world and help people. And make a difference. It’s admirable. So, I have a friend now who has spent her fall vacation in

Greece on the beaches and is [working with refugees] concentrating on families with kids and just helping them from A to Z. [...] I think it's really good. (Male, 40–50, electrician, Bergen)

This humanitarian ethos is deeply embedded in Norwegian society (Gripsrud, 2018; Oxfeldt, 2016; Tvedt, 2007), in the Norwegian middle-class culture and, as demonstrated here, in the culture of the Norwegian working class. Several of the participants emphasised compassion as a human obligation. Here are some examples of what participants value, based on their answers to questions around the moral repertoire associated with altruism and compassion:

Summary: People who fight for others when they don't have to, who stand up for others, who see a drug addict being kicked unprovoked and intervene to help, Médecins Sans Frontières, people who go to Africa and spend their lives helping others, who give up jobs and holidays to help those in need, who have compassion for others, who understand the needs of others, old Stoltenberg [former Labour politician, Balkans peace negotiator, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and father of Jens Stoltenberg, the current Secretary General of NATO], the young female doctor who worked in Africa and got Ebola, health, humanitarian and solidarity workers, who spend their holidays in Greece helping refugees, priests, honest people, people who give up their time to help others in the world, who help the disabled, etc.

People are considered less valuable in the Christian–humanistic repertoire if they are dishonest, do not show compassion or break the law and/or the Christian commandments. The following response from an auxiliary nurse exemplifies how dishonesty is perceived:

A: I don't like people who lie. I have had friends who lied to me. In fact, close friends. [...] I hate that, actually. (Female, 50–60, auxiliary nurse, Oslo)

People who cause others pain are least valued in this moral evaluation repertoire:

Summary: People who lie, dishonest people, racists, criminals, bigots, abusers, football casualties, a pastor who stole money from a congregation, violent people, dictators who drive their people mad, dictators, neo-Nazis, Breivik [the 22 July Norwegian terrorist], Søviknes [a right-wing politician who was accused but not convicted in a sexual abuse case], and drug dealers.

In addition to the Christian–humanist repertoire, another moral repertoire was mobilised. Participants suggested a form of goodness that appears to be linked to ideas of economic and social justice as well as social responsibility. Equality, solidarity, and responsibility are

important values in the culture of the working class (equivalent to the culture of the Norwegian middle class). The persons ranked highest, according to this value hierarchy of social responsibility, are those who work for economic and social equality as well as those who pay their taxes. Furthermore, this heroic figure participates in voluntary work in civic society. Thus social responsibility denotes a certain duality. First, the participants believed that efforts must be made to keep inequalities at a modest level. Second, they believe we should all contribute to civil society. Here are two interview extracts that demonstrate this:

A: My favourites are Gro Harlem Brundtland and Stoltenberg. Einar Gerhardsen from the old days [all former Labour politicians]. So I admire the people working for equity between people. Everyone should have the opportunity for education, etc., etc. (Male, 60–70, bus driver, Oslo)

A: [name] in the taekwondo club. She works her ass off for the club. All those people who do voluntary work that almost no one sees. (Male, 50–60, brewery worker, Oslo)

The moral code which emerges here reflects cultural values which provide the content of norms such as social trust and reciprocity, norms usually associated with the institutions of the (social democratic) Nordic model. The participants expressed their admiration for those who help to create a more equitable society and who take their responsibilities towards the community seriously. Here are some examples of qualities they value:

Summary: People working for a more equal distribution of resources in the world, Jens Stoltenberg during the terrorist attack, people who work for others, volunteers, people who work for voluntary organization, who volunteer to support sports and culture in their local community, who spend their spare time for the good of society.

According to this moral evaluation of people and actions, people are viewed as less valuable when they betray this *contract* of social responsibility. A female driver was clear on this issue when speaking of those for whom she had distain, saying:

A: The ones who say one thing and then do something completely different. I'm thinking of the politicians. And the people at the top of society. They have so many benefits [...]. I think about the rich who are cashing in and still try to evade tax, cheating, or use all the loopholes in the tax system not to contribute. People who move to another country to avoid taxes for example. No, I don't have much respect for that. (Female, 40–70, driver for the Norwegian postal service, Oslo)

In Norway, several well-known individuals with large fortunes have moved abroad to avoid taxes. Perhaps these were the people the driver had in mind. They, according to her, are not responsible citizens. People evading or exploiting *the system* and people who do not contribute economically or socially to the community (understood as the state and local communities in civil society) are lowly valued persons. In general, those wealthy persons who do not contribute to the community or who exploit others are looked upon with contempt and therefore seen as being lower down in this hierarchy of moral values. People who were rated as less valuable were:

Summary: People who increase inequalities, I think, for example, the right-wing parties. Siv Jensen [leader of the right-wing populist Progress Party], business leaders, people who take advantage of welfare benefits, political horse-traders, people with too much money, tax evaders, people who take advantage of loopholes in the tax system, Rimi Hagen [a famous businessman], who sends his shirts to London for cleaning, people who exploit others, who cheat, who like to dominate others, egoists, rich people living in affluent districts, people with a lot of money who bask in the limelight, cynics in real estate who are only concerned with money, people who exploit others, who look down on others and judge them, who step on others, and politicians who enrich themselves.

Social responsibility, work ethic, and diligence were reported as being important values by the Norwegian working class participants in this study. People who were highly valued were those who worked hard, from drug addicts getting their life back on track to successful entrepreneurs with modest backgrounds. Hard work and effort are qualities that are highly valued. As one participant commented:

A: I have a lot of respect for former drug addicts. I admire them for how they managed to work their way up.

Q: So, people who have been ...

A: In the gutter but who managed to rise up. Or others who have had a tough upbringing and a tough childhood and have managed to get give their life a normal direction. (Female, 20–30, Shop assistant, Oslo)

Several participants also mentioned respect for their mothers. For example, a male brewery worker in Oslo spoke of how he admired his mother's work ethic, having raised four children on her own. A female canteen assistant in Kristiansand considered her mother and cousin to be everyday heroes:

A: They [her mother and cousin] never give up. She, my cousin, has gone through a lot and she has raised three kids alone. (Female, 40–50, canteen assistant, Kristiansand)

They appreciated the hard work necessary to manage in difficult situations and provide for the family. The effort put into hard work is also admired when it is linked to successful individuals. This carpenter was explicit on this point when he said:

A: I'd say people who work like myself, really. And people who manage to work their way up.

[...]

Q: Would that typically be Røkke or Stordalen and people like Thon [well-known successful Norwegian businessmen]?

A: Yes, in a way. They managed to create something from nothing and they have modest backgrounds and no higher education. (Male, 30–40, carpenter, Oslo)

Former drug addicts, mothers, ordinary workers, and successful entrepreneurs are admired when they contribute to the community and embody a principle of hard work. Examples of people the participants admired are:

Summary: My mother who took care of us when our father drank, everyone in the emergency services, everyone in health care, nurses, doctors, doctors, policemen, people in the fire department, people in the military, people who try to make the most of it and succeed, people who manage to follow a dream or a goal, people who work hard and who build something from scratch, people who dare to invest, work hard and come from working-class backgrounds, people from ordinary families who succeed through hard work and who build businesses, former drug addicts who hit rock bottom but manage to work their way up again, people who were barely alive but managed to recover, people who have had a tough life but managed, people with a troubled childhood from the east side of Oslo but who still managed, my mum who was alone with four kids and still managed, people with Downs or other disabilities who struggle and are dependent on others, people who are disciplined and reach their goals people who work hard, are disciplined and who sacrificed a lot to get where they are, people who work hard for the elderly for miserable wages, people who have patience in day care centres, my mother and my cousin, who have both gone through a lot but are doing well and helping others, people with the odds against them but dare to invest and work hard, people who work.

The Norwegian working-class participants did not primarily associate these values with particular groups or classes, nor did they claim ownership of them to defend themselves against more privileged groups, as has

been observed in the USA (Kefalas, 2003; Lamont, 2000). This value structure can be seen to represent a communal will to defend a collective system (the Nordic model) in which everyone must contribute, from the shop floor to the board room, a system in which everyone must pay their taxes and participate in voluntary activities in their local communities. If they do not, the *collective contract* is broken. According to this moral evaluation, people are viewed as less valuable if they are slothful, do not want to work or misuse the welfare state. Two electricians in Bergen spoke of their disdain for individuals who undermine the collective system when they said:

A: People who can work but consciously choose not to because they manage to cheat the system and live off benefits, I have absolutely zero respect for people like that. But if there's a reason they're on welfare benefit, for reasons for which the system was designed, then that's fine. (Male, 20–30, electrician, Bergen)

A: I don't like freeloaders, people who don't participate in society and ... yes ... we have to do our duty and demand our rights.

Q: Who are you thinking about?

A: Here I am thinking about big companies that don't pay their taxes. [...] But I also think of those who exploit social security benefits and exploit a system which you and I depend on, right. That pisses me off. (Male, 40–50, electrician, Bergen)

It is not the individuals *per se* or their social class, or even their self-disciplined dignity (Lamont, 2000), but their individual work and diligence which contributes to the common good of society. Examples of lowly valued people are:

Summary: People who misuse welfare benefits, people who exploit the system, spoiled rich guys, politicians who don't know what work is, Stordalen [a well-known owner of a hotel chain] is a person I kind of like, but when he brags about taking time off from work to help his sick wife, I think, my God, there are lots of people who can't do anything like that, people who have had everything served on a plate without working, people who take advantage of welfare benefits, people who come here just to draw resources out of Norway (without working) but that is just some immigrant groups, a guy my sister almost married had a prolapse but he didn't bother to trying to work again – he would rather live off the welfare state, the freeloaders, large companies that do not pay tax, people who do not bother to contribute to the community, who consciously avoid working, who do not want to work but have the ability to do so, everyone should contribute to society's best so I didn't like it when a friend who is good worker stopped working and started living off welfare benefits, people who don't bother to work, people who are lazy and complain, who don't bother to contribute, who can work but don't.

**Table 2.** Moral ideal types in the Norwegian working class.

	Good Samaritan	Socially responsible citizen	Hardworking person
Common good/worth	Altruism, honesty, compassion	Equality, solidarity	Work ethic, diligence
Highly valued people	People who spend their lives helping others (such as refugees, the poor). Humanitarian workers, Médecins Sans Frontières	People who want to distribute goods more equally. People involved in local voluntary work (culture, politics, sports). Left-wing politicians, people with <i>dugnadsånd</i> (a willingness to participate in communal voluntary work)	People who work hard in order to: -take care of themselves, -support a family, - handle their job, - start a business. Single mothers, former drug addicts, people who struggle in life, ordinary workers, entrepreneurs from ordinary backgrounds
Lowly valued people	Liars, racists, criminals, cheats, bigots, dictators, neo-Nazis	People who want to increase inequalities, business leaders, the wealthy, people who dominate others, real estate cynics, egoists, politicians who enrich themselves. The political right	People who are able to work but don't, people who take advantage of the system, such as companies that avoid paying taxes and people who take advantage of welfare benefits, freeloaders

See also Appendix.

Based on empirical data as well as the framework of Boltanski and Thévenot, the morality of the Norwegian working class can be presented in this model (Table 2).

In a discussion of Lamont's work on class differences, Andrew Sayer considers whether certain characteristics such as integrity, solidarity, and reliability are more valued in more equitable societies (Sayer, 2005a, p. 63). The findings reported here support this hypothesis. The anti-hierarchical character of morality fits the Norwegian (or Nordic) model of egalitarianism. In order to understand this cultural configuration, morality should be interpreted in the light of the institutional architecture of the Nordic model. In the following section I argue that the moral ideal types presented above constitute the cultural backbone of the Nordic model.

## Discussion

### *Social responsibility and hard work: A moral defence of the Nordic model*

The image of Norway as a pioneer in promoting peace, development, and justice in the world has a long history. It is an image which can be traced back in literature and popular culture (Gripsrud, 2018, p. 105).

Promoting peace has also played an important role in Norwegian foreign policy, an idea of the ordinary people's mission as peacemakers goes back to such celebrated writers as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910) (Gripsrud, 2018, p. 84; quoting Knudsen, Leira, & Neuman, 2016). After the Second World War, institutions were built and practices developed which combined foreign policy, peace promotion, and development aid, thus linking forms of state branding, humanitarianism, and economic altruism (Tvedt, 2007). The Nobel Peace Prize and the Rafto Prize, celebrate active participation in peace negotiations around the world. Moreover, the relatively large aid and development budget has created an image of Norway as a moral superpower. This imagery is likely embedded in the culture of the working class (transferred through different institutions such as the education system, mass media, and trade unions) as well as being expressed in the moral ideal of the *Good Samaritan*. The participants showed sympathy for people, organisations, and institutions involved in humanitarian work.

However, to understand how the working-class morally defend the Nordic model, the other two ideal types are more important. It is a well-established fact that people in the Nordic countries are unusually trusting. They trust each other and they trust their institutions (Rothstein, 2013; Skirbekk, 2009). It is equally common to associate trust with the Nordic model and the welfare state which is generally seen to express a commitment to egalitarian values. The Nordic model comprises some elements that distinguishes it from other models found in the West; a high level of wage-equality, a relatively high degree of unionisation, a system of collective bargaining, a political emphasis on full employment, a large public sector, and a high level of taxation. Education and health-care are free of charge and the state provides generous support for the unemployed, including income protection and support for professional training (Bendixsen, Bringslid, & Vike, 2018, pp. 8–9; Skirbekk, 2009, p. 16). The collective bargaining system and the high level of unionisation fosters cooperation and mutual trust between employees and employers. A class compromise between employees and employers (as equal partners) in collective bargaining was already in place in 1907 and was further strengthened in the 1930s, resulting in a national collective agreement on wages and working conditions (Olstad, 1991). This agreement regulated the relationship between employees and employers concerning rights, obligations, wages, and working conditions. Understandably, many perceive this system of collective bargaining (which has carved out a central position for the working class) as having been a necessary



condition for the smooth integration of social democracy into the liberal bourgeois societies of the Nordic countries (Olstad, 1991; Sejersted, 2005). The tripartite cooperation between employers, unions and the state was fully institutionalised in the 1960s. Despite growing economic inequalities in the Nordic countries, the collective bargaining system with centralised salary negotiations, still generates – compared to other Western countries – a relatively egalitarian distribution of incomes (Barth, Moene, & Willumsen, 2015). Economic inequality is known to strongly correlate with trust in a society (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Robert Castel (2003) uses the concept of zones of social cohesion to explain this point theoretically. The link between stable work and durable social relationships makes up a zone of integration. Conversely, according to Castel (2003), the absence of any participation in productive activities and relative social isolation gives way to the negative effects of exclusion or disaffiliation (Castel, 2003: XV–XVI). When there is a high level of unemployment and a low degree of public sympathy for the unemployed, this zone of vulnerability expands (Castel, 2003: XVI). The Nordic model still works as a buffer and thus this zone of vulnerability has not expanded in the same way, nor with the same velocity, as in other Western countries. The working class still seems to feel ownership over the Nordic model, a model which they played a central role in constructing. People who do not accept *social responsibility* represent a threat to the class compromise and to the model (or *system*, which is the term the participants used). Thus those who are lowly valued are individuals who increase inequalities, business leaders, wealthy tax evaders, and egoists. My interpretation of this kind of upward boundary-drawing, which would be the preferred terminology of Lamont (2000), is not (primarily) that the working class participants want to demarcate themselves from elitists, egoists or snobs *per se*. Rather, they do so because these sorts of persons are regarded as deviant and as such represent a threat to the maintenance of the collective Nordic model with its institutionalised norms. Equality is a necessary moral value to preserve norms such as trust and solidarity. In the same vein, the working class stress the ideal of the *hardworking person*. This ideal has a long history in Norway. The labour movement in Norway was not only a political project, but for many of its leaders it was also a means by which to educate the workers, to give them *dannelse* (*Bildung*), and to create a new human being. This meant stripping off the pre-industrial habitus of the *dayworker culture* and turning the workers into disciplined, enlightened, and independent individuals within a *culture of the skilled worker*

(Bjørnson, 1990; Olstad, 1991). This educational project emphasised the practicalities of organising, something which extended beyond the domain of trade unions (in its narrowest sense) and which led to the manifestation of solidarity both on the shop floor and in the community at large.

Today, this ideal of hardwork is just as important amongst workers. Work ethic and diligence are important not only at the individual level, but also for contributing collectively to the welfare state. Hence, people are lowly valued not only when they are able to work but do not, but also when they take advantage of social security benefits when they don't need to. No one should be a free-rider in this collective system. Again, the downward boundary-drawing is not (primarily) directed against those who wish not to work or free-riders *per se*, but rather against those types of people who represent a threat to the collective effort of sustaining the universal welfare system. The moral ideal types of the *socially responsible citizen*, and the *hardworking person* show that the working class has faith in the way in which Norwegian society is organised and differentiated, but moreover that it places trust in and collective support for the Nordic model. When everyone does their job, society will be just and integrated, which is to say that organic solidarity will prevail.

The ideal of the *socially responsible citizen* should also be understood as being connected to the local community and civil society. Indeed, another peculiarity of the Nordic countries is the relationship between the state and civil society. Bendixsen et al. (2018: 12) argue that scholars like Jeffrey Alexander and Robert Putnam assume that liberal democracy is in need of some sort of civil society that stands apart from the state. Bendixsen et al. (2018) draw on Etzioni (1995) and summarise this reasoning by pointing to the fact that the autonomy of civil society is often regarded as essential in cultivating a political culture that reproduces egalitarian social bonds, which in turn motivates citizens to be involved in caring about the common good. Moreover, this requires a clearly bounded state that refrains from absorbing and transforming such qualities. But this perspective fails to account for Scandinavian characteristics such as uniquely high levels of growth and voluntary activity, stimulated by state expansion (Bendixsen et al., 2018, p. 12). Still according to Bendixsen et al. (2018), in Scandinavian countries voluntary activity has never been seen as separate from the state, but as an integrated part of it. Since freedom is linked to individual autonomy, public policy is regarded as an essential means by which to realise both.

The idea that individual freedom depends on a limited state does not fit the Scandinavian context. The state is an ally, not an enemy, of autonomy. Passive or active affiliation with an exceptionally large number of organisation is a hallmark of an organised civil society in the Nordic countries (Selle & Wollebæk, 2009, p. 182). Tolerance and mutual respect grow in such organisational networks. Citizens are almost expected to, in one way or another, participate in voluntary activities, such as making waffles for handball tournaments, participating in local politics, acting as football coaches, and scout leaders or helping to organise fund raisers for the school band. The highly organised civil societies of the Nordic countries produces a high level of trust and reciprocity. The participants from the Norwegian working class who took part in this study, strongly emphasised the importance of voluntary contributions. People are *highly valued* when they participate in local voluntary activities such as culture, politics, and sports.

## Conclusion

Inequalities are on the rise in Norway, as in the rest of the Western world (Piketty, 2014). Nevertheless, the wage gap (between the working class and the middle class) is still comparatively modest and the welfare state is still relatively generous. It is hardly controversial to say that the Nordic model acts as a buffer against neoliberal capitalism and has made the zones of vulnerability far less substantial than they would otherwise have been. Former prime minister Jens Stoltenberg often used the term *spleiselaget* (the Dutch treat) to describe the welfare state. The concept is used to emphasise the fact that the welfare state depends on the populations willingness to work and pay taxes. This view is shared by the participants who consistently stated that the *system* (i.e. welfare state) depends on everyone's willingness to work. The moral ideal types of the *hardworking person* and the *socially responsible citizen* capture the work ethic and the egalitarian orientation which make up a certain cultural defence of a system characterised by mutual dependence and solidarity. The deviants are criminals, the wealthy, individuals who avoid paying their taxes and those who do not want to work. Our previous findings showed that moral values are also central in the culture of the highly educated middle class in Norway (Sakslind & Skarpenes, 2014). We argued that in a *loosely bounded* (Lamont, 1992, p. 115) and egalitarian culture, of which Norway is an example, moral values emerge as a powerful force. Furthermore, we argue that the anti-

hierarchical moral culture of the Norwegian middle class has the effect of discouraging boundary drawing towards others based on culture, education, and status. This interpretation of moral values is often criticised by Nordic colleagues, who argue that ‘moral boundaries are entangled with, and in certain respects reinforce, cultural and socioeconomic boundaries’ (Jarness, 2017, pp. 367–368) or that ‘moral categorizations seem to legitimise economic and cultural inequalities by establishing an alternative hierarchy on which lower socioeconomic groups can base their worth’ (Harrits & Pedersen, 2019, p. 874). But the findings from these studies of the middle class and the working class suggest that moral values are to a large extent shared values, embedded in the culture of both classes. The middle classes also distance themselves from criminals, the rich, people who do not pay their taxes, and those who refrain from working when capable (Sakslind & Skarpenes, 2014, p. 321). Thus morality is not an alternative hierarchy for the working class, neither is it a substitute for culture or money. Rather, it is a configuration of values that is, for the most part, shared with the middle class. The *socially responsible citizen* is the hero to both classes in Norwegian society. Moreover, my interpretation is that both classes are, through their moral orientation, common defenders of the welfare state and the Nordic model. Our findings support Sayer’s (2005b, p. 951) argument that moral judgments are likely to be less sensitive to the social position of the valuer and the valued, than is the case for aesthetic judgments. These findings indicate that both classes have internalised values such as equality, solidarity, altruism, and work ethic. What’s more, this anti-hierarchical and cross-class configuration of values still has an impact on the legitimacy of how Norwegian society is organised.

From a historical standpoint, it should be no surprise that the values held by the two classes intertwine. The emergence of the middle class in Norway occurred in a non-feudal society which was numerically dominated by agrarian peasants, within a democratic constitution which was governed by a small stratum of civil servants (1814–1884).<sup>9</sup> Norway had a weak bourgeoisie (few large capitalists) but a vital economy of small enterprises that emerged during the nineteenth century, giving Norwegian modernisation an economic and sociocultural character shaped by the *petit bourgeoisie*, as is suggested by the often employed label *democratic capitalism* (Sejersted, 1993). As for the lower strata, in the interwar years they were strengthened through both the growth of trade unions and political organising, which brought the social democratic Labour Party into power in 1935 as part of an alliance with

representatives from farming communities. Thus the lower classes were present at the birth of the Norwegian middle class, albeit as a negative point of identification. But neither an aristocracy nor anything akin to the German *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* was present in Norway in the nineteenth century. The more formal conclusion is that the class matrix of Norwegian modernisation in the nineteenth century had a peculiar asymmetry compared with that of the continental and British settings (Sakslind & Skarpenes, 2014, p. 326). It is hardly controversial to argue that the absence of higher classes has contributed to the construction of an egalitarian Norwegian culture. In this social formation, moral repertoires are crucially important not only for the educated Norwegian middle class but also for the working class, as this paper has sought to demonstrate.

## Notes

1. The presentation of data and methodology draws on former publications in the project; see Skarpenes, 2018; Skarpenes, 2021. Rune Sakslind, Roger Hestholm and I are collaborating on this project, and all interviews have been conducted by us.
2. Downloaded 25 November 2016 from <https://www.ssb.no/264147/sysselsatte-15-74-ar-etter-kjonn-og-yrke.arsgjennomsnitt.present>.
3. The sample consists of 56 persons. Of course, the sample is too small to allow drawing conclusions (statistical generalization) based on the entire Norwegian working class. We propose contextualist generalizations based on specific configurations of values and these generalizations are developed into ideal types.
4. It is a fact that the Norwegian right-wing party FrP (the Progress Party) has a solid voter base within the working class. In another article from this project I discuss this phenomenon and show that the ethnic Norwegian working class distances itself from both immigrants and slackers; however, these boundaries appear to be weaker than in many other western countries. Workers in Norway draw weaker boundaries toward vulnerable groups (immigrants and unemployed), but they draw strong boundaries toward rich groups. It appears that the working class in Norway continues a struggle for recognition of its societal role and political identification, and this 'struggle' is still fought against economic elites (Skarpenes, 2021).
5. While I assume that the majority are truthful, I can of course not guarantee that this is always the case. These methodological problems (control effect) are present in all qualitative interviews. Similar to other forms of social interaction, there may not only be elements of 'impression management' in the interview situations that have produced our data, but we must also anticipate that this is the case with Lamont's data regarding the USA and France (Lamont, 1992, 2000). Our findings appear in this case to be distinct, comparative findings about Norwegian culture with a methodological status on the line

when regarding what Lamont has discovered in other countries (see Sakslind, Skarpenes, & Hestholm, 2018). The fact that most are truthful and draw on the values the culture makes available does not necessarily mean that in certain instances, participants say something to the researchers yet say something else/do something else in another context. The conventional view in textbook literature in sociology, is that participants often say what they think the researcher wants to hear. Implicit in this view is a hierarchy in which the researcher is located above the informant, resulting in the latter trying to provide what he/she believes the researcher wants to hear. It cannot be ruled out that this occasionally happens during interview settings; it is even likely (including in this study). However, using this kind of potential discrepancy as a foundation for analysis, in which interpretations are based on a logic of disclosure marked by hermeneutics of suspicion, deprives participants of their independent normative judgment and in my opinion this would appear to be epistemologically speculative.

6. We hope to return to the discussion of such differences in other publications.
7. The majority of the working class participants mentioned people who represented moral values. However, some also looked up to the Royal family, Norwegian adventurers (such as Thor Heyerdal), sports stars and people representing a cultural domain. Some looked down at some broadcasting celebrities, cultural celebrities and sports stars.
8. Q: Question. A: Answer.
9. This last argument is taken from our own synopsis (Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2019, pp. 4–5).

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## Appendix

Because the family is important to the working class, the values rooted in this institution are probably central. We gave the participants a sheet of paper with twenty different values and asked them to find the five most important ones they wanted to convey to their children. They then ranked these five values on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest).

Values	Total
Polite	64
Responsible	91
Fair/equality oriented	108
Independent	18
Will to work	26
Compassion	51
Common decency	61
Tolerant	36
Competitive	4
Goal-oriented	22
Socially responsible	6
Religious	4
Creative	13
Refined ( <i>Bildung</i> )	5
Solidarity	28
Honest	144
Conscientious	38
Down-to-earth	14
Performance-oriented	0
Obedient	10

The table shows that values such as responsibility, social responsibility and fair/equality oriented scored high, supporting the moral ideal type, labelled *socially responsible citizen*. The common good associated with the *Good Samaritan* also scored high (honesty and compassion). However, not all the participants answered, and not all the 20 values were presented at the start of the project. The findings are therefore not entirely reliable.