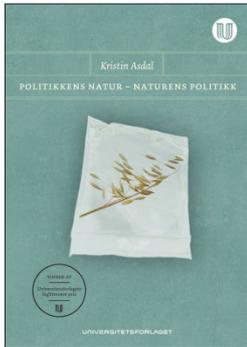


## **Politikkens natur – naturens politikk**

Kristin Asdal. Universitetsforlaget, 2011

by Håkon B. Stokland



The title *Politikkens natur – naturens politikk* can be translated as 'the nature of politics – the politics of nature', and reflects the dual ambition of the book. Kristin Asdal investigates what politics is and how it gets done by simultaneously analyzing the origin and later development of environmental politics in Norway. The book is mainly based on her doctoral thesis from 2004, which has been remolded to match a broader but still mainly academic audience. It

consists of six empirical chapters, which traces the development of Norwegian environmental politics by analyzing six defining cases in its history after world war two. Simultaneously, each chapter investigates the nature of politics by examining one political technology at the core of its analysis.

Asdal elaborates on her approach for studying politics and more specifically the politics of nature in the seventh and last chapter of the book. For this, she draws on Max Weber's studies of bureaucracy, Foucault's lectures on *gouvernementalité*, and actor-network theory. Weber treated bureaucracy as a tool for politics, and Asdal has found inspiration in his emphasis on the importance of technical devices and material arrangements in making the conduct of both bureaucracy and politics possible. Further, she has drawn on Foucault's insistence on studying government as practice, and his focus on governmental technologies and programs of government. In its treatment of the origin and development of a politics of nature in Norway, the book has gained much from Foucault's argument that governmental practices creates new realities that in turn shapes society. Finally, Asdal mentions actor-network theory as an important inspiration, mainly because of its role in making material technologies and the natural sciences relevant and accepted as fields of inquiry for the humanities. By drawing on these inspirations, Asdal examines how the politics of nature has been *done* by making what she has coined 'the technologies of politics' the center of her analysis. Asdal defines this term as the different ways in which scientific knowledge partakes in politics, as well as the technical arrangements and procedures that enables and shapes politics.

In tracing the history of environmental politics, Asdal's main focus is to examine how nature has been made politically relevant by different political technologies. The origin of environmental politics in Norway is often assumed to lie in the so-called green revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and the establishment of the Ministry of the environment in 1972. However, Asdal shows that controversy concerning pollution goes back to the early postwar years and the

establishment of an extensive aluminum industry in a number of rural communities. At this point of time, however, the pollution controversy was not a matter of vulnerable nature or the environment – it was a conflict between the business interests of industry and the local farmers whose domestic animals got fluoride poisoning from smoke emissions. A national board for smoke damage (*røykskaderådet*) was established in the aftermath of this controversy, making pollution an object of national management and regulation. However, the board was organized in such a way that it had close ties to the industry it was supposed to regulate. It quickly turned the pollution issue into an industrial issue, and distanced the issue from the damages of pollution on livestock, forests and agricultural land. The measurement and control of smoke emissions, not smoke damage, became the main regulatory strategy of the board. Emission numbers were easier to measure and control, but the disengagement of the issue from the damages made the emission level negotiable and hence the regulation weak.

Asdal argues that nature and the environment as relevant objects of government were created in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that they were formed in relation to industry and economic reasoning. The environment as a political issue, as well as an influential public opinion speaking on its behalf, originated in a controversy concerning an application to establish an oil-fueled power plant around 1970. This was not a controversial matter at first, but intense work by a few antagonists established relations between the potential power plant and the ongoing international negotiations concerning acid rain. This relation made the damages that the plant could cause in Norwegian landscapes evident, and the reinforced relation between pollution and damage engaged a larger public in the issue. Hence, the pollution issue as an industrial issue was challenged by an effort to make it an environmental issue. The effort paid off, as the plant was never built. The issue of acid rain was, however, not put to rest as the recently established Norwegian environment continued to take damage from other countries' emissions of sulfur dioxides. Asdal shows how the Ministry of the environment and scientists created a vulnerable Norwegian nature in the 1980s and 1990s, in an effort to ensure the prominence of ecology over economy and to make progress in the acid rain issue. As in the case of smoke emissions, the political technology they created in order to attain this goal consisted in the measurement and control of numbers and levels. However, this time they decided to measure the damage and establish levels prescribing how much pollution nature could withstand. The critical levels of nature turned out quite successful in generating a vulnerable nature in opposition to economic growth, and in persuading other countries to commit to reducing their emissions. The compatibility of this political technology of numbers with economic reasoning and cost-efficiency nevertheless turned out

to have a flipside, and soon economists argued that pollution levels should be raised enough to match the critical levels of nature as long as they did not exceed them. Further, Asdal argues that the environmental issue became a full economic issue as the controversy of climate change replaced that of acid rain towards the end of the 1980s. The vulnerable nature at the heart of the issue transformed from national to global, and Norway advocated the political technology of a system of climate quotas based on marked economy in the international negotiations.

In examining the history of Norwegian environmental politics by employing insights from science and technology studies and the field of governmentality studies, the book represents a fresh way of construing 20<sup>th</sup> century political history. However, Asdal's approach does not only involve the transportation of ideas from these academic fields into the field of political history – it brings something back as well. Most importantly, and this is one of the definite strengths of the book, Asdal approaches the origin and development of environmental politics by studying its history in empirical detail. By doing this, she nuances and criticizes some of the more theorizing and philosophical work on politics and its relations to nature and science within both science and technology studies and the field of governmentality studies. By reference to Bruno Latour's argument that Nature by way of scientists short-circuits

the political process, Asdal argues instead that it takes a great deal of effort to make nature a relevant object of government. Further, she argues that nature, once established as a political object, is rather unstable and that it might very well get ignored in favor of for example economic considerations. Additionally, she shows empirically how nature and science can open a political process to new actors and even democratize a formerly closed process, rather than short-circuit it. Considering political technologies of numbers, Asdal nuances the weight put by Peter Miller and much of the governmentality literature on numbers as powerful tools of government. She shows empirically how it might take a great deal of effort to establish a political technology of numbers, and that it might not work as planned or work at all. The theoretical and methodological insights of this book, arrived at through a thorough and yet lively account of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Norwegian environmental politics, should be of relevance to anyone interested in the history and practice of politics.

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