

Academics as the ruling elite in 19th century Norway

Myhre, Jan Eivind

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Myhre, J. E. (2008). Academics as the ruling elite in 19th century Norway. *Historical Social Research*, 33(2), 21-41.
<https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.33.2008.2.21-41>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Academics as the Ruling Elite in 19th Century Norway

*Jan Eivind Myhre**

Abstract: With no aristocracy and its economic bourgeoisie (*Wirtschaftsbürgertum*) in ruins after the Napoleonic wars, the higher civil servants (*Beamten*, corresponding to a *Bildungsbürgertum*) effectively served as the ruling class in the semi-independent democratic state of Norway, created in 1814. Its base was the university in Oslo, founded in 1811. This class dominated politics and much of civil society for decades. Although democratic (wide suffrage) and meritocratic in name, the ruling class would to a large degree intermarry in its own circles and reproduce itself. Only towards the end of the 19th century did the higher civil servants encounter opposition. This came partly from outside as other social groups – peasants, artisans, merchants, workers – would challenge them. But the ruling class was also changed from within, as social recruitment to the university gradually became wider, and as university graduates would enter other occupations than higher civil service. A long-term result has been a noticeable decline in the value of higher education.

All Norwegian undergraduates in history will have heard the following statement by the historian Sverre Steen: “Prior to 1814, the higher civil servants (*embetsmenn*, *Beamten*) ruled in the name of the king. After 1814, they ruled in the name of the Parliament (*Stortinget*).” “1814” refers to the most famous of all Norwegian dates, including a national rebellion, the writing of a democratic constitution and the establishment of a national assembly. Of all the concepts employed to synthesise Norwegian 19th-century history, the concept of the Civil Servant State (Norwegian: *Embetsmannsstaten*, German: *Der Beamtenstaat*) has proved the most enduring.¹ Coined by Jens Arup Seip, the concept implies that the civil servants to a large degree had common interests and a common outlook, and that as a group, or rather estate (*stand*, *Stand*) it was hegemonic in the political, social and cultural spheres or realms. “We must rid ourselves of the unhistorical and intellectualist fallacy”, Perkin writes of England before 1870, “that universities [...] were as important to the ruling classes as they have since become to intellectuals.”² This could not be less true when said about Norway.

* Address all communications to: Jan Eivind Myhre, Department of Archeology, Conservation and Historical Studies, University of Oslo, Postboks 1008 Blindern, 0315 Oslo, Norway; e-mail: j.e.myhre@iakh.uio.no.

¹ The concept was coined by Seip 1963. See also Seip 1974 and 1981.

² Perkin 1993: 212.

Who were these higher civil servants? These *Beamten* were, with the exception of military officers, educated at the university, prior to 1815 in Copenhagen, after that date in the Norwegian capital Christiania (from 1925 to be called Oslo).³ They were mainly graduates in law, theology and medicine; later in the century graduates in philology and science became numerous. A salient point is that in the heyday of the civil servants state, nearly all university graduates became higher civil servants, and nearly all higher civil servants were educated at the university. The exception was officers, who were trained at the military academy, *krigsskolen*. Quite a few of them, however, also went through the academy's higher level (*den militære høyskole*), which was quite academic in character (some university professors taught there part-time). This meant that for many decades, higher civil servant and "academic" were almost synonymous concepts.⁴

The concept of the civil servant state, implying not only a general hegemony or dominance, but the actual rule of the civil servants, is really a historical theory. As such it has encountered opposition. Nobody has questioned, however, that the higher civil servants, the ones that were formally appointed by the king and could not be disposed of except by legal trial, were actually in charge of the government and dominated the parliament between 1814 and 1884. The opposition against the concept of the (higher) civil servant state as a designation of Norway in the 19th century runs along two lines. The first, linked to the name Francis Sejersted,⁵ sees the bourgeoisie as a whole, as one social formation making up the country's elite, consisting of both the university educated civil servants, usually referred to in German as the *Bildungsbürgertum*, and the business elite, usually named the *Wirtschaftsbürgertum*. In this version the ultimate power rests with the latter, since we are talking about a capitalist society, about to move from merchant to industrial capitalism. In Sejersted's theory, the higher civil servants govern on behalf of the business class, or rather on behalf of the bourgeoisie as such, since we are not talking of marionettes of a dogmatic Marxist kind.

The other line of opposition, associated with the historian Edvard Bull the younger, does not question the power of the civil servants in the political area, but underlines that politics was certainly not the only part of society where power was exerted.⁶ The Civil Servant State did not interfere much with the uneven power relations between employers and employees, between the buyers

³ The Royal Frederik's University was founded in 1811. The teaching began in 1813 and the first graduations took place in 1815. See Collett 1999.

⁴ In the 19th century, "academic" (*akademiker*) was actually the name for a person who finished high school (*gymnasium, lærd skole*), but nearly all of them went on to study at the university. The final examination at high school, the *examen artium*, had to be taken at the university as its "First examination", *førsteeksamen*.

⁵ Sejersted 1984, 1978.

⁶ Bull 1975.

and sellers of labour, between farmers and crofters and so forth. Industrial relations made up a system of its own, the argument goes, into which the avowedly liberalist civil servant state hardly interfered. If one concept should sum up the whole Norwegian society in the 19th century, the (higher) civil servant state is not the appropriate one. Such a concept, Bull argues, ought rather to contain concepts like capitalism and property.

Both objections have something to be said in their favour; although the first underestimates the independent status of the civil servants⁷, and the second underestimates the degree to which this educated elite influenced, even shaped, important elements of everyday life in 19th-century Norway. If the civil servant state was so retracted, unwilling or even unable to interfere in economic, social or cultural relations, how is that it could be so hegemonic?

The contours of Norwegian society in the 19th-century⁸

What kinds of societal circumstances paved the way for the higher civil servants to act as an elite in 19th-century Norwegian society? For several centuries in the early modern period Norway was a junior partner, for some periods even regarded as a part or province, of the Danish monarchy. From 1660 this was an absolute monarchy, although most of its 18th-century rulers were too drunk, too lazy, too simple or too insane to be equal to their job. They relied instead to an increasing degree on the burghers, in particular on a rising bureaucracy of civil servants, many of them educated at the university of Copenhagen or German universities. There were, to be true, tensions with the aristocracy, who largely dominated the cabinet.

So far, this story does not sound very unfamiliar to many nationalities in Europe. The Napoleonic wars, however, would change the course of Norwegian history. The treaty of Kiel in 14 January 1814 transferred Norway from Denmark to Sweden, from the loser to the winner of the military campaigns in northern Europe. The Norwegians rebelled, drew up a constitution and declared their independence. In a short campaign during the summer, Swedish troops routed the Norwegians. The final outcome, however, turned out to be quite advantageous to the Norwegians. A dual monarchy was set up, with a high degree of equality between the partners. Norway kept most of its liberal constitution. This arrangement lasted until 1905, when complete independence was achieved in a bloodless process.

Norway, then, entered the post-Napoleonic era with a constitution and semi-independence. Moreover, it had virtually no nobility, since the old native Nor-

⁷ To some extent controlling the framework of the economy and having separate interests stemming from education and emphasising their role as independent from interests. See below.

⁸ The best short introduction to Norwegian history in English is Danielsen et al. 1995.

wegian one had all but died out, and the Danish nobility had shown little interest in the Norwegian part of the monarchy. The young Norwegian parliament took the full consequence of the liberal constitution and ruled out nobility altogether in 1821. From 1814, the country had a one-chamber parliament and its own government. Only foreign policy was dealt with from Stockholm. In the first half of the century Norway remained an overwhelmingly agrarian country with a considerable foreign trade in timber, fish and metal. Industrialisation began in the 1840s and grew into an important part of the economy in the course of the 1860s and 1870s. Shipping was another important industry. In the course of the 19th century, the population grew from 0.9 million to 2.2 million people; the urban share of it increased from 11 to 35%.⁹

The social structure of this society is of special interest to us here. The numerical backbone of Norwegian society was the independent self-owning farmer, or rather peasant, since we seldom may speak of business enterprise in conjunction with Norwegian farming in the period. The farms were usually family units, often with a servant or two, male servants working as farmhands. The alodial and primogeniture system guaranteed stability in the countryside. However, with a considerable population growth, younger sons to an increasing degree had to settle down as crofters (cottars), renting a small piece of land and usually having work duty on the farm. On the coast farming was often combined with fishing, many places also with lumbering. In some areas mining played a considerable role.

The arch typical urban occupation was that of the merchant, since the towns were mainly trading hubs. The merchants would trade with overseas areas or with the hinterland of the towns, the latter becoming more important with time. The shopkeepers were less numerous in Norway than in most other European countries. The other urban occupation was that of the artisan. Up until nearly mid-nineteenth century commerce and handicraft were privileged urban occupations. Still a few merchants were allowed to settle in the countryside, and many a peasant was craftsmen on the side. A growing class of functionaries became visible in the second half of the century.¹⁰ In the course of the 19th century a truly urban working class, initially recruited from landless peasants, replaced the pre-industrial working people who often migrated back and forth between town and country.

On the top of society, as a very thin layer spread out over the whole country, were the higher civil servants. They were, as the introduction says, inherited from the era of unification with Denmark. Their special position in the nascent democracy was reflected in the franchise rules laid down in the constitution. The major principle behind the rules was that the voters had to be mature (25

⁹ Economic development: Bergh et al 1981; Hodne 1975 and 1994; Sejersted 1992. Urbanization: Myhre 1991, Myhre 2006.

¹⁰ Myhre 2004a.

years' limit), free and independent individuals. The means to secure this was thought to be property ownership, which gave its holders a stake in society and a claim to economic and social independence. Therefore, all freeholder peasants were given the vote, as well as house owners in the towns. As independent propertied men, persons with citizenship as merchants, artisans or sea captains (burgher estates), were given the vote. Finally, the vote was rendered all higher civil servants, active or retired. They were often relatively wealthy, but did not often own landed property, since they moved around as part of their careers. They were independent in another sense: Their work often demanded independent decisions, as a later census argued when placing them in the same category as employers.¹¹

Property was not the reason why they were given the right to vote (by the way, they may be said to have given the vote to themselves, since they effectively controlled the constituent assembly at Eidsvoll in the spring of 1814). The higher civil servants considered themselves self-evident voters for at least two reasons: First, they possessed superior education and also the quality which in English somewhat imprecisely is called breeding, formation or even culture.¹² Germans and Norwegians have more precise words for it: *Bildung* and *dannelse*. Second, they thought themselves to be placed above conflicts of interest in society, a position thought to be a consequence of both education and breeding. Therefore, they were fit not only to vote, but also to rule. In what follows, I will show *how* these higher civil servants ruled the country during most of the 19th century. Thereafter I will try to explain *why* they were allowed to dominate politics and culture. Finally, I will draw an outline of the decline of this group – I will not call it “the decline of the Norwegian mandarins” – and take a brief look into the 20th century.

The hegemony of the higher civil servants

Although they only numbered between two and three thousand in a working population of roughly 400,000 to 800,000, that is less than one per thousand, the civil servants – “the thousand academic families”¹³ – came to dominate many areas of Norwegian society. They predominated particularly in parliamentary politics and high culture, but also to some extent in local politics, the civil society of voluntary organisations and the public sphere.

In many senses of the word, they obviously constituted an elite in Norwegian society. *Die Beamten* was not the only elite in Norway in the 19th century, but the most enduring, consistent and visible elite. What does *elite* mean? In its

¹¹ Myhre 2004b.

¹² Modern pedagogy speaks about liberal education or general education.

¹³ Seip 1963: 13.

simplest straightforward meaning the elite is a group of people situated at the top of society. It is not a class, as a matter of fact the concept of the elite arose in opposition the concept of class.¹⁴ Marx did not need an elite concept. An elite is often conceived of as a status elite, with the status stemming from different sources, political, economic, social or cultural. An elite usually possesses (much) capital of various kinds in the sense of Bourdieu. The higher civil servants of Norway certainly did that. In the well known sense borrowed from the classical texts of Pareto and Mosca, the elites are above everything else ruling elites.¹⁵ This is certainly the case with our civil servants. Their power, however, did not rest upon physical coercion, although on a few occasions the police and the military were used to restore order. Their power rested mainly on social and cultural capital which was transferred into political strength.

The contemporary term for the category of higher civil servants was neither elite nor class, but *estate*, the German and Norwegian terms being *Stand*. The term should not be associated too strongly with usages like “the third estate”; with the contemporaries “estate” suggested “rank” or “occupation”. It certainly carries the connotation of a relatively close-knit group. The civil servants had a highly developed group consciousness and a strong family and kin solidarity.

The higher civil servants certainly *ruled*. Although they possessed absolute majority in only two out of 25 parliaments between 1815 and 1885, they usually had between 1/3 and 1/2 of the representatives, and never less than 23 %.¹⁶ Whether you can dominate a democratic assembly with only 1/4 of its members, I will discuss in a moment. What is more important is that the civil servants totally dominated the government, which until the introduction of parliamentarian government in 1884 was appointed by the king. Since the king was dependent for this on Norwegian advisors, it became to some degree a self-recruiting body, especially in the last decades before 1884.

The cabinet contained hardly any member without a university degree (or a degree from the military academy) until very late in the 19th century. Both central and local bureaucracies were filled with university educated civil servants, in particular jurists. One should of course be careful not to fall into the trap of circular reasoning. All major bureaucratic jobs are by definition filled with civil servants in the sense employed here, appointed by the king and with an academic education. Only local public employees, like sheriffs (bailiffs) or elementary school teachers or low level clerks were not university educated and not classified as *Beamten*. In local politics university educated civil servants did not dominate the way they did in national politics, mainly because they were too few in numbers.

¹⁴ Bottomore 1977, according to Myhre 1997: 143.

¹⁵ Bottomore 1977: 14, 11, according to Myhre 1997: 143-144, 159-160.

¹⁶ There were parliamentary elections every three years. Kaartvedt 1964: 148 and Danielsen 1964: 83, both according to Myhre 2007, chapter 4.

The jurists dominated the government, in the first half of the century totally. Other university educated expertise was in a small minority in the governing bureaucracy. Only later in the century did they manage to challenge the dominance of the men of law. The theologians were more evenly distributed throughout the country and were quite influential locally. Medical doctors, philologists and science graduates worked in medical service and high schools, respectively, and seldom in administrative positions.

With the constitution allowing freedom of expression, a civil society took shape in Norway with a breakthrough in the 1830s.¹⁷ The contemporaries spoke with awe about the colossal “spirit of association” (*Associationsaanden*).¹⁸ These associations were of many kinds. There were purely social ones (clubs). There were philanthropic associations (mission, temperance, poor relief). Some associations organised common cultural or spare-time interests (sports, music, reading). Others circled around economic matters in the interest of society at large or just the members themselves. Trade unions in the modern sense did not arise until the 1870s. Overt political parties appeared as late as the 1880s, although more or less informal political groups naturally existed. The late appearance of some types of organisations has quite a lot to do with the nature of the civil servant regime.

At an early stage, a majority of the associations were founded and headed by higher civil servants or other academics, who may be said to dominate, even perhaps “control” this part of civil society. Some of the organisations were elite ones from top to bottom, while other had a noticeable element of lower middle class or working people. The latter is true e.g. with the philanthropic workers’ societies. Many missionary associations and temperance organisations were hardly connected to the social elite. The growing middle class could be associated with the organisations to such a degree that historians have talked about a middle-class movement, particularly in the second half of the century.¹⁹ But these popular organisations often had elite counterparts in the shape of organisations lead by higher civil servants. They were in some instances even initiated from government circles. Although private in their form, these elite associations had an air of semi-officialdom about them.

The public sphere (*Die Öffentlichkeit*) is a concept coined to describe a culture of public deliberation arising through literature and the press in the rising bourgeois societies in the 18th and 19th centuries.²⁰ From a modest start in the

¹⁷ The Constitution did not mention the freedom to form associations, probably because they were not used to thinking in such terms. Religious freedom lagged somewhat behind. Although people of other denominations than national Lutheran were allowed to stay in the country, they could not establish formal congregation until the 1840s. Jews were not permitted to the realm until 1851.

¹⁸ Try 2000; Svåsand 1980; Myhre 2007, chapter 4.

¹⁹ Especially Steen 1948, see also Myhre 2004a.

²⁰ Habermas 1962; Calhoun 1992.

late decades of the relatively mild and relaxed absolute monarchy through the first years of Norwegian independence, an open public sphere flourished from the 1830s on.²¹ Civil servants and other academics founded nearly all the contemporary newspapers and journals in the first decades.²² Many of the founders were oppositional academics, who were sometimes joined by men from lower echelons of society, eager to point out how civil servants abused their position in society. From the 1860s on, the dominance of civil servants and other academics became noticeable, in particular as a concerted opposition arose. Interestingly the literary field was also dominated by academics in the first couple of generations after 1814. Although quite a few others in Norwegian society could write, and did write, the superior knowledge and training in writing possessed by academic people made them *the* literary class. The knowledge part is important here because fiction and non-fiction literature had not yet clearly parted. That happened only slowly, with a break in the 1870s; after this point in time the academic and literary field became distinct from each other. It is no coincidence that the 1870s mark the beginning of the decline of the civil servants as the hegemonic class.

No one questions the prominent role of economic conditions when discussing power in a given society. The economic conditions of the higher civil servants varied a great deal, but in a prominently poor society, they were certainly well-to-do, in some cases even rich. They also had the advantage of a fairly secure income, although some of them had to rely on administrative fees and income from the farms some used as official residences. Quite a few businessmen – merchants, bankers, large artisans, industrialists – were definitely richer, although not as much as one would suspect from the experiences of other times and other countries.

The higher civil servants were sufficiently well-to-do to lead the life one would expect from a social elite. What is interesting is that they were normally genuinely interested in economic pursuits. Some of them participated in businesses, as partners, investors or experts, albeit not nearly as much as had been the case in the 18th and 17th centuries, when their role as bureaucrats had not yet been fully professionalized. Their major involvement with the economy in the 19th century was of another kind. As the effective political rulers in the early and middle decades of the century, they saw it as their task to prepare the ground for economic modernization. As economic liberalists, they did away with old economic privileges to encourage economic enterprise. As avid economic modernizers, they recognized the need for a good infrastructure. How-

²¹ Periods with considerable freedom of expression (complete freedom 1770-71, relative freedom 1784-99) were interspersed with periods with more censorship. Since Norway during the Napoleonic wars, particularly after 1807, was effectively cut off from relations with Denmark, censorship became more relaxed.

²² Myhre 2007, chapter 4.

ever, in a small country like Norway, the civil servants maintained that only the government had economic power to build a proper infrastructure; roads, railways, coastal steamers, telegraph, a stable credit system, a school system and even a network of towns. Economic liberalism was therefore based on a (relatively) strong state. Their brand of liberalism; particularly visible in the economy, but also evident in politics, was initially a strength, but turned later into a weakness.

The basis of the elite

Having established the pervasiveness of the higher civil servants in nearly all corners of society that mattered to a social elite, let us take a closer look at their basis for power, the reasons that they could rule.

First we need to place the estate of higher civil servants in its social structural context. I would like to advance the *vacuum hypothesis*: One of the reasons that *Die Beamten* could rule, was because there were no competitors. As earlier mentioned, there was hardly any nobility, and under no circumstances any after its abolishment in 1821. Members of formerly noble families who were born before 1821 were allowed to use their titles of count and baron, but in Norwegian society such usage with time became rather pretentious, even ridiculous.

Another part of the vacuum, if I may express myself a bit paradoxically, was the early absence of a strong group of burghers, an economic bourgeoisie or *Wirtschaftsbürgertum*. The explanation for this is the Napoleonic wars and the political and economic upheaval they caused. The wars caused not only the transference of Norway from Denmark to Sweden, the Norwegian rebellion and the liberal constitution, but also an economic crisis lingering until the 1830s which led to the downfall of most of the rich bourgeois so-called “lumber patricians” (*trelastpatrisiatet*) or timber barons. The blockade by the British and the loss of markets led to an avalanche of bankruptcies, particularly in the political centre of gravity in the south east. This meant that the men of business lost much of their former influence. A prominent representative uttered around 1830 that there was no middle class any more.²³ He was explicitly referring to his fellow merchants and implicitly to the higher civil servants as an upper class.

Although there were sometimes conflicts of interests between the two sides of the bourgeoisie – the businessmen did not initially appreciate losing privileges – they were after all both a *Bürgertum*. When the liberal modernisation project of the government was completed, there was less to argue about. In a sense Sejersted has a good point in arguing that the civil servants ruled on

²³ “Middelstanden existerer ei mere”, Haagen Mathiesen, according to Sejersted 1978: 274.

behalf of the interest of the men of business. After all, private property was a backbone in the political thinking of the civil servants. It is, however, difficult to see what kind of sanctions the latter could conjure up if the civil servants acted against their interests.

The most well-to-do businessmen and the higher civil servants would also socialize quite a lot, particularly as the former gained economic strength from the 1840s onwards. The resulting social elite bore a common name, *de kondisjonerte*, sometimes translated as the cultured people, but perhaps best thought of as the chosen few or upper ten thousand. As the tables below show, quite a few university graduates were sons (after 1882 also daughters) of businessmen, particularly in law and medicine. The distinctiveness of *de kondisjonerte* as one social elite is underlined by the relatively frequency of intermarriage. The higher civil servants certainly wanted their sons and daughters to marry their own kind, but did not discriminate much against the business elite, as different from other social groups. The history of a social club in Oslo (then called Christiania) illustrates this.²⁴ Founded in 1841, the club was named *Balselskabet Foreningen*. The first word says it was a “ball society”, a club arranging balls. The second is trickier. *Forening* might mean a club or association. But since the first word already denotes the type of association this is, we must concentrate on the second meaning of the word, which is union or alliance. The purpose of the club was union or alliance meaning marriage. This is supported by the fact that a committee of older women (mothers) controlled the membership. Needless to say, only people of the upper ten thousand were admitted, thereby keeping the elite rather closed. Higher civil servants dominated totally in the first few decades, but in line with their decline late in the century, their leadership in this particular club waned.

The recruitment to academic studies supports the relatively closed character of the elite. Looking at the university graduates between 1815 and 1869, we find a good deal of self-recruitment (see Table 3 at the bottom of the article).²⁵ All the five major fields of study; law, theology, medicine, philology and science; showed a share of self-recruiting of about 50 %. By this I mean that roughly half the graduates’ fathers had academic occupations (including officers). This share even increased during these decades, and in the 1850s and 60s three out of five graduates in medicine and science had academic fathers. Approximately one quarter of the fathers during the whole period were businessmen, leaving slightly less than one quarter to other groups, like functionaries, artisans, farmers and workers, the last group being almost negligible until late in the 20th century.

The increased exclusivity in the middle decades of the century was due to the termination of a special arrangement among law and medicine students.

²⁴ Myhre 1997.

²⁵ Aubert et al 1960; Aubert 1964; Aubert et al 1961-62.

Because the young state feared that there would be too few university candidates in law and medicine to fill its needs, young men without *examen artium*, graduation from high schools without Latin were also admitted to study. They had to pass an entrance test, a preliminary examination (*preliminæreksamen*), and went through their university studies without reading Latin. These students became civil servants as medical doctors and lawyers without reaching the highest positions in their professions. As a matter of fact, the Latin-less servants comprised a majority among law and medicine candidates between 1815 and 1845, when the arrangement ended. Their fellow students, however, did not look upon the *præler*, as they were derogatorily called, as true students, and denied them access to the students' union. The *præler* quite often came from more modest social backgrounds than the *latinere*. So, when the university shut the door on students without Latin, it meant, for some years at least, a socially more exclusive student body.

In 1869, after a long fight involving the parliament, Latin was ruled no longer compulsory for the *examen artium* and consequently for entering the university. Although it was replaced by science and other subjects, quite a few men saw this as a blow to the whole academic community and therefore to the whole *embetsstand*, the civil servant class.²⁶ Latin was considered the glue keeping it together and the mark of excellence separating it from the less educated part of society. The decision in 1869 may therefore be seen as the first symbolic premonition of the decline of the civil servants.

There are various ways to interpret the figures in Table 3. One way is to emphasise that the academic elites were not formally closed, and that men from the lower echelons of society steadily made it to or near the top. But in questions of recruitment, Norway does not depart much from other countries in Western Europe. Countries to the east and south were generally had lower enrolment and a socially more exclusive student body, whereas Scotland had an exceptionally high enrolment and a more democratic recruitment.²⁷ One might expect Norway, being the politically most democratic and economically most equal of European countries, to show similar traits in its university system. It did not; as a matter of fact Norwegian recruitment patterns in the second half of the 19th century resembled those of Germany, also when we look at opportunity ratios, which are a better way of measuring social differences in recruitment, since they render the chances of youngsters of different backgrounds to study at the university (table 1). The figures in the last column are fairly similar to the ones in Prussia in 1911.²⁸

²⁶ Seen from posterity, the candidates without Latin were no less academic than other candidates, having just replaced Latin with science.

²⁷ Anderson 2004: chapter 8; Ringer 2000: chapter 5.

²⁸ Anderson 2004: 130-132.

What is striking when combining table 1 and table 3 is the colossal propensity of the university educated civil servant *Stand* to recruit itself during the 19th century. Informally, it stood in the way of other social groups since it – to a large degree – controlled both the university and the parliament. The University of Oslo, being the country’s only university, was in a sense the core of the civil servants state, since it educated its members. The professors, then, may be regarded as the key profession of the whole state.²⁹ The university professors were a socially quite exclusive group, and very few men from below the ranks of civil servants and wealthy businessmen could aspire to a chair. The ranks of university professors were more closed than the academic professions in general. As a matter of fact more than half of the 160 professors at the University of Oslo in the 19th century were related (or in-laws) to other professors.³⁰ There was an intellectual aristocracy in Norway.

Table 1: Proportion (%) of sons of fathers in various occupations entering University of Oslo during three periods (referring to high school graduation)

<i>Fathers' occupation</i>	1820-1839	1860-1879	1900-1919
Minister (priest)	53.7	63.9	35.7
Medical doctor	23.0	37.0	20.2
Lawyer	55.6	46.0	19.1
High school or university teacher	..	31.7	18.9
Military officer	30.2	12.9	7.1
Merchants, owners, managers	5.8	4.4	2.6
Functionaries	..	2.9	1.1
Farmers	0.6	1.7	3.5
School teachers (elementary)	2.6	3.5	6.8
Artisans	11.5	12.4	3.2
Workers	0.3	0.2	0.4

Source: Aubert et al. 1961-62: tables 60-70.

Even so, the intellectual climate of liberalism, also outside the ranks of the civil servants, was that of an elite with meritocratic ideals and relatively little nepotism. At least this is what the elite itself managed to persuade others to believe. And they were of course trained in persuasion. Their academic training, including Latin, gave them an authority which no one else could match. The fact that Norway from quite early was a fairly literate society, only reinforced this.³¹ In a less literate society, it is conceivable that an elite basing its

²⁹ In the formal rank order of civil servants, however, ordinary university professors would rank below cabinet members, supreme court judges and military generals.

³⁰ Myhre 2005; building on the Norwegian dictionary of biography, the database of Forum for universitetshistorie, University of Oslo.

³¹ Compulsory schooling was introduced in 1739, but only from 1860 did all Norwegian children learn to read, write and calculate.

influence on knowledge would have less power. The civil servants thought of themselves as the teachers of the whole population, a group standing above others not only because of their knowledge, but also because they stood above interests, meaning in particular economic interests. To some degree, this understanding was shared with other groups. The civil servants had a reputation for being rather incorruptible. The saying went that they had two inkpots on their desks, one for private and one for professional use.

Their authority manifested itself in a number of ways. An election law in effect between 1828 and 1842 forbade political organisation in connection with the elections. The rationale was that the organizing of interests was a way of coercing people, of infringing upon individual freedom. When formal political parties were about to be established around 1880, there was still much resistance from civil servants because they thought parties would take political discussion away from the public and into closed quarters.³² This way of thinking was also visible in the elite's thinking about organizations in general. Although freedom of expression, laid down in the constitution, prevented from oppressing the new associations, the elites tended to frown upon many of them, particularly early in the century. As we have seen, the higher civil servants founded their own organisations as a way of persuading the population.

The authority of the higher civil servants was acutely felt by others at every step of the political process. Considering that they made up only between two and three per cent of the one qualified to vote, this was certainly necessary to be able to exert power. First of all, all men qualified to vote, between 40 and 30 % of all men above 25 years of age, had to take an oath to the constitution to be eligible to vote.³³ Slightly more than half of the qualified actually did this. Second, you had to turn up on the day of election, an effort made by only between a third and a quarter of the qualified voters. Third, the ballot was not a secret one. Others could see whom you voted for. Finally, the election was indirect, really an election of an electoral college. This body then elected representatives to the parliament. At the two first stages the higher civil servants, trained for public service, had a higher participation. Still, the peasants cast far more votes, sometimes voting for their own candidates. Due to personal authority, the higher civil servants persuaded others to vote for them. Opponents, like artisans or peasants, a historian writes, would lose their nerve in the last minute.³⁴

Nevertheless, higher civil servants possessed the majority in the parliament only twice during the 19th century. Their control of the parliament in spite of this may be explained by two factors. First, they allied themselves with other

³² Uttered by Torkel Halvorsen Aschehoug, see Johansen and Kjeldsen 2005.

³³ The law differentiated between being qualified (*kvalifisert*) to vote on the basis of occupation and being eligible or entitled (*berettiget*) after taking the oath to the Constitution.

³⁴ Seip 1974.

groups, with business people against the farmers, with conservative peasants against radical ones and oppositional townsmen (artisans, barristers). Second, they spoke with the authority, based on a long education, virtually *ex cathedra*. This was in some cases literally true. The most famous parliamentarian of his day, Anton Martin Schweigaard (representative 1842-1870), was a professor of law, economics and statistics. His basis in parliament was his chair at the university,³⁵ a true *catedratico*, as they say in Spain. “Professor-politician” was a standing expression; in the 1860s three out of four representatives from the capital were university professors.

But even when the higher civil servants did not manage to control the parliament, they were in charge of day-to-day governmental spending, law enforcement etc, the reason being that until 1869 the parliament met only every three years and that the session lasted only a few months. In other words, in-between parliamentary sessions the higher civil servants ruled the country. As mentioned earlier, they had a very strong job protection, and could only lose their job by a court decision. They were also protected by a law, inherited from the absolutist era (1776), stating that only natives could have high offices, that is, become civil servants. In Denmark, this was meant as a protection against Germans, in Norway in the 19th century it worked to fend off possible candidates from the union partner Sweden. The law, that way, made an exception for university and gymnasium teachers.

To conclude with: The basis of the elite position of the higher civil servants in Norwegian society was quite wide. They managed to place themselves in a position as authorities as well as guardians. Their strength was that, although they were a social elite, they certainly were *in* the society, and not isolated from it. They were no mandarins.

The ultimate proof of this is the role of the higher civil servants in the nation building process. In the 19th century, the nation building took place in three stages. The first was drawing up a constitution and defending it. Defending it meant keeping it unchanged from the attacks of the Swedish king, who wanted a closer union and a less democratic constitution. The strategy of the higher civil servants against the king was named “constitutional conservatism” and meant treating the constitution as unchangeable, even if it meant keeping non-liberal elements, like the clause that forbade Jews and Catholic monastic orders to enter the realm.³⁶

The next stage began around 1840 and has been given the label national romanticism. This too was led by the higher civil servants, and consisted of worshipping everything thought to be Norwegian, from medieval history to folk songs and the peasant as such. In fact, the civil servants went far in producing a

³⁵ Slagstad 2006: 50 .

³⁶ Full freedom of religion was established in 1842/1844, except for the Jews, who were not admitted until 1851.

national icon out of the freeholder.³⁷ In the third stage nation building was taken out of the hands of the civil servants, contributing to their downfall as a social elite.

The decline of civil servants

In the last third of the century new social groups challenged the higher civil servants' elite position in many fields, economically, politically, socially, culturally. In all these fields it became clear that the higher civil servants no longer represented the country and its people in the nation building process. The third stage of nationalism was led by other groups in society, and the civil servants came to represent what opponents thought of as *the old regime*, conservative, not open to democratic changes and defending the union with Sweden, a position becoming steadily more unpopular with the population at large.

Looking at table 3 again, it becomes clear that something happened around 1870. In the 1860s the number of gymnasium students rose considerably and was followed by a rise in university graduates in the 1870s, an enrolment pattern known to almost every other country in the west of Europe.³⁸ This increase was largely caused by a wider recruitment from middle and lower echelons of society, especially from the functionaries and farmers (Table 2).

Table 2: Graduates from the University of Oslo with fathers having occupations other than academics and businessmen. Per cent.

Study	1850-1869	1870-1889	1890-1909
Medicine	16	27	41
Philology	24	45	41
Science	19	49	59
Theology	23	48	45
Law	26	32	40

(Source: Table 3 below)

Among functionaries (rural) primary school teachers were particularly important, since they were the vanguards of the nationalist counter cultures, presenting locally and nationally an educated challenge to the civil servant culture on subjects like language, religion and alcohol. The counter cultures advocated a national language (opposite the Danish-like language spoken by most civil servants³⁹), lay religion (against the high church religion of the civil servants) and temperance. Recruiting sons of farmers and teachers meant that nationalistic values more and more found their way into the ranks of the civil servants

³⁷ Sørensen and Stråth 1997: 6.

³⁸ Anderson 2004: 125; Jarausch (ed.), 1983.

³⁹ The languages were mutually understandable.

themselves.⁴⁰ The farmers recruited particularly many priests, contributing to the breakaway of low church Lutheranism from the university, founding its own theological seminar in 1907.

The change in recruitment to university studies should not be exaggerated as a cause of the decline of the civil servant class (or *Stand*). Sons of farmers or artisans or clerks would often perfectly accommodate to the conservative climate among the civil servants. The decline can be attributed to a number of wider societal changes. The first concerns the economy. The growth of Norwegian economy from the 1830s on gave rise to a business class of merchants, bankers and industrialists, who from the second half of the century would challenge the civil servants as a leading social class, notwithstanding their mutual co-operation. Economic growth was at times accompanied by inflation, which hit public employees hardest. During the boom in the late 1860s and early 1870 the civil servants had the smallest income rise of all social groups.

The next setback happened in 1884 and was political. The liberal nationalist party won majority in the national assembly and a parliamentary system was introduced whereby the government sprang out of a majority in the parliament. The liberal party (*Venstre*, "Left") formed a cabinet in opposition to the party favoured by the civil servants (*Høyre*, "Right"). The franchise was widened, ending with the vote given to all men in 1898. For women the vote was extended gradually between 1901 and 1913.

The decline in economic status and loss of political power in combination with the rise of the nationalist movements, also meant a gradual waning of the social and cultural influence of the civil servants. Symbolically, their mouthpiece among newspapers, *Morgenbladet*, in 1913 became a spokesman for the economic bourgeoisie. In the census of 1920, the Statistical Bureau dropped the term civil servant (*embetsmann*) as an independent category. In 1919, a well-known book by Kristian Elster on the decline of civil servants was published, called "From the kin of shadows" (*Af skyggernes slekt*). With the advent of the 20th century, power emanated more and more from other sources like economic factors and organisational strength (the labour movement and the counter cultures). In the 1880s, the university had been unfavourably associated with the old regime of conservative civil servants and for many years fought a battle with the liberal government over chairs and budgets. With the rise of a more research-oriented university from the end of the 19th century, the university more or less left politics and was granted freedom as well as relatively ample budgets from the parliament. The age of the professor-politician became a thing of the past.

The share of members of parliament with an academic occupation dropped from 40% in the period 1814-83 to 23% in the generation between 1884 and

⁴⁰ The first generation from 1882 of female students were mainly recruited from the academic professions.

1913. For the fathers of the representatives themselves, the percentage dropped from 28 to 10%. For members of the cabinet, the percentages were 92 to 80 (members) and 66 to 60 (the fathers).⁴¹ This did not necessarily mean that academic education seized to be politically influential, but certainly that it took other forms. Academic knowledge became more influential in the long run through the influence of science on politics. To some extent, other forms of knowledge and education (colleges for teachers, engineers, technicians, nurses etc.) replaced university education in political institutions. The university was no longer the core of the nation.

Table 3: Social recruitment to studies at the University of Oslo. Father's occupation for graduates 1810-1929. Numbers in per cent.

Source: Aubert 1964.
 A note on occupations: *Academics* include officers despite their not being educated at the university. *Businessman* usually denotes a merchant or a wholesaler, but may include shopkeepers. Managers are included. In the last half of the period bankers or industrialists became more common. *Functionaries* normally refer to lower civil servants or private clerks. Primary school teachers became an important group from the second half of the 19th century. *Farmers* mean owners.

Medicine

<i>Father's occupation</i>	1810-29	1830-49	1850-69	1870-89	1890-09	1910-29
Medical doctor, dentist	17	8	11	15	9	15
Other academics	26	42	47	31	23	22
Businessman	19	26	25	27	26	22
Functionary	10	13	11	13	20	19
Farmer	3	4	2	6	13	12
Artisan	5	5	3	8	6	6
Worker	1	-	-	-	2	1
No information	19	2	1	-	1	3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	(84)	(279)	(249)	(458)	(890)	(1058)

⁴¹ Aubert et al. 1961-62, tables 148-151. The dates for cabinet members is 1884-1904.

Philology

<i>Father's occupation</i>	1820-49	1850-69	1870-89	1890-09	1910-19	1920-29
High school or university teacher	4	3	9	13	12	11
Other academics	42	52	28	28	24	14
Businessman	24	20	17	18	14	17
Functionary	18	12	24	21	23	31
Farmer	2	1	8	11	18	16
Artisan	-	10	11	8	5	6
Worker	2	1	2	1	3	3
No information	8	1	1	-	1	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	(50)	(79)	(159)	(211)	(149)	(270)

Science (graduation only after 1851)

<i>Father's occupation</i>	1820-49	1850-69	1870-89	1890-09	1910-19	1920-29
High school or university teacher	..	4	10	7	13	18
Other academics	..	55	24	18	14	6
Businessman	..	15	17	15	24	12
Functionary	..	11	24	24	24	27
Farmer	..	4	12	21	17	21
Artisan	..	4	10	9	6	9
Worker	..	-	3	5	1	4
No information	..	7	-	1	1	3
Total	..	100	100	100	100	100
N	..	(27)	(71)	(105)	(80)	(131)

Theology

<i>Father's occupation</i>	1810-29	1830-49	1850-69	1870-89	1890-09	1910-29
Minister and other theological occupations	33	25	37	21	21	14
Other academics	33	24	15	13	13	6
Businessman	19	27	20	17	21	15
Functionary	11	16	11	18	21	25
Farmer	2	4	8	18	21	25
Artisan	-	2	2	9	2	7
Worker	-	1	2	3	1	6
No information	2	1	5	1	-	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	(255)	(455)	(388)	(642)	(435)	(603)

Law

<i>Father's occupation</i>	1815-29	1830-49	1850-69	1870-89	1890-09	1910-29
Lawyer or other legal occupation	18	23	20	20	16	19
Other academics	23	25	29	19	19	17
Businessman	21	22	22	27	24	23
Functionary	19	14	14	17	23	21
Farmer	6	4	4	7	11	10
Artisan	4	4	7	7	5	5
Worker	2	2	1	1	1	2
No information	7	6	3	2	2	3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	(259)	(775)	(694)	(1044)	(1620)	(1575)

References

- Anderson, R. D. (2004): *European Universities from the Enlightenment to 1914*. Oxford.
- Aubert, Vilhelm et al. (1960): Akademikere i norsk samfunnsstruktur. In: *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning*. 185-204.
- Aubert, Vilhelm et al. (1961-1962): *The Professions in Norwegian Social Structure 1920-1955. Tables*. Oslo.
- Aubert, V. (1964): The Professions in Norwegian Social Structure. In: *Transactions of the Fifth World Congress of Sociology, Washington D.C. 1962*. International Sociological Association. 243-258.
- Bergh, Trond et al. (1981): *Growth and Development. The Norwegian Experience 1830-1980*. Oslo.
- Bottomore, T. B. (1977): *Elites and Society*. Harmondsworth. First published 1964.
- Bull, Edvard (1975): Fra bøndernes og husmennenes samfunn til den organiserte kapitalisme. In: Dahl, Ottar et al. (eds): *Makt og motiv. Festskrift til Jens Arup Seip*. Oslo. 225-240.
- Calhoun, Craig (ed.) (1992): *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Collett, John Peter (1999): *Historien om universitetet i Oslo*. Oslo.
- Danielsen, Rolf (1964): *Det Norske Storting gjennom 150 år. Bind II 1870-1908*. Oslo.
- Danielsen, Rolf et al. (1995): *Norway: A History from the Vikings to our own Times*. Oslo.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1962): *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Neuwied. (Norwegian translation 1971, English translation 1989).

- Hodne, Fritz (1975): *An Economic History of Norway 1815-1970*. Trondheim.
- Hodne, Fritz (1994): Growth in a Dual Economy – the Norwegian Experience 1814-1914. In: O'Brien, Patrick (ed.): *The Industrial Revolution in Europe*. Oxford.
- Jarausch, Konrad H. (ed.) (1983): *The Transformation of Higher Learning 1860-1930*. Chicago.
- Johansen, Anders/Kjeldsen, Jens E. (2005): *Virksomme ord. Politiske taler 1814-2005*. Oslo.
- Kaartvedt, Alf (1964): *Det Norske Storting gjennom 150 år. Bind I 1814-1869*. Oslo.
- Myhre, Jan Eivind (1991): The Urbanization of Norway 1850-1980. In: Hall, Thomas (ed.): *Urban Planning in the Nordic Countries*. London. 122-129, 164-165.
- Myhre, Jan Eivind (1997): Sosietetshistorie som sosialhistorie. Om studiet av eliter. In: Kjeldstadli, Knut/Myhre, Jan Eivind/Pryser, Tore (eds): *Valg og vitenskap. Festschrift til Sivert Langholm*. Oslo. 143-163.
- Myhre, Jan Eivind (2004a): The Middle Classes of Norway. In: Ericsson, Tom/Fink, Jørgen/Myhre, Jan Eivind: *The Scandinavian Middle Classes 1840-1940*. Oslo. 103-145.
- Myhre, Jan Eivind (2004b): Om behovet for klasser. In: Soltvedt, Kjartan (ed.): *Folketellinger gjennom 200 år*. Oslo. 86-102.
- Myhre, Jan Eivind (2005): Det norske akademiske aristokrati. Unpublished manuscript.
- Myhre, Jan Eivind (2006): Den eksplosive byutviklingen 1830-1920. In: Helle, Knut/Eliassen, Finn-Einar/Myhre, Jan Eivind/Stugu, Ola Svein: *Norsk byhistorie. Urbanisering gjennom 1300 år*. Oslo. 247-381, 522-527.
- Myhre, Jan Eivind (2007): Universitet og samfunn. Universitetet i Oslos historie 1811-2011. Forthcoming.
- Perkin, Harold (1983): The Pattern of Social Transformation in England. In: Jarausch, Konrad H. (ed.): *The Transformation of Higher Learning 1860-1930*. Chicago. 207-218.
- Ringer, Fritz (2000): *Toward a Social History of Knowledge. Collected Essays*. New York.
- Seip, Jens Arup (1963): *Fra embedsmannsstat til ettpartistat og andre essays*. Oslo.
- Seip, Jens Arup (1974): *Utsikt over Norges historie. Bind 1: Tidsrommet 1814-ca. 1860*. Oslo.
- Seip, Jens Arup (1981): *Utsikt over Norges historie. Bind 2: Tidsrommet ca. 1850-1884*. Oslo.
- Sejersted, Francis (1978): *Den vanskelige frihet. Norges historie 1814-1951*. Oslo.
- Sejersted, Francis (1984): *Demokrati og rettsstat*. Oslo.
- Sejersted, Francis (1992): A Theory of the Economic and Technological Development in Norway in the Nineteenth Century. In: *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 1.
- Steen, Sverre (1948): De frivillige organisasjoner og det norske demokrati, (Norwegian). In: *Historisk tidsskrift*. 581-600.
- Slagstad, Rune (2004): Shifting Knowledge Regimes: The Metamorphoses of Norwegian Reformism. In: *Thesis Eleven*, No. 77, May.

- Slagstad, Rune (2006): *Kunnskapens hus*. Oslo.
- Sørensen, Øystein/Stråth, Bo (eds) (1997): *The Cultural Construction of Norden*. Oslo.
- Svåsand, Lars (1980): The Early Organization Society in Norway. Some Characteristics. In: *Scandinavian Journal of History*. 3. 185-196.
- Try, Hans (2000): Frivillige assosiasjonar og det offentlege i Norge 1800-1880 åra. Ei skisse. In: *Heimen*. 1. 27-40.