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Metahistory as public history: on introducing metahistorical perspectives in events about events¹

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What constitutes an event? When does it start, and when does it end? To what extent are events the drivers of historical change in and of themselves, and to what extent do they merely derive from underlying causal structures? And more importantly for this special issue, are these the sorts of questions with which practitioners of public history should grapple? In this article, I will argue that the answer to the last question is yes, and suggest that what we may call ‘metahistorical perspectives’ can greatly enrich the practice of public history. In Hayden White’s influential work *Metahistory*, the word is meant to describe the ‘deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively ‘historical’ explanation should be’.² It can, however, also be considered a synonym for *historiography*, that is, the history of history-writing. This comes closer to the intended meaning of the word in this piece, where I take a ‘metahistorical perspective’ in public history to mean any way of relating to the past which brings attention to how ‘history’ is not a closed and finite object of which we can learn, speak and write, but rather a contested and open-ended space which is created and altered through these processes of learning, speaking and writing. A metahistorical perspective can thus relate

¹ I would like to sincerely thank the editors of this special issue for all their guidance and helpful comments along the way, and also the various anonymous reviewers for their valuable input. Lastly, I would like to thank my former colleagues at the National Library of Norway, especially Lars Haga Raavand and Eline Skaar Kleven, who were instrumental in the planning and execution of the public events described in this paper.

² Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (London, 1975), p. xi.

to the practice of professional historians and the question of how history is written, but it can also relate more broadly to memory politics and struggles over the meaning and importance of the past.

It is the practical application of this latter version of a metahistorical approach which is explored in this article, through the example of a series of public events organised at the National Library of Norway in 2019 and 2020. The events all focused on important historical events, and were inspired by micro-history, the pedagogical theories of Lev Vygotsky, and William H. Sewell Jr.'s theory of historical events.³ The historical events discussed were the accident at the Aleksander Kielland oil rig in the North Sea in 1980, the first wave of Pakistani immigration to Norway in 1971, the German invasion in 1940, the crisis settlement between the Norwegian labour- and farmer's parties in 1935 and finally the demonstrations against the construction of the Alta dam and hydroelectric powerplant in 1981. The public events took place over the course of more than one year and were planned one by one - the almost reverse chronological order was thus unintended. While metahistorical perspectives were not always explicitly brought out in the on stage conversation between experts, they were used actively in the introductions framing the public events, and they formed an integral part of programming and planning. With that as background I will first give an overview of Sewell's theory of events as transformation of structures, before a brief sketching of the planning and institutional context of the public events, before finally describing the events and offering some concluding remarks.

I

It would be an exaggeration to say that a range of different theories of events exists within the field of history. In the chapter 'A Theory of the Event' from his celebrated collection *The Logic of History*, William H. Sewell Jr. observes that in 'the traditional division of labor in the human sciences, events were relegated to history, which specialized precisely in recounting the unique

³ William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2009)

and contingent.’⁴ According to Sewell, this emphasis on contingency further meant that historical events were hardly ever the subject of theorization. When in the 1970s, social historians, of whom Sewell counts himself one, began defining themselves in opposition to the previously dominant current of narrative political history, ‘they consequently disdained the study of events’.⁵ Fernand Braudel’s famous notion that events are ‘surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs’, elegantly encapsulates this view, but Sewell finds an antidote outside of the field of history, namely in the work of the structural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins.⁶ Akin to the historian Gabrielle Spiegel’s efforts to bridge gaps between theories of structure and theories of individual action,⁷ Sewell finds in Sahlins an attempt to ‘transform the unequal and radical *opposition* between structure and event ... into a more balanced *relation*’.⁸ This means that historical events can go from being moments in time that change the course of history *on their own*, to being incorporated into structuralist accounts of how society and history actually work. According to Sahlins in Sewell’s retelling then, events are “transformations of structure, and structure is the cumulative outcome of past events’.⁹

This then becomes the starting point for Sewell’s own theory of the event, in which he contends both that ‘social relations are profoundly governed by underlying social and cultural structures’ and ‘a proper understanding of the role of events in history must be founded on a

⁴ Sewell Jr., *Logics of History*, p. 197.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Volume 1* (Berkeley, 1995), p. 21.

⁷ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (Oxford, 2004).

⁸ Sewell Jr., *Logics of History*, p. 199.

⁹ Sewell Jr., p. 199.

concept of structure'.¹⁰ Even though social structures go through constant processes of revision that entail both change and reproduction, there are also moments of accelerated change, writes Sewell. According to him, these moments are 'initiated and carried forward by historical events.'¹¹ The example used by Sewell of an event which 'touches off a chain of occurrences that durably transforms previous structures and practices', is the storming of the Bastille in Paris on 14 July 1789.¹² The temporal aspect of this momentous event is important, as it took several days of political manoeuvrings before the event in Paris came to be seen as an act in support of the forming of a 'National Assembly' by Third Estate delegates to the *Estates General* in Versailles on 17 June. As Sewell writes, 'some period of time elapses between the initial rupture and the subsequent structural transformation', thus emphasising how the history of an event stretches not only backwards in time, to the structural conditions making it possible, but also forwards to the interpretation of the event after it has happened.¹³ According to Sewell, it took until 23 July for an event that had first been greeted as a disaster by some of the members of the National Assembly, to become firmly established as a 'legitimate revolution'.¹⁴

One thing we can take from the structuralist and somewhat abstract notion of events as transformations of structures, is the more basic point that the meaning and importance of an event is not inscribed in it as it happens. Rather, as with the storming of the Bastille, historical actors *interpret* events and fight metaphorical battles over which interpretation ought to be the valid one, thus giving meaning to the event *post facto*. This process begins immediately, and although the first moments are certainly the most important, it really has no determinate

¹⁰ Sewell Jr., p. 226.

¹¹ Sewell Jr., p. 226.

¹² Sewell Jr., p. 227.

¹³ Sewell Jr., p. 236.

¹⁴ Sewell Jr., p. 243.

endpoint. History will always be revised and reconsidered. Events also stretch backwards in time, to the slower changes in society's underlying structures that become the conditions of possibility for the event taking place at all. In combination, these two perspectives can help lift discussions of important historical events in various public history activities from the level of mundane chronicles to that of exhilarating encounters with history as metahistory.

II

Ludmilla Jordanova, in her work on public history, has noted that it is 'hard to go against the grain when it comes to the use of major events as historical markers, as these are constantly affirmed in arenas over which historians have no control'.¹⁵ Instead of going against the grain then, the public events team at the National Library of Norway, of which I formed part for two years, embarked in 2019 on a project to create public events about major events. The reason for choosing historical events as the topic of public events also has a pedagogical aspect. The Danish historian Bernard Eric Jepsen has previously brought the ideas of history didactics to bear on history outside of the school system, and the pedagogical thinking involved in history didactics in a school setting are relevant also for the planning and execution of public history events.¹⁶ The social psychologist Lev Vygotsky's notion of a 'zone of proximal development' is considered an important tool by many pedagogic practitioners, and it is related to a technique known as 'scaffolding', in which a teacher is conscious of how new knowledge always builds on previous knowledge.¹⁷ It is impossible to know in advance the knowledge that audience members at a public event will possess, of course, but it is nonetheless possible to use the idea

¹⁵ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, Third (London, 2019), pp. 155–56.

¹⁶ Anne Brædder, «Public History in Scandinavia: Uses of the Past», i *What is Public History Globally?* (London, 2019), p. 123.

¹⁷ Roger Säljö, *Læring i praksis - Et sosiokulturelt perspektiv*, 11. utg. (Oslo, 2017), pp. 48–75.

of a zone of proximal development to guide the framing and set-up of a public event in such a way as not to overwhelm the audience with ideas and perspectives that may all be brand new.

Using the well-known category of ‘historical events’, as well as using specific events that are themselves familiar to the audience, is one way of doing this. It provides a way of inviting the general public into a space in which more advanced, metahistorical discussions of what actually constitutes an event and their place within historical development can take place.

Instead of announcing a seminar on history and theory, however, the metahistorical perspective was implicit, in what at first glance appeared to be a more traditional approach to famous events. The underpinning theory of events as transformations of structures was not explicitly communicated to the audience, but since detailed accounts of important events tend to be popular, a microhistorical approach was suggested in the framing of the events, with variations over the phrase “but what really happened?” being used to some effect.¹⁸ In the Italian tradition, microhistory is meant to upset or challenge great narratives through an attention to detail,¹⁹ but there is also an Anglo-American approach which emphasizes the importance of narrative for an understanding of history.²⁰ It is especially this latter approach to microhistory which is useful for public history, but the Italian tradition can also be a fruitful starting point for public history practitioners as a way of introducing reflections of a metahistorical and more theoretical nature, . Once we get into the details of historical events, and make honest attempts at uncovering all the different factors at play, including the element of contingency, neither

¹⁸ Consider also the wave of podcasts about historical events, such as NRK’s *Hele historien* in Norway and many more.

¹⁹ Francesca Trivellato, «Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?», *California Italian Studies* 2, nr. 1 (2011). For an example, see Lucy Riall, *Under the Volcano: Empire and Revolution in a Sicilian Town* (Oxford, 2013).

²⁰ Giovanni Levi, 'On Microhistory', in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Peter Burke ed.) (Oxford: 1991), pp. 93–113.

'grand narratives' nor received wisdom tend to hold up to scrutiny. Bringing attention to this through the use of microhistory can be considered a metahistorical approach in public history.

III

The events thus built on already-existing ideas and beliefs about history, but at the same time they aimed to challenge these beliefs by adopting a metahistorical approach to what constitutes an event and how its consequences are decided, inspired by Sewell's theories. Crucial in the methodology described here is the role of the person or persons, who work to programme public events, and who actually plan every aspect of it. This was the position that I held when these events were organised, and the tasks involved range from selecting the topic, panellists and moderator, writing the texts for the programme and advertising material, to giving an introduction at the events themselves. Hence, as far as the relationship between professional historians and the public goes, the public events officer can serve as a sort of go-between figure, moving the delivery of history away from the 'top-down' approach with its 'one-way communication' to the audience that so often characterises the public history practice of academic historians.²¹ Someone working with public history full time can offer a remedy against such limitations, without necessarily moving towards a 'bottom-up approach'. As in this case, they can be trained historians themselves and given the current academic job market within the field of history, historians in need of a job are not necessarily hard to come by. With a job description that focuses on the creation of events for the public, the role as public events officer allows them to work within a different conceptual framework from most historians employed within academe, and they can thus function as a bridge between the public and academic historians.

²¹ Laura King og Gary Rivett, 'Engaging people in making history: impact, public engagement and the world beyond the campus', *History Workshop Journal* 80, nr. 1 (2015), pp. 218–33.

The metahistorical element was not always brought out explicitly in the on-stage conversations, but the perspective was emphasised in the programme texts announcing the events both in print, online and in social media, and in the short introduction provided by a National Library staff member at the beginning of the event. The various historical events and panellists were introduced differently for each event, of course, but a standard sentence always followed in the program listing, and was expanded upon and paraphrased in the introduction on the night of the event. This framing of a public event matters for how it is experienced by the audience, and it can be a good tool for encouraging certain kinds of reflections without necessarily spelling everything out. The accompanying standard sentence read:

Under the heading ‘The event’, The National Library invites a closer look at important events in Norwegian history. What were the consequences of these events, and why do some events keep having repercussions outside of their own time? (author translation)

The importance of framing a conversation in this way should not be underestimated, as it opens up a new space for reflection both for the participants on-stage, and for the audience as they engage in their own interpretative work of what they have just seen. Questions from the audience can lead to unexpected interactions and open up new perspectives for audience members and panellists alike. Due to the size of these events, however, and the fact that they were live streamed to an even larger audience, we opted not to include a Q&A within the time slot which was kept to under an hour. A Q&A session *can* be an enriching experience for the whole audience, but it would be naïve not to acknowledge that quite the opposite can also be the case. Some individuals can take the opportunity to hold rambling monologues of lesser interest to those in attendance, and regardless of the content of audience remarks, certain demographics do tend to be overrepresented within the group of those who regularly raise their

hands in Q&A sessions. The most inclusive events may therefore not necessarily be the ones who open for the most audience participation. These events did not have Q&A sessions, and the element of possible surprise therefore lay in where the on-stage conversation among especially invited guests might lead, rather than in what members of the audience might contribute. This type of event is thus not a 'bottom-up' approach to public history, but it is nonetheless different from for instance a public lecture. The point of an on-stage conversation, as opposed to, for instance, an article, can be to bring together people from different fields and professions that don't usually interact. Part of the task when dealing with professional historians, is to make them understand that some things might be left unsaid, and that they don't have to 'get through' every aspect of a topic in the way they would normally feel obliged to should they be teaching a course or giving a lecture.

Another important person is the moderator or chair of the event, who not only has to keep time and guide the conversation through various pre-decided topics, but also to leave space for the unexpected and unplanned. We often opted for a journalist in this role since they, much like professional historians, are trained in seeing a given topic from different angles, but unlike them are less likely to have 'skin in the game' with regards to the interpretation of an event. Deciding on a suitable moderator, and getting that person involved in the planning as early as possible can be a good idea. They will be the person who ultimately has to execute whatever plans might be decided upon, and it helps if they are part of the planning process themselves. Ideally, the attendees should be invited by the public events officer as a representative of the organisers, but discuss their contribution and intended role in the panel with the moderator. The moderator and the public events officer can then devise an open-ended plan for which topics to go through in which order, and which attendees to bring in at which point of the conversation.

In what follows, I will provide short descriptions of a series of public events about important historical events in the modern history of Norway, which were programmed with a

metahistorical perspective in mind. As will be clear, the events all addressed different types of historical events, meaning that different metahistorical aspects were emphasised in each. More than a ‘series’, which may imply a finite set of dates, these events about events were set up as a ‘concept’ entitled ‘Hendelsen’, meaning simply ‘the event’. With one exception, these events were held at the National Library of Norway in Oslo, open to the general public free of charge, and live streamed via the National Library’s website and social media. Apart from counting the attendees in the physical space and the number of viewers on different platforms, no attempt was made to research either the demographic of the audience or their reactions.

IV

The very first event within the umbrella of this concept focused on the 1980 Aleksander Kielland accident.²² Aleksander Kielland was a residential platform for oil workers named after the Norwegian writer. It was located on the Ekofisk field in the southern part of North Sea, some 300 kilometres south of the city of Stavanger. The platform was owned by the Norwegian company Stavanger Drilling, and operated by the American company Phillips Petroleum. One hundred and twenty-three people died in what was the most severe industrial accident in Norwegian history, and disputes over who held responsibility for the accident are ongoing. The accident occurred when the Kielland platform tipped during a heavy storm, and it was subsequently towed to the harbour in central Stavanger, where it lay upside-down for many years as various court cases and debates about attempting to turn it for further investigative purposes went on.

²² A recording of the event can be viewed here:

<https://mediasite.nb.no/Mediasite/Showcase/arrangementsarkiv/Presentation/9172d8022bf34157b47af57fd9ff01fd1d>

Journalists have written books about the accident and its aftermath,²³ and some historians have also taken an interest,²⁴ albeit often as part of larger works on the history of Norwegian oil exploration.²⁵ As panellists we invited a historian and a journalist, both of whom had written about the incident, and a next of kin who lost his brother in the accident and had been a central motivator in the formation of various committees seeking justice for the deceased, survivors and relatives. Leading the conversation was a well-known writer and commentator who had also written about the accident, and, like the other panellists, had grown up in the city of Stavanger, which remains deeply marked by the accident and its aftermath.

An accident is a very specific type of event, one where something occurs rather suddenly. Although it is possible to find structural reasons for the accident going back in time, the Kielland accident is an ideal case for exploring the metahistorical question of how the meaning of an event is decided in its aftermath. Its meaning remains contested between groups who want the event to have different consequences. The text announcing the event in the programme catalogue and various social media, stated that the accident was an event ‘so powerful, that it lifted the North Sea continental shelf onto mainland Norway’. This was a reference not only to the extension of mainland jurisdiction concerning health and safety to North Sea oil platforms after the accident, but also to how the accident could be said to have inspired more fundamental changes in the level of responsibility taken by the Norwegian state towards oil exploration in the North Sea. Oil might have been discovered in the North Sea at

²³ Torgeir Torgersen Skretting, *Aleksander Kielland ulykken - Tragedien, spillet og hemmelighetene som kunne ha veltet en oljenasjon* (Oslo: 2019); Bjørn Nilsen, *Gjenferd i Nordsjøen - Kielland-ulykken i norsk oljepolitikk* (Oslo: 1984); Per Ståle Lønning og Åge Enghaug, *Katastrofe i Nordsjøen* (Oslo, 1980).

²⁴ Marie Smith-Solbakken, *Alexander L. Kielland-ulykken - hendelsen, etterspillet, hemmelighetene* (Stavanger, 2016).

²⁵ Helge Ryggvik, *Til siste dråpe - Om oljens politiske økonomi* (Oslo, 2009), P. 160.

the Ekofisk field in 1969, but it was not until 1986 that the Norwegian state-owned oil company Statoil could run their first oilfield independently of foreign companies. If we think here of Sewell's idea of events as transformations of structures, the structures transformed by the Aleksander Kielland event were thus not only those of working conditions in the oil industry, but potentially also those of Norway's political economy.

Such an outcome was far from given, however, and after a micro-historical introduction to the accident itself, the conversation at the public event focused on the aftermath of the accident. The struggles between the French company that built the platform, the Norwegian company that owned it and the American company that operated it, and the role of both local action groups and the Norwegian governments in debates over who should take responsibility were put under scrutiny. Video clips of news broadcasts from the day of the accident and pictures of the upside-down platform were shown at the beginning of the event, but most of the time was dedicated to discussion.

Although this discussion centred on rather well-known debates over who was to blame, there were important openings for panel members, and the audience, to reflect on how and why an event leads to certain consequences or outcomes rather than others. Regardless of the dramatic nature of the accident itself, the aftermath could be said to have been just as dramatic. The Norwegian state and the American oil company both wanted oil exploration in the North Sea to continue unhindered after the accident and thus had some common interests in blaming the French company that had constructed the platform. This clashed with the interests not only of the French company, but also with those of survivors and relatives seeking clear answers about what had really gone wrong. The moderator had been part of the planning process, and so knew how to reframe this well-known debate in terms emphasising this as a battle over how to interpret the meaning of a historical event.

The spring of 1971 gave Norway a very first taste of large-scale immigration from a non-Western country. ‘Large-scale’ is perhaps an exaggeration, in retrospect, as the number of migrants arriving from Pakistan that summer was in the low hundreds. This was nonetheless a high number in comparison to all previous known history, and newspapers would write about it as an ‘explosive increase’ and a ‘pressure on borders’.²⁶ Today, Norway has a significant population of non-Western heritage, with Norwegian-Pakistanis making up 0.72 per cent of Norway’s population in 2020. The rather sudden arrival of hundreds of people from Pakistan in the spring of 1971 can thus be seen as a starting point for one of the most discussed developments of recent Norwegian history: the transformation of Norway from a mono-cultural to a multi-cultural society. This is one of the most contentious issues in modern Norway, as is the case in many other European countries, and the early history of non-western migration to Norway has been the subject of both academic books²⁷ and journalistic treatments.²⁸

The term ‘the critical phase’ was adopted from a PhD thesis by the same name, written in the 1970s by the sociologist Aud Kårbøl on Pakistani migration to Norway.²⁹ Kårbøl used the phrase to refer to the first phase of a migrant’s experience in a new country. During this phase, many aspects of each individual’s future relationship with and connection to a new culture are established, as well as the relationship between a group of immigrants and majority society as a whole. For this event we invited a Norwegian-Pakistani journalist who had himself

²⁶ A recording of the event can be viewed here:

<https://mediasite.nb.no/Mediasite/Showcase/arrangementsarkiv/Presentation/e0a4f851bd30497b8632ab49c74c45dd1d>

²⁷ Grete Brochmann og Knut Kjeldstadli, *Innvandringen til Norge, 900–2010* (Oslo: 2013); Hallvard Tjelmeland, *I globaliseringens tid, 1940–2000*, bind 3 i Norsk innvandringshistorie, Knut Kjeldstadli (red.) (Oslo, 2003).

²⁸ Shazia Majid, *Ut av skyggene* (Oslo, 2019).

²⁹ Aud Kårbøl og Arnfinn Haagensen Midtbøen, *Den kritiske fase - Innvandring til Norge fra Pakistan 1970-1973* (Oslo, 2018).

migrated to Norway not long after 1971, a Norwegian-Pakistani writer and journalist whose parents had been part of the first wave of migrants, and a sociologist with expertise on immigration to Norway. Moderating the conversation was a journalist with a broad network among various migrant groups, known for her coverage of issues relating to migration and multiculturalism.

Uncovering the reasons behind the rising number of migrants from Pakistan was important part of the public event. Both so-called push factors - notably the 1971 war between India and Pakistan - and pull-factors such as the fact that Norway had yet to put in place restrictive laws on immigration similar to the 1971 immigration act in the UK, remain largely unknown to the Norwegian public. The structures that were transformed by significant migration to Norway from non-Western countries since 1971, include the demographics of the Norwegian citizenry, as well as public attitudes surrounding ethnicity, culture and indeed the very idea of the nation. It is, however, something of a stretch to connect these seismic shifts in Norwegian society and culture to the events of 1971: certainly the arrival of a few hundred people in 1971 did not precipitate them, but rather subsequent developments. This event was therefore of a very different type than the Aleksander Kielland accident, as the spring of 1971 was intended mainly to mark a starting point for a change that took place over several decades.

Due to the participation in the panel both of a second generation Pakistani migrant, and someone who himself arrived as a migrant around this time, the event at times took on the character of an oral history of what really happened in those years, or even a witness seminar.³⁰ Episodes of both a positive and a negative nature in the meeting between the first Pakistanis in Norway and representatives of Norwegian majority culture were related to an appreciative and diverse audience. Norwegian-Pakistanis are widely seen as a ‘successful’ minority group in

³⁰ Paula Hamilton, ‘Speak, Memory’: Current Issues in Oral and Public History, in *What is Public History Globally?* (London, 2019), p. 220.

Norway today, something which is attested to by the number of famous Norwegian politicians and media personalities who have Pakistani heritage. The reasons for this relative success were thus also discussed at some length: added to the fact that those arriving in the 1970s had relatively high levels of education is the simple reality that they have been in Norway the longest, and these together contribute to the group scoring comparatively well on a number of metrics. There was thus a sense of how Pakistani migration to Norway in some sense represented a specific case, shedding light on more general processes of migration as a historical phenomenon with the capacity to transform a variety of social structures.

The German invasion of Norway on 9 April 1940 was the first ever land, sea and airborne attack under one single command.³¹ The attack was swift and successful, but the sinking of the German cruiser *Blücher* at Oscarsborg fortress some thirty kilometres south of Oslo, nonetheless meant that the invasion was delayed sufficiently for the Norwegian government and royal family to escape the capital. On the following day King Haakon VII while en route to safety in England, pronounced his famous ‘no’ to any cooperation with the occupying forces. This meant that Norway had an exile government in London for the five-year duration of the occupation. The attack on 9 April signalled the beginning of the Second World War for Norway, and the events have been subject to intense scrutiny by historians, writers, and even filmmakers.³² Debates have raged over the reasons for Norway’s relative unpreparedness for the attack, and also over the roles played by various politicians and royal family members

³¹ A recording of the event can be viewed here:

<https://mediasite.nb.no/Mediasite/Showcase/arrangementsarkiv/Presentation/a7b990855d3146498cfe88ab093857a41d>

³² Ole Kristian Grimnes, *Oscarsborg festning 9. april 1940* (Oslo, 1972); Ole Kristian Grimnes og Jo Benkow, *Vendepunkt: 9. april i vår bevisshet* (Oslo, 1990). Alf R. Jacobsen, *9. april - time for time* (Oslo, Vega forlag, 2020); Alf R. Jacobsen, *Kongens nei - 10. april 1940* (Oslo, 2011), Erik Poppe, dir., *The King's No* (Oslo, 2016).

in the lead-up to 'the king's no'. Another topic of discussion has been the roles played by parliamentarians and other notables who stayed behind in Oslo and entered into various forms of negotiations and collaboration with the occupying forces – the most famous of these being Vidkun Quisling, who undertook a sort of coup d'état and was made minister president by the occupying forces.

In addition to the question of what really took place, the title and programme text for this public event tackled the question of the consequences of the events of 9 April. This was not so much about the direct consequence of occupation, but more about how the idea of military unpreparedness was put to use to secure public support for alliance building and armament policies *after* the Second World War. 'Never again the 9th of April' became a slogan in the post-war years, as Norway increased its military spending and became a NATO member, all while sharing a border with the Soviet Union. This was thus an example of how one interpretation of a historical event can be mobilised to achieve certain ends. For the panel we invited one historian and one writer who have both published extensively on the event, and a political scientist and defence expert who often advocates increased military spending in contemporary Norway. Bringing together people from different fields in this way is an important part of what such public history work can entail. The conversation was led by a historian with expertise on the Second World War in Norway.

The event was scheduled to take place on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the invasion, and it was meant to include the exhibition of a log book from Oscarsborg fortress from the night of the attack. Notations of the dramatic events include the spilling of ink all over the pages, as the fortress was being bombarded by the German cruiser ship. This was meant to serve as a graphic and tactile demonstration of the dramatic nature of the event. Due to Covid-19, however, the whole event had to move online and instead took the form of a broadcasted webinar. There were quite significant disagreements between two of the panellists on how to

interpret the role of various Labour party politicians in the events of 9 April and the immediate aftermath. This feisty discussion became a dominant part of the conversation, bringing out the metahistorical aspect of this event in a somewhat different manner than that which had originally been intended.

The Norwegian Labour party arose as a political force in the late nineteenth century and the tumultuous interwar years.³³ Its transformation from a revolutionary party and member of Comintern, to the builder and administrator of a post-war consensus has been the topic of much scholarly inquiry.³⁴ Although the Labour party first formed a government in 1928, the so-called crisis settlement of 1935 has been interpreted as a watershed moment, partly because the Norwegian labour union syndicate also struck a famous compromise with the employers union that same year. Whereas the 1928 government only lasted for a matter of days, 1935 marked the beginning of almost thirty years of uninterrupted Labour party rule. The crisis settlement refers to a deal struck between the Labour party and the Farmers' party (*Bondepartiet*) over a new relief programme based partly on Keynesian stimulus spending. The Farmers' party had been aligned with the bourgeois parties all through the interwar years, and so the transformation of the Labour party was abetted by a changing of sides and a change in economic ideology from severe austerity to expansive public spending within the Farmers' party.

³³ A recording of the event can be viewed here:

<https://mediasite.nb.no/Mediasite/Showcase/arrangementsarkiv/Presentation/d951feafb13645748e28b29a3ffc42381d>

³⁴ Even Lange, *Samling om felles mål (1935 - 70)*, Aschehougs norgeshistorie 11 (Oslo, 1998); Finn Olstad, *Den store oppturen* (Oslo, 2017); Berge Furre, *Vårt hundreår - Norsk historie 1905 - 1990* (Oslo, 1991); Francis Sejersted, *Sosialdemokratiets tidsalder - Norge og Sverige i det 20. århundre* (Oslo, 2005).

Between 2005 and 2013, today's incarnation of the Farmers' party, *Senterpartiet*, was again aligned with the political left in a so-called red-green alliance, and in recent time the party has grown significantly, so that by 2021 they were almost competing in the polls with the Labour party and the conservative party *Høyre* for the position of most popular party, and became part of the new coalition government with the Labour party after the 2021 election. The growth of the mildly 'populist' *Senterpartiet* in Norway is seen as a Norwegian version of the rise of so-called 'populist' parties world wide in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, yet in Norway this development brought the centre-left into power.

Looking back, we can see that the 1935 alliance between farmers and rural communities on the one hand, and a labour movement with its basis in the urban proletariat on the other became a turning point for Norwegian social democracy in the interwar years. For this public history event we were interested in exploring parallels between developments in the interwar years and current day politics. For the panel addressing the 1935 settlement, we invited a historian with expertise on the crisis settlement, and especially the role of *Bondepartiet*, and a leftist journalist and writer who has written extensively on the period and has been a strong advocate for similar alliances today. The conversation was led by a journalist from a newspaper closely connected to *Senterpartiet*, who has also written extensively on the crisis settlement and the history of the farmers' movement. In addition to the public event, a short film clip was produced for social media, in which archival footage and a voice-over was used to explain the events of 1935. This video was shown at the beginning of the event to set the stage.

The crisis settlement of 1935 represents yet another type of event, different again from the Kielland accident, the early days of Pakistani immigration and the German invasion. The settlement was agreed and a new government could take power at a very clear point in time, yet the developments leading up to the event go back many years. The event was a culmination of developments within both the Labour party and the Farmer's party, which in turn related to the

social and political situation of the interwar years. This perspective was brought out by the historian in the panel, who explicitly questioned the idea of historical events as markers of historical change. This led to an interesting exchange over how to make sense of the crisis settlement in particular, and historical change as such. Had the panel been populated only by historians, the idea that events stretch back in time, to the slow development of the structural conditions enabling an event, would probably have seemed uncontroversial. In this case, however, the journalist in the panel adopted a ‘common sense’ approach and took issue with the historian’s suggestion that even the ongoing Covid 19-pandemic had started way before 2019. The journalist argued that events were nonetheless important in a quest to understand the past, and that the event in question was the best example of an event that could be used to sum up and exemplify the political development in the interwar years. The metahistorical element was thus explicitly discussed on stage in this particular public event.

In 1978, the Norwegian government decided to carry through the building of a large hydroelectric power plant and dam in the Alta-Kautokeino river in Norway’s northernmost region Finnmark.³⁵ The plans were met with great resistance due to both the environmental damage of the project, and the way in which it would interfere with the traditional reindeer husbandry of the Sámi people. Demonstrations against the dam led to an important alliance between two relatively new social movements, that of the environmental movement and the movement for indigenous rights. The demonstrations included hunger strikes and civil disobedience both in Finnmark and in Oslo, and culminated in January 1981 in an attempt by demonstrators to halt construction work through non-violent resistance at the construction site.

³⁵ A recording of the event can be viewed here:

<https://mediasite.nb.no/Mediasite/Showcase/arrangementsarkiv/Presentation/c0951ff7dfaa4358a15c3b2cd11868ee1d>

A large police force was sent from Oslo to a winter-dark Finnmark to disband the protests, and the construction of the dam finally went ahead.³⁶

The demonstrations against the dam thus ended in failure, but the consequences for the movement for Sámi rights were tremendous. New laws protecting the rights, culture and language of the Sámi people were passed throughout the 1980s, culminating in the opening of the Sámi parliament in 1989. The structures most severely transformed by these environmental protests were thus the legal, political and social structures governing life as a Sámi person living within the boundaries of the Norwegian nation state. Although the river was not saved, the vast negative attention surrounding the construction of the dam also meant that this was the last, mega hydroelectric power plant to be built in Norway. The alliance between the environmental movement and local actors also became a template for the Norwegian environmental movement in later struggles against oil drilling in the Arctic and the dumping of waste from the mining industry.

As panelists, we were honoured to have the current president of the Sámi parliament, Aili Keskitalo, who as a young girl was inspired to become politically active by the Alta demonstrations. The other panelist was one of the leaders of the local resistance group at the time, and the moderator was the then current president of Norway's largest member based conservation organisation, Naturvernforbundet, who also hails from the northern Norway. The event was opened with a short video clip about the construction of the dam, produced by the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate.

The focus of the public event was on the very last demonstration at a campsite in the blistering cold Finnmark winter of 1981, but the Alta demonstrations were really a series of events all through the 1970s, including a hunger strike in front of the Norwegian parliament

³⁶ Jan Borring et al, *Alta-bilder: 12 års kamp for Alta-Kautokeinovassdraget* (Oslo, Pax Forlag, 1981); Alfred Nilsen, *Alta-kampen - miljøkampens største folkereising* (Alta, 2019).

building in Oslo. Due to the participation in the panel of one of the leaders of the demonstrations, an elderly man who has not been in the public eye since 1981, the event, as with the panel on the 1971 Pakistani arrivals, veered towards an oral history, as people sought to set out what really happened. The element of contingency was greatly emphasised in the conversation, as it was made clear that many things could have ended up differently, especially with regards to escalations between police forces and demonstrators. The Norwegian government at the time did consider sending in the army to disband protestors, and the upbeat story of indigenous people and urban hippies coming together could have looked very different and had other outcomes in the face of state sanctioned violence. Oral accounts from people who were present as important actors in historical events are vital for being able to construct historical accounts 'from below', and so the metahistorical aspect in this event moved to the background, although contingency could be said to qualify as such.

V

History is more than dates, facts and simple narratives in which event A led to consequence B. Everyone with an interest in history knows this, yet it is perhaps easy to think of these as highly advanced insights that are unsuitable for public events programming. That may be the case with the fine details of William Sewell Jr.'s theory of events as transformations of structures, but in this article, I have tried to show how a grounding in metahistory can be helpful when programming events for the public. Theory and the act of theorising is sometimes viewed as a way of complicating things, an often frowned-upon activity related to the concept of *academising*. But in this case what theory really amounts to is to question whether something specific, for instance a historical event, can be seen as an outcome of something more general - a pattern or a system of some sort. As Sewell observed, historians will often argue for contingency and the uniqueness of historical events, and this is perhaps the main reason for

their aversion to theory after ‘the cultural turn’. Thankfully, historians are unlikely to come up with stylised models for how change happens, but the exercise of what we may call attempted generalisation can nonetheless yield important insights. Furthermore, this way of using theory and what I have called ‘the metahistorical perspective’ lends itself very nicely to public history. Far from being a very academic pursuit, I would argue that ordinary people think about history in this way all the time, and that the act of generalising from specific events to overarching theories and narratives is deeply rooted in our way of thinking. What a metahistorical perspective really adds to public history is thus a richness and nuance based on the ways in which people already think about history. The focus on events allowed for a constant conversation between the micro and macro level of history, between the specific event on the one hand and our general understanding of history on the other, such that each public event thematised the historical event in question as just as much as it thematised history.

Moving on from historical events, one could imagine a similar series programmed on the basis of, for instance, theories of historical materialism or dialectics. Historical events could again serve as entry-points, but it would be possible to also thematise historical developments of a more protracted nature, such as the industrial revolution. As an improvement on the format we used for this set of public events, it could be argued that the concept would benefit from more uniformity. It would perhaps be advisable to use the same chair for each panel, and it would be possible to be more explicit about the metahistorical perspective without descending into a seminar on history and theory. There is a balance to be struck between curating an event of interest to the general public and the use of metahistorical perspectives, but as I have indicated above, the interrogation of theoretical frameworks in the context of investigating actual historical events and developments, has the potential of carrying great general interest.

On-stage conversations are a type of public history work in which much of the work lies in the preparation. After deciding on the historical event in question, inviting the guests and

hiring and prepping the conversation leader, the event begins and the organisers have no more power or influence over where the conversation will lead and what might happen on stage. This requires a certain degree of trust on the part of the organisers, but more importantly, it requires a great deal of research, preparation and reflection. It is my hope that this article can be helpful for those undertaking such work, and that they are given the time and resources to carry out successful public events programming within their institutional context.