Arne Næss is conventionally portrayed as the seminal character of modern Norwegian philosophy. Equally important, however, is his status as a founding father of the social sciences as a distinct academic field in Norway. Shortly after the German invasion Næss gathered an interdisciplinary group of students and junior scholars to scrutinize the foundations of their respective fields of study. After the war the agenda of this group drifted from philosophy toward social research. To introduce a new interdisciplinary complex, known from the United States as the “behavioral sciences”, into the national university system became its highest priority. In late 1949 these efforts led to the formation of the Institute for Social Research, which would prove seminal to the development of social psychology, sociology, and political science throughout the following decades.

It seems to be a common characteristic of the intellectual situation in all the Nordic countries that Vienna-style empiricist philosophy tended to operate as a gateway to American-style social science. In my master’s thesis, now fifteen years old, I studied how this transition from philosophy to social research came about in the Norwegian setting. My focal argument was that Næss’ distinctive epistemological program and the social experience of Fascism and resistance both proved decisive, and that the group’s intellectual development could be analyzed in terms of an intriguing dialectic between basic epistemological, ethical, and political attitudes. From 1943 Næss and his students increasingly addressed the practical and normative challenges of postwar society as a special responsibility of philosophers and social scholars. Similar to such proponents of unified science as John Dewey and Karl Popper, they came to see the ethos of empirical research as intrinsically relevant to the basic norms and methods of democratic politics.

This fascinating interplay of epistemological and political ideas will not be explored in much detail here. Instead I want to focus on a contribution by the young Stein Rokkan, one of Næss’ most distinguished students. Rokkan’s masters’ thesis on David Hume (1948) was never published and exists merely as a rather

1 This article is based on my doctoral dissertation, In Quest of a Democratic Social Order: The Americanization of Norwegian Social Scholarship 1918–1970, Oslo 2006.
2 Later published as Empirisme og demokrati, Oslo 1997.
mistreated Nachlass in his archives. However, in what follows I would argue that it could be read as an attempt to explore the philosophical genealogy of Næss’ radical empiricism. By constructing Hume as the philosophical father of radical empiricism, Rokkan indirectly challenged Popper’s theory of piecemeal social engineering, which represented a competing interpretation of the ethical-political implications of unified science. In order to appreciate Rokkan’s early work, I will first sketch some major features of Næss’ program in the theory of science and his wartime attempts to extrapolate it into a program of ethical and political education.

II

Næss’ distinctive approach to unified science was often referred to as “radical empiricism”. This program was first presented, or rather demonstrated, in his doctoral dissertation Erkenntnis und wissenschaftliches Verhalten (Cognition and Scientific Behavior), written during his sojourn in Vienna in 1933-34.

Erkenntnis was a rather eccentric contribution to the discourse of the Vienna Circle, and to ascribe model status to it among his philosophical followers would be somewhat exaggerated. Still it expressed a view of the principles of unified science which helps explain why Næss became quite a gate-opener to the social sciences. What he set out to do was to replace “subjective” epistemology with an objective psychology of scientific cognition. The aim was to overcome what he saw as a fundamental inconsistence in the movement for unified science: When the logical empiricists drew their sharp line of demarcation between science and metaphysics, they applied epistemological doctrines which were themselves ultimately metaphysical rather than scientific in nature. Næss’ alternative was a naturalistic and radically action-oriented model of human cognition. The behavioral sciences were here invoked to produce a characteristic alienation to the object of study and thereby facilitate the transition from philosophy to science. This ambition was typical of the movement for unified science. But while Carnap and Neurath based their theory of science on highly formalized disciplines such as physics and mathematics, Næss was more inclined to look to such disciplines as biology, psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology. This difference had far-reaching implications. The physicalism of Carnap and Neurath led to a model of unified science as a one-way avenue leading from the social and cultural sciences via psychology down to physiology, biochemistry, and ultimately physics. Næss’ approach suggested a more flexible, non-hierarchical cooperation between various disciplines involved in the study of man, from biology and psychology to anthropology and sociology. While diverging from prevailing modes of thought within the Central-