

Breaking the law of Jante

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Abstract

The article intends to critically examine the concept of *Janteloven* (the law of Jante), a literary construct from Aksel Sandemose's *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks* (1997[1933]). *Janteloven* is, anecdotally and with little critical appraisal, assumed to explain the egalitarian nature of the Scandinavian nations. *Janteloven*, despite common belief in Scandinavia, has its equivalent elsewhere (Newby (2009: 308) for example compares it to the Scottish expression of "ah kent his faither"). Espen Arnakke, the narrator in Sandemose's book, formulates *Janteloven* and repeatedly emphasises its existence outside the narrow confines of his native Danish village. The article therefore seeks to critically examine *Janteloven* and how it has gained traction in the Norwegian nation-building project. The notion of *Janteloven* is so pervasive in Norway, that it merits analysis: what is *janteloven*; how is it apparent in Norwegian society; why is it assumed to be so pervasive; is it really as pervasive as assumed; how is it reproduced? The article argues, in part, that *Janteloven* is a form of structural censorship and entails the exertion of symbolic power in the endeavour to present the image of a cohesive nation-state. Alongside theories of nationalism, this article employs analytical tools developed by Pierre Bourdieu in examining the reproduction of *Janteloven*. The article includes a close examination of the Norwegian nation-building project, and explores how *Janteloven* is inconsistently applied in an effort to reproduce a mould for Norwegians to follow, whilst simultaneously exempting aspects of Norwegian society from the alleged universal law of *Jante*. A final reflection of the article is whether *Janteloven* is still, or can remain, relevant in an increasingly globalised society.

Keywords: *Janteloven*, nation-building, nationalism, Norway, national myths, cultural imagination

Introduction¹

This article will critically appraise *Janteloven*² – a concept well-known in the Nordic countries – and examine its role in the Norwegian nation-building and socialisation project. In order to explicate this nebulous construct, the article will draw on empirical material from

¹ Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Ida Norberg for helpful feedback on ideas presented in the article.

² Spellings vary in the Nordic countries; this essay will use the Norwegian/Danish spelling.

Norway, theories of nationalism, and notions of symbolic power and structural censorship. The goal is to develop, through a combination of theory and comparison, a critical understanding of *Janteloven*. Following this introduction, it will examine, in-depth, the origin of *Janteloven* and the context in which it was formulated. In order to evaluate its current use as an analytical concept, the article reviews previous literature which utilizes the concept and assesses their analyses. Having completed this review, it proceeds to examine the historical conditions of Norwegian nationalism, and hypothesize as to why *Janteloven* found such fertile ground in Norway. The remaining sections will examine different aspects of *Janteloven* through empirical material, and attempt to demonstrate how it relates to symbolic power and structural censorship. In particular, this article examines how the birth of Norwegian nationalism and *Janteloven* resonate and echo in present day Norway; through sports, media, and politics. The article also contains a brief exploration of how *Janteloven* could be used to explain wage equality in Norway, but contains a warning to not fall into a post hoc fallacy. The goal of this investigation is to improve our understanding of *Janteloven*. A core argument of this article is that *Janteloven* is neither omnipresent nor omnipotent in Norway, or exclusive to Norway, but is used as shorthand for specific values which are used as a tool to impose symbolic control.

What is *Janteloven*?

Aksel Sandemose (1899-1965) was a Danish-Norwegian author whose books are considered to be partly autobiographical (Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 2015). The autobiographical nature of Sandemose's work usually results in the argument that Jante, the fictional town in which the narrative persona Espen Arnakke grew up, is in fact Sandemose's birthplace of Nykøbing, Denmark. *Janteloven* is shorthand for social rules that existed in this fictional town. The laws of Jante are:

1. You shall not believe you *are* anything.
2. You shall not believe you are as much as *us*.
3. You shall not believe you are wiser than *us*.
4. You shall not imagine you are better than *us*.
5. You shall not believe you know more than *us*.
6. You shall not believe you are more than *us*.
7. You shall not believe *you* are good for anything.
8. You shall not laugh at *us*.
9. You shall not believe anyone cares about *you*.
10. You shall not believe you can teach *us* anything.

(Sandemose, 1999 [1933]: 65³ [Emphasis in original])

This is the most direct formulation of the Ten Commandments of Jante, which are considered more important than the biblical Ten Commandments (Sandemose, 1999 [1933]: 66). Sandemose's book, *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks*, contains other laws and commands that are also a part of *Janteloven*. For example, preceding the Ten Commandments of Jante Espen Arnakke tells us 'You must not drink alcohol: that was the greatest command of Janteloven' (Sandemose, 1999 [1933]: 38 [emphasis in original]). This command was so overwhelming that Arnakke confesses to preferring his parents' death (by his hands) rather than them discovering one of their children imbibing alcohol (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 296-297). Furthermore, *Janteloven* imbues Espen Arnakke with fear through the threat 'perhaps you believe I don't know something about you?' (Sandemose, 1999 [1933]: 75, 116 [emphasis in original]). Importantly, 'Janteloven was not just the law, it was the heart of language' (Sandemose, 1999 [1933]: 65-66). *Janteloven* is considered omnipresent in Arnakke's childhood. Yet, it is not geographically limited to Jante:

Jante was everywhere, it lay on the prairie in Canada, it sprawled over the U.S.A,
[and] it bloomed at Jevnaker and flourished in Jylland

(Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 74.)

A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks is replete with biblical language and religious references. Not only is *Janteloven* considered greater than the Ten Commandments (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 38), we are also told that 'with Confirmation they affirm Janteloven' (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 108). *Janteloven* is moreover used to claim neutrality for the benefit of a peaceful home (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 72), which Arnakke argues is tantamount to 'delivering the weak unto Molok' (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 72-73).⁴ An important element of *Janteloven*, which is often overlooked, is its relationship to class and normality: 'if you believe I will tell you about something rare or odd, it is only you who knows too little' (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 21). Arnakke, delves into his childhood memories of growing up in a small town, raised by a factory worker and struggling to make ends meet (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 11-18, 157-160) and his envy, fear, and hate for his "superiors" (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 22, 24, 51, 57). Importantly, *Janteloven* is pernicious:

³ All quotes from Norwegian works are translated by the article's author.

⁴ Molok features in the Old Testament where he was rendered child sacrifices.

It succeeds Jante to keep Jante down. How we suffered, and how we writhed! All are as big, but believes all others to be bigger. That is the town's foundation. It has become impossible for the individual to stand, - there passes too much time before he discovers that he is knocked down, if he ever discovers it. Most never do. *They* are the tireless toilers at the factory, the standardized and purposeful worker-type, the men that came and went three times a day for three human ages, until they could no longer walk.

(Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 66-67.)

***Janteloven* in analyses**

Thinking in an academic sense is a special and thoroughly cultivated bluff in the struggle for survival.

(Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 127.)

Janteloven creeps into an array of academic literature. It is important to distinguish between critical analysis of the concept, and what is, at best, a 'cultivated bluff' and common-sense approach. *Janteloven* is often used as an explanation for attitudes and behaviours without a critical examination of its actual nature. According to Newby (2009: 320), *Janteloven* is the cause of suspicion of 'those who dare to behave ostentatiously'. In this sense, it is related to the notion of crab bucket: 'Any [crab] that tries to get out gets pulled back' (Pratchett, 2009:217). Bromgard, Trafinow and Linn (2014: 375-376) use *Janteloven* as an explanation for Norwegians ascribing negative attributes to expressions of pride. Although their experiments seem to confirm differences in attitudes towards expressions of pride between Americans and Norwegians, their conclusions are undermined by the lack of attention paid to other potentially significant factors; age, geography, education, socio-economic status, et cetera. In other words, they use *Janteloven* as an easy explanation for something which has deeper, underlying factors.

Another analysis, which uses *Janteloven* as an analytical concept but fails to examine it more closely, is Avant and Knutsen (1993). Firstly, they put the cart before the horse when suggesting that *Janteloven* is the 'origins of the values and attitudes commonly shared by most Norwegians' (Avant and Knutsen, 1993: 452). *Janteloven*, as mentioned above, was only formulated in 1933, and can therefore not form part of the long-term formation of Norwegian values and attitudes, although it ties into the construction and reconstruction of these values from the interbellum and onwards. Furthermore, Avant and Knutsen (1993: 452-453) gloss over the malignant aspects of *Janteloven*, presenting it as merely a 'fear of individualism'. Avant and Knutsen (1993: 457) argue that *Janteloven* encourages

‘ethnocentricity and tends to support effort [sic] to exclude those who are different’. There is further injustice made towards *Janteloven* as an analytical concept, when Avant and Knutsen (1993: 454) summarize the negative impact of *Janteloven* on Espen Arnakke as resulting in a ‘spiteful and jealous person, and ends up a murderer’. This, I would argue, is a flawed reading of *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks*, as the narrative voice is retrospective, and involves Arnakke coming to terms with his past. As Arnakke himself says:

But I have put things behind me that have bothered and pained me, and chased me from place to place as a fugitive [...] You could easily come to believe that I mean I’ve always had it bad. Nothing could be more erroneous, but I had to drag out those things which in their context could help me [tell my story]. When I regard the misery around me, I can’t doubt that I belong to the happiest portion [...] And I tell the eternal unbelievable story that humanity grows.

(Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 351, 354, 358.)

A distinction needs to be made between what *Janteloven* is in *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks* and how it functions as an analytical concept. Avant and Knutsen (1993: 459) conflate *Janteloven* as ‘a helpful label for a set of values widely shared in Norway’ with an ‘[explanation of] some widely shared values’. *Janteloven* can only function as an explanation if we have a deeper understanding of what it is and how it is used.

A more rigorous analysis of *Janteloven* can be seen in Ahlness’ (2014) analysis of *Janteloven*’s presence in the works of Thorbjørn Egner, and how the books serve to reproduce *Janteloven* in younger generations. Thorbjørn Egner (1912-1990) was a Norwegian author/song-writer/lyricist whose works are considered an important part of the Norwegian cultural heritage (Bache-Wiig, 2014). Interestingly, Ahlness (2014: 547) suggests that *Janteloven* has shifted from being a source of self-deprecation to a source of pride and is ‘proclaimed throughout Denmark, Sweden and [Norway]’ (Ahlness, 2014: 548). Further, Ahlness perceptively points to the use of *Janteloven* as an expression communicating both a fear of individualism *and* an awareness of this fear, rather than *Janteloven* explaining these fears (Ahlness, 2014: 549). Ahlness (2014: 553) remarks that *Janteloven*, as an expression for fear of individualism, is not a given. As a communicative act, it is open to be re-interpreted. For example, if we look at the role of religion in *A Fugitive Crosses his Tracks*, we could question whether secularization impacts on the nature of *Janteloven* as a communicative act. As Arnakke points out ‘with Confirmation they assert *Janteloven*’ (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 108). With this in mind, we can turn to the changing contexts in which *Janteloven* is interpreted in Norway.

Norway – a breeding ground for *Janteloven*?

Examining the historical context will allow us to understand why *Janteloven* resonates so effectively with Norwegians. Eriksen (2009: 287) characterises Norway as a country where ‘national identity is taken for granted’, yet where has this sentiment come from? First of all, Norwegian nationalism was a powerful tool in the creation of a homogeneous identity in the 19th Century. Norwegian nationalism arose as a result of the Treaty of Kiel and the Norwegian attempt at self-determination in 1814 (Østerud, 1984: 55). An important element of this nationalism is that it was formulated by the upper echelons of Norwegian society: civil servants, academics and wealthy merchants (Østerud, 1984: 56; Glenthøj, 2008: 58, 106; Eriksen and Sørheim, 1994: 107). This resonates with Nairn’s argument that it is peripheric elites which have the means to challenge central powers (Nairn, 1981: 339-340; Özkirimli, 2000: 89-90) (in Norway’s case, this would be Sweden and Denmark). Norwegian nationalism was developed in a European context highly supportive of nationalism, infused with French patriotic liberalism and the German national romantic *Volkslied* (Eriksen and Sørheim, 1994: 79; Østerud, 1984: 13). Norwegian nationalism, as such, struggled with their definition of Norwegian citizenship: should it be based on *jus solis*⁵ or *jus sanguinis*⁶ (Kjelstadli, 2009: 60, 64; Glenthøj, 2008: 68-69).

One of the strongest tools in building Norwegian nationalism has been history. In Norway, ‘history became the handmaiden of nationalism’ and created a national consciousness (Seip, 1995: 42; Østerud, 1984: 58; Eriksen and Sørheim, 1994: 108). Combined with popular notions of the relationship between nature and people (Glenthøj, 2008: 98-99; Seip, 1995: 37; Østerud, 1984: 54-56; Montesquieu, 1777: 233-234, 236-237), Norway proved fertile soil for a nationalist project. This combination of history and nature in Norwegian nationalism resonates with Breuilly’s criteria for asserting nationalism: a nation with a unique character, the nation’s interests are of supreme importance, and the nation must be as independent as possible (Özkirimli, 2000: 104). The Norwegian struggle for independence in the 19th Century became a textbook case of nationalism (Østerud, 1984: 54), and the struggle for self-determination promoted sacrifice from all classes. Nobility was abolished in 1821, being Norwegian was equal to being noble; love for the country was inextricable tied to sacrifice, either through armed resistance against the Swedish or through donating wealth to the nation-building cause and economic protectionism (Glenthøj, 2008:

⁵ Based on territorial belonging

⁶ Based on descent or lineage

96, 105-106, 126-127; Seip, 1995: 38-39). This patriotism did eventually burn out, as it took its toll on the mercantile classes and their will to finance the nation-building project (Glenthøj, 2008: 124, 126-127). The appropriation of a peasant lifestyle by urban elites has influenced the Norwegian national identity since its inception (Avant and Knutsen, 1993: 451; Østerud, 1984: 66; Glenthøj, 2008: 105; Pausewang, 2001: 189), which has been used to justify a hegemonic ideal of egalitarianism. These points tie into Gellner's position that cultural homogenization, state centralization and education is linked to nationalism (Özkirimli, 2000: 130-132; Østerud, 1984: 40, 60; Eriksen and Sørheim, 1994: 108; Vike, Lidén and Lien, 2001: 19).

Seen in the light of Norwegian nationalism and nation-building, it appears clear that *Janteloven* would resonate with the national ideal. The focus in *Janteloven* on the supremacy of the collective can easily be moulded to fit the nationalist project. It is particularly in academia and education that this has its clearest impact. Children, through the centralized educational system, encounter the nationalist hegemony of *Janteloven* in a multitude of forms: the curricula in humanities, social sciences, and literature (Ahlness, 2014: 548; Avant and Knutsen, 1993: 455; Seip, 1995: 37, 41; Endestad, 2012: 118; Eriksen and Sørheim, 1994: 108; Lidén, 2001: 68-85). However, it is not the school in Jante which enforces *Janteloven*. Arnakke does not blame the school for *Janteloven*, but points to its affirmation in the Christian ritual of Confirmation (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 108). In other words, Sandemose believed people were socialized into *Janteloven* through religion, whereas the Norwegian nationalist project attempts to socialize children into it through education. With the reproduction of *Janteloven* through education, we can expect very different results over time in Norwegian society when taking into account changing curricula and educational policies and practices. Having given a brief overview of the context in which *Janteloven* was implanted, we can now turn to its presumed impact on society by examining its precepts.

***Janteloven* as symbolic power and structural censorship**

Janteloven as a vehicle of nationalism emphasises its unifying principle: the nation is greater than the individual. In sports, for example, a high-profile athlete must tread carefully when speaking of Norway, lest he/she says something that can be construed negatively: a 'catastrophically illegitimate act' (Henningsen, 2001: 130; Hofseth, 2013: 1). Elite athletes have to 'demonstrate their confidence in the ideology of equality' (Henningsen, 2001: 126).

Vike, Lidén and Lien (2001: 13) emphasises that the ambiguous term *likhet*⁷ is often used in the competition for resources. The ability to manipulate this ideology is manifest in public figures, which have to represent themselves as equal to all others in order to achieve credibility (Vike, Lidén and Lien, 2001: 23). The equality paradigm becomes a useful tool for those with the capital to wield it. In terms of Bourdieu's symbolic power, the agents capable of garnering recognition under the equality paradigm possess a symbolic capital which is proportional to that recognition (Bourdieu, 1991: 106). The reciprocal constitution of the representative and the group is supportive of *Janteloven* in the sense that the representative does not stand above the group, but claims to stand for them (Bourdieu, 1991: 106; Vike, Lidén and Lien, 2001: 16, 23). The inconspicuous effect of this process is that the symbolic power contained in the language of equality becomes misrecognized as natural, or random (Bourdieu, 1987: 14; Bourdieu, 1991: 116; Vike, Lidén and Lien, 2001: 24; Swartz, 1997: 89), thus increasing the symbolic power of those in dominant positions. This leads to what Gullestad (2002: 80) refers to as the 'inegalitarian subtext of Nordic egalitarianism'.

Janteloven resonates as a principle of classification, drawing sharp lines between the individual and the collective. Yet, because it does not define the characteristics of the group, it only defines punishable traits in individuals; it can be superimposed upon other markers of identity. In the case of Norway, *Janteloven* was appropriated from its literary context in order to strengthen a hegemonic ideology which gave primacy to the Norwegian nation-state. It also functions to annul other pertinent properties which might fragment the group (Bourdieu, 1991: 130). The equality paradigm also promotes aversion to conflict, where differences are sacrificed and hierarchies are concealed, in order to maintain peace (Pausewang, 2001: 180, 182; Gullestad, 2002: 83). This resembles Sandemose's representation of neutrality in the town of Jante: peace can only be achieved by sacrificing the weak (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 72)

After the Second World War, Norway saw a prolonged period of rebuilding and solidarity, and the creation of a social democratic welfare-state. The welfare-state, the equality paradigm and nationalism in Norway attempt to turn the nation-state into a 'universal reference point' (Vike, Lidén and Lien, 2001: 24; Pausewang, 2001: 171; Eriksen, 2009: 287), which is comparable to Anderson's imagined community (Anderson, 2006: 6). In recent years, this 'universal reference point' has been highlighted and strengthened through

⁷ Translating either to equality or similarity

citizenship ceremonies: highlighting national identity and loyalty to Norway as the cardinal identity for citizens (Hagelund, Kavli and Reegård, 2009). The provision of education is one arena in which the welfare-state seeks to impose this universal reference point, evidenced by the colloquialism by which the state education is known: *enhets skolen* – the unitary school (Lidén, 2001: 68). As pointed out by Bourdieu and Passeren:

[Teachers] constitute the most finished products of the system of production which it is, inter alia, their task to reproduce

(Bourdieu and Passeren. 1990: 197)

This is mirrored in Sandemose's (1999[1933]: 54) description of Rosenvinge, a primary school teacher: 'We feared Rosenvinge, but we did not hate him. He was good at teaching because he'd never been hooked on a pedagogical hook'. The only teacher, who was not seen to reproduce the inequalities in Jante, was the one who was not a finished product of the system. The role of education in reproducing *Janteloven* can, alternatively, be seen as a 'hidden curriculum'; hidden assumptions, values, and expectations embedded in educational institutions (Snyder, 1971: xii-xiii, 4-9). Healthcare is another area in which the state imposes a universal reference point; the normative representation of health leaves little room for deviation and is rarely challenged, much like hidden curricula (Pausewang, 2001: 171).

The domination of this paradigm establishes a form of structural censorship (Bourdieu, 1991: 138), which promises sanctions against dissenting values. The representative is not a manipulator of this structural censorship; rather he/she is the enforcer of it (Bourdieu, 1991: 138). The notion of equality, and its embodiment in *Janteloven*, is particularly pernicious because symbolic power 'can be exercised only if it is *recognized*, that is, misrecognized as arbitrary' and is defined by 'the field in which *belief* is produced and reproduced' (Bourdieu, 1991: 170 [emphasis in original]). It will be useful to examine some contextualized cases where *Janteloven*, through its symbolic power and structural censorship, can be identified.

'You shall not laugh at us' (Sandemose, 1999 [1933]: 65)

The 8th commandment of *Janteloven* warns you to be careful of laughing at someone. What is never clear, and thus opens it up to manipulation by those with symbolic power, is who you are not to laugh at. The threat of 'perhaps you believe I don't know something about *you*?' (Sandemose, 1999 [1933]: 75, 116) is the deterrent. Yet, comedy still exists in Norway.

Comedians acquire fame and fortune in Norway, as in many other countries. So how is *Janteloven* reproduced through comedy in Norway? As has been made clear earlier, I do not believe *Janteloven* is monolithic in Norwegian society and comedy, but there are times when *Janteloven* features as underlying element in acts. Comedians have the possibility of acquiring immense amounts of symbolic capital; allowing them to claim representation for large swathes of the population when performing satirical pieces, but also to punish social transgressions.

An example of the latter can be found in Lene Kongsvik Johansen's series *Kongsvik Ungdomsskole* and *Kongsvik videregående*⁸. A fictional series, it depicts characters who, in one way or another, violate social norms. The series encourages one to laugh at their pretensions (or in one case, health issues), as Johansen, acting out all the main characters (à la a Mike Myers or Eddie Murphy film), presents the viewer with different scenarios. The series features characters such as "Kine", the 16 year old who imagines herself to be the most popular person at the school; Birgitte, a lawyer who blames the school for her child's poor performance; Tuva, the 17 year old activist in human rights, animal rights, and politics. All of these characters, their behaviours, attitudes and beliefs, are ridiculed. We can see traces of *Janteloven*'s underlying these representations. The purpose of the series is to ridicule people who think they are "better" than everyone else, or more "capable", and to expose these people as false.

Another example, which has the potential to be interpreted in the same way, is the Ylvis brothers' music video making fun of Jan Egeland, a prominent Norwegian diplomat (see TVNorge 2012). While it starts off with a serious tone, it quickly descends into absurdity. Rather than ridiculing ostentatious or pretentious behaviour, such as the above example, it celebrates a public figure. It reinforces *Janteloven* in a different way. Firstly, the Ylvis brothers are targeting a real person rather than presenting stereotypes. This allows for a conflict between the Ylvis brothers, as ridiculers, and Egeland, their target. Subsequently, they are given the opportunity to display their symbolic power: a negative response by Egeland would allow the Ylvis brothers to invoke the punitive aspect of *Janteloven* ("who do you think you are?"), whereas a positive response allows for a reinforcement of both parties' symbolic power. The Ylvis brothers and Egeland do the latter by meeting on a talk-show (see NorwayESC2010, 2013) and laughing about the video together. This allows Egeland to

⁸ *Ungdomsskole* equals the first half of secondary school (13-15 years old), whereas *Videregående* equals the final years of secondary school (15-18 years old)

reinforce his belief in the ideology of equality by not taking offence. Bromgard, Trafinow and Linn (2014: 375) see humility as evidence of *Janteloven*. This interaction generates mutual constitution of symbolic power, as Egeland and the Ylvis brothers reinforce each other's work (one as "the United Nations Superhero man" (TVNorge, 2014: [01:07-01:10/04:25]), and the others as comedians).

These two examples offer insight into how traces of *Janteloven*, and the values it promotes, can be found in Norwegian comedy. Yet, they do not actually reflect the commandment 'you shall not laugh at us'. A recent example of this commandment manifesting in the defence of the nation is two articles from *The Guardian*. Michael Booth (2014a) wrote a lengthy piece pointing out the less salubrious elements of Nordic cultures, taking satirical pot-shots at each country in turn: 'describing Sweden as quasi-totalitarian, Norway as insular, Finland as taboo-ridden, or the Danes as jingoistic greenwashers' (Booth, 2014b). The interesting element is not that someone wrote a critical, and humorous, piece on the Nordic countries, but that each nation saw the need to respond⁹ (see Booth, 2014b). Responses included: 'Class matters a lot in Britain; Denmark is a more homogenous society'; 'It is difficult to take the author's criticisms seriously, bearing in mind that he comes from a country still reliant on a Victorian plumbing system' (comment from Finland); 'The article fitted so neatly into a very British tradition of slightly ethnocentric, but awfully shallow journalistic entertainment literature' (comment from Iceland); 'Michael Booth's account doesn't capture the overall sociocultural and political climate in this country' (comment from Norway); 'If one harbours deep suspicion of the state, prefers traditional gender roles and dislikes children's rights, then Sweden is indeed a place to avoid (comment from Sweden). These responses contain an undertone of *Janteloven*'s 8th commandment: You shall not laugh at us. We also see allusions to *Janteloven*'s threat: Do you think I do not know something about you?

The difference between the two first examples and the last one seems to be a matter of who is targeted by whom. Norwegian comedians may stereotype and ridicule pretentious characters, or create an absurd representation of a public figure, but these acts serve to reinforce the national ideology of equality. Kongsvik does so through the negative sanctioning of pretentious behaviour. The Ylvis brothers and Egeland reinforce the ideology through the Ylvis brothers humorously celebrating a Norwegian diplomat's peace-keeping

⁹ These were not official replies, but nationals from each country which can be seen as "representing" the nation.

work and Egeland accepting the ridicule: Norway is proud of having produced Egeland, and Egeland does not consider himself above a joke. This is similar to Henningsen's (2001) observations with regards to Norwegian athletes. These examples re-affirm the supremacy of equality. Booth, on the other hand, highlights inequalities and tarnishes the image of the unified, homogeneous Norwegian nation. Interestingly, the Norwegian representative's response to Booth was also a polemic against the current government: 'this government is launching deliberate attacks on collective and sustainable solutions' (Bolsø in Booth, 2014b). Bolsø's response is both an attack against Booth's representation of Norway, but also the anti-community image of the current government. This is, in my opinion, an interesting mobilisation of symbolic capital. Bolsø attempts to increase her symbolic power, and her capacity to represent Norway, by attacking the current government as un-Norwegian. This draws us back to Bourdieu (1991: 106): reinforcing the equality paradigm grants the agent more symbolic power with which to wield it. On this note, we can progress to a second set of commandments.

You shall not believe you *are* anything; you shall not imagine you are better than *us*; you shall not believe you are more than *us*; you shall not believe you are good for anything

'It fortunes Jante to keep Jante down'¹⁰ (Sandemose, 1999[1933]: 66): This statement can be interpreted in multiple ways. Hofseth (2013) argues *Janteloven* is one of the reasons Norwegian athletes, specifically Petter Northug¹¹, are successful. It keeps their pride and arrogance in check and keeps them attentive to their limitations. This makes them assess opponents more realistically, allowing them to coordinate their performance better (Hofseth, 2013). This is an interesting contrast to Henningsen (2001), who presents statements from young elite-level football players which indicate that extreme confidence is essential to their performance. The interesting paradox from Henningsen's perspective is how this attitude of extreme confidence cannot be taken out of the field of sports. Henningsen (2001) attributes some of Ole Gunnar Solskjær's¹² popularity to the public's perception of him being the same down to earth local boy from Kristiansund. As stated in previous sections, conforming to the ideology of equality increases a person's symbolic power and grants them recognition as representatives of a group. Solskjær's stellar career is redefined as the nation's achievement:

¹⁰ My translation here is debatable, as the Norwegian text can be translated in multiple ways. The original reads 'Det lykkes Jante å holde Jante nede'.

¹¹ World-class cross-country skier

¹² An internationally renowned football player who used to play for Manchester United

a knighthood cements his Norwegian identity, and allows the nation to claim him as one of their own (provided he does not consider himself above the group).

Janteloven is founded on the supremacy of the collective. This is why it comes as no surprise that *Janteloven* is meant to benefit society, to the detriment of the individual if necessary. The welfare state is organized around the idea of equality and the tensions between “*yter eller nyter*” – contributing or benefitting. Everyone benefits from everyone contributing to the best of their ability, the welfare state mantra goes. The commandments that form the title for this section become tantamount to commands that you do not deserve to benefit more than anyone else. This can be interpreted as no job deserving more pay than another. Evidence of this attitude can be found in the struggle for wage equality and the low presence of wage disparity in Norway. For comparison’s sake, we can contrast wage differentials between state employees/civil servants, parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, and the prime minister in Norway and the UK. Table 1 presents the different wages.

| | Norway | UK |
|--|--------------|----------|
| State employee/civil servant¹³ | kr 509,700 | £24,380 |
| Member of parliament | kr 865,100 | £67,060 |
| Cabinet minister | kr 1,234,100 | £134,565 |
| Prime minister | kr 1,519,700 | £142,500 |

Table 1 - Wages in the public sector in Norway and the UK (SSB, 2014; Stortinget 2014; parliament.uk, 2014; ONS, 2013)

A useful tool to clarify the relationship between these wages is to compare ratios (see table 2). What we can see immediately is that there is an enormous difference between the wages: in the UK, the Prime Minister earns almost six times more than the average civil servant; in Norway, the Prime Minister earns almost three times more than the average civil servant. On a large scale, we can also compare the GINI coefficients¹⁴ of the two countries: Norway has a score of 0.27 and the UK has a score of 0.38 (World Bank, 2015a). Furthermore, the Palma ratio¹⁵ for Norway (average of 1.93 between 2004-2013) and the UK

¹³ This is the average wage for this group.

¹⁴ The GINI coefficient indicates wage equality sensitive to the middle deciles; lower values indicate higher equality

¹⁵ The Palma ratio measures income equality between the top 10percent and the bottom 40percent; values closer to 1 indicate high equality (For more on the Palma, see Cobham and Sumner, 2013)

(average of 5.07 between 2003-2013) indicates higher equality in Norway (SSB, 2015; HMRC, 2015). This would imply that there is more wage equality in Norway than in the UK.

| | Norway | UK |
|--|--------|------|
| Member of parliament : State employee/civil servant | 1.69 | 2.75 |
| Cabinet minister : State employee/civil servant | 2.42 | 5.52 |
| Prime minister : State employee/civil servant | 2.98 | 5.84 |

Table 2- Wage differential by ratio

The essential question to ask now is whether *Janteloven* has anything to do with the wage equality. If *Janteloven* is significant in the development of equal wages (and not valuing any citizen above another) there should be high wage equality in the nations where *Janteloven*, or social rules that are similar to *Janteloven*, is considered to be strongly present. To examine this line of reasoning, we can examine the GINI coefficient in a selection of European nations (see image 1).

a relatively equal level at a national level, it does not explain it (Rogstad, 2013: 1). The former government in Norway worked hard to limit high wages in upper management positions in state-owned companies (NTB, 2012a; NTB, 2012b), but only Norwegian property-tycoon Olav Thon, for example, point blank refused to pay his CEO more than two million kroner, stating that wages above that does not impact on the quality of the person employed (Aftenposten, 2011). In summary, one could argue that *Janteloven* plays a part in Norwegian wage equality, but the effect is not uniform.

Conclusion – you shall not believe you know more than us; you shall not believe you are wiser than us; you shall not believe you can teach us anything

It is perhaps with a sense of irony that the final heading of this article reiterates the clauses of *Janteloven* dealing with knowledge. Firstly, because this article presumes to increase our understanding of *Janteloven*, and through that expose its flaws as an explanatory tool. Furthermore, by de-mystifying *Janteloven*, we counteract the myth of egalitarianism. *Janteloven*, as a specific concept, is tied to *A Fugitive Crosses his Tracks*, and our understanding of *Janteloven* has to be founded on an understanding of this novel. This is where previous literature has generally been lacking; they make assumptions as to what *Janteloven* is. This is derived from a common-sense understanding of the concept, it does not allow for any meaningful analysis. If *Janteloven* is to advance as an explanatory tool, the criteria and conditions that allow *Janteloven* to exist need to be examined critically.

Firstly, it is related to class: *Janteloven* did not apply to the middle or upper classes in the town of *Jante*. In other words, we can view it as a tool to impose values and beliefs on the marginalized. In Gramscian terms, we can understand it as a form of hegemony (Femia, 1987: 1). Secondly, *Janteloven* operates in conjunction with religion. At the time of Sandemose's writing, this would more than likely imply a Protestant ethic, as is also apparent throughout the book. Thirdly, the novel emphasises the universality of *Janteloven*. Thus it is not tied to an explicit geographic area, contrary to previous analyses. These factors highlight the fluidity of *Janteloven*. What seems to have become the case is that, in the Nordic countries, *Janteloven* has become shorthand for an idea. This shorthand, as Ahlness argues, expresses an attitude towards individualism, but does not explain these attitudes. Viewing *Janteloven* as an expression means its meaning is contextualized. This removes it from the roots in Sandemose's work, and its meaning can be reinterpreted and shifted.

By contextualising *Janteloven* we can see how it is manipulated in different contexts. In the nation-building project, *Janteloven* offers a useful tool in promoting homogeneity and egalitarianism. What we should not lose sight of is that *Janteloven* does not have any agency: it is merely a device utilized by an elite with the power to shape the field of belief. By seeing how *Janteloven* is superimposed on a context of national/cultural homogenisation and retrospectively used to explain aspects of Norwegian history (such as the abolishment of nobility in 1821), we can pierce the veil and focus on the elites which have shaped Norwegian nationalism.

Using Bourdieu's notions of symbolic power and structural censorship, we can increase our understanding of the 'inegalitarian subtext of Nordic egalitarianism' (Gullestad, 2002). The equality paradigm allows a representative of this paradigm to acquire symbolic power when acting on behalf of the paradigm. When applying this to *Janteloven* we find that agents can manipulate *Janteloven* to critique those who supposedly violate *Janteloven* and the equality paradigm, thus rendering them greater recognition as representatives of the collective. Effectively, agents can acquire significant symbolic capital, which can be translated into other forms of capital, through this process. For comedians and football players, for example, it can increase their fame and popularity. *Janteloven* in these contexts becomes a form of structural censorship, which negatively sanctions certain behaviour. Comedians can stereotype behaviour and encourage negative sanctions towards such behaviour, or the comedian and "victim" can mutually reinforce their symbolic power through their interaction. Egeland takes no offence and recognizes their skill, and by extension their representation of him, making him appear humble and down to earth. The Ylvis brothers benefit from this recognition and their representation of Egeland, although absurd, is legitimized. Yet, this is only available to them through their already significant symbolic power: Egeland as a recognized statesman, and the Ylvis brothers as comedians.

Despite *Janteloven*'s utility in analysing symbolic power, structural censorship, and its role in nationalism, it cannot be operationalized on an economic level. Because the concept is socially constituted and contextualized, it does not lend itself as a causal explanation for wage equality. As was shown, countries where the expression *Janteloven* would probably not be recognized have similar wage equality to countries where *Janteloven* is considered omnipresent. *Janteloven* cannot be operationalized as a factor in economic analyses, or, as attempted by Bromgaard, Trafinow and Linn (2014), psychology. *Janteloven* is too fluid and contextually dependent to offer meaningful answers. Primarily, as in

Bromgaard, Trafinow and Linn's study, it only serves to conceal other factors. Again, this adds to *Janteloven's* pernicious and nebulous nature; it reinforces the notion that underlying factors (such as class, education, age, et cetera.) are natural or random: Thus allowing powerful agents to oppress less powerful groups. By quoting *Janteloven*, agents can conceal their own motives, and simultaneously conceal the source of their power whilst reinforcing it through the paradigm of equality.

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