

# Åsne Seierstad's *En av oss*: Perpetrator and Victim in the Construction of National Innocence

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Although originally written in Norwegian and only later translated to English, Åsne Seierstad's 2013 book, *En av oss. En fortelling om Norge* (translated by Sarah Death and published in 2015 as *One of Us: The Story of Anders Breivik and the Massacre in Norway*), appears, as critic Jon Rognlien asserts, largely to have been written with an international audience in mind (Rognlien 2013). Seierstad is a journalist and foreign correspondent who in recent years has achieved international recognition for her non-fiction book, *Bokhandleren i Kabul* (2002, published in English in 2003 as *The Bookseller of Kabul*), which examined conditions in Afghanistan at the outset of the recent war from the perspective of one Afghan family. *En av oss* is also a book-length non-fiction investigation of a national trauma, though in this case the national trauma, the terrorist attacks of 22 July 2011, took place in Seierstad's own homeland rather than abroad. Seierstad has since gone on to publish *To søstre* (2016, *Two Sisters*), which explores the lives of two young Norwegian-Somalian women who choose to join the Islamic State in Syria.

In terms of the factual details presented about the sole perpetrator of the attacks in Norway, Anders Behring Breivik, *En av oss* offers little that Norwegian readers had not already learned through previous publications, such as Kjetil Stormark's *Da terroren rammet Norge. 189 minutter som rystet verden* (untranslated: *When Terror Came to Norway: 189 Minutes that Shook the World*), which appeared only months after the massacre in the fall of 2011; Aage Storm Borchgrevink's *En norsk tragedie. Anders Behring Breivik og veiene til Utøya* (2012, translated by Guy Puzey as *A Norwegian Tragedy: Anders Behring Breivik and*

*the Massacre on Utøya*, 2013); or the official report of the commission that evaluated the response of government agencies to the attacks, *Rapport fra 22. juli-kommisjonen* (2012, untranslated: *Report from the 22 July Commission*). Yet despite the relatively modest amount of new material offered by Seierstad, the book has sold equally well domestically and abroad, and thus clearly also serves a domestic purpose. In the following, I explore this domestic purpose, positing that *En av oss* functions as a narrative about national innocence in which both perpetrator and victims play key roles.

The domestic discourse surrounding the terrorist attacks of 22 July<sup>1</sup> has been dominated by convictions about Norwegian exceptionalism and underpinned by the widely-held belief that Norway is somehow more ethical and less to blame for global social injustices than the rest of Western society. Terje Tvedt calls this rationalization of Norwegian interests and interventions a “godhetsregime” [regime of goodness], which he describes as “[...] et dominant normlegitimerende og normproduserende regime hvor forestillinger og retorikk om godhet regulerer systeminterne relasjoner og gir systemet dets grunnleggende eksterne legitimitet” (Tvedt 2003, 34) [a dominant regime that legitimizes and produces norms for which representations and rhetoric about goodness regulate the internal relations

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<sup>1</sup> Like the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, the terrorist attacks in Norway on 22 July 2011 are commonly referred to by their date alone. Some writers use the notation 22/7, following European conventions for writing the date. Others simply write the date out as “22. juli” [22nd July]. For the sake of simplicity, I follow the practice of the translator of *En av oss* and use “22 July” throughout.

of the system and give the system its fundamental external legitimacy].<sup>2</sup> This form of Norwegian exceptionalism is predicated on social democratic ideology, and it was precisely these ideals that the perpetrator set out to attack when he bombed the buildings that housed the coalition government led by the Labor Party and shot to death participants at the annual Labor Party youth camp.

It has become a truism that Norway lost its innocence on that summer day. I am interested in examining the conceptual limits of that innocence and how it is constructed through narrative, with Seierstad's *En av oss* as a particularly apt example. There are three components to my analysis of how Seierstad frames questions of guilt and innocence in *En av oss*. The first concerns the degree to which Anders Behring Breivik was or was not portrayed in public discourse as a "monster," a loaded term often applied to perpetrators of particularly heinous crimes. The second concerns the question of whether Breivik can be considered to be an ideologue who acted out of political conviction. Finally, I explore the degree to which Seierstad portrays the state as in some ways indirectly culpable in the massacre. But before addressing these three areas, I will first examine how Seierstad constructs a collective "us" and structures the book in a way that shifts attention away from the perpetrator and onto his victims.

### **Defining "One of Us"**

The title of the book, *En av oss*, appears at first glance to express what Norwegian citizens found most difficult to comprehend about these attacks, namely that they were literally

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<sup>2</sup> This and all translations from texts in Norwegian other than Seierstad's *En av oss* itself are my own.

carried out by one of them, and not by external enemies; Breivik was born and raised in Norway as the son of two ethnically Norwegian parents and embraced an overtly “Nordic” identity that encompassed an affiliation with Christianity and whiteness.<sup>3</sup> Yet Seierstad in fact resists such a reading of her own title, framing the perpetrator as an extreme outsider, rather than investigating the domestic context that made it possible for him to plan and carry out his attacks. In a review entitled “Hvem er en av oss?” [Who is one of us?] Rognlien raises some of the questions about the issues of inclusion and belonging that I will further interrogate here. Rognlien muses “Jeg lurer både på hvem den ene er, og hva dette oss er” [I wonder both who the one person is, and what this us is], concluding that the “one” cannot be the perpetrator: “Skulle Seierstad ønsket å gjøre ham til ‘en av oss’, måtte hun ikke insistert på hvor elendig han er, på alle måter, i alle vinkler” (Rognlien 2013) [If Seierstad had wished to make him into “one of us,” she would not have insisted on how terrible he was in every way, from every angle]. It is important to note, however, that Seierstad does not so much make the perpetrator out to be “terrible”; instead of portraying him as a dangerous monster, she ridicules him, a point to which I will return below.

Seierstad’s book raises, but ultimately fails to answer, larger questions of how we make narrative sense of ideologically driven domestic terrorists, especially when, like Breivik, they come from a position of privilege. Instead she repeatedly redirects the readers’ attention to three of the youths he killed on the island of Utøya, Simon Sæbø, Anders

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin R. Teitelbaum points out that Breivik wrote overtly in his manifesto about preserving “the Nordic genotype” and “fought to preserve an imagined racial community” (Teitelbaum 2016, 140–141).

Kristiansen and Bano Abobakar Rashid, an eighteen-year-old female Kurdish refugee from Iraq. Seierstad devotes considerable time to demonstrating how these three teenagers were, each in their own way, one of “us.” In her epilogue to the book, she explains what she means by the title:

*En av oss* er en bok om tilhørighet. Og det er en bok om fellesskap. [Simon og Anders] hadde tydelige *hjemsteder*, både geografisk, politisk og i sine familier. Bano hørte til både i Kurdistan og i Norge. Hennes høyeste ønske var å bli “en av oss”. Nynorsken, bunaden, Nesoddens lokalhistorie. Det fantes ingen snarveier.

*En av oss* er også en bok om det å søke tilhørighet uten å finne det.

Gjerningsmannen valgte til slutt å tre ut av fellesskapet; og å ramme det på det mest brutale vis.

Underveis i arbeidet med boken innså jeg at den også er en *fortelling om Norge*. En samtidsfortelling om oss. (Seierstad 2013, 529; italics original)

[*One of Us* is a book about belonging, a book about community. [Simon and Anders] belonged in definite places, geographically, politically and with their families. Bano belonged in both Kurdistan and Norway. Her greatest aspiration was to become “one of us.” [the New Norwegian, the national costume, the local history of Nesodden.]<sup>4</sup>

There were no short cuts.

This is also a book about looking for a way to belong and not finding it. The perpetrator ultimately decided to opt out of the community and strike at it in the most brutal of ways.

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<sup>4</sup> The translator does not include this passage in the English translation.

As I worked on the book, it came to me that this was also a story about contemporary Norway. It is a story about us. (Seierstad 2015, 523)]

Seierstad makes it clear, then, that her primary concern is with the victims rather than with the perpetrator. This is reflected in the original subtitle of the book, which translates as *A Story About Norway*. The more sensational subtitle of Sarah Death's translation, *The Story of Anders Breivik and the Massacre in Norway*, is thus misleading. It is not, in fact, the story of the perpetrator, and Seierstad indicates this in a number of ways throughout the text. One clear example of this is that she begins the book from the perspective of an unidentified person whom the reader later learns is Bano; the book's preface opens with "Hun løp" (Seierstad 2013, 7) ["She ran" (Seierstad 2015, ix)]. In the epilogue, she makes the focus on the victims even more explicit: "Etter at rettssaken var over, skjønnte jeg at jeg måtte dykke dypere. Der fant jeg Simon, Anders og Viljar. Der fant jeg Bano og Lara. Dette er fortellingen om dem" (Seierstad 2013, 524) [After the trial had finished, I realised I had to go deeper to find out what had really happened, and I started searching. I found Simon, Anders and Viljar. I found Bano and Lara. This is their story" (Seierstad 2015, 515)].<sup>5</sup>

In addition to a preface and epilogue, the book consists of three parts, with the first providing detailed background information about not only the perpetrator, but also Bano, Simon and Anders. Seierstad never allows the perpetrator's perspective to dominate for long. The first part of the book interweaves chapters focusing on all four of these protagonists, leading up to the long chapter entitled "Fredag" ["Friday"] which provides an

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<sup>5</sup> Viljar Hanssen, a close friend of Anders and Simon, was shot five times on Utøya and suffered massive head trauma including the loss of an eye, but survived. Lara Rashid, Bano's younger sister, survived the attack uninjured.

almost unbearable blow-by-blow account of the bombing and subsequent shootings from multiple points of view. In this chapter Seierstad describes fifteen of the seventy-seven murders carried out by the perpetrator, in addition to documenting several stories of survival on Utøya. “Fredag” is followed by three chapters on a variety of initial responses to the attacks; these perspectives include survivors, the families of those murdered, the perpetrator’s mother, and first responders. Part two briefly depicts the 2012 trial of the perpetrator, and part three, which is very short, sketches the longer-term after effects of the attacks for the families of two of the victims and for the perpetrator himself.

### **Perpetrator as Monster**

It is common to refer to perpetrators of horrific acts as “monsters,” and indeed that term appears a number of times in *En av oss*. Remarkably though, it is the perpetrator himself who uses the term, most often accusing the media of making him out to be one. During the very first police interview, before even being removed from Utøya, the following exchange between the perpetrator and members of the police force takes place: “Dere ser på meg som et monster, ikke sant?’ ‘Vi ser på deg som et menneske.’ ‘Dere kommer til å henrette meg. Og hele min familie.’ ‘Vi er villige til å holde vakt over familien din om det trengs. For oss er et liv et liv. Du vil bli behandlet nøyaktig på samme måte som alle andre’” (Seierstad 2013, 374). [“‘You all see me as a monster, don’t you?’ ‘We see you as a human being.’ ‘You’re going to execute me. And all my family.’ ‘We are prepared to give your family protection if need be. For us, a life is a life. You will be treated exactly the same as everybody else’” (Seierstad 2015, 363)]. This is a crucial passage; it suggests the reception the perpetrator expected, and perhaps also his own judgment of his actions. Moreover, it expresses the particular Norwegian response to violence that perplexed and astonished

people around the world. According to both Seierstad and virtually every other source, every representative of the state whom Breivik encountered during and after his arrest treated him with unwavering courtesy and fairness. While it is true that he was demonized in social media and to an extent the popular press, this was never the official line. During the same initial police interview he claimed “Media vil nok framstille meg som et monster...” [“The media certainly wants to portray me as a monster”], to which the interviewer retorts with a highly suggestive question: “Er det et mål å bli framstilt som et monster?” (Seierstad 2013, 367) [“Is it your aim to be portrayed as a monster?” (Seierstad 2015, 367)]. The perpetrator is unable or unwilling to answer the question directly.

At a subsequent round of police interviews, this time with his lawyer present, the perpetrator opens the conversation with the question “Så det er du som har fått den beklagelige oppgaven og æren å avhøre det største monsteret i norgeshistorien siden Quisling?” (Seierstad 2013, 401; see also 406) [“So you’re the one with the unfortunate task and honour of interviewing the biggest monster in Norwegian history since Quisling?” (Seierstad 2014, 390; see also 394)]. Seierstad points out that if anything the media ridiculed him, rather than demonizing him: “Uniformene, martyrdomsgavene, utmerkelsene, titlene, ja selv språket hans ble latterliggjort” (Seierstad 2013, 431) [“The uniforms, the martyr’s gifts, the awards and decorations, the titles, even his language were ridiculed” (Seierstad 2015, 423)]. The perpetrator, however, interpreted this reception quite differently: “Det bildet som er bygget opp i media av at jeg er et psykotisk monster som spiser babyer til frokost ...” (Seierstad 2013, 431) [“The picture the media has constructed of me as a psychotic monster who eats babies for breakfast” (Seierstad 2015, 423)]. I have found nothing to indicate that this is true. The media and general public were horrified by the



massacre he committed, and had no need to resort to lurid fantasies in order to distance themselves from his actions or from him.

In the chapter entitled “Monologen” [“The Monologue”], Seierstad devotes a significant amount of space to the perpetrator’s hour-long statement in court, where he opens by listing all the negative ways that the media has portrayed him in the months since his arrest (Seierstad 2013, 449; Seierstad 2015, 440–441). Yet as a preface to what is perhaps the most convincing psychological evaluation of the perpetrator given as evidence in court, Ulrik Fredrik Malt, a professor of psychology serving as one of a dozen expert witnesses, takes great care to warn against viewing the perpetrator as a monster, telling the court “Vi sitter ikke her bare med en høyreradikal jævel, vi sitter her med et medmenneske som uansett hva han har påført oss andre, lider” (Seierstad 2013, 481) [“We have with us here not only a right-wing extremist bastard, but also a fellow human being who, regardless of what he has done to the rest of us, is suffering” (Seierstad 2015, 473)].<sup>6</sup> Malt’s compassion in fact infuriated the perpetrator. This compassion was echoed in the humane treatment of the perpetrator at all times, as for example at the beginning of the trial when the prosecutors and the victims’ advocates greeted him with handshakes, an act that bewildered foreign journalists (Seierstad 2013, 437; Seierstad 2015, 429).

This resistance to treating the perpetrator as a monster puts the Norwegian discourse surrounding Breivik at odds with Anglo-American perpetrator narratives, where it

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<sup>6</sup> Malt echoes the sentiments of Hannah Arendt, who writes in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* “Despite the intentions of Ben-Gurion and all the efforts of the prosecution, there remained an individual in the dock, a person of flesh and blood [...]” (Arendt 2006, 20).

is far more common to conceptualize the perpetrator as monstrous. In an article on American serial killer narratives, for example, Edward J. Ingebretsen explains:

Serial killers are invariably read into a traditional grammar of the supernatural monstrous that functions in two distinct ways. As hermeneutic, the monstrous organizes a language of reference that is saturated with political implications. As a rubric, on the other hand, the monstrous *directs* otherwise unacceptable excesses of violence and passion toward sanctioned political ends. (Ingebretsen 1998, 27; italics original).

In resisting this “grammar of the supernatural monstrous,” Norway finds itself, as we shall see, in a difficult conceptual bind when it comes to precisely the political and ideological implications of the perpetrator’s acts.

Rather than portraying him as a monster, Seierstad constructs a portrait of the perpetrator as social loser and “wannabe”; she does this by documenting the ways in which the perpetrator (as well as his mother before him) was unable to fit into the exclusive upper middle class segment of Norwegian society in which he grew up. In the chapters focusing on his childhood and young adulthood, she emphasizes his repeated failed attempts to gain respect and admiration in school, in the graffiti gang he frequented, in the neoliberal populist Fremskrittspartiet [the Progress Party], and even among right-wing extremist ideologues online. The only forum in which the perpetrator succeeded socially was, according to Seierstad, online gaming.

On the other hand, Seierstad portrays his victims, Anders, Bano, and Simon, as extraordinarily successful in their attempts to make a place for themselves in Norwegian society. While this is perhaps not surprising for ethnically Norwegian Simon and Anders, who were everything the perpetrator is not (popular, self-assured, influential, admired), Seierstad

takes pains to document how hard Bano had to work to gain acceptance in Norway. As a religious and ethnic minority who arrived in the country at the age of seven as an asylum seeker, and as someone who experienced discrimination growing up in a small suburb of Oslo, she presents a complex challenge to the limits of inclusion. Moreover, as a female immigrant Muslim member of the Labor Party, she represented everything the perpetrator despises. Seierstad activates a number of nationalist touchstones, such as Bano's purchase of a Norwegian folk costume and her deep admiration for former prime minister and "mother of the nation" Gro Harlem Brundtland, in order to demonstrate how well-assimilated Bano was and prove that she was in fact "one of us."

The perpetrator's social problems stem according to Seierstad from his failure to read his place in the social hierarchy accurately. Of his time as an aspiring tagger in a graffiti gang, she writes "Anders hadde gjort en kardinalfeil. Han hadde ikke skjønnt hvor han hørte hjemme. Han var en toy, men hadde oppført seg som en King. med andre ord, som en wannabe" (Seierstad 2013, 78) ["Anders had committed a cardinal sin. He hadn't known his place. He was a toy but had behaved like a king. In other words, like a wannabe" (Seierstad 2015, 64)]. He had a similar experience in high school; Seierstad explains that at the first high school he attended, Hartvig Nissen, "Han skjønnte ikke kodene, han falt gjennom sosialt og sluttet etter et år" (Seierstad 2013, 101) ["He didn't understand the codes, was seen as a social misfit, and left after a year" (Seierstad 2015, 89)]. This experience repeated itself when he changed schools, eventually leading to his decision to drop out completely. The same pattern followed him into adulthood, as when he applied to stand for election for the Progress Party in 2002: "Han ble ikke veid og funnet for lett. Han var ikke en gang blitt veid. Rett før jul var nominasjonslisten klar. To ungdomskandidater var nominert. Jøran sto på listen. Lene sto på listen" (Seierstad 2013, 117) ["He was not weighed and found wanting. He

was not even weighed. He was never called for interview [*sic*]. His name did not go on the list” (Seierstad 2015, 105)]. The ultimate insult comes in rejection from the stars of the ultra-right-wing Eurabia conspiracy movement, whom Breivik admired. Despite writing to many of them directly, “Han fikk aldri noe svar fra fyrtårnene på feltet, ikke fra Robert Spencer, ikke fra Bat Ye’or, ikke fra Fjordman” (Seierstad 2013, 170) [“He never received a reply from the top names in the field, not from Robert Spencer, nor from Bat Ye’or, nor from Fjordman” (Seierstad 2015, 157)]. Both outsider and insider groups alike, from the graffiti gang to the trendy teenagers at Hartvig Nissen to the extreme right conspiracy theorists, rejected Breivik, creating an apparently unified but highly disparate front against him. In fact, one might argue that the only thing these groups appear to have in common is their rejection of Breivik during his formative years.

Other writers, such as Borchgrevink, present case studies that reproduce a familiar pattern from the literature on perpetrators of how early childhood psychological trauma inevitably made Breivik into a mass murderer. Seierstad rejects this trauma narrative, and through her frequent mockery of the perpetrator for his personal foibles she seems instead to suggest that he was simply too foolish and narcissistic to learn how to follow social codes properly. Seierstad appears to revel in the perpetrator’s vanity and predilections. She notes his use of makeup and his nose job, and that one of his first online posts to the Progress Party debate forum expressed enthusiasm for the (non-royal) spouses of public darlings Crown Prince Haakon and Princess Märtha Louise (Seierstad 2013, 113; Seierstad 2015, 100), a notably trivial topic for someone hoping to launch a political career. Later in the narrative she shares some of the more absurd entries from the perpetrator’s account of his preparations for the attacks: “‘I just love Eurovision,’ skrev han i loggen lørdag 14. mai, og unner seg fri for å se finalen i Melodi Grand Prix” (Seierstad 2013, 240) [“‘I just love

Eurovision,' he noted in the log on Saturday 14 May, awarding himself a night off to watch the final of the song contest" (Seierstad 2015, 229)]. The Eurovision Song Contest, an annual entertainment extravaganza in Europe, is the height of camp, so the incongruity of the perpetrator watching it as he constructs a weapon of mass destruction is acute. His childish description of his Chinese takeaway dinner as "Nam nam" (Seierstad 2013, 251) ["Yummy" (Seierstad 2015, 240)] is equally jarring. These and other such references have the cumulative effect of presenting an image of the perpetrator as banal and foolish, something quite the opposite of a monster.

While there is indeed much evidence that Breivik often failed to interpret social codes properly, this does not mean that he consciously rejected them. In a book on the concept of evil, philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen describes Breivik's desire for attention and social status as strikingly conventional. Vetlesen points out that "I all oppmerksomheten som terrorisme- og ekstremismeforskere har viet Breiviks Manifest og bidrag i ulike nettfora [...] overses det at markørene for vellykkethet og status som Breivik bekjenner seg til er *alt annet enn samtids- og samfunnskritiske*" (Vetlesen 2014, 46; italics original) [In all the attention paid in terrorism and extremism research to Breivik's manifesto and contributions to various internet forums [...] the fact that the signs of success and status that Breivik subscribes to are *anything but critical of contemporary society* is overlooked]. As a young adult, the perpetrator obsessed over perfecting his personal appearance according to conventional contemporary standards of beauty, making lots of money, and acquiring exclusive brand name clothing.

The disconnect between the heinous acts and the personal foibles of the perpetrator comes to a head during the first police interrogation when at one point the perpetrator complained about a tiny scratch on his finger: "'Se, jeg er skadet,' sa han. 'Jeg må forbindes.

Jeg har allerede mistet mye blod” (Seierstad 2013, 371) [“‘Look, I’m hurt,’ he said. ‘This will have to be bandaged up. I’ve already lost a lot of blood” (Seierstad 2015, 360)], which is an absurd thing to say in the wake of shooting sixty-nine people to death, especially given that he attributes the scratch to a flying bone fragment. His lack of perspective tips even further over into the absurd when he strikes a bodybuilder pose during the police’s attempt to photograph him during the same interrogation session (Seierstad 2013, 377; Seierstad 2015, 366)]. His odd behavior during this interview is difficult to interpret, but it suggests a kind of self-loathing and an anticipation of rejection at the very moment when his secret plan was going public.

Seierstad’s active disdain for the perpetrator is in a very obvious way understandable because the acts of 22 July are so clearly cruel, unjustifiable, and horrific. Yet the disdain she expresses in *En av oss* might also be said to reproduce the very same rejection and humiliation that Breivik experienced repeatedly throughout his life. Vetlesen explores these processes more deeply, placing Breivik’s social failings in the context of shame: “[...] den fremviste og velpleide fasaden av overlegenhet, av å være bedre, smartere og djervere enn alle andre [...] er et dekke over en grunnleggende taps- og nederlagsopplevelse med tilhørende – aldri innrømmet, aldri meddelt – skam og selvforakt” (Vetlesen 2014, 50) [(...) the well cared for façade displaying a sense of superiority and being better, smarter and bolder than all others (...) conceals a fundamental experience of loss and defeat, with a corresponding—never admitted, never revealed—sense of shame and self-loathing]. This unspoken sense of shame over being a failure is not, according to Vetlesen, merely a product of the perpetrator’s particular psychopathology. It is something that the society he grew up in imprinted on him at the same time that it ostracized him:

At Breivik ikke synes å ha hatt noen steder å gå med denne skammen [...] sier også noe om hvilket miljø og samfunn som har gjort sitt til å forme og befeste et silkt syn på hva som er skammelig og som følgelig må skjules og benektes, ikke vedkjennes, hos en ung mann i landet Norge i vår tid [...]. At tap og nederlag, mangel på å lykkes i å selge seg selv på så mange arenaer – markeder – er reelt og ikke bare innbilt truende, nemlig ensidig negativt vurdert i samfunnet i dag, er *korrekt* oppfattet (internalisert) fra Breiviks side og sier derfor minst like mye om en kulturell tilstand og epoke som om han qua enkeltindivid [...]. (Vetlesen 2014, 50–51; italics original)

[That Breivik did not seem to have anywhere to go with this shame (...) also says something about the environment and society that has formed and solidified that kind of view of what is shameful and what thus must be hidden and denied, what must not be acknowledged, for a young man in the country of Norway in our time (...). That loss, defeat, and lack of success in selling oneself in so many arenas—markets—is real and not just an imagined threat, something that is judged exclusively as negative, is *correctly* understood (internalized) by Breivik, and thus says at least much about a state of culture and an epoch as it does about him as an individual (...).]

Neither Seierstad, nor any of the other Breivik biographers have addressed the profound sense of shame over personal failure that Vetlesen identifies here as a catalyst for extreme action. In continuing to shame him rather than take him seriously as an ideologue in her narrative, Seierstad in a sense only perpetuates the social mechanisms that produced him.

### **Perpetrator as Ideologue**

There is an uncomfortable alternative interpretation of Seierstad's title; it is possible to take it at face value, underscoring that the perpetrator himself is in fact "one of us," a direct product of the larger society, as indeed Vetlesen suggests. The implications of this are profound. In the book, *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia*, social anthropologist Sindre Bangstad argues that the perpetrator was not simply an ideological lone wolf (though, of course, he carried out the attacks themselves alone) operating in an Internet bubble of extremist hatred, but instead that his views are far more widespread in contemporary Norway than most people are willing to acknowledge. Bangstad's premise is that "there is a *knowledge regime* in a Foucauldian sense at work here and that, within this regime, certain ways of speaking and writing about Muslims in Norway, ways that often veer into the Islamophobic, have become almost naturalized and therefore legitimate in and through the media" (Bangstad 2014, 143; italics original). Bangstad is critical of Seierstad and the other Breivik biographers for failing to acknowledge this, suggesting that these authors contribute to the continuing process of "societal externalization" whereby the perpetrator's acts are deliberately disconnected from the broader political and media context that in effect makes certain extremist ideas mainstream:

A further impetus to the societal externalization of 22/7 was provided by a plethora of books by prominent Norwegian authors which in the ensuing years have provided the media and the public at large with never-ending commentary on the troubled private life of Anders Behring Breivik, his mother and sister (see Borchgrevink 2012; Seierstad 2013; Christensen 2013 for the most prominent examples of this genre), and which by and large reduced 22/7 to a question of the perpetrator's individual psychopathology. (Bangstad 2014, 108)



Bangstad documents how leading thinkers behind the “Eurabia” conspiracy, including Egyptian born British writer Bat Ye’or, Norwegian Conservative politician Hallgrim Berg, American writer Bruce Bawer, Iraqi-Norwegian film maker Walid al-Kubaisi, Italian writer Oriana Fallaci, the Norwegian blogger known as “Fjordman” (Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen), British-American historian Bernard Lewis, and American writer Robert Spencer, have made their way into the mainstream of Norwegian politics and letters. As Bangstad explains, “the ‘Eurabia’ thesis holds that there is a formal cooperation between Muslim states in the Middle East and the EU and that this cooperation is hidden from the European general public. The hypothesis is that this is aimed at establishing ‘Eurabia’ and has been operating since the petroleum crisis of 1973” (Bangstad 2014, 145). These writers directly inspired the perpetrator, as he himself documents in his manifesto, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*.

Vetlesen touches on something similar when he criticizes public discourse surrounding the perpetrator for failing to acknowledge that his actions were deeply politically and ideologically motivated, rather than simply the inevitable result of early childhood trauma or the crazed actions of a madman: “En psykiatisering i form av patologisering av Breiviks person og hans motiver og handlinger ville innebære en avpolitisering av et prosjekt som for ham i høyeste grad var politisk” (Vetlesen 2014, 41) [a psychiatrization in the form of the pathologization of Breivik’s person, motives and actions would entail the de-politicization of a project that for him was in the highest degree political]. Vetlesen asks us to consider the consequences of the perpetrator acting not (only) out of mental illness, but out of ideological conviction: “Hvis svaret er ja, hvilket lys kaster det over vårt samfunn at det har kunnet frembringe en slik masse-morder; en slik desperasjon, et slikt fiendebilde som det gjerningsmannen agerte på, og som vi i ideologisk

henseende vet han ikke er alene om?” (Vetlesen 2014, 8) [If the answer is yes, in what light does it place our society that we could produce such a mass murderer, such desperation, such an image of the enemy as the one the perpetrator acted on, and that we know he was not alone in espousing, ideologically speaking?]. Taking him seriously as an ideologue is challenging, both because of the foibles and vanity that Seierstad dwells on in her narrative, and because it necessitates a closer examination of the political landscape in contemporary Norway.

Only once does Seierstad dwell at any length on the multiple strands of far-right ideology that lie just under the surface in Norway; in a summary paragraph about the trial, she mentions that “[...] forsvaret [hadde] ført fram vitner som understreket at Breivik ikke var alene om tankene sine. Historikere, filosofer og forskere med religion, terror eller høyreekstremisme som spesialfelt kom og la ut om hvor Breivik befant seg, i et ekstremistisk, men ikke ukjent, ideologisk landskap” (Seierstad 2013, 476) [“The defence had called witnesses who stressed that Breivik was not alone in his thinking. Historians, philosophers and researchers in the fields of religion, terrorism and right-wing extremism took the witness stand and set out where Breivik stood in an extremist, but not unknown, ideological landscape” (Seierstad 2015, 468)]. Seierstad does spend a little time discussing the Progress Party’s underlying racism (Seierstad 2013, 108–110; Seierstad 2015, 96–99) and she details the period during which the perpetrator was active in the party, but she does little or nothing to examine how this kind of ideology has spread beyond the once marginal Progress Party. Instead, she follows the perpetrator’s own logic; in his manifesto, he presents himself as someone whose primary sources of influence come from beyond Norway’s borders. Seierstad thus portrays the perpetrator as a lone criminal who attacks a fundamentally innocent society, maintaining the twofold illusion that Norway is completely

blameless (a “regime of goodness” in Tvedt’s terms) and that his ideology is an entirely foreign import.

In her account of the inherent racism of the Progress Party, Seierstad describes the now infamous “Mustafa letter,” a fictive letter threatening the Norwegian way of life purportedly written by an Islamist extremist that long-time party chairperson, Carl I. Hagen, presented publicly with great flourish. Seierstad also touches on the close ties that Øystein Hedstrøm, a former party spokesperson on immigration, had to overtly racist organizations. Seierstad notes that neither scandal dampened voter enthusiasm for the party; after the “Mustafa letter” the party tripled its percentage of the vote in the 1987 parliamentary election to twelve per cent (Seierstad 2013, 109; Seierstad 2015, 97), and after the Hedstrøm exposé in 1995 this rose to twenty-one per cent (Seierstad 2013, 111; Seierstad 2015, 98). She quotes islamophobic statements by Hagen at length, pointing out that “Muslimene hadde ikke tatt noen avgjørende skritt mot integrering, mente han, og fundamentalismens framvekst hadde skremt nordmenn” [“In his opinion, the Muslims had taken no decisive steps toward integration and the growth of fundamentalism had frightened Norwegians”] Yet her only editorial comment is “Slik lød Hagen på 90-tallet” (Seierstad 2013, 111) [“This is the way Hagen sounded in the 1990s” (Seierstad 2015, 99)], a neutral observation at best, and one that does not acknowledge that the Progress Party’s Islamophobia can be documented up to the present day, as Bangstad demonstrates thoroughly.

Hagen, his successor as party chairperson, Siv Jensen, and other prominent party members continued overtly extremist rhetoric up to and beyond 2011. As Bangstad points out, after the massacre Jensen went on the offensive against anyone who attempted to connect extremist views held by members of the Progress Party to the perpetrator’s acts; in

an opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal* only days after the attacks, she wrote:

Some media and commentators, mainly on the left, are trying to use the atrocities of one man to smear and slander the Progress Party in our nation's time of grief. It's disrespectful. The party I lead is the second largest party in the Norwegian parliament, and the leading opposition party in Norway. Throughout its existence the Progress Party has been the foremost voice for individual liberty, smaller and more effective government and free markets in Norway. ("Norwegian Politics")

Jensen simply resorts to the size of the party to legitimize her position, without acknowledging any validity in the criticism based on the party's statements and positions. Moreover, she appears to suggest that the Progress Party itself is a victim.<sup>7</sup> While this opinion piece is largely conciliatory, it is also framed in such a way as to underplay the Progress Party's actual positions on exactly the issues that lie at the heart of the perpetrator's attack on the Labor Party, namely multiculturalism, immigration in general and Muslim immigrants in particular. Jensen only hints at her party's prior extremist positions when she writes "Although there's a fundamental difference between a pen and a weapon, the rhetoric in our discussions of these issues will have to change, as most of us want to avoid misunderstandings and exaggerations. Most of us may even now regret things we said in heated debates. However, there is no reason to shy away from these controversial issues" ("Norwegian Politics"). Rather than saying "I" or "we in the Progress Party," she generalizes

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<sup>7</sup> In a now infamous statement made in Parliament, another prominent Progress Party member, Per Sandberg, accused the Labor Party—the actual target of Breivik's attacks—of deliberately having "spilt offer" [played the victim]. Sandberg quickly apologized for and retracted the statement (Sørli et al. 2011).

to include “most of us.” *The Wall Street Journal* contributes to the obfuscation in this opinion piece by allowing her false claim that there are “no far-right parties” in Norway to stand unchallenged, despite a long list of bona fide far-right parties in recent decades.<sup>8</sup>

Just months before the publication of *En av oss*, in what was the first parliamentary election held after 22 July, the coalition government led by the Labor Party was defeated by an opposing coalition that included the Progress Party, which thus for the first time in its forty-year history became part of a ruling government, rather than merely an opposition party. The apparent hard shift to the right came as a shock to many. While it is essential to acknowledge that there is a crucial difference between merely espousing radical or even extremist political views and using such views as a justification for mass murder, my concern here is with what I see as a deliberate erasure of the popular impact of such views on the domestic scene. The perpetrator is thus in a very real sense “one of us” because his views on the state, women, immigration and so-called traditional Western values, which are largely in opposition to twentieth-century social democratic ideology in Norway, have gained popularity and become increasingly mainstream.<sup>9</sup> Yet Seierstad completely fails to acknowledge this.

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<sup>8</sup> This list includes the following, among many other short-lived parties and groups: Stopp innvandring (Stop Immigration, 1987–1995), Hvit valgallianse (White Electoral Alliance, 1995–1997), NasjonalAlliansen (the National Alliance, 1999–2006), and Vigrid (1999–present: <http://www.vigridtvedt.net>). Admittedly none of these have garnered enough votes to gain representation in parliament.

<sup>9</sup> Not all of Breivik’s views have been accepted into mainstream political discourse in Norway. Teitelbaum argues that Breivik attempted to hide his overtly racist views on race

### **Naming Names: The State as Perpetrator**

In *En av oss* Seierstad strongly suggests that government officials had a duty both to protect the perpetrator from trauma in childhood and to prevent or contain his violent actions on 22 July, and that the state failed in both endeavors. The book thus presents a discourse that indirectly implies that the state is at least indirectly culpable in the perpetrator's massacre. Unlike previous biographers, Seierstad observed the Breivik trial first hand, and thus had access to all evidence presented about his childhood. Moreover, she had access to *Rapport fra 22. juli-kommisjonen*, which gives a highly critical evaluation of how the two attacks were handled by government agencies and first responders.

Four chapters in *En av oss* cover the perpetrator's childhood, including the involvement of child welfare authorities, and roughly sixteen of the seventy-one pages that make up the chapter describing the events of 22 July cover the actions taken in response to the attacks. In her narrative Seierstad actively highlights the roles played by various state agencies in relation to Breivik's early development and later terrorist acts, and in a number of cases she frames the representatives of these agencies as de facto accomplices. She names only a few representatives of the state in the narrative, and identifies the majority only by their profession or the agency they represent; in general, Seierstad names those who acted properly, while allowing those who made bad decisions to go unnamed in the

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and ethnicity in his manifesto precisely because of their unpopularity, but that these attitudes are nonetheless evident in the manifesto and even more clearly expressed in the perpetrator's statements in connection with his 2012 trial (Teitelbaum 2016, 143).

narrative. She thus presents the reader with a complex ethical puzzle in which the targets of the attacks—the sitting coalition government led by the Labor Party and the Labor Party itself—are also paradoxically somehow indirectly responsible for them.

In *En av oss*, not only does Seierstad define the perpetrator himself as explicitly not one of us, but she also marginalizes incompetent government officials and agencies, thus constructing a narrative “us” that consists primarily of private individuals. We see this, for example, in Seierstad’s portrayal of the experts involved in evaluating Breivik in childhood. She is not the first to point out the problems in the treatment he received around the age of four, when his mother contacted child welfare authorities for help and was referred to Statens senter for barne- og ungdomspsykiatri [the Center for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry]. The Center strongly recommended that the four-year-old Breivik be placed in foster care, but child welfare authorities ultimately decided against this. Seierstad documents a long series of questionable decisions resulting in the dismissal of the case (Seierstad 2013, 40–44; Seierstad 2015 30–31); it is clear she is convinced that the child welfare authorities exercised poor judgment, and is more critical of them than she is of the perpetrator’s mother, whom she depicts as essentially helpless.<sup>10</sup> One of the psychologists at the Centre for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Arild Gjertsen, is named in the English translation and portrayed in a positive light because he at least tried to get child welfare authorities to reverse their decision and remove Breivik from his mother’s care (Seierstad

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<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth study of Wenche Behring Breivik’s background, experiences as a mother, and responses to her son’s terrorist acts, see Marit Christensen’s *Moren* [2013, *The Mother*].

2015, 29).<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Seierstad paraphrases a report written by a nameless social worker: “[...] det [kunne likevel] være grunn til bekymring for hvordan moren ville mestre eventuelle senere kriser, men [hun] fant ikke at denne bekymringen i seg selv var nok til å foreslå omsorgsovertakelse” (Seierstad 2013, 44) [“there could be grounds for concern about how the mother might cope with potential crises in the future, but this in itself was not considered sufficient to warrant removing the boy from his mother’s care” (Seierstad 2015,31)]. With hindsight, these words appear chilling and fateful, and Seierstad implies that a different decision might have prevented the massacre in 2011. The child welfare authorities as well as the lawyer for Breivik’s mother, who fought to keep him in his mother’s custody, remain nameless and are portrayed as at best incompetent, at worst malicious.

Poor decision-making and a lack of understanding regarding the big picture on the part of public authorities also characterizes the hours immediately following the bombing of the main government building in Oslo. Drawing heavily on the *Rapport fra 22. juli-kommisjonen*, Seierstad documents dozens of points in time at which crucial information was not communicated or poor decisions were made. Interspersed with depictions of the ongoing shootings on Utøya are small portraits of the private citizens who stepped in to aid the victims while the police were not yet on the scene. The pattern in Seierstad’s narrative about the police officers who responded to the massacre on Utøya resembles that of the authorities entrusted with evaluating the perpetrator’s relationship with his mother. Only one of the police officers, Håvard Gåsbakk, is named and personalized in the narrative

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<sup>11</sup> Gjertsen’s name does not appear in the Norwegian original, where Seierstad refers to him simply as “den unge psykologen” (Seierstad 2013, 42) [the young psychologist].



(Seierstad 2013, 335; Seierstad 2015, 324). This is because Gåsbakk, who was off duty at the time, acted on his own initiative and made good decisions independent of the chain of command. We see the opposition between the nameless police and Gåsbakk, as well as the implied culpability of public authorities in the following passage: “Gåsbakk måtte snu da han nesten var framme ved Thorbjørnkaia, for å kjøre tilbake til Storøya. I gjennomsnitt drepte Breivik et menneske i minuttet” (Seierstad 2013, 341) [“Gåsbakk had almost reached the [...] landing stage when he was instructed to turn round and drive to the golf course. Breivik was killing an average of one person a minute” (Seierstad 2015, 331)]. Seierstad leaves it to the reader to make the link, implying that if Gåsbakk and one or two other police officers had been allowed to take a boat directly from the landing stage they could have saved two dozen lives, but the chain of command prevented them from doing so. In a similar passage, Seierstad appears to mock the extreme caution of the police force once they finally arrive on the island, juxtaposing it with the ongoing killings:

På sydspissen fikk en jente to skudd i hodet og ett i brystet mens mennene beveget seg på stien. En annen fikk en kule gjennom halsen, mens mennene småløp i terrenget. En tredje fikk en kule gjennom hodet, mens de skiftet skjoldbærer. En fjerde ble skutt tre ganger, først i ryggen så han falt, deretter gjennom hodet og halsen. Og mennene var ennå ikke framme. (Seierstad 2013, 352)

[Meanwhile, on the southern tip of the island a girl was hit twice in the head and once in the chest as the armed men were walking along the path. Another kid got a bullet through the neck while the men were jogging across open ground. A third, through her head while they were changing shield carrier. A fourth was shot twice in the back as the five men drew nearer. The fifth, a boy, was shot three times, first in

the back to bring him down, then through the head and neck, and the men were still not there. (Seierstad 2015, 341–342)]

Perhaps ironically, Gåsbakk himself is among this group of five police officers. He is, however, off the hook so to speak since Seierstad has previously documented his thwarted attempts to get to the island. She needs him in the narrative because she uses his perceptions and impressions to explain the capture and arrest of the perpetrator. The others remain unnamed representatives of the culpable state. She portrays these same anonymous police officers in a positive light, however, in the previously discussed interview sequence with the perpetrator. This suggests an ambivalence on the part of Seierstad about the role of first responders.

The degree to which one is named and individualized in Seierstad’s narrative gives an indication of how closely the reader should identify with that person. Seierstad explains how important it was to give the full names of the victims, regardless of how briefly they appeared in the narrative:

Mange kommer med i boken først i kapitlet som omhandler 22. juli, og forsvinner ut av fortellingen samme dag. Det har vært de vondeste tekstbitene å sende til foreldre til gjennomlesning. Jeg er takknemlig overfor alle dem som har latt meg få skrive om barna deres. For meg har det vært viktig å beskrive for ettertiden akkurat hvor fryktelig den dagen var. (Seierstad 2013, 525)

[The first time I mention someone, I have usually put down their full name.<sup>12</sup> Some people do not appear in the book until “Friday”—the chapter about 22 July—and disappeared from the account the moment they are killed. These were the most

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<sup>12</sup> This sentence does not appear in the Norwegian original.

painful parts of the book to send to their families. I asked all the parents affected to read the sections about their children and choose for themselves whether they wanted their child to be part of the book. For me it was important to describe for posterity exactly how that day was. (Seierstad 2015, 516)]

Given this attention to detail regarding the names of the victims, it becomes striking any time a figure remains unnamed in the text.

After the attacks, people debated whether or not it was appropriate to even speak the name the perpetrator. Some media outlets used only the word “gjerningsmann” (perpetrator), others referred to him by his initials only (“ABB”) in reports about the massacre. This refusal to name him by name can be viewed as a kind of public shaming. Seierstad employs a deliberate approach to naming him in *En av oss*. She describes him as “En mange ikke vil nevne ved navn” [“A man many are reluctant to refer to by name”] explaining “Selv bruker jeg navnet hans. I barndommen var det naturlig å bruke fornavnet, fra og med 22. juli bruker jeg etternavnet eller fullt navn” (Seierstad 2013, 525) [“I do use his name. When writing about his childhood it was natural to use his first name; from 22 July onwards I use his surname or full name” (Seierstad 2015, 516)]. He is still “Anders” (still a child?) for Seierstad as late as his last week of preparations for the attack, though she intersperses both “Anders” and “Breivik” throughout the chapter about these preparations. This is a process that Ingebretsen considers in his analysis of true crime narratives about serial killers. He sees it in particular in Steven G. Michaud’s book about Ted Bundy, *The Only Living Witness* (1983):

Texts of the monstrous depend upon a simultaneous political forgetting as well as ideologically shaped remembering. “Ted was one of us,” a friend remarked (*Witness* 6). And so he was—and the verb is well chosen for the work it must do. Erasing the

closeness and intimacy, that first-name basis, is where the real work of making monsters begins. (Ingebretsen 1998, 30).

The shift from the intimate first name to the impersonal surname is a strategy that Seierstad uses to distance herself from the perpetrator. This strategy is especially potent in a culture that has almost entirely abandoned the formal second person pronouns that are common in other European languages, rarely refers to people by their honorific titles (or even by Miss, Mrs. or Mr.), and where people very quickly move to a first name basis with colleagues, clients and acquaintances. Refusing to use the perpetrator's first name is thus a means of excluding him from the collective "us."

Given the importance of naming regarding both victims and perpetrator, Seierstad's decision not to name most of the government officials and first responders gains more significance than it might otherwise have. While it is true that none of the leaders of, for example, the Oslo police force are named in the *Rapport fra 22. juli-kommisjonen* because the concern of the authors of the report was with correcting systemic problems rather than placing individual blame, Seierstad clearly had the option to name names, should she have wanted to. By not interviewing them, not naming them, and not presenting the circumstances that led to the decisions they made, they remain anonymous and vaguely culpable, with no opportunity to defend themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Given how central a discourse of national innocence appears to be for Norway, it follows that it is of the utmost importance to develop narratives, such as Seierstad's *En av oss*, that create as much distance as possible between mainstream society and the perpetrator. This leads to a disturbing disconnect between, on the one hand, the signs of a domestic flirtation

with elements of extremist ideology and, on the other hand, Tvedt's description of Norway as a self-styled "regime of goodness" that exports social democratic ideals world-wide, when these are the very same ideals that right-wing extremism in general, and Anders Behring Breivik in particular, seeks to destroy.

It is the perpetrator himself, rather than his biographers and the public at large, who activates the "monster" trope in describing himself. Instead, Seierstad portrays him as a wannabe and a fool, which in turn makes it possible to ignore his larger ideological motivations. The erasure of the ideological foundation of these terrorist acts in effect makes it conceptually possible for Norwegians to continue to flirt with right-wing extremism without danger of becoming personally associated with Breivik and his heinous acts. Finally, given the damning evidence of incompetence and lack of preparation on the part of first responders presented in *Rapport fra 22. juli-kommisjonen*, it is difficult not to widen the blame for the death and destruction of 22 July 2011; yet at the same time the maintenance of a narrative of national innocence requires that no identifiable individuals other than the perpetrator himself receive blame. *En av oss* thus presents a complex interpretive challenge because its function for its domestic audience differs so clearly from its function internationally. For international audiences, this was the simply first widely-acclaimed, in-depth account of the massacre. It was notable for being a *New York Times Bestseller* and the work of an esteemed journalist with a solid international reputation, which meant that it easily overshadowed Borchgrevink's book, which came out in English two years earlier. As I have tried to argue above, *En av oss* has had a much more complex domestic function.

Ultimately, on what might be called a meta level, *En av oss* demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining the key ideological position that underpins the welfare state, namely the democratic notion of absolute equality before the law. From this position,

Anders Behring Breivik really is “one of us.” Yet his acts are so horrific that it is virtually impossible to accept this. The police who interviewed him and the officials at his trial were in fact able to sustain the illusion in relation to the perpetrator, precisely because it is so fundamental to the entire fabric of Norwegian society, but Seierstad could or would not do the same. It is easy for readers to recognize and share her at times palpable disdain for the perpetrator, and her book might thus be said to give voice to a collective sense of anger and disgust that has had few other available legitimate outlets in Norwegian society.

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