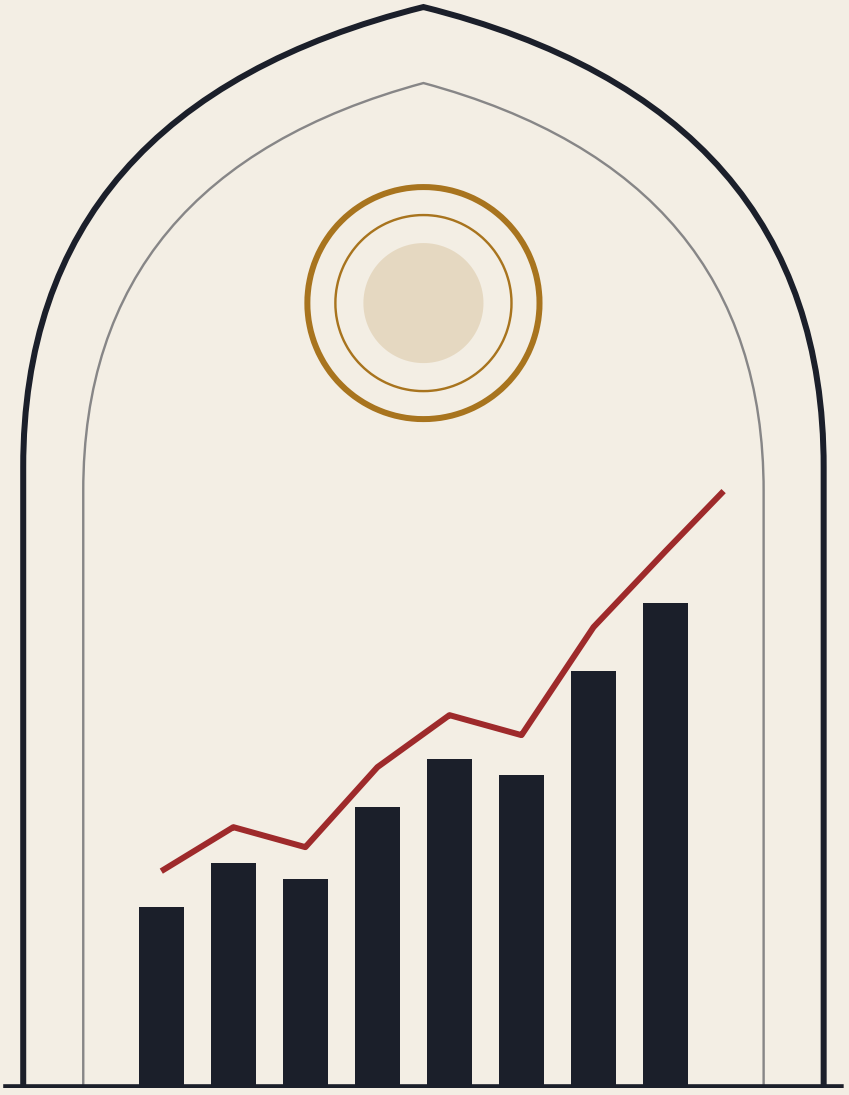
A PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAY



Our Father,

who art in the market …

Is it guilt or debt we are asking to be freed from?

Håkon Meidel Andersen, philosopher, technologist and author

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Our Father, who art in the market …

The operating system beneath the story – a philosophical essay

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The cells that do not vote

You are told that you live in a democracy, that your vote shapes the future, and that the world is governed by the people, for the people. But look at your own body for a moment. Not a single one of your cells voted on what you would have for breakfast. Not one of them knows what you are thinking about right now. Each one simply does its job, inside a system far larger than it can grasp.

But you are not a cell. Or are you?

What if a society works in exactly the same way? What if the forces that shape your life do not think in election cycles, but in generations? This essay is about the operating system that lies beneath the whole story, and about how we can begin to see it.

What elections change

Let us be fair first: voting matters. Elections make it possible to replace governments peacefully, something most of human history never managed. But notice what elections actually change, and what they do not. They change the faces, the tone and the slogans at the podium. How often do they touch the machinery underneath: the mandates of central banks, the treaties, the trade rules, the regulatory bodies, the permanent civil service and the financial system on which everything else rests?

Norway has an answer worth thinking about. Twice, the people were asked directly about exactly that: the treaties. In 1972, 53.5 percent voted no to the European Community. In 1994, 52.2 percent voted no to the European Union. Both times Norway stayed out. Even so, Norway became an associated member of the EU's internal market through the EEA Agreement, signed in 1992 and in force from 1 January 1994, before the second no. The demand for a separate referendum on the EEA was rejected by the Norwegian parliament. What does it say about how movable the machinery is, when the people can say no twice and still end up with a body of rules most of them have never read?

There is also a class of people who move seamlessly between these worlds: in government for a decade, in a bank or a consulting firm for the next, then on to an international institution, a foundation or a board. In the United States, three Treasury

Secretaries since the mid-1990s have come from the same investment bank, Goldman Sachs: Robert Rubin under Bill Clinton, Henry Paulson under George W. Bush and Steven Mnuchin under Donald Trump. Both parties appointed them. The pattern held.

None of this requires any secret conspiracy. It is simply what happens when the same small circle shares the same schools, the same assumptions and the same career incentives. Why would they need to coordinate, when they already think alike? Meanwhile, the public is invited to fight passionately over the casting.

So the point is not that your vote is worthless. The influence is real, but limited, and the range of possible outcomes is far narrower than it appears. How big is the difference, really, between choosing who governs and choosing the framework they govern within? The framework is rarely on the ballot. Most people never notice the walls, simply because they have never tried to walk through them. And if the deepest decisions are not made in elections, we have to ask: what is it that actually holds the whole system together?

The religion of money

For most of history, it was religion that bound societies together. It told us what was good and evil, what we owed one another, and what the meaning of a life was. Who holds that role in our time? In large parts of the modern world, it has quietly been handed over to the monetary system. Is money still just a tool, or has it become a worldview?

Look at what this system has. High priests: central bank governors whose smallest words are studied like holy scripture, where markets can move billions because of a single adjective. Sacred texts: GDP figures, balance sheets and credit ratings. Rituals: the interest-rate meetings, the quarterly results, budget day. And a promise of salvation: more growth, more wealth, higher status. Always more.

The idea is not new. As early as 1921, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote that capitalism itself is a religion, a pure cult religion without dogma. He pointed to the double meaning of the German word *Schuld*, which means both guilt and debt. In Norwegian, the same old word, *skuld*, is the root of the verb *skulde*, which means both to owe money and to put the blame on someone. Is that a coincidence? In English, the split shows up in the Lord's Prayer itself. The King James Bible reads: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Many churches pray instead: "And forgive us our trespasses." So when we pray it, is it guilt or debt we are asking to be freed from?

In German and Norwegian, one word means both guilt and debt



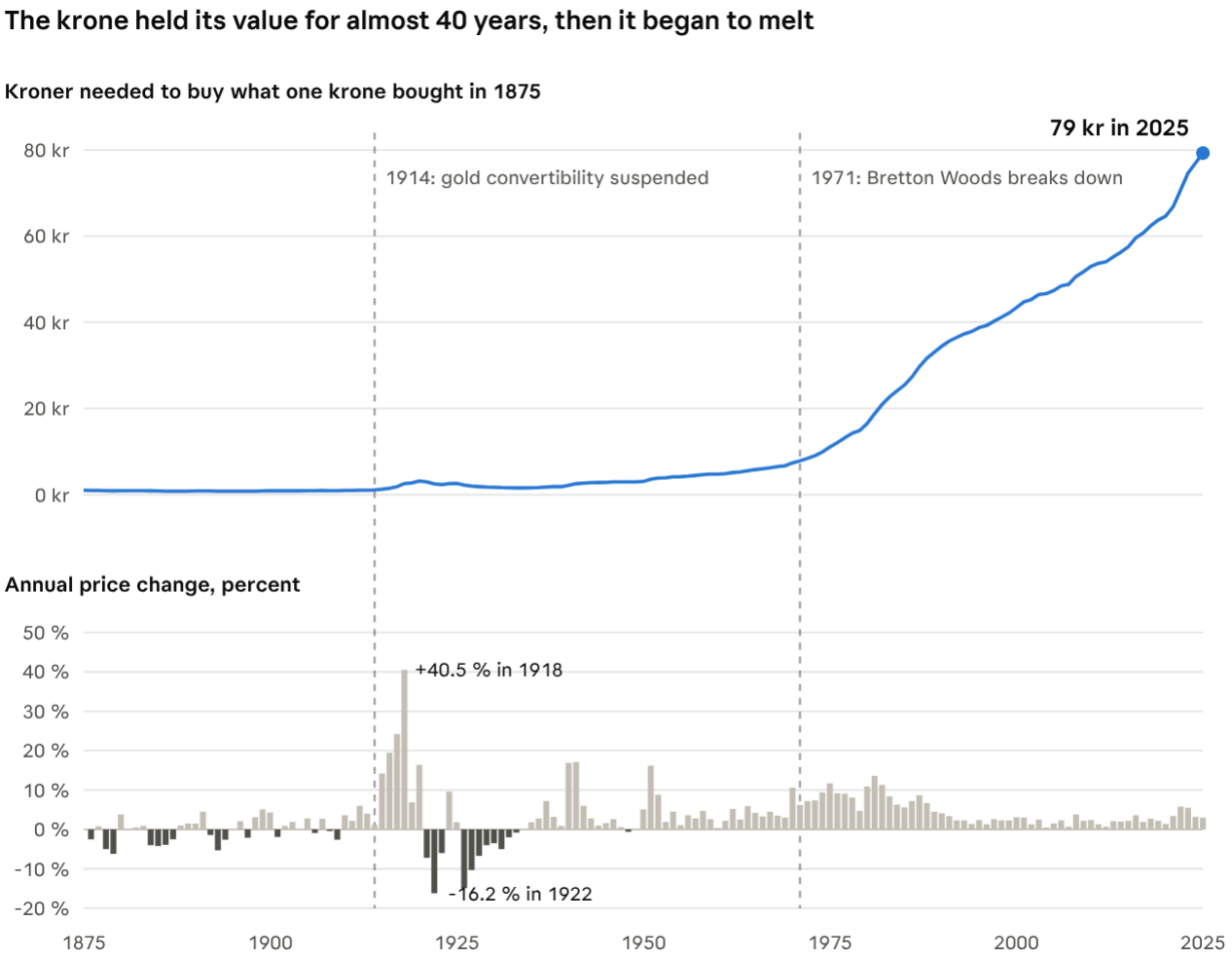
German has one word for both guilt and debt: Schuld. Walter Benjamin pointed to the double meaning in 1921.

The word skuld · Nynorskordboka and Benjamin 1921

And when debts actually were cancelled, was it out of kindness? In the 1600s BC, King Ammi-ṣaduqa of Babylon proclaimed that loans of barley and silver were to be cancelled, "because the king has established equity for the land". But the same edict says that loans for a business journey, a partnership or a trading venture were not to be touched: "his tablet shall not be broken". The debtor was set free. The credit that drove trade stood. Was it mercy, or a restart that let the machine keep running?

The pattern is not bound to one time, one culture or one religion. Islamic banking is meant, by its own principle, to be interest-free. Yet a study of the banks in Malaysia found that Islamic banking in practice is not very different from conventional banking, and that Islamic deposits track the interest rates on conventional deposits closely, for competitive reasons. What is it, then, that is forbidden: the interest, or the word? And how many of our own words work the same way?

And what is a Norwegian krone actually worth? The krone became Norway's sole monetary unit in 1875, tied to gold. For almost 40 years it held its value. Then the First World War broke out, and from 5 August 1914 Norges Bank was released from its obligation to redeem banknotes in gold. What cost one krone in 1875 cost around 79 kroner in 2025.



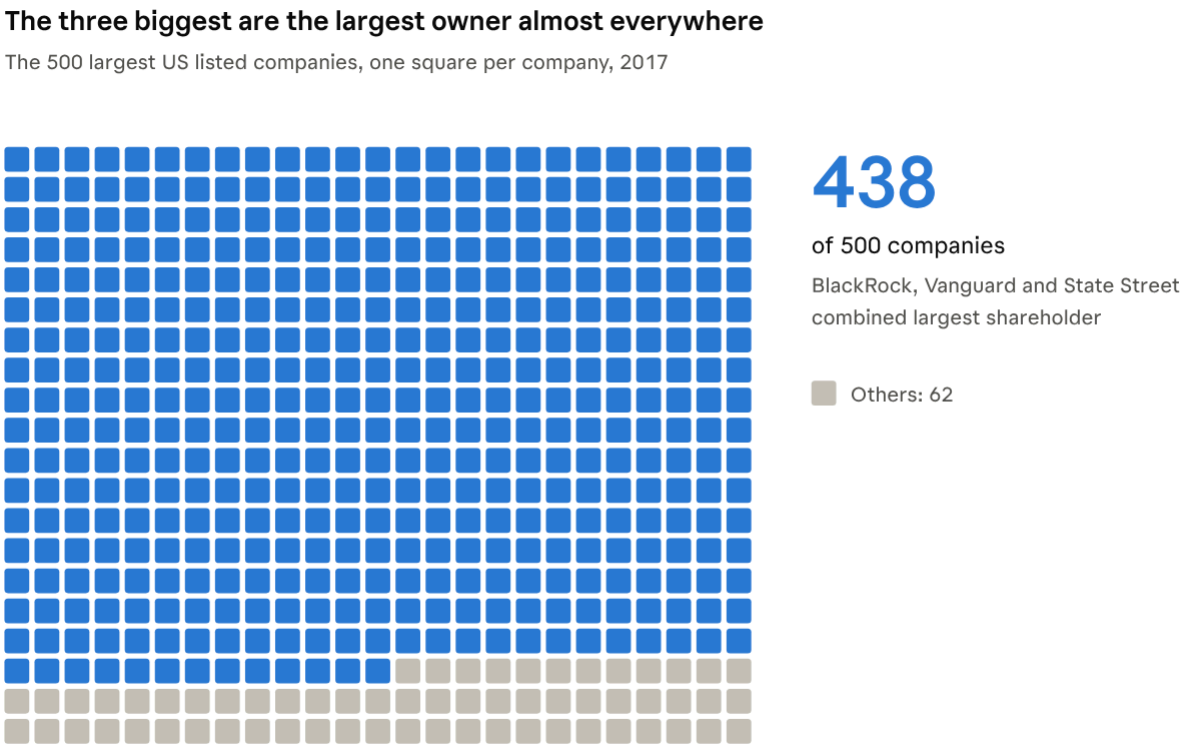
Consumer price index 1875–2015: Norges Bank and Statistics Norway (1998=100); 2016–2025: Statistics Norway, historical series (2025=100), linked in 2015

From 1970 to 2025, prices increased more than tenfold. Nobody voted on it. Who loses when money loses its value: the one who saves, or the one who owes?

Does this religion have a morality, or only a set of accounts? Take GDP, the number nations live and die by. A car crash increases GDP through the repairs, the hospital bills and the lawyers' fees. A parent caring for a child at home adds nothing. A standing forest counts as zero; the same forest cut down and sold counts as growth. The man behind the first official estimates of national income in the United States, the economist Simon Kuznets, warned in his own report to the US Senate in 1934: "The welfare of a nation can, therefore, scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income as defined above." Why was the warning forgotten, while the number became sacred?

Every religion has its temples, and this one has three: BlackRock, Vanguard and State Street. They manage other people's capital. But where does the influence that comes with it gather? BlackRock alone managed $15.5 trillion at the end of September 2026. Because these firms track whole markets, they end up owning a piece of almost everything. Researchers at the University of Amsterdam mapped the ownership in a study published

in 2017. Together, the three were the largest shareholder in 438 of the 500 companies in the US S&P 500 index. Competing airlines, competing banks and competing pharmaceutical giants have the same owners on both sides of the table.



Fichtner, Heemskerk and Garcia-Bernardo 2017, Business and Politics 19(2)

What happens to competition then? A study in the *Journal of Finance* from 2018 found that airline tickets on US routes were on average 3–7 percent more expensive than they would have been with separate owners. Later research disagrees about how large the effect is. And before we point at America: Norway's Government Pension Fund Global, the oil fund, owns on average 1.5 percent of all listed companies in the world and is the world's largest single investor. Which of us is really standing outside the temple?

When morality became expensive

For a while, these giants spoke the language of morality: climate pledges and social responsibility. An acronym appeared everywhere: ESG. Then it began to cost. US states pulled billions out, state attorneys general went to court, and politicians demanded answers. On 9 January 2025, BlackRock left the climate alliance Net Zero Asset Managers. Four days later, the alliance suspended its tracking of what its members were actually doing. And how did BlackRock explain its exit? Membership had not changed how clients' money was managed. What, then, was the pledge worth?

Notice that both sides used the same weapon. One side wanted to steer the money towards the climate, the other pulled the money out in protest. Both fought over morality with profitability as the currency. The religion whose only morality is profitability had learned to speak like a religion for exactly as long as it paid.

Does the system ever ask whether something is good, or only whether it is profitable? Does it ask what kind of people and communities it creates, or only whether the numbers point upwards? Because almost no one recognises this as a religion, almost no one questions the root itself. We argue about how the money should be divided up. How often do we ask what the money has done to us?

That is the first layer of the operating system. The second layer is harder to see, because it lives inside our own heads.

The filter in our own heads

Every society has a set of things it has agreed not to think about. Ours is no exception. We like to believe that we see the world as it really is. But do we? Or do we see it through a filter, a shared collection of moral and political assumptions we took in long before we were able to question them?

The filter is comfortable. It tells us who the good people are, and who the bad ones are. It shields us from thoughts that could have cost us friends, a job or status. As early as 1974, the German researcher Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann described the mechanism. She called it the spiral of silence: whoever believes they are in the minority falls silent for fear of being left standing alone. And the more people fall silent, the more it looks as if everyone agrees. But the filter also disorients us, because certain questions simply stop being asked.

The uncomfortable part is that every tribe has its own filter. Ask some people whether endless economic growth is possible on a finite planet, and watch the conversation die. Ask others what falling birth rates mean for the welfare we have built, and watch that conversation stop just as abruptly. Ask whether more money always means better schools, or whether the market is a good measure of a person's worth, and see who suddenly changes the subject.

Which of these questions made you tense up?

You do not have to agree with any particular answer. The point is that when a question becomes impossible to ask, the problem it points to does not disappear. It simply carries on, undisturbed, outside the filter. How often does power speak the language of rights and representation, and how often that of logistics, capital, demography, technology and time? The answer begins with an uncomfortable truth about structure.

Structure and the organism

It would be easy to hear all this and conclude that structure itself is the enemy, that people would finally be free if we only tore down the hierarchies. But is that so? A village of a hundred people can run on trust and conversation. Can a nation of more than five and a half million? It needs roads, courts, power grids, supply chains, and someone who decides where the water should go. At that scale, coordination is not a choice, but a precondition for people to survive.

How large can a society grow before it can no longer govern itself? Research gives no number. In 1973, the political scientists Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte concluded that no single size is best both for the citizen's influence and for society's capacity to solve the big tasks. The anthropologist Robin Dunbar estimated that a human being can maintain around 150 stable relationships, but that number is disputed too. The strongest answer came from Elinor Ostrom. She did not ask how large, but how it is built. Communities that have managed common resources over generations are built in layers, where each layer keeps the right to decide over its own affairs. So perhaps the limit of self-government is not a population figure, but the point where the local layer loses that right?

Think back to the cells in your body. Atoms form molecules, molecules form cells, cells form organs and a brain, and brains form a society. At that level something strange happens: society begins to behave like a living organism in its own right. It has a memory, namely its institutions and laws. It has an immune system. Remember the spiral of silence? That is how society isolates people and ideas it perceives as threats. And it has survival instincts no individual has chosen.

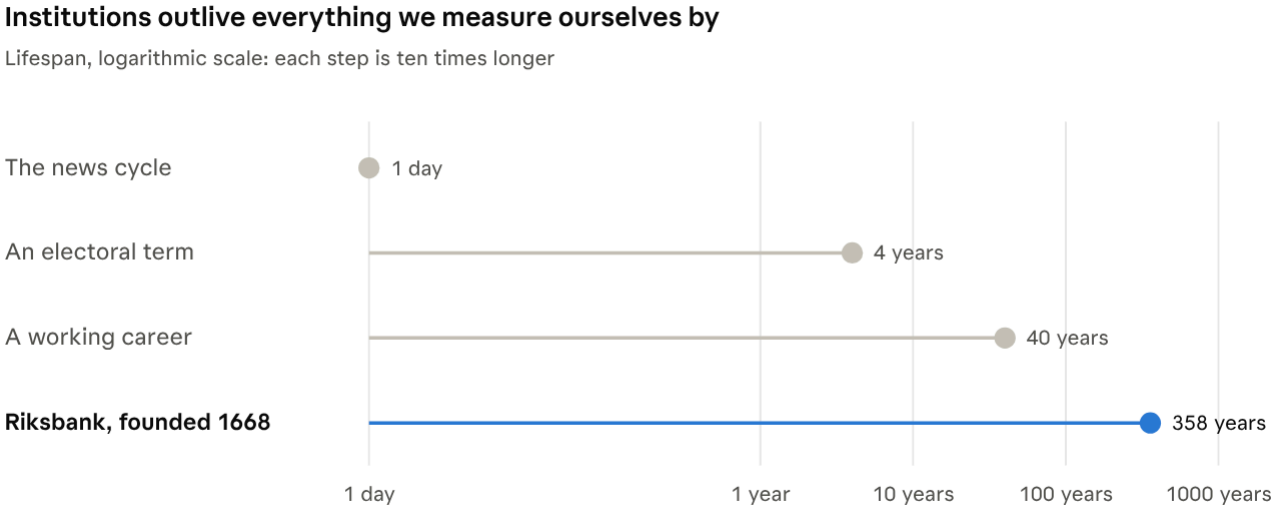
The image is not new, and it has a dark history. Totalitarian regimes have used exactly this: the individual as a cell, the state as the body, and the cell must sacrifice itself. But Herbert Spencer, who developed the image in his essay "The Social Organism" in 1860, already drew a line: the community is to serve its members, not the members the community. Who serves whom in our organism?

So the real question was never whether power and structure should exist. They will exist regardless. The real question is what kind of structure we have, whom it answers to, and which direction it is heading. To answer that, you have to change the clock you are looking at.

The clocks

Most of us live in snapshots. The news cycle lasts a day, the feed lasts until the next flick of the thumb, an electoral term lasts four years, and even an entire working career spans only four decades. But how long do the most powerful structures on Earth live?

Sweden's Riksbank was founded in 1668. It has outlived royal houses, wars and dozens of governments, and every one of their heated debates. Norway's oil fund is built to serve citizens who are not yet born. Institutions, capital, demography and technology move on timescales longer than a human life.



Riksbank 1668–2026 (riksbank.se); electoral term and career as in the text

And here lies the asymmetry. If you think in weeks while the forces around you think in generations, who is steering, and who is merely reacting? You will feel every single wave, but never notice the tide. While we argue about the outrage of the week, deeper undercurrents are already deciding the shape of the next century. And in our time, two of them matter most: one that is a tide, and one that is a storm.

The tide and the storm

The first undercurrent is demography, and it is the tide. In Japan, more people have died than have been born every year since 2007. South Korea, which in 2023 had the world's lowest birth rate, is still below one child per woman, even after two years of slight increase. In the EU, the median age on 1 January 2025 was close to 45, in Italy over 49. In Nigeria it is under 20. The UN projects that Africa will be home to more than one in four people on Earth by 2050. What will such a shift do to the world economy and the global balance of power?

And how well do we really know our own population? Is it still true that immigrants keep birth rates up? In 2025, for the first time, immigrant women in Norway had a lower fertility rate than the national rate: 1.44 children per woman, against 1.48. The differences between immigrant groups are large, and the decline is mainly because Ukrainian women had few children. How often is policy built, from every side, on a picture of the population that is no longer accurate?

The second undercurrent is artificial intelligence, and it is the storm. AI is not just a new tool, like a slightly better spreadsheet. It is a force multiplier. Whom does it amplify? Those who already control the data, the computing power and the institutions. Nearly nine in ten of the most notable AI models in 2024 came from industry, not from universities. Decisions that once took committees months can, in our time, be made in seconds. Influence can be automated on a scale no propaganda ministry could ever have dreamed of. And at the same time, the systems are becoming less transparent: companies' openness about how their models are built fell markedly in 2025. What happens to the distance between those who understand the systems and those who only feel the effects first-hand? Is that not a new Latin, which only the initiated can read?

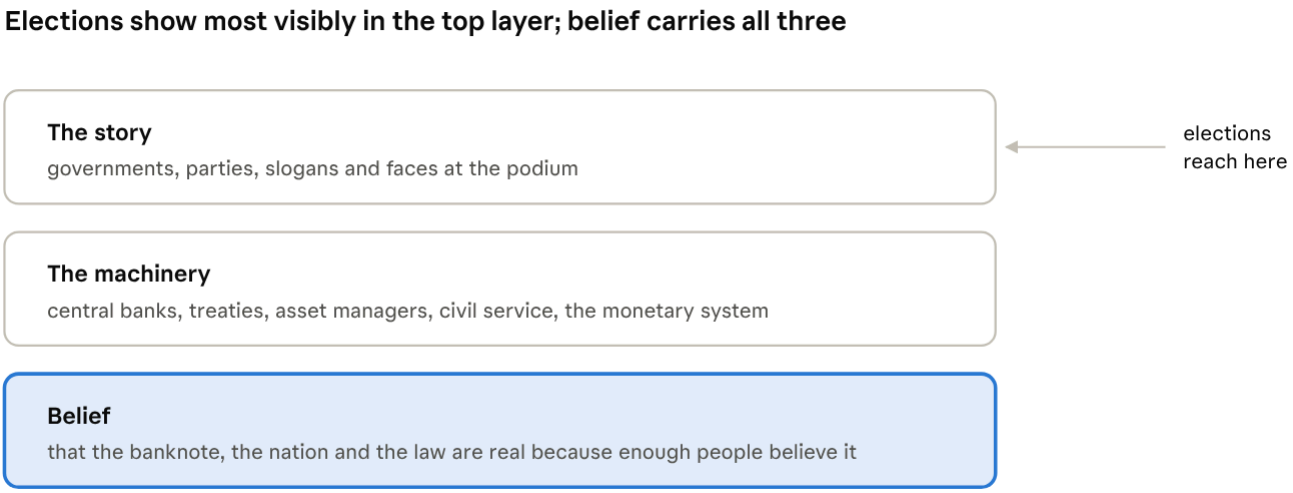
Put the two forces together: an ageing world population whose centre of gravity is shifting, and a technology that concentrates power and capacity. Then the luxury of adapting slowly is gone.

Belief

The rules of the game are being rewritten, whether we notice it or not. Let us tie the threads together: the story of democracy, the religion of money, the filter in our own heads, the organism and the clocks it is governed by. Then ask the one fundamental question: What is it that actually holds all of this together? Not force. Not laws. Not even money.

Belief.

Take a banknote out of your pocket. It is cotton paper and ink. Norges Bank itself writes that a genuine banknote should look and feel worth far more than the paper it is printed on. But why is it worth more? Because millions of people believe that it is. The historian Yuval Noah Harari has pointed out that nations, companies, money and laws work in the same way. None of it exists in nature. It exists because enough minds agree that it exists. Even the word *credit* comes from the Latin *credere*, to believe. The operating system was never written in computer code. It is written in shared belief.



The operating system in three layers · the essay's own image

And something similar applies inside you. Decide to buy a particular car model, and suddenly you see it everywhere. Are there more of them on the roads? No. What changed was what you noticed. Researchers call it the frequency illusion. Give someone a sugar pill and say it is medicine, and some will feel less pain, even though the effect in studies ranges from large to none. What we expect changes how we experience what happens.

But here we must draw a distinction. Hope is something other than belief. Whoever buys a lottery ticket knows the chance is small, and hopes anyway. Hope is honest with itself. And whoever says "I believe this until something better turns up" is navigating uncertainty honestly. The danger arises the moment a belief can no longer be corrected. When reality knocks, and no one opens the door. For whoever has never examined the grounds of their own conviction does not have a belief. They are owned by one.

And who owns it? In the medieval church, the peasant could not check God's will for himself, because it was spoken in Latin. How much better off is the modern voter, when the logic of the market is wrapped in econometric models, or the patient, when the diagnosis is coded in professional jargon? The scribes have changed their robes, but have they changed their role? If what we believe governs what we notice, and what we notice governs what we do, who then decides what we believe?

Who is at the helm

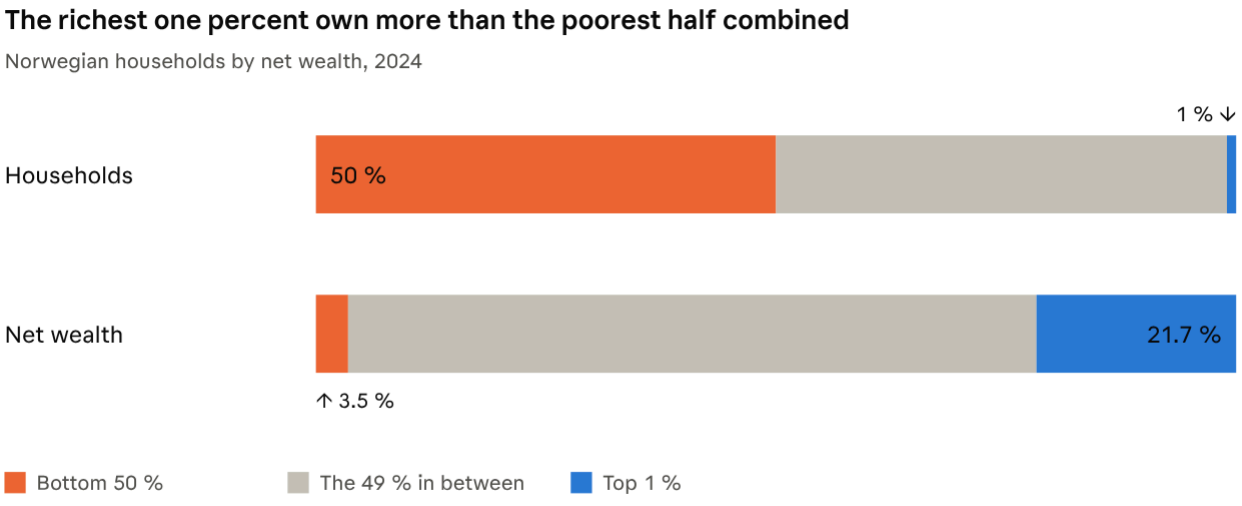
Is it any wonder that so many forces compete to decide what you should believe? Does advertising sell you a product, or a feeling that you are not good enough without it? And the news feed: when each of us gets our own version of reality, how long will we still recognise the other half of the country as neighbours?

But the deepest belief of all is that you are powerless. No one needs to install it. The researchers who discovered learned helplessness concluded in 2016 that they had got it backwards: passivity in the face of prolonged adversity is not something we learn. It is the starting point. What we have to learn is that what we do has an effect. What then happens to a person who never gets to experience that? No one needs to control them. They control themselves.

No one needed to plan this. The pattern requires neither a secret room nor a master plan. So who is really in control? In a way, all of us are. The organism is steered by what its cells believe in common. It is a kind of mind that no one owns, assembled from billions of convictions pulling in the same direction without anyone having chosen it.

But some cells sit closer to the levers than others. Less than half a percent of Americans attend twelve highly selective private universities. Yet more than one in ten chief executives of the 500 largest US companies, a quarter of US senators, half of Rhodes Scholars and three in four Supreme Court justices appointed in the half-century before 2023 went there. And children from the richest one percent are more than twice as likely to attend as children from the middle class with the same test scores. The people at the top are not without feelings. But what does distance do to the ability to feel for people you never meet? American political scientists have measured it: in nearly 1,800 policy issues over 20 years, ordinary citizens' independent influence on policy was close to zero, once you took into account what economic elites and interest groups wanted.

And in Norway? In 2024, the richest one percent of households, around 26,000, owned 21.7 percent of all net wealth. The poorest half, 1.3 million households, owned 3.5 percent.



Statistics Norway: "Hva er vanlig formue?", household net wealth 2024

Inequality has not always moved in one direction. The richest one percent's share of income fell from 22 percent in 1882 to 4 percent in 1980, and was back at 10 percent in 2017. Who sits closer to the levers: the 26,000 or the 1.3 million?

Some will say that the system lifts up the worst among us. Perhaps. But does it need to, in order to work the way it does? Those at the top of the food chain are not necessarily villains. They are driven by convictions they inherited, just like the rest of us. The only difference is that their belief is at the helm. There is no simple villain to blame. That is unsettling, but also the most hopeful thing about it all. For how many people have to change their minds before the rest follow? In experiments, researchers have seen that a minority of around a quarter can be enough. And where does such a minority begin, if not with you?

Four questions

So meet every conviction as a seed someone is trying to plant in you. Before you let it in, ask four questions. Who planted this? Who benefits from my believing it? Does it make my life larger or smaller? And the most important: Can I check it myself?

Is it not true that every empire, every religion and every revolution began as a conviction, carried forward by a few, until the organism itself changed shape? The future is still being shaped.

So think carefully before you lapse into belief. Should it not have been left behind in the Middle Ages? Yet in an age when nearly all knowledge is a keystroke away, how often do we check before we believe? Belief never disappeared. It just traded its robe for a suit.

For my own part, the answer is simple. I will not exempt any conviction from scrutiny, not even my own. I relate to what I know, and what I wonder about, I find out.

None of your cells voted on what you would have for breakfast. But you are not a cell. You can ask. And should the future not be written in what we can verify, in knowledge and logic, not in what someone asked us to believe?

Håkon Meidel Andersen, philosopher, technologist and author

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