

After honor. From Egil Skallagrimsson to Karl Ove Knausgård

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Social norms influence our emotional life, Martha Nussbaum claims in her book *Upheavals of thought*, and “social norms pertinent to the emotional life vary”.<sup>1</sup> She writes: “A culture that values honor highly, and attaches a strong negative value to the slighting of honor, will have many occasions for anger that an equality focused culture (...) will not have”<sup>2</sup>. Julian Pitt-Rivers, one of the pioneers of modern honor research, highlights three facets in his definition of honor: “a sentiment, a manifestation of this sentiment in conduct, and the evaluation of this conduct by others”<sup>3</sup>. However it is more common within the field of research to rely on only two aspects, external and internal honor. External honor is ones personal reputation, prestige and social value in the opinion of others. Internal honor is more or less synonymous to personal integrity or character, individual quality or honorableness. This differentiation is what Frank Henderson Stewart calls “the bipartite theory [of honor]”<sup>4</sup>. Honor, anger and shame are hardly universal affects. They are, as Nussbaum claims, connected to social norms. Honor is connected to specific *honor groups*, which individuals belong to or identify with. Different honor groups have different *honor codes*, and the groups might be large and extensive (like cultural groups or nations) or small and limited (like professional groups). There also exist subgroups within larger societies in which deviant honor codes are normative (for example criminal groups). Western culture is from its Greek and Roman heritage an old honor culture. “Homeric man’s highest good is [...] enjoyment of time, public esteem”, Eric R. Dodds claim.<sup>5</sup> The old Norse culture was an even more extreme honor culture, as depicted in the Icelandic sagas. To day, however, western honor culture is impaired. The reasons might be of several kinds. Swart emphasizes the individualization of western cultural values. This is what he calls the “integrity position”. James Bowman points to the fact that the two World Wars totally discharged any credible honor culture in the western world because of the nature of

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<sup>1</sup> Nussbaum 2001, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Pitt-Rivers 1968, p. 503.

<sup>4</sup> Stewart 1994, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Dodds 1951, p. Xxx.

modern warfare. In the late modern welfare states honor culture has been replaced by what Nussbaum calls equality focused culture in which social and political equal rights dominate the hierarchy of values. Beyond doubt one could say that the cultural clash between intact honor cultures and cultures “after honor” represent one of the most serious conflicts in contemporary societies.

### Old Norse honor culture

The Scandinavian societies have evolved from rather extreme honor cultures to late modern cultures in which equality is the governing norm perhaps more than in any other region. As a reminder of our cultural roots I thought I could tell the touching story about Egil Skallagrimsson playing ballgames as a seven year-old child together with ten year-old Grim. Unfortunately Egil lost the competition. This made him so mad that he hit Grim with the bat. But Grim was the bigger of the two. He lifted Egil up and threw him on the ground. Egil then went to the adults in his guild and picked up an axe. The saga tells that Egil then rushed towards Grim, and hewed the axe into his head so that it stood firmly in his skull. Egil was not taken care of by the child protection agency. But the killing led to a conflict in which seven men lost their lives. Egil’s father, the old Skallagrim, was not too glad about the incident. But his mother was rather proud, and said that Egil was a true Viking, and that he should have his own warship as soon as he was old enough. Later in Egil’s life there was just more and more of the same kinds of stories. Excessive wrath, violently temperament, free floating anger, overly sensitivity towards loss of honor were the advantages of the celebrities of the time. In social life the sense of honor and readiness for violence were what initiated all serious events. And the events followed a repeated script: Sense of honor – infringement of honor – anger – violence/vengeance – retribution – re-retribution (spiral of violence). In Old Norse culture honor was more important than life itself. The ultimate life value was the posthumous reputation, and that could be worthwhile dying for. Most important to emphasize is that in this way honor was the principle by which the society worked. There did not exist any executive power, no police force; every citizen had to safeguard his or her own reputation, rights and property, and to do so every person had to rely on his or her own family and guild.

Later in history Christianity acquired the notion of honor. The honor of the guild was replaced by the honor of God. The relation between external and internal honor has changed throughout history. Two of the most well known representations of

Western honor culture, the culture of chivalry and the Victorian so called “Christian gentleman” appear to be cases in which both external and internal honor played an important part. In general one could say that honor culture continued, but the honor belonged to God in Heaven. And yet; quite an amount of honor dripped down through the hierarchy of the church as well. Popes and priests managed to make their fortune by other methods than the Vikings, but their methods seems to have been as effective as the Viking raids.

As to the historical development it is important to notice that even though there was a substantial Christian influence on western honor culture, a phenomenon like the dueling in which men solved infringements of honor risking their lives man against man, continued throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in some cases even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### The World Wars

Western honor culture went thorough a period of decline and fall during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to James Bowman this is due to the two World Wars. Modern warfare more or less put an and to honor culture in the West, and in this respect the Second World War can be regarded as an extension of the First when it comes to the notion of honor. On the German side it was important to reestablish honor lost at the surrender after the First World War. When the empires mobilized in July 1914 there was a kind of war frenzy in Europa. Most of the soldiers went to the front to gain a quick and honorable victory and be “back before Christmas”. But the situation at the front undermined the fighting spirit and destroyed any sense of military honor. This was largely due to the prolonged trench warfare, which made it impossible for any of the military powers to gain victory. The undermining of any conception of honorable warfare was due to the enormous number of casualties, but equally important was the industrialization and anonymisation of the acts of killing. The question of life and death was totally random because of new technologies like the machine gun, the mortar and the gas attacks. “If a machine gun could wipe out a whole battalion of men in three minutes, where was the relevance of the old concept of heroism, glory and fair play between gentlemen?” John Ellis asks in his book *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (1986)<sup>6</sup>. The combatants were demoralized, and

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<sup>6</sup> Ellis 1986, p. 26, cited from Bowman 2006, p. 108.

after a while a new kind of wounded soldiers started to come back from the front. At first they were called cowards, and they risked being executed for desertion. But the war powers had to realize that these combatants were in fact wounded in war, and a new diagnosis appeared, “shell shock”, to which there were no effective cure but prolonged psychological treatment.

The effects of modern warfare are documented by the “war poets” Wilfred Owen, who was killed in 1918, and Siegfried Sassoon, who survived. Later on several famous novels also appeared, among them Eric Maria Remarque’s *Vom Westen nicht Neues* (1929) and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). In Hemingway’s novel we find the famous words: “There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity (...) Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene besides the concrete names of villages.” It was not just abstract values that lost their meaning. It was the concept of the human species that changed. The idealistic concept of man, i.e. an individual with substantial honorable personal qualities such as pride, courage and honor was replaced by a new psychological, therapeutic concept of man in which traumas can be stronger than personal strength. In the 1990s Pat Barker wrote a biographical novel about this, *Regeneration* (1991), depicting both Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon in therapeutic treatment by the Freudian psychoanalysis dr. Rivers behind the frontline.

In spite of the extreme losses of life during the First World War, there was a gap between the soldiers’ and the civilians’ war experience. This changed in certain way in the Second World War, because the civilians to a great extent became targets of active hostilities. A World War became a Total War. This contributed to the decline and fall of honor in Western societies. When the war broke out, the moral capital was definitively on the side of the allied. Nazism was a racist ideology and the violently attacks on other independent nations left Germany with no honor whatsoever. However in a historical perspective it turned out that there were large scaled dishonorable acts of war on both sides. The most important new technology of warfare was the use of air forces. Area bombing and annihilation of large cities made civilians targets of large scale terror murder. In 1939 the British had decided that the RAF was not allowed to drop bombs on German territory. However on day one of Winston Churchill’s position as prime minister, this was changed. After the Germans had bombed the city of Rotterdam 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1940, area bombing of cities became

an accepted act of war, and was performed by both warring parties. In his book *Honor. A History* James Bowman writes a chapter under the headline “Area Bombing and the Demise of Honor Culture”. A number of cases contribute to the conclusion that this kind of warfare made it impossible to Europe ever to claim cultural honor again. The German raid on Rotterdam, London and a number of British cities, and the allied forces’ bombing of Dresden, in addition to the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the most well known examples of terror bombing of civilians during the Second World War. By these acts the Western Civilization has made itself dishonorable in a historical perspective.

I would like to mention three Norwegian authors who reflect the post war cultural situation, the poet Gunvor Hofmo and the novelists Sigurd Hoel and Nini Roll Anker. *Jeg vil hjem til menneskene* [I want to go back home to the humans] was the title of the first collection of poems of the most important author who made her debut immediately after the war. She finds herself away from home, and the home she can only long for, is what is human. This sense of lost humanity dominated her feeling of life throughout her life span. It put its mark on her poetry and her health condition, and the direct background was holocaust. Hofmo had a Jewish friend, Ruth Maier. She came to Norway as a refugee in 1939. But together with 532 other Jews she was deported from Oslo in 1942. She was sent directly to the gas chambers in Auschwitz, and died five days later at the age of 22. Ruth Maiers diary has been published both in Norwegian and English, and she has been called “the Norwegian Anne Frank”. Substantial parts of Hofmo’s poetry are directly or indirectly related to the cruelty of the war. In a way it can be considered a kind of witness literature. In her most famous poetry she depicts her life condition as a permanent state of emergency. The poetry is called “Det er ingen hverdag mer” [The everydays are gone]:

Gud, hvis du ennå ser:  
det er ingen hverdag mer.

Det er bare stumme skrik,  
det er bare sorte lik

som henger i røde trær!  
Hør hvor stille det er.

Vi vender oss for å gå hjem

men alltid hører vi dem.

Alt vi fornemmer en dag  
er de dreptes åndedrag!

Om vi i glemsel går:  
det er asken deres vi trår.

Gud, hvis du ennå ser:  
det er ingen hverdag mer

[God, if you are still watching  
Every day life is gone.

All there is, are silent screams.  
All there is, are black corpses

Hanging in red trees!  
Listen! How quiet it is.

We turn around to go home,  
But we always encounter them.

All we sense one day  
Is the breath of the dead!

Even if we forget  
It is their ashes we tread on.

God, if you are still watching  
Everyday life is gone.]

I think this is as close as one gets the “Stunde null”-experience in Norwegian literature. She had the feeling that the human values as such had left the world. She found herself “on the other side”, in “a different world”. In addition she had a

Christian belief, and now she used the only genre the believers have to their disposition in which they can accuse God, the *trenody*. Large parts of Hofmo's poetry can be considered as a new kind of modernistic *trenodies*. Hofmo does not only target the humanity with her accusations of dishonor. She even pleads the honor of God. She calls him a God with no feeling of shame. She discharges the long Christian tradition of worship of the honor of God.

Sigurd Hoel represented an older generation, the generation who introduced the psychoanalysis to the Norwegian country. His novel *Møte ved milepelen* [Meeting at the milestone] was published in 1947. Hoel brought with him the way of thinking from the first half of the century. The idea of an autonomous individual based on honorable and moral virtues was replaced by a complex concept of the self, which included different layers of conscious and unconscious, often conflicting elements. Traumatizing experiences could disturb the balance between the layers of the self. Sigurd Hoel's novel is an investigation into the question why and how common Norwegians could become Nazis. From the outset the narrator of the novel is called Den Plettfrie, the impeccable. But he ends up recognizing that he is guilty, along with everyone that has ever failed in love. This point is underlined in the story by the fact that The Impeccable turns out to be the biological father of the most brutal Nazi who tries to catch and kill him. Even The Impeccable is dishonored. The honorable image of the human is lost.

The third author I want to mention, Nini Roll Anker, is picked to represent the feminist aspect of the loss of honor culture. As Swart notices: "In societies where honor is important, it tends to be mainly something for men."<sup>7</sup> In Anker's novel the point of view is Beth, the wife of a man who works in the arms industry, and the mother of two boys who is mobilized to fight in the war. One of them is severely wounded in a way that makes it impossible ever to think that he could ever resemble a human being again. The other becomes a deserter, and his mother assists him to escape. They are both captured, and the novel is written by Beth in prison, while she awaits the possible execution of her son and the punishment of herself. The novel is a

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<sup>7</sup> Swart 1994, s. 107.

very strong manifest for a pacifist stance and a protest against the false ideas of honor and violence in the men's world.

Now, on the background of the two World Wars, and the decline and fall of honor culture that they represented, let us move on contemporary times and contemporary literature. I will concentrate on the voluminous work *Min kamp* [My struggle] the Karl Ove Knausgård. I will argue that *My struggle* represents late modernity especially when it comes to the decline of honor culture. While honor way back in history was crucial for the way society worked, how it disciplined its citizens and how it regulated the relations between individuals and groups, it no longer in late modern times plays an important part in political governing and cultural education of society in general. In fact there are quite a number of examples indicating that a kind of anti-honor culture has evolved, especially in the cultural field. Performing notoriously embarrassing behavior has become a winner concept in comedy, and it is more than possible, maybe even recommendable, to build fame and celebrity status on ways of behavior that would traditionally be regarded as devastating for personal honor. It is sufficient to mention Rowan Atkinson's success with *Mr. Bean* and Sasha Baron Cohen's successful film *Borat*. Openness about traditionally shameful or dishonorable phenomena is however not restricted to the comedy branch. The former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik scored extra bipartisan points by telling openly about his psychological torments and his treatment. This example indicates an important aspect of the potentially shameful or dishonorable in late modernity. It works as a proof of honesty and authenticity, which are virtues that late modern man appreciates highly. The courage to be "open" about private matters is to day regarded as braver than courageous violence in war. Formerly shameful phenomena do not necessarily lead to shame any more. On the contrary, in some cases it creates credit. Openness on former shame topics might be one of several gains from the decline of honor culture. It has become possible to talk about personal psychological torments, bullying, sexual orientation and so on. And this might have produced more tolerance in society at large. Knausgård is often being characterized as "recklessly revealing" on topics concerning his private matters.

However, revealing of private life, automatically leads to revealing of the life of others. Recklessness has become a highly rated virtue when it comes to openness about ones own private life. It might be easy to agree that everyone has the ownership



to one's own life and life story. But most of us would be able to recognize that recklessness when it comes to openness about the life of others is more problematic, especially if a person insists on being "open" about information to the public that involved persons do not want revealing of. The involved might be defenseless, as for example children are, or they may contest the truth-value of the information.

I think no cultural phenomena actualize questions like these more clearly than Karl Ove Knausgård's work *My Struggle*. Knausgård has gained greater and faster prestige than any other participant in Norwegian public life in recent years, and it is all based on revealing of events that belong to the sphere of intimacy, and would traditionally be regarded as irrelevant to public life. Some events are even quite shameful or dishonorable, according to traditional honor codes.

Robert R. Oprisco in his book *Honor. A Phenomenology* makes the point that it is relevant to distinguish between shame and dishonor in connection with contraventions with honor culture: "Shame is a fact of life. The society will have expectations for each member based upon their identities and their past actions," he states.<sup>8</sup> He underlines that "prestige is gained through excelling. Shame is avoided by not failing."<sup>9</sup> Unn Wikan holds the opinion that in honor cultures it is more common to be concerned about to avoid shame than it is to gain honor. This statement is being commented upon both by Swart and Oprisco. In the late modern version we find in Knausgård this fear of shame seems to be strongly reduced. This is explicitly commented upon in *My Struggle II*: "Jeg driter i meg selv på den måten," [I don't give a shit about myself in that way]<sup>10</sup>. He doesn't care about himself in connection with openness about embarrassing or dishonorable events, he claims. An obvious example is the detailed depiction of premature ejaculation in connection with the sexual encounter with women. His own adultery does neither bother him. The same holds true in cases where he is the victim of others' adultery. In accordance with statistical knowledge about late modern change of intimacy, such events are registered as trivial rather than dishonorable. Drunkenness, failure, stupidity and hooliganism during the time when he lived in Bergen are depicted in the same way. Well, after all he seems sensitive towards his own failure, but not very embarrassed or shameful. He has no need to hide away. On the contrary. He seems indifferent

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<sup>8</sup> Oprisco 2012, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Oprisco 2012, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Knausgård 2014, p. 162.

towards the “expectations” which “society” might have, and the kind of prestige one could gain “through excelling”. *My struggle* depicts both a recklessly revealing protagonist and a sort of shameless person.

At this point it is relevant to add that it is not that Knausgård is unable to feel shame. In fact he often feels small in company with others. The most dramatic shame-episode unfolds at a seminar together with other authors. Knausgård is being rejected by a woman (in fact the woman who later becomes his wife), and then uses a shard to cut up his own face. The day after, while confronted with his fellow seminar participants, there is no doubt that he feels intensely shameful. But he is not ashamed about it. He writes about it in detail in his novel, and thus performs his shamefulness to other instead of hiding away. Knausgård outside his work even seems to regard shame as a basic mood of his life, and his publisher tells him that he is at his best as an author every time writes about something shameful (interview in Paris Review). Knausgård claims that he has a kind of shame meter. Shame is not something alien to him. What is shameless is that he enjoys telling about it, that he “doesn’t give a shit about himself in that way”.

Unlike shame dishonor is, according to Oprisco, directed against an honor group, not against oneself. “Dishonor differs from shame (...) because it actually engages the values of a group to dismiss it”, Oprisco writes<sup>11</sup>. The most controversial aspect connected to *My struggle* is probably its “recklessly revealing” of individuals representing honor groups that the author himself would traditionally belong to, that is his family and his guild. There have been heavy protests against Knausgård’s project from his family members. In October 2009 they published an article in the newspaper *Klassekampen*, in which they stated: “This is confession literature and non fiction. Judas literature. This is a book full of insinuations, lies, erroneously characterizations of individuals and revealing acts that are obviously unlawful.” This conflict between Knausgård and his family are the most obvious example of how far away from traditional honor culture late modern values has moved. Knausgård not only dishonors his father’s posthumous reputation and his guild’s social prestige, but even reveals intimate information about former girl friends, current wife and children and a number of friends. He violates traditional social norms about honorable behavior towards prime honor groups.

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<sup>11</sup> Oprisco 2012, p.69.

Knausgård's project represents the decline and fall of traditional honor culture, by the protagonist's seemingly indifference towards personal shame and by his disloyalty towards traditional honor groups. Knausgård himself stresses his need to be alone. He wants to be free. But Knausgård is not at all alone. On the one hand he writes himself free from traditional honor groups, but on the other hand he writes himself into new honor groups, late modern honor groups which he wants to belong to. That is honor groups which is not based on family and friendship but fame. The prime honor groups in late modern times are based on prestige, excellence, fame and celebrity status.

Prestige is the conception of honor that positively affects an individual's hierarchical social value in a group. Prestige is the process whereby external groups grant honor to a member for achieving or displaying excellence in deeds and attributes considered good by said group.<sup>12</sup>

This is Oprisco's definition of prestige, and he claims that it resembles Stewart's notion "vertical honor". "Vertical honor [is] the right to special respect enjoyed by those who are superior", Stewart writes<sup>13</sup>. He lists a number of virtues that could evoke such special respect, but he ends his list by mentioning "or anything else". Oprisco states: "A person can get honored for anything as long as it is of value to and considered virtuous by the honor-bestowing sovereign"<sup>14</sup>. It should thus surprise no one that one can achieve "vertical honor" based on phenomenon that outside a specific honor group (writers) would traditionally be regarded as dishonorable. W. L. Sessions in his book *Honor for Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation and Defense* (2010) distinguishes between *conferred honor*, *recognition honor* and *positional honor*. In Knausgård's case it is all about *recognition honor*, which is according to Sessions the highest rated. There is however no doubt that this leads directly to *positional honor*. Knausgård's *My struggle* made him the most famous Norwegian writer domestically and internationally within a very short period of time. I don't mean by this to insinuate that the scandalous aspects of the work is the only reason for Knausgård's recognitional honor. A lot of readers and critics have

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<sup>12</sup> Oprisco 2012, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Stewart 1994, p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> Oprisco 2012, p. 63.

highlighted the esthetic meritorious elements in the novels. My point is rather that the break with the traditional honor culture has *not* ruined his honor. On the contrary. And this fact illustrates the decline of traditional honor culture.

Like other autobiographical texts *My struggle* performs what autobiographical texts usually does; the work constitutes a self by writing. Autobiographies are never neutral reports about lived life. They create what they write about, a self that the writer is able to identify with. In Knausgård's case it is obvious how he in this process writes himself out of the community with traditional honor groups – and how he writes himself into the new community with the authors' and celebrities' honor group. As a consequence of succeeding so well with this project, that is “for achieving or displaying excellence”, he is integrated in the late modern media society's group of celebrities, that is the premier honor group of our time. But such an honor group is marked with the characteristics of the liquidity of late modernity. Fame changes. Superstars flash for a while and then they extinguish. Late modern communities seldom include any guaranty of duration. Fame and attention are something one has to compete for. We are talking here of what Swart calls *competitive honor*. And one does not get attention by being loyal to existing traditions and common norms. Attention comes with the transcending of social codes, pushing the limits and breaking the rules, including the honor codes. This is probably why Knausgård's “recklessness” has its effect. I am sure Knausgård is writing for his freedom, as he states, and not for fame. I am sure this is an artistic fact. But the social fact is maximum prestige in the honor group of the cultural field.

To sum up I think one could say that Karl Ove Knausgård's *My struggle* shows the status of the concept of honor and honor culture in late modern societies in the West. It is possible for individuals to set themselves free from any relation to traditional honor groups like family and guild. Likewise it is not only possible, but even highly rated, to set oneself free from traditional honor codes, included ethical norms. In accordance with the general development in late modern societies, belonging to honor groups and loyalty towards honor codes are subject to choice and second choices. At the same time Knausgård's work and the reception of it show that traditional feelings and conceptions of honor still exist as a kind of rest-[scratch?]value among people. “Reckless revealing” of traditional honor groups can lead to great frustration, anger and even illness among those involved. But without any appeal to the law. (Court

cases of defamation have greatly decreased even in countries that have a tradition for such cases, like Germany.) It may come as a surprise that even the emancipated individual, who has set himself free from traditional honor groups and honor codes, seems frustrated about the decline of honor culture. In Knausgård's case this comes clearly across in connection with the feminist consequences of the fall of honor culture. Most honor cultures have been very male dominated cultures. Late modern Western societies are developing in the direction of equality and equal rights, which unsettle the traditional man's role. Knausgård shows great frustration towards the feminization of his role especially as a father. He also shows a great fascination and nostalgia towards traditional honor culture when he writes about his admiration for the boxing club that a friend of his is a member of. In this context he blames the late modern welfare state for having ruined values like men's honor and violence.

In many ways I would think the decline and fall of honor culture represents a great release and liberation. It has some bizarre consequences for people like me who cannot stand embarrassing emotions, included others' embarrassing behavior. But in general I think it is likely that the fall of honor culture makes it easier to foresee a society based on equality and equal rights. At the same time it seems likely that the clash between strong honor cultures and impaired honor cultures represents one of the greatest challenges of the globalized world. It is my opinion that this cultural clash is more challenging than the clash of religions. On this background I think a new scientific focus on honor cultures and the decline and fall of honor cultures is required.

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