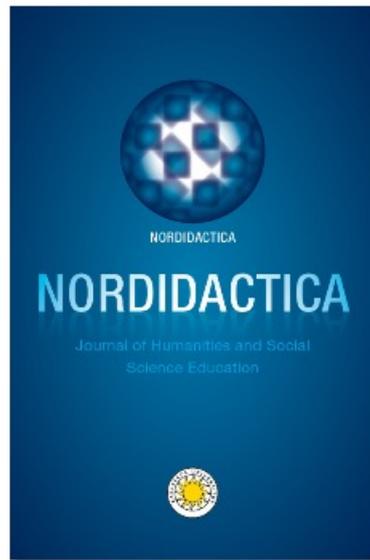


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Education for sustainable development and narratives of Nordic exceptionalism: The contributions of decolonialism

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Abstract: This paper argues that approaches embedded in technology optimism hold a hegemonic stance in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Norway. A monolithic focus on technology also leads to a lack of emphasis on the possible contributions of Social Studies. Although sustainable development is commonly understood as having the global goal of “saving the planet,” ESD remains situated within a colonial epistemological regime. In spite of its good intentions, ESD may in fact contribute to the construction and reproduction of differences between “Us” and “Them,” denoting the Global North and South. The aim of this paper is to explore the contributions of decolonial perspectives in providing possible interruptions of the hegemonic narratives, and fostering transformation. The paper exemplifies how current practices of ESD can serve to sustain rather than change the global economic and political systems. It is argued that decolonial perspectives can be tools for disrupting mainstream ESD.

KEYWORDS: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, SOCIAL STUDIES, DECOLONIAL, NARRATIVE, NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM

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Introduction

Although there is no clear consensus on exactly what Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) should be, commitment to ESD appears uncontroversial and mainstream around the world. Critical scholars have argued that current approaches to ESD tend to sustain rather than change the status quo of the global political economy, not questioning the hegemonic belief in technology's ability to deliver environmental and social sustainability (Hellberg and Knutsson, 2018, Knutsson, 2018). In a similar vein, the aim of this paper is to shed light on how decolonial perspectives might serve as alternative tools for furthering global social justice and sustainability. Decolonialism exposes and contests the core idea that the world is no longer governed by colonial structures. Applying empirical examples from fieldwork in a seventh-grade classroom, this paper focuses on the content of Social Studies concerning images of Norway in the global arena. The research questions are as follows:

- How do the dominant cultural narratives of Norway in the global arena influence Social Studies teaching about sustainability?
- What contributions could decolonial perspectives make to education about sustainability and global social justice?

While refraining from suggesting a new normative ideal or one-size-fits-all solution, decolonial theory is recommended for its potential to question epistemological universalism, disrupt current practices, and stimulate alternative ways of thinking about global developments (Andreotti, 2011b). In spite of the good intentions of fostering global citizenship, ESD is highly exposed to an "equity deficit" through its reproduction of a Western ideal of life in the identification of who represents the norm and who is in need of change (Ideland and Malmberg, 2014). Such constructions as "Us" and "Them" are reinforced by ideologies of exceptionalism embedded within Western educational systems. The legacy of Social Studies in Norway clearly embodies the inherent tension in democratic education between reproducing the current social order and stimulating emancipation and change (Shor, 1992, Freire, 2000, Englund, 1986). Social Studies has historically held a leading role in the nationalistic endeavor of fostering patriotic citizens, permeated by methodological nationalism (Slagstad, 1998). However, its stated aims highlight "understanding and influencing the global community" (Norwegian directory of education and training, 2013), and sustainable development is emphasized in the curriculum. Even so, besides painting a rather gloomy picture of previous efforts in Norway toward ESD overall, the literature indicates that global social justice is especially neglected (Sinnes and Straume, 2017, Eriksen, 2017).

The following analysis is conducted through a decolonial theoretical lens (Andreotti, 2011b, Andreotti, 2011a, Grosfoguel, 2006, Mignolo, 2005) and methodologically informed by the insights of critical pedagogy (Apple et al., 2009). Although the primary function of these frameworks is to reveal social injustice, their significance also lies in their aspirations to locate spaces of transformation. Hence, the paper discusses the existence of counter-hegemonic narratives. I argue that these perspectives hold significance for highlighting the pedagogical possibilities of decolonial perspectives in Social Studies education. These include their capacity to provoke critical thinking,

challenge epistemological universalism, and revise students' understanding of structures and systems.

The first section of this paper presents a contextual background to the policies of sustainable development in the Norwegian context, emphasizing education. The second section provides an introduction to decolonial theory and indicates some of the particularities when applied in a Norwegian context. After an overview of the research methods applied, results are discussed, structured according to the metanarratives in focus. The section also includes a more general discussion on the implications of the study for didactical challenges within ESD. In the conclusion, the potential of the decolonial theoretical lens to disrupt hegemonic narratives of sustainable development is highlighted, both generally and for the particular context of Social Studies.

Background: ESD and the case of Norway

The UN World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) launched the concept of sustainable development in 1987, led by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. While Norway was “active and morally pretentious” in international environmental discourse (Lafferty et al., 2007, 186), practical politics at home were restricted to bold formulations in policy documents. Official strategies on sustainable development have mainly followed two avenues. First, the idea that Norway must proceed with its petroleum industry to provide the world with “clean” fossil fuel technology serves arguments for further expansion. Second, a focus on channeling climate politics through aid—encouraging emissions reductions in other countries by “helping” them build new industries and technologies (Straume, 2016). Approaches within education are highly consistent with this overall context. Evaluations show that the influences of the UN Decade of ESD (2005-2014) on school and teaching have been limited (Andresen et al., 2015, Straume, 2016, Laumann, 2007, Sinnes and Straume, 2017). One of the main problems is that “few projects have been concerned with social themes such as inclusion, democracy and social justice” (Andresen et al., 2015, 250). This is further accentuated by the fact that most of the funding and measures are channeled through the Natural Backpack project, led by the Centre for Natural Sciences in Education (Straume, 2016). In line with the recently adopted UNESCO Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (GAP), the ongoing curriculum reform in Norway highlights sustainable development as one of three themes to permeate all compulsory education. However, this shows scant promise of changing the status quo because the policy describes ESD thus: “New technology will, in addition to ethical reflection and judgement related to technology development, be central to the new interdisciplinary topic sustainable development” (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2015, 39). This techno-optimism is highly consistent with the larger international context of ESD, permeated by approaches depending upon and complicit with state, market, and multilateral institutions (Knutsson, 2018).

Sinnes and Straume (2017) argue that technology optimism prevails as the leading discourse in Norwegian educational policy given the new curriculum reform. The discrepancy between a seemingly widespread notion that Social Studies is important for

sustainable development and the prioritizing of natural sciences is evident within research and subject didactics. Although research on ESD in Norway in general is scarce, there is a relatively well-developed didactical tradition of outdoor education and explorative approaches within the natural sciences, providing practical approaches to ESD (Bjønness, 2017, Jordet, 2010, Sinnes, 2015). Within Social Studies didactics, however, the topic is almost absent and mostly mentioned within the geography branch (Sætre, 2016, Birkeland, 2014). One example of a Social Studies approach in Norway provides an interesting study of how students in an upper secondary school participating in a project on taking action for sustainability in their everyday lives see themselves as citizens. A core finding is that the students lack an understanding of global distributional patterns and solidarity (Sæther, 2017). This situation implies an urgent need to move from a collective acknowledgment of the importance of Social Studies to ESD, emphasizing a focus on global structures and inequality, toward looking at what this might mean in teaching practices. This paper is intended as a contribution to this conversation. Notably, it sheds light on the need to see education for sustainability, democracy, and social justice as inseparable.

Theoretical framework: The significance of decolonialism and world-systems perspectives

Decolonial theory offers tools to analyze sustainable development from a structural perspective. This is especially relevant in a study of the role of Norway in a global context. Decolonial perspectives have strong affinities with postcolonialism, but while the latter pay more attention to agents of colonial cultures, decolonialism is indebted to and interlinked with world-systems theory in focusing on understanding global economic inequality and criticizing ongoing structures of capital accumulation (Andreotti, 2011b, Grosfoguel, 2002, Wallerstein, 1974). Through this lens, globalization is understood as continuing colonialism. Colonialism did not end with national autonomy for states in the Global South, as illustrated by the global division of labor and socio-material structures. This also has a clear and visible racialized aspect, in which the colonial idea of the “White man’s burden” is reproduced through the “burden of the fittest” in global cooperation today, explaining global poverty as a lack of attributes in the South that the North has the ability to provide (Andreotti, 2011a). The decolonial perspective offers a historical and systemic approach to understanding global inequalities that challenge the ideals of sustainable development today.

Applying the decolonial lens to the Norwegian context, climate-change mitigation assessments and development policies can be understood through the larger cultural discourse of technology optimism (Arvesen et al., 2011). The idea that developing new technology is the answer per se to sustainable development contrasts with approaches focused on social redistribution or resource pessimism. The “distinct anomaly” (Lafferty et al., 2007) between self-image and reality in Norwegian sustainability policy may also be seen to exemplify *Nordic exceptionalism* as a specific kind of nation branding in the Nordic countries (Browning, 2007). This idea relates to the image of the

Nordic countries as innocent of colonialism despite the fact that their participation in colonial practices and subsequent processes of globalization is well documented (Mikander, 2015, Eidsvik, 2012, Tvedt, 2003). As an example, paying for climate quotas in other countries in order to balance carbon emissions accounts has been described as “carbon colonialism” (Martiniussen, 2013). This underlines the interrelation between technology optimism and the modern Eurocentric belief that the “Third World” needs the assistance of the “First World” to grow economically (Andreotti, 2011a). This ideology of Eurocentrism serves to legitimize a deeply unequal global economic system, where the relative progress of this “center” of the World-system is happening at expense of the “periphery”, or the Global South. The ideology is also scripted into hegemonic understandings of modern technology as such. Knutsson (2018) argues that technological progress and global inequality interlace. The idea that new technology can solve the sustainability challenge is illusory because modern technology is ultimately premised on unequal global exchange.

For education, one of the main implications of decolonial thinking is its outlook on knowledge production. The perspective strongly criticizes the Western/masculinist idea that we can produce knowledges that are unpositioned and universalistic. The main ambition here lies not in an allegedly new universalism but rather to unsettle, challenge, and foster diversity and “border thinking” (Andreotti, 2011b, Bhambra, 2014). This resonates well with insights from critical pedagogy. The main criticism of citizenship education in both the Norwegian and international contexts has been the lack of a critical dimension and the failure to focus on social transformation (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004, Lorentzen and Røthing, 2017, Westheimer, 2015). Kumashiro (2002) argues that learning that enables social transformation requires not merely more knowledge, but disruptive knowledge. This involves experiencing one’s situatedness as a learner and the relativity of epistemology. For Biesta (2009, 2005, 2014), this is theorized as transcendental violence, the ability of the teacher to enable the student to come into being as a unique individual. It requires being challenged on the knowledge that is taken for granted and thus being disturbed sufficiently to react in and to the world. Biesta argues that for education to be truly democratic, it needs to foster this kind of subjectification for students. Such pedagogical thinking is exposed to the possible risk of paralyzing students with its uncertainty and possible anger or fear, however (Andreotti, 2011b). This paradox is also at the core of current theorizing about ESD, arguing that understanding the magnitude of the global crisis through education can lead to “learned hopelessness” (Sinnes, 2015, Nagel, 2005, Jickling and Wals, 2013). Thus, education has to walk a thin line between apathy and enabling action.

The world-systems perspective central to decolonial thinking has its roots in critical social sciences related to politics, economics, and sociology (Grosfoguel, 2006). In relation to the more specific subject content of Social Studies, the significance of decolonial perspectives lies especially in the challenge it poses to the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical traditions emanating from Europe (Bhambra, 2014), and extending from that, how we understand global social and economic structures today. The old colonial hierarchies of Europeans/non-Europeans can be located in historical narratives and current global distributional structures, as well as the

national identity of Western countries, since “the identity of those nations is predicted on their relationships to the colonized others” (Ahmed, 2000, 10). Thus, decolonial perspectives might also provide new insights into the constructions of national identity at the core of Social Studies content.

Research methods

The phenomena under study in this article are narratives about Norway in a global context, tracked across several scales, such as classroom observations, learning materials applied, and interviews with teachers and pupils. This approach resonates well with critical theory. The “political-intellectual work” these fields aspire to stretches across established academic disciplines (Svendsen, 2014). Rather than engage on a quest for “naïve realism,” this paper presents theoretically informed interpretations (Røthing, 2017, Kincheloe et al., 2011). The case in focus is a series of lectures on the topic “Consumption and Pollution” in a seventh-grade Social Studies class in a school in South-Eastern Norway. A semi-structured, in-depth interview with the teacher, “Paul,” was conducted immediately after the lectures, enabling elements of stimulated recall (Calderhead, 1981). This triangulation was vital to establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, notably by confronting the teacher with experiences and understandings from the observations (Nowell et al., 2017). As Paul was mentoring three pre-service teachers at the time, they were invited to participate in the interview. Two of them mostly took the role of silent listeners, while one added to the conversation with critical comments. This pre-service teacher is referred to as “pre-service teacher 1.” All the students were seventh-graders and thus between the ages of 12 and 13. Gender or other social identity markers are not considered in this context.

The study was conducted in compliance with the national *Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law, and Theology*. Of particular relevance was the importance of “not ascribing irrational or unworthy motives to participants without providing convincing documentation and justification” (NESH. Den nasjonale forskningsetiske komité for samfunnsvitenskap og humaniora, 2016, 22), since I was a clear co-constructor of the narratives told on the basis of Paul’s practices and accounts. In this regard, I made an effort to be transparent in my perspectives, for example providing critical follow-up questions while explicitly stating my point of view.

TABLE 1

Overview of empirical material

Observations	Interviews	Learning materials
*Observation notes from five lectures	*Semi-structured interview with one teacher and three preservice-teachers *Focus group interview with six students	*Textbook for Social Studies year 7: <i>Midgard 7</i> (Aarre et al., 2008) *Movie <i>Before the Flood</i> (DiCaprio and Stevens, 2017)

Narrative analysis

The research questions entail a narrative analysis. This involves a double hermeneutic, applying an interpretivist approach to the construction of meaning by the narrator (Bazeley, 2013, 204). The significance of locating narratives is that it permits an exploration of the way in which meaningful totalities are constructed from scattered events (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). The narratives communicated by the teacher and constructed through classroom interaction and in learning materials can serve as “windows to the contradictory and shifting nature of hegemonic discourses, which we tend to take for granted as stable monolithic forces” (Chase, 2011, 422). Importantly, in narrative analysis, the researcher is both a “story-finder” and a “storyteller” (Johannessen et al., 2010, 215). This places particular limitations on interviews because the narratives told in the context of an interview are always co-constructed (Bazeley, 2013). In this approach, validity is thus related not to the data but to the inferences drawn from them (Creswell and Miller, 2000). What is more, this implies that other stories could have been told from the same encounters. The choice to focus on the two narratives “Technology optimism as Norwegian exceptionalism” and “Eurocentrism and the illusion of universal knowledge” in this paper is informed by the idea of the *telling case*, in which validity is related to the explanatory power of the case to “make previously obscure theoretical relationships apparent” (Andreotti, 2011a, 90). A central part of the analysis was thus also how stories were activated and meaning created through processes in the classroom and the application of learning materials.

Results

This section presents and discusses the results of the study, structured in accordance with the main themes technology optimism and Nordic exceptionalism, the idea of Eurocentric and universal knowledge and the tenaciousness of hegemonic narratives. In the final paragraph, the more overall didactical implications for current thinking on ESD are discussed in relation to reflections made by teachers and students during interviews.

Technology optimism as Norwegian exceptionalism

The series of lectures on sustainable development I observed covered a range of topics structured on the basis of the headlines in the textbook *Midgard 7*, namely, consumption, global warming, pollution of earth and water, and international cooperation (Aarre et al., 2008). However, a repeated issue was the debate over Norway's petroleum industry. This was probably related to Paul's stated wish to "include current issues, to stimulate societal awareness, to make it clear that the topics we discuss relate to everyday lives." The pupils also brought this up during the group interview, when they explained that they are most motivated for Social Studies when it relates to topical issues, events that "are happening while we are discussing them." In recent years, the petroleum industry has been heavily discussed in Norway, spurred by the suggestion of opening the arctic Northern Norwegian areas to further drilling. Such industrial expansion could lead to new jobs but could also pose a threat to the already vulnerable ecosystems of the area. In bringing up the topic several times, Paul placed it at the center of the plot, as *the question* with regard to Norway's global role in sustainable development, as illustrated by this classroom dialogue:

Paul: Is the solution to cut the production of oil? Norway produces a lot ... Any opinions? If I was to say that today we stop all production of oil in Norway, some would be celebrating and others would be infuriated. Why? I am saying that I am quitting as of today.

Student 1: But that is one of the biggest resources ... Then people working on oil platforms would lose their jobs. Although some would be happy if we emit less CO₂.

Student 2: But, like, won't we become poor then?

Paul: Yes, we would be much poorer. It would have massive consequences for schools and hospitals because where would you cut ... Would this mean anything for other countries?

Student 3: We are lucky to have a lot of gas ...

Paul: Yes, many countries do not have that. We send oil and gas in pipes to Germany and Great Britain. If we stop sending oil and gas, they will carry on heating their houses, but they would use coal, which pollutes a lot more than gas does. I do not know, if you were extremely idealist, you could say no more oil and gas, but that would have so many consequences. Other countries would be less environmentally friendly if we cut the oil and gas supplies to them.

Through this narrative, Paul positions Norway as a central actor in enhancing sustainability in energy consumption by providing neighboring countries with "clean energy." Norway is presented as lucky to have access to vital resources and thus also as having a moral imperative to help others. Some students, as illustrated by the comment of student 3, appear to have already internalized this. The textbook presents a slightly more multi-faceted story. The section "International environmental cooperation" opens with a paragraph called "Rich countries pollute the most." The text states:

We who live in the rich parts of the world, emit most CO₂ and other greenhouse gases. That is why we also have a particular responsibility to reduce our emissions. Simultaneously, we have the economic capacity for shielding those who experience the most serious consequences of climate change (Aarre et al., 2008, 152).

This paragraph is complemented by figures on the difference in CO₂ emissions per capita in different countries. Although there is a positioning of an “Us” having the tools to help “the Other,” focus is on economic structures rather than some alleged difference in abilities. However, in the following section, Norway is again placed as a major protagonist in global policy, as it states “the Norwegian government has decided to be a leading country in international environmental cooperation” (Aarre et al., 2008, 152). Thus, although the text opens up the possibility for reflection on global injustice, Norway is still featured as a global savior, epitomizing the idea of exceptionalism. This depicts Norway as a value-driven norm entrepreneur for sustainability, placing itself as a role model (Elgström and Delputte, 2016). The idea of the “common world” of a sustainable future is constructed through this national identity, working as a technology of differentiation that separates “Us” from “Them,” the countries holding the knowledge and those in need of modernization. In this way, the colonial perspective on the world is stabilized through nation branding (Ideland and Malmberg, 2014). The text provides a further example: “In China, Norway has contributed with knowledge on how to control CO₂ emissions from industry” (Aarre et al., 2008, 152). The progress of China in reducing CO₂ emissions is thus ascribed to Norwegian knowledge. Race is also a clear symbol in this categorization, since the people featured as “saviors” in the pictures are exclusively white. While they are depicted in action, the very few pictures of the “victims” of the Global South feature people at a distance and displaying despair.

When bringing up Norway’s role in global climate policy, Paul appears to be a bit defensive. He applies the terms “idealistic” and “realistic” to the alternatives of phasing out or not phasing out the oil and gas industry, respectively. This is repeated in the interview after class, where Paul says the following:

With this topic, I mean, realistically speaking, what you might think ideally is one thing ... At the same time, I think that it is important that you are critical toward ... You know just on this topic ... Not that you say that we cut it all just now (oil and gas) but that you think two thoughts at the same time, that you develop new technology and methods. It would have such huge consequences for Norway to decide to stop the entire petroleum industry.

Paul is reluctant and apparently finds the topic a bit difficult to balance. His way of dealing with the issue can be understood as reflecting the fact that the way in which Norway has built its wealth on the now-dubious petroleum industry can make the topic of sustainable development intricate to cover in-depth in the classroom (Straume, 2016). The Norwegian self-understanding is highly invested in the idea that a strong Norwegian economy will advance global efforts for sustainability through aid and the ability to produce quality oil and gas for other countries. However, the Green Party has introduced counter-narratives to the debate. Moreover, the topic actualizes the challenge of how state-abiding the subject content should be and highlights the relationship

between the socialization and subjectification functions of education (Biesta, 2009). To what extent should the teacher be open to different opinions about this topic? Should the teacher simply give the main positions in official policy? When I bring up this challenge during the interview, Paul is clear that he aims to present his pupils with a “value neutral” presentation. I tell him that I did not really perceive his story as neutral, but largely in line with official Norwegian policy. Paul seems a bit discomforted, and responds thus:

No, but, erh ... you have some arguments, then, for the most idealistic, it would be to cut all oil and gas right now ... and then the opposite, to be aware of the consequences of such an idealistic action, they have to understand what it means. And they have to understand that by the fact that it will lead to more pollution in other countries that might use coal instead of gas from Norway, that it is better, after all, than coal.

This may be understood as an expression of Norwegian exceptionalist nation branding (Browning, 2007), whereby Norway is positioned as a key actor in providing the solution to climate change by its “better” petroleum technology. This also serves as a justification for continuing to engage in an industry with negative connotations in the context of climate change—it is simply the most “realistic” solution, reinstating the image of Norway as a leading force for sustainable development. Within decolonial critiques of modernity, this idea of being vital to the world’s well-being is characterized as one of the most definitive tenets of modernity (Maldonado-Torres, 2004, 32). This is, as Paul illustrates, well intentioned and based on the idea of a universal rationality. The point here is not to assess normatively whether this recurring story of Norway as a do-gooder for global energy supply holds true, but rather to illustrate how the monolithic presentation might counteract the possibility of exploring alternative perspectives. As Martiniussen (2013) shows, neighboring countries, such as Sweden and Germany have managed to spur many developments in renewable energies, but it demands political will to subsidize such technologies. The Norwegian oil industry continues to involve itself in “dirty” business abroad, such as tar sand and shale oil (Klein, 2014), challenging ecosystems as well as the lifestyles of local indigenous peoples. Moreover, a survey indicated that 58 percent of the Norwegian population wants to leave the oil in the North in the ground (NTB, 2017), signaling a reluctance to expand the petroleum industry.

Eurocentrism and the illusion of universal knowledge

An important insight from decolonial perspectives, is how the idea of the universal thought is “based on a claim to universality at the same time as it elides its own particularity, and how this claim is sustained through the exercise of material power in the world” (Bhabra, 2014). There are at least two implications from this insight for education. One is the permeation of Eurocentrism through narratives on global matters, and another is the epistemological notion of the possibility of universal knowledge as such. The interview with Paul locates some interesting ambiguities on the latter. This is also the topic that generates the greatest interest from the pre-service teachers. While agreeing on how Social Studies is a subject “without clear answers”, they all emphasize

the importance for the teacher of being “objective.” This is explicitly connected to democracy, and how, as Paul says, “you have a lot of power to influence your students in Social Studies, maybe more than in other subjects.” A prime example is the consensus on how the teacher should always keep her voting record secret. Paul responds thus:

You seek to be a bit like ... value neutral in that we do not push our own view, but try to give both sides.... You know if I was a politician in a political party, I could not do propaganda in religious and ethical teaching, for example. And if I was a member of a kind of special sect, I couldn't show my view. You don't have a right to do that, to use your power as a teacher.

The negotiation of this topic through the conversation reflects an implicit idea that some people and some knowledges are “more situated” than others are. It affirms the alleged existence of a universal rationality and reduces the epistemologies that are different from the dominant, Eurocentric perspective to “ideas, traditions or beliefs” (Andreotti, 2011a, 111). Lacking an affinity with a minority group, the knowledge communicated is perceived as less situated and more neutral. This also comes to the fore with the continued use of the words “realistic” and “idealistic” in our conversations about the highly political debate on Norwegian oil policy. The danger of uncovered, biased knowledge is also referred to by both Paul and the pre-service teachers as to why critical thinking is especially important in Social Studies. However, the outlook on knowledge communicated here poses the danger of critical thinking becoming synonymous with exclusively applying the terms and approaches located within Western modernity (Maldonado-Torres, 2004). Neutral knowledge then becomes a question of removing possible subjective knowledge acquired from political and religious viewpoints, for instance, to arrive at a relatively “clean” statement. Interestingly, one of the pre-service teachers challenges this position:

Pre-service teacher 1: You know, there are some topics that are almost impossible to look at neutrally. However, you can challenge the students, ask them if things could be different. You don't necessarily need to encourage any specific ideas, but ask them to think about it, reflect ...

With this quote, the pre-service teacher opens up to a reflexivity on difference and diversity, and emphasizes the importance of challenging students, which is central to the idea of subjectification. As she points out, the students should be enabled to think differently. She continues to promote this possible position throughout the conversation, facing resistance from Paul. When we discuss the extent to which the teacher has a responsibility to be state-loyal, the pre-service teacher says the following:

Even if something is decided by law, you can still open it up for discussion ... It is always interesting to talk with pupils about given norms in a religion or country, and reflect upon why it is like that in that context and different in another.

In this perspective, there is the seed of a challenge to the idea of universal truths, operationalizing the apparent didactical ideal of Social Studies as a subject without clear answers. Knowledge and learning in the subject thus become a matter of understanding

structures contextually rather than of making a decision about the “right” answer or solution.

The other aspect of this universalism, the idea of history as a trajectory that departed from a state of nature and culminated in Europe (Andreotti, 2011b), is highlighted by discussions of the global division of labor. This is achieved mainly through the presentation of excerpts from the movie *Before the Flood* (DiCaprio and Stevens, 2017). *Before the Flood* is a documentary depicting American actor Leonardo DiCaprio on a global journey as a UN “Messenger of Peace” to explore the challenges of climate change. Before watching the movie, the class discusses global production chains. Paul initiates an activity in which the students check the labels on their clothes. This spurs a lot of engagement and interest. The class creates a statistical overview, revealing that Turkey, China, and Bangladesh are the most common countries of origin. Paul points out the locations of the countries on a map, explaining transportation routes and implications in terms of emissions. The lecture includes several of the features commonly advocated for ESD, such as creative thinking, a systems approach, and interdisciplinarity (Sinnes, 2015, Sterling, 2009). Paul follows up this activity by looking at the connections between consumption and pollution from the perspectives of the physical climate and of human behavior and social organization:

Paul: What is the connection between consumption and pollution when the product is made on the other side of the Earth?

Student 1: The products have to be transported a long way. By boat, for instance.

Paul: Yes, transport is a major part of the pollution. How can you solve that? You have to have clothes.

Student 2: Make factories in many countries ...

Student 3: But won't that mean more factories, then? Why aren't there more factories in Norway?

Student 4: Because it is cheaper in other countries.

Paul: That is correct. By why is that? It sounds, strange, doesn't it? That a sweater you buy from Taiwan or Korea is cheaper than one from Norway.

Student 1: It is cheaper to produce there than in Norway because Norway is an expensive country.

Paul: Yes, and what you pay the workers matters. It is still cheaper to buy something from the other side of the Earth, but it pollutes.

Paul then asks the students to look at a picture in the textbook illustrating the transportation route of a pair of jogging shoes from China to Norway. The text states: “It is profitable for corporations to produce goods in countries where the workers are not paid so well. When salaries are low, goods become cheaper for us” (Aarre et al., 2008, 141). On the opposite page, there is an illustration of a girl sitting beside her stuffed clothes closet talking on the phone and declaring “I have nothing to wear.” The headline is “We consume more.” When Paul asks the students what they think about this illustration, the students appear a bit disengaged, so he says, “We know that she

actually has a lot to wear, right? That is how we are, us in the rich parts of the world. That's the way it goes." The conversation continues about the pictures from the textbook:

Paul: They pick up clothes down there, then they leave the factories, the factories emit pollution into the air, and that may be why it is cheaper in China: They do not have such regulations about what you can emit. We have that in Norway, a strict legal framework.... So, when the product reaches the store, before you buy it, it has already polluted a lot. And you might not even need the product. Maybe you have a similar one at home ...

Student 1: But doesn't it help, sometimes, to buy the product? I mean, in a way, it has already polluted ...

Paul: Yes, if nobody buys the goods, they won't take in more stock. Yes, it would be a shame if someone were to lose their job in the store too. You know, it becomes a bit negative, this thing with consumption, that it is negative to have new things. A lot of positive stuff is happening as well!

There is an apparent ambivalence to Paul's way of navigating this topic. Although he wants the students to understand the connections in global production chains, he seems concerned about not giving them a guilty conscience about their lifestyle. The topics are brought closer to lived reality, by focusing on the clothes the students wear. Paul also seeks to balance the topic by introducing conflictual aspects, such as the dilemma between jobs in commerce and the need to counteract overconsumption. There is an externalization of guilt by focusing on poor working relations and rights in the South as the main challenges, rather than consumption or global power structures. The narrative communicates not only that the students should acknowledge that their consumption is not always morally "clean," but also that there is not very much an individual can do about it in her everyday life. However, this is followed in the textbook by the sections on Norway as a champion of international cooperation. The section on global climate agreements is placed under the headline "It works!" (Aarre et al., 2008, 154). Thus, the main message is that Norway has "got it covered." There is a text box with the legend "What can we do to reduce CO₂ emissions?" that includes bullet points such as "We have to buy only the things we really need" and "Do not throw out what others might use" (Aarre et al., 2008, 149). Interestingly, this text box is part of a double-page section focusing on technology development. In the textbook, as well as in Paul's lecture, overconsumption, the global division of labor, and the exploitation of workers in the Global South are presented as possible counter-narratives, but they are not positioned as main topics; rather, they appear as appendices to the main narrative on technology optimism.

Disruptive spaces, border thinking, and the tenaciousness of narratives

During the interview, Paul tells me, clearly impressed, that the suggestion of watching *Before the Flood* was made by one of his students. Involving the students, taking their suggestions seriously, and valuing their contributions are actions that Paul emphasizes in his teaching. In the chosen excerpts from the movie, DiCaprio visits

China and India as examples of countries at different stages of development. While China is presented as a pioneer in the proposed transition to environmental friendliness, India provides a contrast, shown as being in need of further development. The part on India includes a dialogue between DiCaprio and the environmental activist-author Sunita Narain. Narain is visibly frustrated by American NGOs that want to transmit “the lessons they have learned” in development to the context of Southern countries while failing to focus on the changes needed locally:

Your consumption has really put a hole in the planet, and I think that's the conversation we need to have. Electric consumption by one American at home is equivalent to 34 inhabitants of India. Why? Because you are building bigger, more, and using much more than before.

With this comment, Narain steers the narrative toward a different focus, which emerges as the main and most powerful part of the conversation. She poses an alternative and challenging outlook, and DiCaprio answers apologetically:

DiCaprio: Look ... There's no way I don't agree with you. How can you argue with that? ... And I think yes, it's a very difficult argument to present to Americans that we need to change our lifestyles. And I want to argue that it probably isn't going to happen. So we are depending, if we want to solve the climate crisis, that renewables like solar and wind will get cheaper and cheaper and cheaper the more money we funnel into them, the more we invest in them, and ultimately it will solve that problem. ... You're shaking your head obviously.

Narain: Let's be real about this. Who will invest and how will you invest in it? We are doing more investment in solar today. China is doing much more investment in solar today than the US. What is the US doing that the rest of the world can learn from? You are a fossil fuel-addicted country, and if you are seriously disengaging, that is something we can learn from. We can hold this up to our government and say listen if the US can do it, and the US is doing it, in spite all their pressures, we can do it as well.

While DiCaprio rejects Narain's comment about consumption and lifestyle as non-realistic, he continues the Eurocentric story of capitalist modernity as savior. Narain counters by placing the United States in the position of culprit rather than liberator. Although this apparently represents a break with the leading metanarrative, both in the movie and in the class, it does not really escape the overarching logic of universalism. The reason why the United States must rethink its consumption patterns is that countries such as India want “the same.” It reflects what Mignolo (2005) calls the hidden logic of colonialism, in which modernity is presented as the point of arrival. As he puts it, “Independence changed the actors but not the script” (Mignolo, 2005, 112). Narain is depicted as a protagonist, but the script is modernity. Her voice is not really positioned as rational.

After the somewhat heated discussion between Narain and DiCaprio, Paul stops the movie to ask the students about their thoughts after being exposed to the gross inequalities in electricity consumption. Some of the students clearly find the injustice stirring:

Student 1: It is frustrating for India that the US asks it to use less coal, because the people do not do it themselves!

Student 2: You know, it is not really right when they say that in that one area of Beijing the people emit more than in the whole of the US, because the US emits more per capita.

These comments show how the pupils, by their way of responding to the new and somewhat disturbing knowledge (Biesta, 2014), also have the ability to move toward a “space of negotiation and creative opportunity that is always pregnant with (risky) possibilities” (Andreotti, 2011b, 395). This is where the prevailing narratives can be disrupted and new patterns created. By creating a learning atmosphere in which the students feel comfortable putting forward their reactions, Paul opens up the possibility for such “border thinking” and the interruption of dominant ideas (Andreotti, 2011b). Handling such spaces demands that the educator act as a cultural broker, managing the negotiation between discursive systems and allowing for an unpredictable outcome. In this regard, Paul appears a bit discomfited by the frustration of his students and tries to help them sort through their thoughts by providing “facts”: “Coal is very cheap, but it pollutes a lot. A poor country like India, you cannot just demand that they move straight to solar energy. Twenty percent of the population lacks electricity; they have to have basic electricity too.” Interestingly, in this sense India can, in DiCaprio’s words, be described as “in transition,” since 40% of the capacity added to India’s electricity grid in the past year has been solar.¹ A second challenge to enabling the space for border thinking is how the school as an institution demands fast and predictable learning outcomes (Andreotti, 2011b), something that also seem to influence the way Paul negotiates the comments from his students. He repeatedly remarks through his lectures that “we have to move on,” “we have to look at the learning outcome,” and so on, although he clearly values the more open-ended conversations. In this regard, the institutional terms seem to restrict the didactical and professional choices of the teacher.

The last part of the movie excerpt features DiCaprio performing a monologue, reflecting upon what he experienced in the Global South and in a way sealing the issue of North/South relations within modernity:

What is the right thing to do? What actions should we be taking? There are over a billion people out there without electricity, and they want lights, they want heat, they want the lifestyle that we have had in the United States for over 100 years. If we are going to solve this problem, we all have a responsibility to set an example. But more than that, help the developing world transition, before it's too late.

From a decolonial perspective, the quotation expresses the idea of “the burden of the fittest”(Andreotti, 2011a). The West is seen as having a responsibility to help the rest, and “set an example.” Alternative modes of mitigating and adapting to climate change are not acknowledged. This is the case for efforts in solar investment as well as the

¹ For further information, see <https://qz.com/1134798/solar-power-accounts-for-nearly-40-of-indias-new-power-generation-capacity/>.

example of Indian villages using cow dung for fuel, presented as pity and backward rather than as creative coping strategies. The comment from Narain about focusing on lifestyles is rejected, or even denied as irrational within the modernist logic. DiCaprio wants to acknowledge her view but declares it simply “unrealistic,” placing himself in the position of the possessor of truth. The leading storyline is the idea of “transition,” implying technology optimism, and that the change should primarily happen in the developing world to provide the same lifestyle that the West has had for a long time. Such references to history as stages of linear development is a common feature of mechanisms of Othering between the Global North and South (Ideland and Malmberg, 2014). Importantly, regardless of any alleged good intentions or benevolent motives, this very idea of the South “catching up” with the material developments of the North is simply illusive. Exploitation of the South and the global unequal exchange embedded in the modern world system is what ultimately makes this technological progress in the North possible from the outset (Knutsson, 2018).

Implications for ESD

The educational practices analyzed here show that narratives constructed through lectures and learning materials can be rather monolithic and claim universalism for themselves. From a pedagogical perspective, the prevalence of technology optimism can also be understood on basis of its appeal as having positive connotations. A recurring theme with Paul in describing the challenges of working with this topic is the need to consider the emotive aspect for the students. He fears the risk of education on climate change and global inequality being marked by overwhelming hopelessness:

You know, with this topic, it is important that it does not become too negative; it might be like the world is done tomorrow. So it is important that they have some viewpoints saying that there are possibilities and that they can make some positive contributions.

An alternative perspective to the fear of fostering apathy when facing difficult information about current affairs is the indifference that comes from the feeling of powerlessness. Within the ideas of disruptive knowledge and transcendental violence is the empowerment of individual students as always making a difference in the world through their subjectification (Biesta, 2014). This is fundamental for education to fulfill its democratic ambitions. In addition, it could be a question of the students’ *right* to knowledge. Perspectives on ESD underlining the uncertainty and complexity of sustainable development issues can be regarded as somewhat exaggerated. Doubts about the causes and consequences of climate change are no longer prominent (Alfsen et al., 2013, O'Brien, 2012). With regard to global social justice, the figures are overwhelmingly clear that resources are extremely unevenly distributed (Eriksen, 2017). Offering explanations from decolonial theory could help students understand both how and why the differences between Europe and non-Europeans arise; to understand that they are not natural but the consequences of histories of power, and thus neither inevitable nor unchangeable. The students offer interesting comments on this matter during the group interview, communicating a wish to be “taken seriously.” One

says, “I think we should talk more about the serious topics. That we are old enough to know now, about terror, climate change ...” The class watches *Supernytt* during lunch at school. *Supernytt* is a news show produced by the state-led TV channel NRK, intended for children aged 7–12. The class also subscribes to the national newspaper for children, *Aftenposten Junior*. Outside school, all the students watch what they call the “real news,” and they are all active on social media, following updates from national news media:

Student 1: I often watch Supernytt at school, then my dad watches the news in the evening, and I sit down with him and watch. I also read the adult newspapers. I think it is silly with Supernytt, because the news is often delayed. It appears on the real news program long before.

Student 2: The thing with Supernytt is that it is for younger children. There is nothing about war and that kind of thing, because first-graders watch it too. I think we should watch the real news.... I think it is more serious.

Interestingly, there seems to be a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the way the school and Paul seek to adjust the news to the age group and what might be considered appropriate or safe for children, and on the other hand, the way the pupils relate to media outside school. Their high awareness of global issues, expressed in the interview, is also surprising. The students display their intellectual capacities in questioning some of the core narrative assumptions in the class. The flipside to the argument about the challenge of avoiding the creation of apathy when considering the severity of certain topics could thus be that, especially in times of social media and fake news, the school should take responsibility for discussing and handling the impressions students receive as active consumers of several media sources. The importance of being able to “hold paradoxes and not be overwhelmed by complexity, ambiguity, conflict, uncertainty and difference” (Andreotti, 2011b, 395) is also regarded as central to decolonial educational approaches.

The intention of focusing on decolonial perspectives is not to present them as normative ideals but to argue, along with Andreotti (2011b), that they are challenging perspectives to mainstream ESD. They offer a different take on critical thinking as core foundation in the scientific underpinning of Social Studies. Every theory will offer only a limited and partial perspective, but the significance of these frameworks lies in their relationality and self-reflexivity. Maldonado-Torres (2004) describes the alleged neutrality or universalism of modern knowledge as epistemic blindness, a lack of ability to see non-European ways of thinking and acknowledge the reproduction of the colonial system. A related criticism is the failure of the epistemological paradigm of the West as such in relation to sustainable development due to the false distinction between humans and nature (Kahn, 2010, Svendsen et al., 2016). The impact of decolonial perspectives lies in the ability to question what is taken for granted, foster system-critical thinking, and pose the questions “Why is it like this,” “Does it have to be like this,” and “How could it be different?”

Conclusions

The empirical examples in this study signal that Norwegian exceptionalism and technology optimism are inherent components of ESD as it unfolds in this particular case. While acknowledging the limitations of the empirical material, it is clear that other practices could have evolved in different contexts. However, the decolonial theoretical lens helps to expose the challenges posed by and to normativity in mainstream ESD and to disrupt hegemonic narratives. The narratives on Norwegian exceptionalism and technology optimism discussed in this paper also manifest an inherent challenge of a methodological nationalism that is still traceable in Social Studies. If the undisputed analytical unity of the subject remains the nation-state and Eurocentric history, there is a risk of reinforcing the epistemic blindness of the allegedly universal modernism. This truly reaches its limitations with the ecological destruction of the planet, poverty, and the impossibility of the subsumption of other peoples (Andreotti, 2011b). On the other hand, the analysis also reveals the significance of decolonial perspectives in deconstructing current knowledge, as well as opening up the discourse to diversity and difference. As Grosfoguel writes, “The West has produced a utopian thinking that has not transcended the abstract universals that characterize Eurocentric thinking ... The West is at a dead end when it comes to producing new alternatives” (Grosfoguel, 2002, 222). Social Studies could offer this kind of thinking about other socio-material alternatives, but to enable this, it also needs a critical approach to history and the structures influencing and shaping our societies and epistemologies.

Another implication of this analysis concerns the power of narratives and thus the importance of paying attention to them when studying teaching practices. The tenaciousness of the metanarratives appears as an obstacle to social transformation. We have to move beyond the “depoliticized focus on individual skills towards a broader understanding of ideology, culture and political-economies” (Andreotti, 2011b, 393). To do so, we require a critique that pays attention to the fact that global differences in power and wealth are not natural, but the consequences of histories of power. Social Studies is vital for such historical, contextual, and power-critical thinking. Apathy may arise from simply hearing about the gloomy figures of overconsumption and global inequality, but agency may lie in being challenged by disruptive knowledge and imagining something different.

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