

## Preface

This book is the third in a three-volume series on institutional change in Nordic societies. Among the Nordics, the main emphasis is on Norway, in many ways the best example of neo-corporatism. Where the present volume focuses on the interplay of democracy and social institutions, the previous volumes, also published by De Gruyter Open, were devoted to working life and the welfare state and to aspects of the public sphere.

Taken together, the three volumes reflect in new ways the old sociological questions of how society is possible and how does it change? But modern societies are too complex to be conceived within the framework of one theory of structure and change. One answer to this challenge is to concentrate on social institutions as the most generic – albeit not the only important – units of society, and focus on how they change.

The last two decades have seen considerable progress in the understanding of institutional change. The three volume series takes as its departure these theoretical innovations and applies them to one form of society – the Scandinavian, or Nordic, societies. These societies are interesting because they are different expressions of a neo-corporatist model, with a strong interplay of state and society, a state which at the same time is strong and liberal, an extensive social welfare sector and a highly organized and politically mobilized civil society.

Within a democratic frame of reference, the main specificity in the first volume, *Cooperation and Conflict the Nordic Way* is that of bargaining and compromise between social partners in the labour market as well as in civil society. There is a close link between this and the second book, *Institutional Change in the Public Sphere*, in the reciprocal relationship between the welfare regime and the public sphere. Compromises are dependent upon a well-functioning public sphere, while on the other hand the strength of the public sphere is dependent upon a strong and simultaneously liberal state, which by intervention guarantees its autonomy. In the present volume, these strands are more explicitly linked together in analyses of the relationship between a broad set of institutional features and the political institutions as such.

The books are the outgrowth of a network project on sociological theory funded by the Norwegian Research Council. Three partners have taken on practical responsibilities for the project: the Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo, the Institute for Social Research and the Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research. We are thankful to the Norwegian Research Council and to the collaborating institutes for their support of the project and for the many productive conversations with our colleagues. We also express our gratitude to the participants at the conference on democracy and institutional change in Athens, June 2015, from whose contributions and comments we benefited in producing this book.

Oslo, September 2017

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