

Responsibility for Anders Breivik

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, MAY 11 2012

It is easy to spend a week in Norway – as I have just done – and not to talk about Anders Behring Breivik and his ghastly deeds. This, even though, his trial is currently underway in Oslo.

It is certainly true that I have not been in the capital but in Bergen, the country's second largest city, which I have regularly visited for near-20 years, and in which I have both friends and close professional collaborators. Both individually, and collectively, they have paid me the highest compliment which a Norwegian can give a foreigner by calling me, 'a friend of Norway'.

At breakfast, this very morning, I occupied a table with a well-groomed business woman who was, probably, in her 40s. We exchanged pleasantries – the weather, our work, worries about the road to the airport which is under construction. Then, fatally, I asked, 'How are things in Norway?'

'Like what?', she replied

'After this terrible national tragedy?'

'It happened near to where I live', she said, 'but it is so close to my heart, that I push it far away. I watch the progress of the trial on the TV but that's all.'

After this, the atmosphere at the table changed: She opened her newspaper. And I, somewhat shame-facedly, turned to editing a paper.

It is probably true that Breivik suffers from pathology. There is clear evidence that in his early childhood he was referred to the welfare services and then disappeared in the system. The unsteadiness waiting several decades to re-emerge as it did in the build up to that fateful day last year.

It is also true that the ancient impulse of white racism – which flourishes anew on the faceless world of the internet – took hold of Breivik's psyche, pushing him over the edge. The latter, I suspect, was spurred on by the rising Islamophobia which has marked Western security discourses in the two decades since the end of the Cold War.

The subsequent tit-for-tatting between the West and the Muslim world – the first Gulf War, 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq and minor skirmishes – only added to the idea that this was the way of the future. These everyday encounters with 'the Other' were not helped by Samuel Huntington's idea that the world faced a 'Clash of Civilisations', and George W. Bush's notion that the various wars he ignited might be considered as 'crusades'.

We need constantly, I always think, to remind ourselves that Bush's remarks were something more than just a whisper. The theme and the language which drove it was picked up in many distant places across the world. Hence it became, as predicted, a global war on terror. It was a timely reminder of the power of social construction, but was also to become a painful experience.

A dislodged academic, one of the Washington-policy tribe, who spent a few years teaching in South Africa, urged the

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locals, especially after the Madrid station bombing, to join in America's campaign to chart a new direction in history. Most sensible locals ignored him but I didn't. Unsurprisingly, we clashed on Op Ed pages many times, but it was the war we fought in our emails which largely ended a twenty-five year friendship.

In testimony of the horrendous events on Utoya Island in the continuing trail in Oslo this week, Norwegians are reliving Breivik's murderous deeds. It must be painful to hear it in that most intimate of tongues, their own: a language spoken by only just over 4-million people but a language which has produced great literature, like Henrik Ibsen's plays, and great artist like Edvard Munch.

As for Breivik and his trial, while the Norwegians may be living through this – or switching off, as they choose, although this is difficult because never has there been a national conversation as intense as is this – the truth is we are all responsible for him and this terrible crime against humanity.

About the author:

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