

The Dream of Utopia: A biographical introduction on Tron Øgrim
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Tron Øgrim (July 27th 1947–May 23th 2007) was, during the 60s and 70s, the political ideologue of the Norwegian Maoists, known as AKP(m-l), Arbeidernes Kommunistparti (marxist-leninistene). Later, from the 80s, he practised as a journalist, speaker and columnist specializing on new technology, especially the Internet, computers and Wikipedia. Øgrim was also one of Norway's earliest collectors of science fiction and wrote three science fiction-novels under the pseudonym Erik Austey. He was married to teacher, writer and politician Jorun Gulbrandsen from 1969 to 1998. He had three daughters, Maja Øgrim, Liv Tora Gulbrandsen and Ellen Aabø.

Tron Øgrim grew up in a middle class home in Hellerud, a suburb on Oslo's east side. His parents, nutrition physiologist Marit Odlaug Eggen (1915–2008) and physicist Johan Otto Øgrim (1913–2006), both gave him a strong cultural and political heritage. During the 1930s Otto Øgrim was active in the Marxist university organization Mot Dag (Towards Day), and both parents were active in the Norwegian underground movement during the occupation years (1940–1945), Otto being part of the leadership of the intelligence organization XU. After the war Marit Eggen Øgrim went on to become one of Norway's pioneers in public nutrition politics. Otto Øgrim got a position at the University of Oslo in experimental physics and made great success in a series of radio and TV-shows making physics understandable for the public.

Leadership dispositions and occupation with public education was somewhat of a family trait. Otto Øgrim was the son of a famous Salvation Army general, Tobias Immanuel Øgrim (1886–1962), son of the elder Johan Øgrim (1853–1938), one of the founders of the Salvation Army in Scandinavia. Tron Øgrim often spoke warmly about his Salvation Army-forefathers, especially his grandmother Othonie Margrethe Olsen (1879–1972), who broke with her family to be a "slum sister" in the Salvation Army. Even still, Tron Øgrim was from his teens an outspoken atheist, reading from early on his father's scientific magazines, political literature he found in the bookshelf, and especially: American science fiction magazines.

"My childhood ideology was in a way Freud, Einstein and Marx," Tron Øgrim later said.¹

In 1961, Sosialistisk Folkeparti (SF; Socialist Peoples Party) was founded by former members of the social democratic party, protesting against Norway's NATO-membership. SF, a typical representative of the New Left that emerged during the late 50s, appealed instantly to Tron Øgrim, who attended his first political demonstration against nuclear weapons in 1961. Tron Øgrim joined SF the same year. He was 13 years old.

Two years later, SF's youth organization Sosialistisk Ungdomsforbund, (SUF; Socialist Youth League) was formed. Tron Øgrim was also here a member from the time the organization started, and it was SUF that was to become the foundation of the new radical left in Norway emerging in the mid-60s. At this time, Tron also became interested in China's critique of the Soviet Union and chairman Mao's support of the liberation struggles in the Third World. Together with his school friends in the ultra-activist local group of SUF, "Bryn-Hellerud SUF", he soon started propagating the theories of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong, wanting SUF to become a revolutionary communist organization. He quickly succeeded. The US War in Vietnam, the student uprisings in Paris and Berlin, the black liberation struggle in the US, the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia – the spirit of the time, of 1968 – made Øgrim's pretty far fetched alternative, Norwegian revolution inspired by a peasant revolution in China, appear extremely attractive. In 1969 Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book* sold 26,000 copies in Norway.²

In making this utopian thought appealing, convincing, even possible, Øgrim's capabilities, as charismatic ideologue was tremendous. He attended debates, held speeches and wrote extensively and was soon considered "chief ideologue" of the Maoists, who, after 1968 dominated the new young left. In 1969 SUF broke off from their mother party SF, took the name SUF(m-l) and started building a new Marxist-Leninist communist party. In 1973 the party Arbeidernes Kommunistparti (marxist-leninistene), (Workers Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist) was formed. From 1967 and up to 1984 Øgrim was always in the inner circle of the movement's leadership.

¹ Interview with Tron Øgrim done by Håkon Kolmannskog, 23.10.2003.

² Tvedt and Hjellum, "Den maoistiske bevegelsens kronologi", in Tvedt (red.), (ml), p. 201.

The Norwegian Maoist Movement was to become the strongest and largest in the Western World during the 70s.³ In the middle of this decade, the whole Maoist movement in Norway probably consisted of 5000 members, about 3000 in the communist party, all being “cadres”, committed to the cause, using most of their spare time on political work. The Maoists started their own newspaper, *Klassekampen* (Class Struggle), from 1977 a daily after the members had collected 25 million NOK in only a year. They had their own publishing house, Oktober, and over 20 bookstores spread around the country. They had a record company, Mai, and several political fronts and organizations. They dominated the university societies. In the May 1st demonstrations the Maoist initiative was at a time (mid-70s) nearly twice as big as the social democratic alternatives. Throughout this process Tron Øgrim played the role as ideologue and institution founder, initializing *Klassekampen*, Oktober, Mai and several other organizations. From his childhood Tron Øgrim had been a bookworm. (He actually quit school just before his final exams because of his goal to read at least one book a day.) This, combined with his charisma and intellectual capacity, made him play an important role among a new generation of writers, e.g. Dag Solstad, Edvard Hoem, Tor Obrestad, Jon Michelet and Espen Haavardsholm. To this day, the Maoists influence in the intellectual and cultural field in Norway is still under discussion.

The relative success of the Maoist movement (especially their influence in the cultural field and university sector) represents somewhat of a “historical puzzle” in Norwegian history and public debate. One of the reasons for this is probably that the Norwegian Maoists, although representing a foreign and exotic ideology and mainly recruiting in a field of student radicals, managed to connect to parts of the Norwegian social reality and political tradition. The Maoists were from the beginning extremely practical oriented, always looking for a way to “mobilize the masses”. In the 60s they were the leading force in many of the Vietnam-demonstrations that took place and early in the 70s they participated and supported a wave of illegal strikes that hit the Scandinavian countries. From the mid-70s they started the so called “campaign for the proletarianization of the party”, ending in perhaps 1000 party members quitting their studies or white-collar jobs to go work in the industry.⁴ Most of these cadres returned to their studies and other types of work in a couple of years, but it gave the Maoists experience and connections to the social reality at the work place. A couple of hundred or so stayed and became union activists and leaders of high profile. However, the Maoists never got much support in the working class in Norway, it was first and foremost a phenomenon among people in the field of higher education, but this almost extreme occupation with “praxis” perhaps made the Maoists more serious, more experienced and well organized than their fellow Maoist parties in the West.

Although Tron Øgrim was infamous for his clumsiness, he was crucial in cultivating this side of the Maoist movement. His ideological teachings were always aimed towards “getting something done”. In this aspect he was tremendously influenced by Mao Zedong and what many traditional Marxists would call Mao’s “voluntarism”. Tron Øgrim himself worked several years in the brewery industry, first at Schous bryggeri and then at Ringnes, where he became a union representative in Nora industrier.

It is perhaps paradoxical, that this relative success connects with the most sectarian period of the Maoists, and, in the end, their total failure. In the national elections of 1973 the AKP(m-l)s electoral front, Rød Valgallianse, only gained 0,4% of the votes. This was a huge blow to the Maoists. Tron Øgrim’s response to this was an extreme leftist course, formulated in his dystopic 100 page document *Teser om høyreavviket* (Theses on the rightist-deviation). In this document he propagated the proletarianization of the party and also the thesis that the world was on the brink of a Third World War where Norway was sure to be occupied by the Soviet Union. The narrative of Utopia, the Norwegian Revolution, was now exchanged with a narrative of Dystopia, the coming of a Third World War. This new narrative gave the party a new mission and enhanced strength, but effectively cut off most ties the party had with Norwegian reality as most people saw it. AKP(m-l) now entered their extreme sectarian period, preparing the party for occupation, using cover names, making one third of their party base totally secret, digging depots around the country, spying on other leftist parties considered “quislings”. Later Tron Øgrim recalled the campaign, saying: “That was very much me. For worse, mostly.”⁵

In 1976 Mao Zedong died, thus introducing the beginning of the end, both for international Maoism and AKP(m-l) (although the party formally kept it going until 2007). After Mao’s death the Gang of Four, the most profiled leaders of the Cultural Revolution, one of them being Mao’s wife, were arrested as traitors to the country. This was a harsh critique of the Cultural Revolution and implicitly of Mao himself. Weeks later, the Albanian Marxist-Leninists, whom Mao had called the lantern of socialism in Europe, broke off with the

³ Relative to size. See Håkon Kolmannskog, “Ideologisk leiarskap i den norske ml-rørsla. Det umoglege kunst”, Universitetet i Oslo, 2006, p. 1, and Robert J. Alexander, *Maoism in the developed world*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, Connecticut 2001, p. 139.

⁴ Jon Ivar Elstad, “Arbeiderklassen tur/retur. (ml)-bevegelsens sjølproletarisering”, *Samtiden* 3/2004, pp. 26–35.

⁵ Interview with Tron Øgrim done by Håkon Kolmannskog, 23.10.2003.

Chinese. From this point on international Maoism was in a devastating crisis, the “scientific” ideology of Marxism-Leninism was now disputed, with different opinions and centres. Soon AKP(m-l) was in a crisis as well, ideologically and organizationally (*Klassekampen* and Oktober being nearly broke). In this situation Tron Øgrim published the book *Marxismen – vitenskap eller åpenbaringsreligion* (Marxism – science or revelational religion) (Forlaget, October 1979). There, he admitted that the party had been far too uncritical of China and Mao (“we were parrots of China,” he wrote) and that it was time for a socialist politics for Norwegian conditions. But the book came far too late, and Øgrim still held on to his belief that Maoism was scientific and correct in most cases. Josef Stalin was still “70 % good and 30 % bad”, as Mao had put it, he still supported Pol Pot’s Cambodian “experiment”. Tron Øgrim could not save the movement he had been so important in creating; he himself was a prisoner of the thinking he tried to change. In a couple of years the party lost thousands of members, and even though most other European Maoist parties were worse off, this was in reality also the downfall of the Norwegian Maoist movement.

In 1984 Tron left the Central Committee and later his party as well. He became more and more peripheral politically, but started a new career as a journalist, speaker and writer, especially on new technology. He wrote several books on political issues as well as three science fiction books. Tron Øgrim also probably started Norway’s first blog, *Under En Stein I Skogen* (steinen.net), where he commented on his favourite topics, formulated like this:

“I’m a squirrel! I’ve found a hole where I put what I write about computers and THE FUTURE, SCHOOL, POLITICS, ECONOMY, ART and EVERYTHING.”⁶

This was true. Tron Øgrim seemed interested in nearly everything, read constantly and had tremendous memory. A list he once made of his favourite books, contained titles in English, German, Spanish, Flemish (!) and Esperanto, in genres as different as poetry, crime, language history and surrealist modernism.⁷ But notably, the list contained a lot of science fiction. Flammarion. Bradbury. Stapledon. Strugatski. Delany. Lem. He called the list a biography.

When Tron Øgrim died he left a colossal book collection. His science fiction books are now catalogued and presented at Litteraturhuset in Oslo. This is of course a great gift to all fans of science fiction. But it is also a gift to all of us who want to understand, not judge, the revolutionary spirit, and the dream of utopia that Tron Øgrim once helped create.

⁶ «Under en stein i skogen ... Tron Øgrim’s hemmelige datasted», www.steinen.net (reading date: 30.5.2011), my translation.

⁷ Tron Øgrim, “Litteratur i de siste 40 millioner år”, i *Skrift. En antologi i anledning Forlaget Oktobers 25-årsjubileum*, Forlaget Oktober 1995, pp. 97–114.