

# M/C Journal, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2013) - 'resilient'

[Home](#) > [Vol. 16, No. 5 \(2013\)](#) > [Roy Krøvel](#)

## The Role of Conflict in Producing Alternative Social Imaginations of the Future

- [Roy Krøvel](#)
- [Volume 16](#)
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- ['resilient'](#)

### Introduction

Greater resilience is associated with the ability to self-organise, and with social learning as part of a process of adaptation and transformation (Goldstein 341).

This article deals with responses to a crisis in a Norwegian community in the late 1880s, and with some of the many internal conflicts it caused. The crisis and the subsequent conflicts in this particular community, Volda, were caused by a number of processes, driven mostly by external forces and closely linked to the expansion of the capitalist mode of production in rural Norway. But the crisis also reflects a growing nationalism in Norway. In the late 1880s, all these causes seemed to come together in Volda, a small community consisting mostly of independent small farmers and of fishers.

The article employs the concept of 'resilience' and the theory of resilience in order better to understand how individuals and the community reacted to crisis and conflict in Volda in late 1880, experiences which will cast light on the history of the late 1880s in Volda, and on individuals and communities elsewhere which have also experienced such crises.

### Theoretical Perspectives

Some understandings of social resilience inspired by systems theory and ecology focus on a society's ability to maintain existing structures. Reducing conflict to promote greater collaboration and resilience, however, may become a reactionary strategy, perpetuating inequalities (Arthur, Friend and Marschke). Instead, the understanding of resilience could be enriched by drawing on ecological perspectives that see conflict as an integral aspect of a diverse ecology in continuous development.

In the same vein, Grove has argued that some approaches to anticipatory politics fashion subjects to withstand 'shocks and responding to adversity through modern institutions such as human rights and the social contract, rather than mobilising against the sources of insecurity'. As an alternative, radical politics of resilience ought to explore political alternatives to the existing order of things.

### Methodology

According to Hall and Lamont, understanding "how individuals, communities, and societies secured their well-being" in the face of the challenges imposed by neoliberalism is a "problem of understanding the bases for social resilience". This article takes a similarly broad approach to understanding resilience, focusing on a small group of people within a relatively small community to understand how they attempted to secure their well-being in the face of the challenges posed by capitalism and growing nationalism. The main interest, however, is not resilience understood as something that exists or is being produced within this small group, but, rather, how this group produced social imaginaries of the past and the future in cooperation and conflict with other groups in the same community.

The research proceeds to analyse the contributions mainly of six members of this small group. It draws on existing literature on the history of the community in the late 1800s and, in particular, biographies of Synnøve Riste (Øyehaug) and Rasmus Steinsvik (Gausemel). In addition, the research builds on original empirical research of approximately 500 articles written by the members of the group in the period from 1887 to 1895 and published in the newspapers *Vestmannen*, *Fedraheimen* and *17de Mai*; and will try to re-tell a history of key events, referring to a selection of these articles.

## **A Story about Being a Woman in Volda in the Late 1880s**

This history begins with a letter from Synnøve Riste, a young peasant woman and daughter of a local member of parliament, to Anders Hovden, a friend and theology student. In the letter, Synnøve Riste told her friend about something she just had experienced and had found disturbing (more details in Øyehaug).

She first sets her story in the context of an evangelical awakening that was gaining momentum in the community. There was one preacher in particular who seemed to have become very popular among the young women. He had few problems when it comes to women, she wrote, ironically. Curious about the whole thing, Synnøve decided to attend a meeting to see for herself what was going on. The preacher noticed her among the group of young women. He turned his attention towards her and scolded her for her apparent lack of religious fervour. In the letter she explained the feeling of shame that came over her when the preacher singled her out for public criticism. But the feeling of shame soon gave way to anger, she wrote, before adding that the worst part of it was 'not being able to speak back'; as a woman at a religious meeting she had to hold her tongue.

Synnøve Riste was worried about the consequences of the religious awakening. She asked her friend to do something. Could he perhaps write a poem for the weekly newspaper the group had begun to publish only a few months earlier?

Anders Hovden duly complied. The poem was published, anonymously, on Wednesday 17 March 1888. Previously, the poem says, women enjoyed the freedom to roam the mountains and valleys. Now, however, a dark mood had come over the young women. 'Use your mind! Let the madness end! Throw off the blood sucker! And let the world see that you are a woman!'

The puritans appreciated neither the poem nor the newspaper. The newspaper was published by the same group of young men and women who had already organised a private language school for those who wanted to learn to read and write New Norwegian, a 'new' language based on the old dialects stemming from the time before Norway lost its independence and became a part of Denmark and then, after 1814, Sweden. At the language school the students read and discussed translations of Karl Marx and the anarchist Peter Kropotkin.

The newspaper quickly grew radical. It reported on the riots following the hanging of the Haymarket Anarchists in Chicago in 1886. It advocated women's suffrage, agitated against capitalism, argued that peasants and small farmers must learn solidarity from the industrial workers defended a young woman in Oslo who was convicted of killing her newborn baby and published articles from international socialist and anarchist newspapers and magazines.

## **Social Causes for Individual Resilience and Collaborative Resilience**

Recent literature on developmental psychology link resilience to 'the availability of close attachments or a supportive and disciplined environment' (Hall and Lamont 13). Some psychologists have studied how individuals feel empowered or constrained by their environment. Synnøve Riste clearly felt constrained by developments in her social world, but was also resourceful enough to find ways to resist and engage in transformational social action on many levels.

According to contemporary testimonies, Synnøve Riste must have been an extraordinary woman (Steinsvik "Synnøve Riste"). She was born Synnøve Aarflot, but later married Per Riste and took his family name. The Aarflot family was relatively well-off and locally influential, although the farms were quite small by European standards. Both her father and her uncle served as members of parliament for the ('left') Liberal Party. From a young age she took responsibility for her younger siblings and for the family farm, as her father spent much time in the capital. Her grandfather had been granted the privilege of printing books and newspapers, which meant that she grew up with easy access to current news and debates. She married a man of her own choosing; a man substantially older than herself, but with a reputation for liberal ideas on language, education and social issues.

Psychological approaches to resilience consider the influence of cognitive ability, self-perception and emotional regulation, in addition to social networks and community support, as important sources of resilience (Lamont, Welburn and Fleming). Synnøve Riste's friend and lover, Rasmus Steinsvik, later described her as 'a mainspring' of social activity. She did not only rely on family, social networks and community support to resist stigmatisation from the puritans, but she was herself a driving force behind social activities that produced new knowledge and generated communities of support for others. Lamont,

Welburn and Fleming underline the importance for social resilience of cultural repertoires and the availability of 'alternative ways of understanding social reality' (Lamont, Welburn and Fleming). Many of the social activities Synnøve Riste instigated served as arenas for debate and collaborative activity to develop alternative understandings of the social reality of the community.

In 1887, Synnøve Riste had relied on support from her extended family to found the newspaper *Vestmannen*, but as the group around the language school and newspaper gradually produced more radical alternative understandings of the social reality they came increasingly into conflict with less radical members of the Liberal Party. Her uncle owned the printing press where *Vestmannen* was printed. He was also a member of parliament seeking re-election. And he was certainly not amused when Rasmus Steinsvik, editor of *Vestmannen*, published an article reprimanding him for his lacklustre performance in general and his unprincipled voting in support of a budget allocating the Swedish king a substantial amount of money. Steinsvik advised the readers to vote instead for Per Riste, Synnøve Riste's liberal husband and director of the language school. The uncle stopped printing the newspaper.

## **Social Resilience in Volda**

The growing social conflicts in Volda might be taken to indicate a lack of resilience. This, however, would be a mistake. Social connectedness is an important source of social resilience (Barnes and Hall 226). Strong ties to family and friends matter, as does membership in associations. Dense networks of social connectedness are related to well-being and social resilience. Inversely, high levels of inequality seem to be linked to low levels of resilience. Participation in democratic processes has also been found to be an important source of resilience (Barnes and Hall 229). Volda was a small community with relatively low levels of inequality and local cultural traditions underlining the importance of cooperation and the obligations of everyone to participate in various forms of communal work. Similarly, even though a couple of families dominated local politics, there was no significant socioeconomic division between the average and the more prosperous farmers. Traditionally, women on the small, independent farms participated actively in most aspects of social life. Volda would thus score high on most indicators predicting social resilience.

Reading the local newspapers confirms this impression of high levels of social resilience. In fact, this small community of only a few hundred families produced two competing newspapers at the time. *Vestmannen* dedicated ample space to issues related to education and schools, including adult education, reflecting the fact that Volda was emerging as a local educational centre; local youths attending schools outside the community regularly wrote articles in the newspaper to share the new knowledge they had attained with other members of the community. The topics were in large part related to farming, earth sciences, meteorology and fisheries. *Vestmannen* also reported on other local associations and activities.

The local newspapers reported on numerous political meetings and public debates. The Liberal Party was traditionally the strongest political party in Volda and pushed for greater independence from Sweden, but was divided between moderates and radicals. The radicals joined workers and socialists in demanding universal suffrage, including, as we have seen, women's right to vote. The left libertarians in Volda organised a 'radical left' faction of the Liberal Party and in the run-up to the elections in 1888 numerous rallies were arranged. In some parts of the municipality the youth set up independent and often quite radical youth organisations, while others established a 'book discussion'.

The language issue developed into a particularly powerful source for social resilience. All members of the community shared the experience of having to write and speak a foreign language when communicating with authorities or during higher education. It was a shared experience of discrimination that contributed to producing a common identity. Hing has shown that those who value their in-group 'can draw on this positive identity to provide a sense of self-worth that offers resilience'. The struggle for recognition stimulated locals to arrange independent activities, and it was in fact through the burgeoning movement for a New Norwegian language that the local radicals in Volda first encountered radical literature that helped them reframe the problems and issues of their social world.

In his biography of Ivar Mortensson Egnund, editor of the newspaper *Fedraheimen* and a lifelong collaborator of Rasmus Steinsvik, Klaus Langen has argued that Mortensson Egnund saw the ideal type of community imagined by the anarchist Leo Tolstoy in the small Norwegian communities of independent small farmers, a potential model for cooperation, participation and freedom. It was not an uncritical perspective, however. The left libertarians were constantly involved in clashes with what they saw as repressive forces within the communities. It is probably more correct to say that they believed that the potential existed, within these communities, for freedom to flourish.

Most importantly, however, reading *Fedraheimen*, and particularly the journalist, editor and novelist Arne Garborg, infused this group of local radicals with anti-capitalist perspectives to be used to make sense of the processes of change that affected the community. One of Garborg's biographers, claims that no Norwegian has ever been more fundamentally anti-capitalist than Garborg (Thesen). This anti-capitalism helped the radicals in Volda to understand the local conflicts and the evangelical awakening as symptoms of a deeper and more fundamental development driven by capitalism. A series of articles in *Vestmannen* called for solidarity and unity between small farmers and the growing urban class of industrial workers.

## Science and Modernity

The left libertarians put their hope in science and modernity to improve the lives of people. They believed that education was the key to move forward and get rid of the old and bad ways of doing things. The newspaper was reporting the latest advances in natural sciences and life sciences. It reported enthusiastically about the marvels of electricity, and speculated about a future in which Norway could exploit the waterfalls to generate it on a large scale. *Vestmannen* printed articles in defence of Darwinism (Egnund), new insights from astronomy (Steinsvik "Kva Den Nye Astronomien"), health sciences, agronomy, new methods of fishing and farming – and much more.

This was a time when such matters mattered. Reports on new advances in meteorology in the newspaper appeared next to harrowing reports about the devastating effects of a storm that surprised local fishermen at sea where many men regularly paid with their lives. Hunger was still a constant threat in the harsh winter months, so new knowledge that could improve the harvest was most welcome. Leprosy and other diseases continued to be serious problems in this region of Norway. Health could not be taken lightly, and the left libertarians believed that science and knowledge was the only way forward. 'Knowledge is a sweet fruit,' *Vestmannen* wrote.

Reporting on Darwinism and astronomy again pitted *Vestmannen* against the puritans. On several occasions the newspaper reported on confrontations between those who promoted science and those who defended a fundamentalist view of the Bible. In November 1888 the signature '-t' published an article on a meeting that had taken place a few days earlier in a small village not far from Volda (Unknown). The article described how local teachers and other participants were scolded for holding liberal views on science and religion. Anyone who expressed the view that the Bible should not be interpreted literally risked being stigmatised and ostracised.

It is tempting to label the group of left libertarians 'positivists' or 'modernists', but that would be unfair. Arne Garborg, the group's most important source of inspiration, was indeed inspired by Émile Zola and the French naturalists. Garborg had argued that nothing less than the uncompromising search for truth was acceptable. Nevertheless, he did not believe in objectivity; Garborg and his followers agreed that it was not possible or even desirable to be anything else than subjective.

## Adaptation or Transformation?

PM Giærder, a friend of Rasmus Steinsvik's, built a new printing press with the help of local blacksmiths, so the newspaper could keep afloat for a few more months. Finally, however, in 1888, the editor and the printer took the printing press with them and moved to Tynset, another small community to the east. There they joined forces with another dwindling left libertarian publication, *Fedraheimen*.

Generations later, more details emerged about the hurried exit from Volda. Synnøve Riste had become pregnant, but not by her husband Per. She was pregnant by Rasmus Steinsvik, the editor of *Vestmannen* and co-founder of the language school. And then, after giving birth to a baby daughter she fell ill and died. The former friends Per and Rasmus were now enemies and the group of left libertarians in Volda fell apart.

It would be too easy to conclude that the left libertarians failed to transform the community and a closer look would reveal a more nuanced picture. Key members of the radical group went on to play important roles on the local and national political scene. Locally, the remaining members of the group formed new alliances with former opponents to continue the language struggle. The local church gradually began to sympathise with those who agitated for a new language based on the Norwegian dialects.

The radical faction of the Liberal Party grew in importance as the conflict with Sweden over the hated union intensified. The anarchists Garborg and Steinsvik became successful editors of a radical national

newspaper, *17de Mai*, while two other members of the small group of radicals went on to become mayors of Volda. One was later elected member of parliament for the Liberal Party.

Many of the more radical anarchist and communist ideas failed to make an impact on society. However, on issues such as women's rights, voting and science, the left libertarians left a lasting impression on the community. It is fair to say that they contributed to transforming their society in many and lasting ways.

## Conclusion

This study of crisis and conflict in Volda indicate that conflict can play an important role in social learning and collective creativity in resilient communities. There is a tendency, in parts of resilience literature, to view resilient communities as harmonious wholes without rifts or clashes of interests (see for instance Goldstein; Arthur, Friend and Marschke). Instead, conflicts should rather be understood as a natural aspect of any society adapting and transforming itself to respond to crisis. Future research on social resilience could benefit from an ecological understanding of nature that accepts polarisation and conflict as a natural part of ecology and which helps us to reach deeper understandings of the social world, also fostering learning, creativity and the production of alternative political solutions.

This research has indicated the importance of social imaginaries of the past. Collective memories of 'what everybody knows that everybody else knows' about 'what has worked in the past' form the basis for producing ideas about how to create collective action (Swidler 338, 39). Historical institutions are pivotal in producing schemas which are default options for collective action. In Volda, the left libertarians imagined a potential for freedom in the past of the community; this formed the basis for producing an alternative social imaginary of the future of the community.

The social imaginary was not, however, based only on local experience and collective memory of the past. Theories played an important role in the process of trying to understand the past and the present in order to imagine future alternatives. The conflicts themselves stimulated the radicals to search more widely and probe more deeply for alternative explanations to the problems they experienced. This search led them to new insights which were sometimes adopted by the local community and, in some cases, helped to transform social life in the long-run.

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