

**Setting the Agenda: Exporting Norwegian Norms through the Nobel
Peace Prize**

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Dr. Christine Ingebritsen, Scandinavian Studies
University of Washington

Maren Anderson Johnson
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International media erupted when the Nobel Peace Prize Committee announced in October 2009 that newly elected President Barack Hussein Obama was the selected recipient for the prize, which is revered as one of the world's most prestigious. The furry of posts on social media sites, articles from international newspapers and general attitudes of dumbfoundedness all centered around one central question: what are the criteria used by the Nobel Peace Prize committee that deem an individual deserving of such a high prize?

When this question was asked in conjunction with President Obama's award, this question seemed to suggest that many deemed President Obama unqualified to receive this prize because. Many argued that he had not produced *results* for the high promises he made on the campaign trail. He had only been in office for nine months when the decision came down that Obama would be the prize's recipient. There was no *evidence* that his mission to engage in peaceful dialog in the Middle East or deal with nuclear proliferation would ever come to fruition because he had held the highest office in the United States for less than a year.

International commentary and analysis of the Obama Peace Prize failed to execute one final step to garner a better understanding of this choice: few asked the members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee why they chose Obama. The furry of criticism centered around holding Obama to the norms, values and attitudes of global politics, a system where results are the linchpin. Norway, however, does not uphold these international norms. In this paper, I will argue that the Peace Prize acts as a vehicle for Norway to disseminate its norms and international agenda, which often

differs from mainstream international ideas. The analysis of two peace prize recipients, Wangari Maathai and President Barack Obama, will hopefully demonstrate how the Peace Prize is used to foster new attitudes and norms around international issues such as human rights, ecology, democracy and peace. The Nobel Peace Prize gives a global stage to Norway to influence the international agenda and express a commitment and support for certain values and norms.

History

To understand current character of the Nobel Peace Prize, one must return to the history where one can find clues about the norms and values associated with the modern awarding of the prize. Alfred Nobel left his estate to award 5 prizes, 4 of which are awarded in Stockholm. At the time that Nobel established the prizes, Norway and Sweden were still in a Union with each other. Nobel had an extensive network of connections throughout Norway and Sweden including one prominent Norwegian: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, an avid nationalist actively involved in trying to dissolve the union between Sweden and Norway. Even though Nobel never saw the dissolution of the union between the two countries, one can assume he had admiration or respect for the work of figures like Bjørnson who approached the quest for national independence through non-violent messages. In his will, Nobel left no explanation for why he selected Norway to house the Peace Prize. But Nobel was fortuitous in giving the Peace Prize to Norway since the dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden in 1905 is one of the few peaceful separations in history. In the modern era of the nation-state,

Norway has sculpted itself as a leader and innovator in peace and conflict resolution, making Oslo the natural home for the annual prize.

The aftershocks of the Obama Peace Prize resulted in furious study into the guidelines required for someone to receive a Nobel Peace Prize. When one returns to Alfred Nobel's will and the original intent he had in establishing these prizes, one finds that Nobel left ambiguous guidelines. He believed a recipient should be someone who: "in the preceding year have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind" (Sejersted). There are three important observations to note in regard to this established criterion.

First, the process of constructing the Nobel Peace Prize selection committee is unique. Five individuals sit on the committee and all are appointed by the Norwegian parliament, the Stortinget. Members are elected to the committee for six year terms with the option for renewal. Most notably, the composition of the committee should loosely reflect the proportional representation of the political parties in the Stortinget, which means that the members of the committee mirror the moods of the political climate in Norway. The Nobel Committee is not supervised by the Stortinget, merely closely related to it.

This leads to a second important observation; the members of the Nobel Committee are political appointees, which means their membership on the committee is highly political as are the agendas they bring to the table when selecting the year's nominee. The members of the committee, as stated above, are reflective of the current political climate, values, attitudes and norms in Norway. Therefore, the decision-makers

carry with them the political agendas and moods swirling in Norway when selecting the recipient.

Third, since the mission or guiding criteria for the Nobel Committee is fairly boundless, Nobel did not discriminate about the merger of politics and the prize. Norway's unique social and political policies and norms make the relationship between politics and the Peace Prize even more complicated. As a country with 4.8 million inhabitants and a thriving social democracy, Norway's political system has been characterized by some as an anomaly because of their progressive stances on social welfare and the environment. After centuries of being one of Europe's poorest countries, the discovery of oil in the Norwegian Sea has drastically altered Norway's economics. However, in this period of great growth, the government has maintained its commitment to social welfare for each citizen. Oil profits are deposited into a national trust fund to ensure that the expansive social programs such as healthcare and welfare continue even after the oil boom. As money is garnered from oil resources, the Norwegian government has also maintained a commitment to discourage its citizens from overconsumption of oil. Gas prices waiver between nine and ten dollars a gallon to encourage citizens to use public transportation instead of private vehicle ownership.

Norway has a history of peace, of progressive norms and the Peace Prize is a tool for them to export or present these norms to the international community. By studying the mission of the Nobel Peace Prize committee as outlined by Alfred Nobel, the process of composing the committee, its members and some of the universal social norms of the Norwegian state provides a base to begin to deepen the study of the Peace Prize as a

vehicle of international prominence for Norway. Alfred Nobel bestowed a gift upon Norway by giving it the Peace Prize, but with it comes the challenge to select candidates, to support norms and ideas that in turn work for the betterment of mankind. I argue the Nobel Committee searches for candidates who espouse values similar to Norway in order to promote norms of ecological protection, human rights, democracy and peace and become ambassadors of peace and goodness for mankind.

Professor Wangari Maathai

In 2004, the Nobel Committee announced that it would award that year's prize to Professor Wangari Maathai. Professor Maathai founded the Greenbelt movement in Kenya to, as the Greenbelt Movement webpage says, "...work with women to improve their livelihoods by increasing their access to resources like firewood for cooking and clean water" (The Greenbelt Movement). Maathai, who died this past September, was a visionary and very progressive in her home nation of Kenya. In her acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, she said:

At first, I was overwhelmed. The Peace Prize is an honor like no other. I was surprised because I had no idea that anyone was listening. I quickly realized that although I had been given this great honor, the honor was not just for me. It was also for the thousands of women who planted 30 million trees throughout Kenya as part of the Green Belt Movement. It was also for those who worked to bring back democracy to Kenya through peaceful means, which we did in 2002.

I believe the Nobel committee was sending a message that protecting and restoring the environment contributes to peace; it is peace work (The Greenbelt Movement).

Maathai's comments almost fit perfectly with key norms promoted by the Norwegian government. First, her mention of ecological preservation mirrors the Norwegian desire to inspire new attitudes toward the natural world. Maathai inspired women to plant over 30 million trees in Kenya as a way to both improve the ecology of the country, but also as a way to promote the human rights and self-empowerment of women. The Greenbelt Movement not only improved the ecology of Kenya, but inspired a generation of women to view themselves as participants in preserving their communities. In turn, by giving these women a value, they gained a new sense of self-appreciation and consideration for the natural world.

Second, Maathai recognizes the importance of achieving democracy through peaceful means, which mirrors Norway's struggle to dissolve the union with Sweden. She articulates her belief that through peaceful democracy, mankind can achieve greatness, which for her includes respect of the environment; to live peacefully, one must live in communion with the natural world.

Maathai's project and her speech from the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in 2004 sounds Norwegian. She espouses support for human rights, democracy, peace and communion with nature. The Nobel Committee endowed her with their blessing by awarding the prize to her, signaling that Maathai's Greenbelt Movement promotes values, which the Nobel selection committee deems important for achieving for greatness in mankind. The Norwegian Nobel Committee cast a vote of confidence and support in Wangari Maathai by bestowing upon her the role of honorary Norwegian.

President Barack Obama

After examining Wangari Maathai, she seems an obvious candidate for the Nobel Prize, but turning to Barack Obama, as previously shown in this piece inspires many different emotions. Giving the prize to Barack Obama in 2009 shone the spotlight on Norway as an active, controversial norm setter. Whereas Maathai had accomplished significant changes in Kenya through a grassroots movement, Obama raised \$750 million to run in the most expensive presidential race ever in the United States. Yes, he won the election. But, he had not planted 30 million trees in Kenya or even began enacting legislation on universal healthcare, or stricter international nuclear arms treaties, or ended the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, actions which Norway has not supported except through NATO in Afghanistan. Were these just talking points to inspire the base of voters who were so unhappy for eight years under the leadership of George W. Bush or was there more to Obama? These major, looming questions had yet to be answered.

That is why the Nobel Committee selected Barack Obama, because they wanted to support the values, norms and attitudes he articulated in his run for president and in his first nine months in office. The selection of Barack Obama was highly political. Norwegian politicians were never a fan of George W. Bush and some interpreted Obama's selection as backlash and reaffirmation of the American public's decision. However, the decision to honor Obama stems deeper, I believe. The Prize was intended to place some international power and support behind Obama's politics, which in many way mirror Norwegian social and political values. Universal health care, the end of

combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and improved international dialog and cooperation are issues Norwegians and Americans agree upon. In his Peace Prize acceptance speech, Obama sculpted a new role for the United States in the global community, one that continues to uphold the regulations established by the international community:

I believe the United States of America must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war. That is what makes us different from those whom we fight. That is a source of our strength. That is why I prohibited torture. That is why I ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed. And that is why I have reaffirmed America's commitment to abide by the Geneva Conventions. We lose ourselves when we compromise the very ideals that we fight to defend. And we honor -- we honor those ideals by upholding them not when it's easy, but when it is hard ("Obama's Nobel Remarks").

Obama articulates a reinvigoration of the United States as an international leader with a new commitment to cooperation and peace instead of unilateral actions of war. These are revolutionary messages from an American president and by awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize, the committee is trying to use its influence to support Obama's continued work on this mission. The Nobel Committee is trying to use its influence to support Obama's work which they saw as integral to promoting the greatness of mankind.

Conclusion

After the Nobel Committee announced that Obama was the 2009 recipient of the prize, the UK's leading newspaper the *Guardian* published an article examining Norway's approach of evaluating and selecting Peace Prize candidates. Gwadlyns Fouché

writes, “This...shows the committee’s determination to have a major impact on international affairs and political processes”. Fouché highlights a key component of the Nobel Committee’s selection process—agenda setting. As the world annually turns toward Oslo for the announcement of the year’s recipient, this is the chance for Norway to insert itself as a central figure in international dialog and highlight issues, values and norms they deem important for the international community.

Often, the values that the Nobel Committee focuses on reflect Norwegian norms, not out of selfishness, but out of strong belief in ideals such as: social welfare, ecological consciousness, human rights and peace. In Norway, these are ideas steeped in tradition from its history of union with Sweden, its economic stress and eventual economic gain. These are not radical values, but they are norms that the world has struggled to integrate and Norway continues to refine its commitment to these values. Norway uses the Nobel Peace Prize as a tool to export the values at the core of its democracy and support projects that honor these values throughout the world.

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