

CONSTRUCTION OF SYMBOLIC EQUALITY IN NORWEGIAN POLITICAL RITUALS

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Abstract: *How is equality expressed in political rituals? How do we know whether we are witnessing equality? How is equality connoted symbolically? Such questions consider the appearance of a phenomenon that, probably, does not yet exist. This article aims at exploring symbolic constructions of equality in Norwegian political rituals from the theoretic standpoints of intersectionality and democratic equality. To achieve this aim, I analyze symbolism of three ritual dimensions: surroundings, participants' actions and time (use and division). The methodological tools are ethnographic observation and interpretation. My analysis indicates that, in the Norwegian political context, equality manifests in symbols of transparency, openness, availability, solidarity, care, love and access to power possessors for citizens. These symbols are embedded in habitual forms of punctuality, physical contact, singing and emotional expression.*

Key words: equality, ethnographic observation, intersectionality, Norway, politics, rituals.

1. Introduction

The development of equality in practice depends on political will (Norway 2015a). If the state and its politicians do not invest in equality at the foundation of social, political and economic development, progression to a more equal society may be hindered. When the state is involved in initiatives to promote equality, its society is strengthened and enhanced (ibid.).

Across the world, some states work purposefully towards developing and maintaining conditions associated with equality. Norway is one such state (Bendixsen et al. 2018). For several years, the country has been among the leaders in the development of equality, improving positions of women and minorities (UNDP 2018). The country combines the advanced welfare politics with protection and development of equality as a vital value (Bendixsen et al. 2018). The Norwegian legislation obliges Norwegian politicians to promote

equality in daily work, establishing it as one of the main working tasks (Norway 2015b).

Despite the elaborated legislative guidelines and remarkable achievements of the country, we know little about how the Norwegian top-politicians realize equality in actions (Neumann 2011; Norway 2015a; Norway 2015b). The lack of knowledge is related to the particularities of the Norwegian elite studies and political ethnography in terms of top politics in general, since these fields are little available for observations (Dargie 1998; Neumann 2011).

Nonetheless, there are vast challenges involved in seeking equality, even for egalitarian oriented countries. One such challenge is the ambiguous nature of equality. Voltaire (2010 [1764]) wrote: "Equality [...] is at the same time the most natural and the most chimerical thing possible." Two hundred years later, the British philosopher John Lucas repeated Voltaire's concerns: "The demand for equality obsesses all our political thought. We are not sure what it is [...] but we are sure that whatever it is, we want it" (1965, 138).

While equality is a well-elaborated topic, theoretically (Anderson 1999; Baker et al. 2004; Cantillon and Lynch 2017; Dahl 2006; Young 1990, 1997), only a few studies have examined equality in *practice* (Baker et al. 2004). In particular, ethnographic studies of the symbolism of equality in politics from an intersectional perspective seem absent for both the Norwegian and other national political contexts. Symbolic uncertainty of equality joined with the particularities of the Norwegian political aspiration for equality and social centrality of ritual performances frame the gap for the present research.

In order to analyze one side of symbolic constructions of equality; I turn to political rituals as a symbolic performative activity with multiple social functions (Turner 1969). Rituals are enriched with capacities to express and construct social reality by redefining and manipulating sociocultural codes and legitimizing, shaping new and supporting previous social norms (Bell 2009; Kertzer 1989). Specifically, the study seeks to address the following question: *How is equality constructed symbolically in rituals involving Norwegian top-politicians?* In answering this question, the article aims at raising awareness of the role symbols and ritual actions play in political processes geared towards equality.

To illuminate the research question, I begin with a description of previous studies of equality in politics, generally, and the Norwegian political context, specifically. Further, I elaborate on the analytical approaches, study design, data and methods used in the present research. Section two presents my analysis of the data. The concluding section provides a summary and final discussion.

2. Previous Studies

Studies of equality originate in fruitful and well-established studies of inequality and discrimination. I am particularly interested in researches, which take the perspective of intersectionality and focus on the Norwegian context. The number of studies has thus inquired in inequality from the perspective of intersectionality (see, i.e., Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad 2010; Gullikstad 2013; Jarvis, Mthiyane, Lindhardt and Ruus 2018; Skjeie and Langvasbråten 2009). For example, Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad (2010) inquired into questions like what does it mean to be (gender) equal in Norway? And, how are majority and minority positions and hierarchies created in family, working and political lives? The authors problematized ethnicity, class and gender intersections in Norwegian society, exploring ways in which Norwegian political and social ideas about equality might contribute to the development of inequality in society.

The symbolism of power and gender inequality is also relevant to the political context (Daloz 2010; Edelman 1964; Pitkin 1967; Rai 2011; Verge and Pastor 2017). Norwegian researchers agree about the crucial role of symbolism in politics in relation to the gender aspect (see, e.g., Bolsø and Mühleisen 2015, Frækhaug 2013; Krogstad 2013, 2015, 2017; Krogstad and Storvik 2010, 2012).

Baker and colleagues (2004) argued that studies of inequality are only one of at least six research areas that are relevant to equality studies. Specifically, they stated that equality studies must grow and develop into a distinct field of knowledge and include studies of egalitarian processes in practice. Examples of studies of equality in practice are Bendixsen, Bringslid and Vike 2018, Brighthouse 2007, and Hanlon 2009.

The Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad argued that Norwegians associate equality with local community, nature and domestic realm, while they affiliate the state with hierarchy, formality and impersonality (1991, 1992). Gullestad developed the concepts of egalitarian individualism and equality as sameness (1984, 1991). Highly influential, Gullestad's works have been criticized by other researchers for dyschromic understanding of public and private and lack of insight of interrelations between the state and rest of society (Lo 2018). Trägård (1997) noticed that equality culture developed in the Scandinavian state politics can be understood as a result of generalizing egalitarian norms inherent to the local peasant assembly. Bendixsen, Bringslid and Vike (2018) made a major effort to map development and peculiarities of Scandinavian egalitarianism both historically and in its modern state. In this volume, Lo (2018) explores how municipal politicians and administrators conceive their roles as actors in

political processes. He argues that politicians operate within and produce their policy with the sense of egalitarian-rooted pragmatism. Ethnographic researches exploring constructions of egalitarian symbolism in the Norwegian and other contexts are seemed to be absent.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

3.1. Equality and Intersectionality

This article understands equality in line with the elaboration of democratic and affective equality and social justice theory (Anderson 1999; 2007; Cantillon and Lynch 2017; Young 1990, 1997). Equality is a system of social relations based on mutual respect and the cosmopolitan recognition of individuals as equals in all their diversity (Anderson 1999). Every individual has a worth and dignity that is not conditional upon anyone else's desires or preferences. Equality abolishes all oppression in the form of marginalization, status hierarchy, domination, exploitation and cultural imperialism (Anderson 1999; Young 1997). It demands that people be respected as equals because they deserve to be treated as such. Both inequality and equality are socially constructed and points to the need for the construction of new egalitarian norms (Anderson 1999). Further, respect, love, care and solidarity are immanent to equality and necessary for equality development. Love, as an aspect of equality, is not only private, but a political matter because it is vital to creating caring infrastructures for democratic thinking and practice (Cantillon and Lynch 2017, 178). The production of respect, love, care and solidarity involves emotional work, physical work, commitment, time, trust, belongingness, presence, mutuality and other kind of resources (ibid.).

Recognition and respect for human diversity is a call to approach equality in terms of intersectionality (Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1991, 2017; Lykke 2006; Young 1997). The intersectionality theory is commonly used to conceptualize ways in which sociocultural hierarchies, power differentials and in/exclusions around discursively and institutionally constructed categories such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age/generation, nationality, etc. mutually co-construct each other (Lykke 2006, 151). I agree with Severs and Erzeel (2016) who point out that intersectionality is ingrained into political power and into political production of (in)equality accordingly. I hence apply intersectionality as a lens through which I analyse the appearance of symbols (Crenshaw 2017). I argue that equality can – and should – be constructed at the intersections of social axes, and assume that, intersectionally, equality is characterized by the same properties as

inequality. Thus, it has the capacity to strengthen itself by interlocking and intersecting on different axes. For example, if a society has a favourable gender climate, it may also have a better atmosphere for the rights of LGBTQ (UNDP 2018).

3.2. Symbols and Rituals

Symbols may be as effective tools for constructing equality, as they have proven to be efficient in producing inequality, domination and power relations (Solheim 1998). The diversity of reality and the particularities of institutions define the variable nature of egalitarian symbolism. In this article, I seek for symbols, which express *overall equality* regardless of gender, class, ethnicity or other socially important characteristics in the context of political rituals.

To understand the ways in which equality is constructed and expressed symbolically, I apply ritual studies' theoretic perspective (Geertz 1973; Kertzer 1989; Ricoeur 1981; Solheim 1998; Turner 1969; Wilentz 1985). I use the definition of symbols coined by Clifford Geertz where symbols are "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol's meaning" (Geertz 1973, 91).

In turn, I approach ritual as a symbolic act or, as David Kertzer put it, as "an action wrapped in a web of symbols" (1989, 9). This definition draws on at least three essentialities of rituals. First, their embeddedness in culture as a web of symbols in which all are situated (Geertz 1973, 5). Second, their performative nature, whereby meanings are produced through the dynamics of action and in interplay with the surroundings. And third, their layered character (i.e. "wrapped") where symbols continuously (re)produce *surplus of meanings* (Ricoeur 1981).

Further, ritual communication occupies tremendous space in the social reality and carries out multiple sociocultural functions. Among other roles, rituals allow constructing and manipulating cultural codes effectively, articulating social conflicts and power collisions in socially accepted forms and expressing unity of different powers (Turner 1969).

Ritual is grounded in preverbal forms of communication and therefore does not necessarily involve verbality (Erikson 1968). Yet, oral statements are regularly an essential part of rituals. The particularity of ritual verbality is that oral statements merge with non-verbal symbolic production, as they not only state something but also *do*. For example, the "I do" voiced by the man and woman at the proper moment in a wedding ceremony does not describe the deed; it is the deed (Bell 2009, 68). Due to the described, many theorists, including David Kertzer (1989), do not segregate between the

verbal and non-verbal elements of rituals and assert that visual, sensual and verbal symbolism creates meanings and functionality conjointly.

Despite their noticeable diversity, rituals are united by essential commonalities. It is a kind of ceremony characterized by rich symbolism, sequences of activities and established manipulations of artifacts, words and gestures (Bell 2009). Time is another central dimension of rituals. It is linked to an event's dedication as well as to active performance and timing of the happening (Turner 1969). Ritual performances involve location, which creates meanings and provides artifacts. In addition, the human body is a powerful source for ritual symbolism. Both the human body in ritual action (dancing, talking, and singing) and the symbolism of the body as such (for example, bodily production – human blood and tears and bodily shape, colour and particularities) is the source of symbols (Bell 2009).

Linking ritual theory and equality theories, I hypothesize that equality symbolism in rituals might be expressed in repetitive manifestations of respect, love, solidarity and care.

4. Design and Methods

4.1. Methods and Data Sources

The present research is a qualitative study based on ethnographic observation and interpretations (Geertz 1973; Marcus 1995). Specifically, for the present study I engaged in multi-sited observation. The implications of this are as follows: First, I did not limit the fieldwork to one geographic location; rather, I observed politicians across diverse sites. And second, I made observations in sites involving social institutions, including the media, markets and churches (Marcus 1995). Before, during and immediately after the rites were performed, I took pictures and videos and conducted ethnographic interviews with some of the Ministers involved.

I concentrated on Ministers in the Erna Solberg Cabinet, which was appointed on October 16, 2013 and re-shuffled in January 2019. In accordance with the official government webpage, at the moment of observations, the Cabinet consisted of 22 Ministers, of whom 12 were men and 10 were women (Norway 2019b).

4.2. Entrance to the Field

To obtain knowledge of rituals I could potentially observe, I consulted the webpage of the Norwegian government (Norway 2019a). The Ministers' online calendars provided information on their activities for seven to ten days

ahead. I expected access to the rituals to be problematic. Indeed, the challenge of gaining entry has been previously described as the chief obstacle for observation in political anthropology (Dargie 1998). In fact, entrance to the field was uncomplicated, at least on the national level. The day after my initial research, three rituals were scheduled in my local area with the participation of three Ministers. Without any organizational agreements, I was able to witness two of these ceremonies. Overall, during May and June 2019, I observed five political rituals involving three male and one female Ministers. There were two openings of socially important objects, two conferences and one public meeting.

5. Interpretations of the Results

5.1. Simplicity of Artifacts

5.1.1. Surroundings

To gain a sense of the atmosphere of the ritual events, I arrived and observed the staging and surroundings of the rites prior to their beginning. I mapped artifacts – material objects produced by humans – and interpreted them in relation to the Norwegian cultural codes and values (Alvesson and Billing 2009, 124). The rituals took place in a diversity of surroundings, like conference rooms, a library, open air etc. Most of the rooms were decorated with furniture in a similar design, even though buildings' exteriors were done in different styles.

One of the sites was a hotel hall where the conference took place. That conference hall was equipped with black chairs for spectators, a stage, a digital screen, a piano and a pulpit. The interior colors combined white, dark blue, dark bordeaux, black and tree-colors and were deep, calm and modest. A few pictures in simple frames decorated the walls. Huge rectangular windows stretched from floor to ceiling, inviting the beautiful garden outside into the room as a natural decoration. Brought together, these elements narrated the officiality of the atmosphere yet restrained grandiosity and other cultural codes of upper class. Rather, they produced symbolism of upper middle-class with elements of puritan self-limitations typical for the Norwegian society (Bendixen et al. 2018).

The first row of chairs was marked with “Reserved” signs; these were printed on regular white paper with no further indication as to whom the reservations were for. Designating a place with a name is an old tradition that relates to the privilege of sitting in an honorable place. Typically, the reserved seat is relatively more comfortable, affording a better view and identifying higher status. Accordingly, the practice of reserving seats is often an expression of wealth and rank. Thus, historically, the rich and powerful purchased church pews and theatre boxes. Such place “tagging” allows persons to broadcast their titles and distinguish themselves by virtue of their class and social status.



Figure 1: The Minister waits to take the floor.
Source: Svetlana Anistratenko

In my observations, the anonymized nature of the reservations and the simplicity of their appearance symbolized a voluntary refusal of privileges, blurring differentiations and making less visible the hierarchy of relations. Additionally, the anonymization of the signs minimized the distance. Yet, even anonymized, the reservation drew the line between the viewers and the participants. In other words, practically, anyone could

end up sitting behind the Minister, but not next to him.

There were three tall chairs and two tall round tables on the stage. These were in a minimalistic style formed by clean lines of wood and metal. Visually, the furniture suggested that the full body of the participating Minister would be observable during the entire rite, be s/he sitting, standing or walking. In this way, the furniture emphasized the symbolic elements of transparency, availability and openness, reducing barriers between the spectators and participants.

5.1.2. Outfit and Look

It is important to notice that the look-simplicity of artifacts, e.g. garments, has the symbolic capacity to reproduce notions of hierarchy and power (Bolsø and Mühleisen 2015). For that reason, this section inquires into symbolism of clothes politicians wore.

In all the events, the Ministers dressed somewhat casually, despite wearing (in all cases but one) traditional office attire, such as a men’s suit. When the modern three-piece black suit was first designed more than 150 years ago, it aimed at releasing men from the extravagant garments worn by the aristocracy. In this respect, it represented a step towards democratization

(Krogstad 2017). As time passed, the suit became enriched with the opposite cultural codes and became a male symbol associated with authority, discipline and control (Bolsø and Mühleisen 2015).

The only observed female Minister wore a feminine version of the traditional male suit, with a white jacket and black trousers. Her jacket had a dense texture and was buttoned. Her short smoothly styled hair, lack of jewellery and a stack of papers in her hands emphasized her loyalty to the values of control and discipline. Somewhat ironically, this neat, black and white look was more laden with symbols of power and control than outfits of the Minister's male colleagues. Her strict, distancing expression remained intact throughout her ritual actions, which took place during a business conference at a private organization. The Minister arrived only just before her speech, which was scheduled at the end of the event. She did not take a seat at any point, and she left immediately after her presentation, demonstrating her rational use of time. During her speech, the Minister made jokes and smiled, but limited other emotional expressions. All things considered, her symbolic expressions were distant – representing rationality and de-emphasizing notions of solidarity.

Gender researchers Agnes Bolsø and Wencke Mühleisen studied the visual representations of female politicians in their manner of dress. Following the terminology of these scholars, I describe the female Minister's dress style as "passing to power" (2015). "Passing to power" refers to clothing worn by women to adapt to the style of powerful men while simultaneously retaining some signs of femininity. The passing to power image reinforces recognized power symbolism and, due to this association with hierarchy, refuses equal relations. Use of the "passing to power" symbolism relates to an insecure position of femininity in power where "authority and masculinity are often seen as connoted, while femininity holds a more ambivalent position related to formal and legitimate power" (Bolsø and Mühleisen 2015, 224). The visual researcher Anne Krogstad noted that female politicians stand at risk of being defeated as politicians if they do not appear powerful and dominative (2017).

The visual representations of the male Ministers were different. Despite the generally traditional look of the Ministers, I could observe some tendencies of breaking up with the disciplined rules associated with the three-piece suit. The majority of the Ministers did not wear ties; those who wore jackets left them unbuttoned. The Minister of Development went the furthest of all: he wore a button-down light blue shirt and dark blue jeans. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up and the top buttons were undone. Finally, none of the male Ministers was clean-shaven, they had stubble or wore short beards.

In the case of my observations, the outfits of the politicians produced multiple symbolic allusions in terms of hierarchy and equality. The relaxed relations with outfits made the male Ministers appear less formal, thereby decreasing their symbolic expression of control. The mentioned look-modifications seemed to point toward democratization and symbolic annihilation of inequalities in outfits. Stubble on their faces made the Ministers look less disciplined, more earthly, human and, in this way, more available. They demonstrated tendencies toward democratization and humanity of their nature. Loyalty to bureaucracy and affiliation to a power position was generally restrained by the mentioned symbolism but presented more clearly in the case of the female Minister.

5.2. On the Junctions of Time and Actions

The symbolism of artifacts is available to visual perception and intertwining with the symbolism of time and timing, which is less obvious yet a core of any ritual. Time is laden with symbolism even before the ritual begins. By referring to the date, length and sequence of a ritual, organizers and participants convey and gain ideas about the meanings of the event (Bell 2009).

In the rituals observed for this research, most rites shared a periodical structure of three sections: (1) arrival (20 to 3 minutes prior to the start), (2) official part and (3) post-ritual period, when anyone could communicate with the participating Ministers. In the following subsections, I discuss each of these segments. I shall also describe and analyse actions of the Ministers, which gain their symbolic senses, in many regards, due their relations with facets of time.

5.2.1. Arrival

It was typical that a ceremonial site would start to fill with people approximately 15 minutes before the beginning. All Ministers arrived early or on time. One of the male Ministers came 20 minutes prior and had a coffee outside of the location, greeting arriving spectators. The other one came three minutes prior, went to his place at the first row, and chatted the rest of the time with people around. Others were precise and arrived the minute, the ceremonies started.

Symbolism of punctuality at the arrival moment is an important commonality between all observed happenings. The English social theorist Richard Lewis (2006) discussed the diversity of time understanding across cultures. In accordance with Lewis' framework, Norway is a linear time-culture, where time is a valuable commodity that can be spent, wasted, saved

and given. In such cultures, schedules are critical because they enable planning and prevent uncertainty. Willingness to wait is low and, punctuality is an expression of respect and determination to make effective use of time (ibid.).

Further, in linear cultures, symbolic punctuality may prevent aggression and power domination, while tardiness may have an opposite effect. Accordingly, time is an instrument of diplomacy in international politics (Faizullaev 2013). In some cases, politicians use tardiness to demonstrate influence, point to a colleague's dependable position or weaken and manipulate others (Batchelor 2017). A known example of a politician who repeatedly arrives late is the Russian President Vladimir Putin. Due to delays, the media suspect Putin of playing psychological games with the purpose of dominating his colleagues. He is accused of being disrespectful, snobbish and of attempting to create a hostile atmosphere (ibid.).

The aggression of participants left waiting can be triggered by physical and psychological conditions, since willingness to wait depends on one's situation. Commonly, public rituals involve a significant number of spectators, characterized by a wide range of ages, social positions and health conditions. Politicians, who make a crowd wait, demonstrate a lack of consideration of these factors. In contrast, those who are on time symbolically verify spectators' importance and show care about others time commodity. Further, delays might generate conflicts between the intended meanings and the actual meanings. For example, if a ritual's aim is to demonstrate solidarity in a group but part of the group is late, the result may be a sense of disagreement.

In sum, the symbolism of punctuality in the arrival point is conjoined with the symbolism of solidarity, care, interest to the public and respect. By being on time and prior, the Norwegian Ministers emphasized that they share an interest with the spectators in participating in the ceremonies.

5.2.2. Official Part

The second part of the observed rites was the official performance. The timing of this part was frequently guided by programs published in advance. The programs indicated that a similar amount of time would be allocated to each speaker. It was common for the performances to be opened by hosts. In four out of the five observed rituals, the Ministers were present in the room at the beginning of the event. During each ceremony, the Ministers took the stage as second and third participants or closers of the rite, but never openers. When they spoke, they followed the timing indicated in the programs. Each of participants was given the same amount of time for their presentation. After

their part performed alone or in dialog with other participants, the Ministers returned to their places and listened to the other contributors.

Subordination to the programs and their timelines – as well as secondary participation – provided several symbolic connotations. Passing right for the first act and speech to other contributors represented the idea of redistributing supremacy, flattening hierarchies and democratizing the process. In these rituals, the power possessor did not lead the ceremony, nor did he/she open socially important objects or initiate socially sore topics. Rather, they took a “one of many participants” role, becoming supporters but not leaders.

This role validated the opportunity for their non-appearance. In other words, once the ritual started, an object would be opened, and a conversation begun whether the Ministers were in the room or not. These initiating processes would be triggered by non-governmental powers. While the Ministers’ absence could potentially result in changes to the program, it would not spoil the special moment of the opening (Anistratenko 2017). Furthermore, as the Ministers were not first to take the floor, they were able to express respect and interest, waiting for their turn.

The regalement on stage produced an analogous symbolism as the Ministers’ punctuality, but with the added element that time was shared equally. Such distribution connoted the conversation as created and supported by all participants. Following the schedule, the politicians symbolically situated themselves as equals among equals, rejecting the privilege of using someone else’s time and, hence, misusing their position.

5.2.3. After the Official Performance

After the official performance ended, there was commonly with informal communication between the participants and spectators of the event. This part was so similar between all happenings that, I suggest, it has become a part of the performance.

During this period, the Ministers were active in social interaction, taking pictures with others, answering and asking questions, shaking hands and giving hugs. None of these activities was treated as insignificant or uninteresting for the politicians, including taking photos with spectators. At this stage of the event, informal communication and relaxed timing emphasized the importance of citizens and secured their effective access to those possessing governmental power. Considering time as currency, the Ministers’ behaviour testified that they preferred to spend it on citizens.



Figure 2: The Minister after the public meeting. Source: Svetlana Anistratenko.

In summary, it is possible to claim that, in the observed rituals, time was a tool for the symbolic expression of respect, emphasizing the availability of the politicians, the high value they placed on citizens and the equal role of all participants in the events. This symbolism was triggered in advance (through communication of the events), reflected in the programs and supported during the rituals. The post-official period was a natural part of the events and used to communicate openness and care for the interests of participants and spectators. Time and timing framed actions of the Ministers and verified symbolism of topics related to equality issues, which I discuss in the next section.

5.3. Symbolism of Actions

5.3.1. Involvement in Equality Topics

Some topics of the rituals were directly related to equality issues, which connoted the act of participation as potentially supportive to equality. One of the observed ceremonies was the political-religious conference “Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War,” arranged by the Norwegian Church Aid organization. The program included a dialog by the Minister of International Development and the leader of the Norwegian Church Aid about a visit they had taken to the Panzi Hospital in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Panzi Hospital, headed by the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Dr. Denis Mukwege, specializes in helping survivors of sexual violence.

The conference started with a short film, in which a young white girl spoke about how she and her mother had been raped during the war. Her father had left them shortly after. It transpired that the film conveyed the true story of a Congolese girl who had been a patient at the Panzi Hospital and had met the Minister there. It seemed to be emotional for the Minister to talk about that meeting. In his part of the speech, he condemned both rape and victim blaming. He also described feeling sorry for the victims, and his anger with conditions at the hospital, where each bed would have two women and two

or three children. He contrasted the experiences of the patients at this hospital to those of his own children, emphasizing his terror at the thought of them experiencing such hospital conditions. During his talk, the Minister rolled his shirtsleeves up and down several times and repeatedly rubbed his face. These gestures complemented other symbolic expressions of his concern and involvement with the cause. After his time on stage, the Minister returned to his seat and the conference host announced that he would be leaving. The Minister objected, claiming that he would stay to the end.

Emotions demonstrated by the Minister, his body language, verbal statements and changes of plans produced the advanced symbolism of involvement with the cause and solidarity with the victims, as well as love and care for them. His descriptions of his thoughts about his own kids might be understood as his private emotional experience of imagining all children as equal and as his call for spectators to think of the same too. Inscribed in the topic of the conference, the Minister's performance maintained and reinforced symbolism of conviction and non-acceptance of sexual violence.

5.3.2. Creation of Symbolic Space for Equality



Figure 3: The image of the Minister is demonstrating nail polish. Source: [instagram.com/p/Brvzoh_n72i/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Brvzoh_n72i/)

The other observed rituals had seemingly little space for the symbolism of equality, as their topics were not directly related to the theme. In one of the observed rituals, the Minister of Trade and Industry held an informal meeting with citizens. This so-called "Political Breakfast" was led by two journalists in front of an audience of approximately 100. The themes of the conversation generally concerned the Minister's tasks, which related to local businesses, the economy and logistics. However, the discussion explored private themes, including the Minister's life and public image as well. The Minister has a popular profile on

Instagram. He had recently received an intense response to an image he had posted there. There the Minister had displayed off his polished nails, which his child had painted.

The Minister was asked about his motives to post the image. He answered that he aimed at presenting a healthy image of fatherhood and free masculine

expressions. Describing in detail the abovementioned photograph, the Minister voluntarily involved himself with symbolic references to fatherhood, childcare and LGBTQ rights, since men's use of traditionally female products (such as nail polish) is frequently associated with LGBTQ minorities. The Minister verbally expressed solidarity with men who use nail polish (for any reason) and ignored the stigma associated with such body modifications, simultaneously enacting the symbolism of openness, care for children and freedom of expression.

Likewise, the Minister of Digital Affairs during the opening of a new scientific and information technology center involved the relevant symbolism. At the event, the auditorium was full of members from international scientific and business communities. The Minister began his speech by pointing out his lapel pin – a multi-colored circular ring. He accentuated similarities between the pin and LGBTQ rainbow symbolism, claiming that even if the pin had no direct link to the LGBTQ, he himself still supported LGBTQ rights and would be participating in the upcoming Pride events. Later in his performance, he argued that technological development should seek to remedy global injustices, fight racism, nationalism and improve quality of life. Thus, the Minister combined use of artifacts and oral statements to create the space for relevant symbols.

In sum, a noteworthy proportion of the politicians' actions in rituals was associated with their discussion of private affairs (in relation to, e.g., their children and family) and their demonstration of an emotional connection with LGBTQ rights, the fight against racism, nationalism and sexual violence. The politicians demonstrated their affection through their body, using gestures and mimicry and raising and lowering their voices. They also employed artifacts to produce symbolic diversity associated with support of oppressed groups.

5.3.3. Proximity of the Human Body

Distance and proximity are symbolic tools that have long been used by possessors of power (Krogstad 2017). The analysis would not be complete if these dimensions were left out. At one event, a Minister claimed: "It is a short way to power in Norway." At that moment, the Minister was sitting less than a meter away from the audience and in touching distance from the two journalists who were hosting the event. This proximity was not unique across the observed rituals. In fact, in three out of the five events, the Ministers shared the stage with one or several other people, with whom they communicated in dialog. They also used digital media to present the voices of others. Even the politicians who delivered a solo speech avoided the use of

the pulpit and stood in front of the public with their entire body on display. Following the ceremony, most Ministers made themselves available for physical contact sitting together with other attendees and demonstrating generosity in their willingness to hug, touch and shake hands with others after official parts.

Acting in the described way, the Ministers conveyed representations opposite to traditional symbolism of power, where distance is typically employed to emphasize authority and exclusivity, highlighting the right to rule. Symbolically, it can be expressed through gaze, clothing, accessories and elevation over others (Krogstad 2017). Similarly, proximity can also be used as an instrument of hierarchy. For example, if a power possessor extends his/her person and body to another person, she/he symbolically distributes power to that person and raises her/him over others. Thus, the link between proximity and hierarchy is constructed by the symbolism of exclusivity and privilege. In the observed rituals, proximity was used for a different kind of symbolism – one related to democracy, since anyone could be close to the powerful. Being available to physical contact, the Ministers signalled openness, transparency and the desire for closeness.

5.3.4. Participation in Collective Actions



Figure 4: The Minister is singing. Source: Svetlana Anistratenko

Finally, it is important to inquire into collective actions during the rite and ways of the Ministers' involvement in them. One of the symbolically bright moments of my observations was the communal singing by participants at the conference against sexual violence. When the conference host announced that singing would commence, audience members rose from their seats. The Minister stood up, as well. While singing, he swayed to the beat of the music, diligently and carefully articulating every word displayed on the screen.

Singing covers a wide spectrum of emotional expression, from gladness and joy to sorrow and worry. In communal singing, people experience attachment and unity. Singing is thus a powerful tool for vanishing boundaries and producing equal relations at the moment of the performance. In this particular ceremony, the Minister accepted the rules, which applied to everyone and performed the song on equal terms with others. By singing with others, he expressed his will to reduce the separation between power

possessors and the wider community, and his desire to be part of that community.

6. Conclusions

In modern society, elements of equality are less consistent and impactful and more fragmented and widespread than those of inequality. These elements of equality have not appeared independently, but as a result of will, obligation and effort. Accordingly, political will (reinforced by the drive of individual politicians) is needed for the continued production of such elements, in support of societal equality.

My analysis of the observed rituals demonstrated that Norwegian politicians use diverse strategies to construct equality symbolically, including the use of artifacts, physicality and verballity, as well as including employment of known cultural codes and recognized sociocultural values.

In the Norwegian political context, the notion of equality, produced by the politicians, is embedded in symbols of transparency, inclusion, respect, redistribution of power, democracy, dignity, modesty, participation, openness, predictability and accessibility. This symbolism was employed to support the idea of equality that the state (and its representatives) guaranteed to its public, enabling citizens to participate in and communicate with political power possessors. On the opposite side, equality constructions rejected symbolism of protectionism, hierarchy paternalism, opaqueness, discrimination, oppression and domination.

In the observed rituals, symbols of expressed emotion, humanitarianism, care and love were also important for constructing equality by the politicians. These symbols were associated with domestic and private areas and effectively substituted the symbolism of rationality. Symbolic practices such as singing, laughing and even – paradoxically – expressing anger were effective for deconstructing hierarchies and eliminating barriers. These practices were activated at the intersections of social axes, emphasizing the universality of human nature, irrespective of group divisions.

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