

Andri Snær Magnason on Iceland today

Donald Gíslason

The smallness and intimacy of Icelandic society was brought home to me last year when I was staying at the home of Wincie Jóhannsdóttir, a teacher at the Hamrahlíð College in Reykjavík and an occasional translator of Icelandic fiction. “One of my students came up to me,” said Wincie, “and asked for help with a poem by a modern Icelandic author the class was studying. ‘Don’t ask me,’ I said. ‘He only lives across town. Call him up!’”

I had just bought the book that virtually everyone in Iceland had read, Andri Snær Magnason’s best-seller *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation*, my copy of which was lying on the kitchen table. Right next to it was the Reykjavík phone book, which seemed to look at me and say: “Well, what are you waiting for?”

So I opened it up and started looking under “M” for “Magnason,” then quickly realized my mistake. In Iceland, the phone book is organized by first names, last names being formed from the first names of each person’s father. So I switched over to the “A” section and quickly found the entry for “Andri Snær Magnason” on Karfavogi street in Reykjavík 104.

Not three hours later I was sitting in his kitchen, listening to the sound of his kids playing in the living room as he made me a frothy cappuccino on the stove. “This might be our last,” he said with a big grin, “given the economic situation.” And for the next hour I sat in conversation with arguably the most listened-to intellectual in Iceland today, as he held forth not just about his book, but about the Icelandic character in general, and about my



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Donald Gíslason and Andri Snær

favourite topic, the Icelandic music scene, which I had come to study at the Iceland Airwaves music festival, held in Reykjavík every October.

I began by noting that Wincie was learning to make *svið* (boiled sheep’s heads) for the first time.

ASM: For the first time? Yes, that’s a reaction that’s taking place now, because our whole culture is built on poverty. Our whole food culture is built on crisis and poverty, on using every scrap. Our grandmothers knew all about this and we all grew up in this tradition. In the autumn, when the lambs are slaughtered, we would get a barrel full of blood, with lots of fat, lots of liver and stomachs, and the women would sew up these blood sausages and liver sausages — which are really good, children love them, even today.

It’s like a natural reaction that people have, doing that now. For some time they had been throwing away more and more, throwing away the blood, because people

didn’t have time to do it any more. But now that people have time, you see some very bloody family parties where they’re all filling a barrel with blood and barley, and then having this big blood sausage feast in the evening. It’s good stuff.

But that’s our kind of reaction to events, a sign that we haven’t lost our roots and we know how to be poor. It’s not a step back. It’s just back to normal, maybe.

DG: So it feels more authentically “Icelandic” to be in need, and using every resource possible?

ASM: Well, everything that we have comes from disadvantage. (laughs) Everything that we cherish today comes from poverty, isolation and natural disasters. The type of music we have is because we were isolated for 600 or 700 years and were cut off from the mainstream of European music. The music of the *rímur*, the “rhymes,” is the result of that kind of iso-

lation and was the most popular art form here for 600 years.

And that's because of poverty and isolation, which then turned into something that we found very special. Our language is difficult, but it allows us to read the sagas. And our landscape is so beautiful because our mountains killed one third of the population, more than two hundred years ago.

DG: In the volcanic eruption of 1783.

ASM: Yes, 1783, and a few times before that. So I would say that everything that we really have is based on crisis, devastation and isolation.

DG: Has the recent prosperity, then, been an “unnatural” time in Iceland?

ASM: Yes, I think so. (laughs) It doesn't really fit us. It's still natural in a sense that when we get an opportunity to do things, we are ready to take quite big risks, because if we fail we fall back to the basics but we won't fall any further than that. And that often becomes the psyche of the nation when there's a big catch to chase, like when everyone goes out to kill the whales. And that's what we did to the herring, we kind of finished the herring.

Like Al Gore says: “When old habit meets new technology, the results can be a catastrophic.” So when the old type of war met a new kind of weapons, we had those horrible things we witnessed in the 20th century. When old habits of transportation meet globalization, we have global warming. So what we had in Iceland was everybody going and catching while they could, with heavy machinery, and we almost wiped out the whole stock of one of the biggest biomasses in the oceans in just 20 or 30 years.

And now we did the same to the banks. (laughs) We kind of wiped them all out by plunging into this same idea, all of us at once. It seems to be the history of Iceland that we all plunge into some natural resource, everybody at the same time, getting the same idea. The word “brake” is not in our vocabulary. If you say “stop” then you are just pushed out of the way.

So that's what we're seeing. People were taking out loans like the boom would last 40 years. But it's worse than the last booms. Before people only lost their jobs and they could do something else, go to the next resource. But now we're in debt, and that's big trouble, really.

DG: I know from my brief study of music in Iceland that musical culture here accelerated rapidly from the early 19th century, when Iceland had virtually no instruments, to the present period, when there are music schools in every small village, Iceland has a major symphony orchestra, musicians like Vladimir Ashkenazy established his home here in the 1970s, and there is an appreciation and a practice of classical music that is of international calibre. And after popular music was introduced to Iceland through the radio programmes from American air bases in the 1950s, Iceland within a few decades was at the bleeding edge of popular musical experimentation. What is it about the way that Icelanders take on new things? They seem to just press the accelerator and ... go for it.

ASM: Well, the old *rímur* were still very popular until the Second World War, they were still played on the radio. But then the British came and laughed at us for listening to this sort of thing, and people kind of felt ashamed. This became a symbol of poverty, and we wanted to be acknowledged in the world. We didn't want to be some kind of aboriginals, we just wanted to be a mid-European high-cultural nation. So we kind of erased a lot of our musical history. We hid it, or we tried to make it more “beautiful” by adding musical instruments and we hid away most of the oldest parts of our musical traditions. So, for the public, much of it was kind of lost.

So we created this strong division between our classic traditions and our pop culture. They just weren't the same world. But then after the punk period in the 1980s – after Björk, really – all the boundaries between classic and experimental and pop were lost, although it was more like pop culture found itself standing still on the sidelines while the other music changed around it. Popular musicians started acknowledging the old folk music and using it. Sigur Rós has used it. Björk's band, The Sugarcubes, were taking these bards and having them sing at punk concerts. They were mixing everything together.

And from that time the identity of Icelandic popular music has been kind of anti-mainstream. Being original has become the identity of Icelandic music. Like if you are in Nashville, you would say: “We are country musicians, we

make country music.” Our identity became more like: “We are strange. We are alternative. We don't want anybody to like our music.” (laughs)

And after the arrival of the Internet, our musicians started playing for one hundred thousand people, sure, but in small “sockets” all over the world. Like the band Múm, that I have been working with quite a lot. They would maybe sell one or two hundred thousand records worldwide, while they only sold maybe one or two thousand here in Iceland.

The Internet completely changed how music was distributed. You can be an Icelandic band, you're your fans are in Japan, and that has even provided the financial basis for being strange. You can do very experimental things and still reach a very large public.

DG: They have really taken to the Internet. I noticed that the Iceland Airwaves website had a number of podcasts on it, and by the time I had come to Iceland I had seen Ólafur Arnalds, I had seen the video of Hjaltalín performing in a garage, and I felt I knew these people before I even saw them on the street. And I was working from Vancouver.

ASM: Well, one of the things is that the infrastructure doesn't come from nowhere. It comes from, maybe, what do you call it, the social-democratic infrastructure that was created in the 50s, 60s and 70s, where lots of children had access to free music schools. So many of these band members, like the members of Hjaltalín, are very skilled musicians.

DG: I have noticed that the skill level of some of these popular bands is very, very high. Particularly Benny Hemm Hemm, who at their concert at Tunglið had on stage 3 trombones, 2 trumpets, a French horn, acoustic guitar, a bass guitar, a drum set, and off-stage 6 girls playing violins and one clarinet. And, of course, they were all playing from score and somebody had to write the arrangements. That's not the skill level of your average North American garage band, writing brass arrangements and music of that level.

ASM: No, that's true. And that's like I was telling you before, how alternative, rock, punk, ambient electro and classical education all merged. So when I was working with a school here in Reykjavík,

creating a play, there had to be music for the play, so we had these electro boys to make the music, and they picked up two girls from the school that had been classically educated, one on cello, the other on guitar, and they became a band – the band Múm.

They met by coincidence and formed a band, but they were not starting from scratch, learning the guitar. They had already the background, and then they had their own musical personalities. I think that's also the case with Björk, with Benny Hemm Hemm and especially with Hjaltalín. Hjaltalín are very big into using the oboe and all that stuff.

DG: I interviewed Rebecca Björnsdóttir, the bassoon-player for Hjaltalín and we talked about this new genre called “chamber pop.”

ASM: Yeah, exactly, it's chamber pop. And they also made chamber pop out of a disco ballad, the most popular song of the summer, *Pú komst við hjartað í mér* (You touched my heart). It's by Páll Óskar – gay and very flamboyant – who makes very fine disco but he also sings beautifully with a harpist. And you can see people making some kind of Euro-trash techno music one day, and then the next they're singing these beautiful songs in church with Múm and a big harp.

People trained in music can often have a very narrow identity. They say: I am this kind of player, so I would never touch anything like that. But here you don't say “I am this, or I am that,” you just kind of absorb all the influences that you can get. And the closeness, people are very close here. The young people gather in downtown Reykjavík, they talk together, they form a band. It's a really good kind of ... infrastructure, really.

DG: I notice that collaboration comes second nature to these musicians. They are in several bands at once, they lend each other their equipment. It's like they are all out in the Wild West, all coming out to build a barn for somebody.

ASM: And we don't see “band wars.” We don't see people saying: I like this, I hate that, or I like this music, I hate that music. We don't see bands talking badly, not even about the worst bands (laughs), not even the most sleazy pop groups. And many even take the worst songs and play them their own way, and make something

new out of them.

That hatred between this genre and that genre, we hardly see it here. Maybe some rappers are trying to make enemies with each other, but I think that's just on the surface, because we're not big enough to make enemies here ...

Páll Óskar, Benny Hemm Hemm and Hjaltalín all have videos on You Tube to listen to. In our next installment, Andri Snær discusses in more detail the recent collapse of the Icelandic economy, and what Iceland should do about it.

DG: In what sense is Iceland a “dreamland?”

ASM: Iceland is a dreamland in the sense that you have 300,000 left people on an island and then you just see what happens. We have access to all the information in the world, but we have a special language and we have to translate all the ideas into Dreamlandic. We are like a human laboratory, a human experiment. We could easily have become a communist state. We did not. We became a highly right-libertarian state and are suffering the consequences now. We could have become a military base, like Okinawa, we had the opportunity, but we did not take that step.

So what I am looking at in the book are these utopias and how they affect our language, our economy, and how we look at our place in the world. It might sound a bit complicated but my grandmother understood it. She is very clever, though ... (laughs).

We had this American military base and then after the Cold War the base wanted to close down, we had almost no unemployment in Iceland at that time, but 2,000 people would lose their jobs. So, there was an interview with a woman who said: “This is the worst news I have heard in my life. My life is finished if they close down the base.”

And I was wondering like maybe that's where the Military Industrial Complex comes from. Not from the leaders, not from Bush, but from the people that work in these bases, these weapon factories, and don't want to close them down. And so they try to choose a leader who does not want to close down the base, or the factory. So if world peace spread around the world like a virus we would see headlines like *World Peace Threatens Local Economy*, *Riots Because of World Peace*, or *World Peace: the Worst Thing*

That Has Happened in my Life.

So I was looking at how we fail to address problems and crisis with a creative mind, but rather by looking at ourselves as a product of the base, as if we did not create the base, but we are a product of it.

So I am looking at how we become addicted to industries, ideas and realities that, while only one out of many, have become our reality by some sort of quirk of history. And then I am applying that point of view to the policy that we have had now in Iceland for some time. We just saw the banking utopia crash, but we are dreaming of another utopia going the same way: to make Iceland one of the biggest aluminum smelters in the world.

So we had engineers literally counting the waterfalls and hot springs in Iceland, and calculating how much power they would generate – which was, like, 10 times more than the nation needed. So they calculated how much aluminum could be smelted from the rest that we didn't use ourselves. And in a kind of naïve approach to progress, they saw this as the only way for us to become a real nation, a wealthy nation, with living standards like the others.

So what I'm looking at in my book is similar dreamlands, like Okinawa and Jamaica, places that have become addicted to only one industry and are very often the poorest places on earth. You see, there is something of people's creativity that is lost under such a big structure, and it seems like what our language often says is the basis of our life is not really the basis, but something that is actually holding us back.

Often after an economic collapse, we see smaller industries rising out of it, smaller economies that, combined, are much larger than what was there before. And this is the basic philosophy of the book: how this affects the language we use, and how as a consequence many of Iceland's most beautiful areas are under direct threat and have been for the last two decades.

DG: So this breaking up the economy into smaller pieces is actually a way of making the country more flexible and resilient. Is the break-up of the single-economy idea, then, the healthy consequence of the current crisis?

ASM: Well, from what the world media have said, Iceland was descending to

the level of Cuba. But as long as we will not be in huge debt, which would really be a huge burden on the generations, then I think that we will look back after 5 years and see this as a very healthy, positive new starting point for our economy.

Our economy was based on these high-flying billion-dollar investments, which are not really very creative, because you are just taking a loan and buying a company, which is different from making a company. You are taking over, dismantling, doing all this investment banker stuff. And this became, a black hole for new industries, a huge brain drain. Because if you were a physicist, an engineer, computer scientist, biologist, or if you could do anything, the banks hired you and trained you to do banking.

And this almost absorbed a whole generation of talent. So if you are starting a company and you are competing with a bank that pays every single man on the top floors more than the CEOs of most computer companies, then you don't stand a chance. And probably the CEO of your own computer company will be bought up by the banks, too.

So our national infrastructure of high-tech companies was losing most of its talent. And if you are going to start a company here, you need to keep your key people. So what is happening today is that we are seeing hundreds, literally hundreds of key people being set free – not losing their jobs, but set free (laughs). And I am very optimistic and eager to see what all these free people will do in the next three or four years.

Just as long as we don't lose people abroad. Just as long as people want to be here. And I think the aluminum smelters would be a worse threat to the basic idea of what Iceland is, as a land. But the thing is that there is a global crisis, it is quite unlikely that people will go instantly to New York or London to find something else to do, and I could almost bet a bottle of champagne or cognac that after 5 years, when you come back you'll see at least four or five companies that would say that the key to their existence was the crash of 2008.

DG: That is an amazingly optimistic view of Iceland. Are you alone in thinking that, or have you started others in that line of thinking?

ASM: We have started a movement, a think tank that is kind of getting people

together and participating in creating this vision, because we have seen this happen before. We saw it when the dot com bubble burst. We really hoped that people had learned from the dot com bubble, but they seem not to have.

But the nerds, the computer people that lost jobs in computer companies, still had their extremely valuable knowledge base after the bubble. They had been creating all sorts of stuff that maybe did not become anything, but they had been creating things. They had made mistakes and they knew how to do it next time.

So from that bubble we saw Iceland's biggest software export develop, called CCP. It's a computer game with 300,000 subscribers, and it's in an old fish-filleting factory at the harbour. And it is likely one of our largest export companies in general, because when 300,000 people pay \$10 a month, that's quite an export. And it's one of the biggest online computer Internet societies in the world.

And one of Iceland's other biggest companies – and we should have had at least 5 or 6 of them in the last 10 years, but like I said, all the talent went to the banks – is a leading company in the world in making prosthetic limbs. So, if somebody asked me 20 years ago what should Iceland do in the future, and I said why don't we make spare limbs for amputated people, people would have said I was crazy. But the fact is, this is one of Iceland's biggest export companies. And it's an international company, it made the leg for Oscar Pistorius, who was disqualified from the Olympic games because his legs enhanced his abilities. And that's a very cool story, but it didn't catch the public's imagination, because we had all those banks and the banks had such a huge profit, overshadowing everything.

So there was Pistorius, and Yoko Ono, who made the peace tower. Always small-scale, but huge triumphs nonetheless, although they didn't become a role model for our youth, who were enticed by the private jets and the Range Rovers, and going into a business school.

So I think that in the next few years we will need new role models, and they will not be the super-rich Viking entrepreneurs. It is worth noting that the Viking Age was not sustainable. You can't burn down the same village twice (laughs). So, we will develop better role models for our youth, in science, computing, the health industries, or maybe just being a normal

person, a teacher. We will have a more subtle range of ideas to choose from for you to claim to be successful in life.

DG: That's really interesting because I have always thought that the success of Iceland, at least in the musical field, is because it's just the right scale, It is large enough to support a wide variety of music no matter what type you want. And you don't get the pushdown from the heavy music industry that you get from a large American city, for example. Does the balance between creative push and the repressive activity of large-scale industry still have to be worked out in other parts of the economy? I think it's a great success in music.

ASM: I would say the balance is between being very international and also small-scale, having a huge international network and also deciding to be here, to use the creative environment here to make something for the outside world. The banks went out of scale, really, and that always makes us vulnerable to shifts in the world market and at the same time overturns so many values in our society.

I think the good thing about alternative music here is that alternative is almost our mainstream here in Iceland. In fact, many pop groups that are trying to be mainstream pop groups get no attention (laughs) because they are so small and corny compared with the quality of the alternative music scene.

I think we could learn lots from the music scene and its flexibility. To be creative, you know, you can't have much of an overhead, and a Range Rover bought with a loan will be a burden on your creativity because you can't take the same chances.

DG: I have noticed that Björk wrote an introduction to your book. And Sigur Rós in their *Heima* film referred to the aluminum smelter that was coming into production. Do popular musicians have a role to play in developing national policy here?

ASM: National policy in the last few years has been very arrogant. It is really a sad case that there has been almost a divorce between the creative industries and national policy. The government has had closed ears for quite a lot of time. So the fact that Björk and Sigur Rós have almost been advocating against

our government is not something really natural, because I think people would rather work with the government, with a government that shares our opinion – even though artists in general should be critical of governments.

So it's a fine balance but in this case it is almost what economists, artists, biologists have said has been answered with silence and closed ears. And they just keep on rolling out the machine. The only hope that I see now is that the aluminum prices of the world market will fall so dramatically that we will have some breathing space to get to know the areas before they destroy them. And that is what we have been doing in the last years: introducing areas to the nation, because "untouched" means "remote" and "isolated" and therefore not famous. So what we have been doing is taking photographers and documentary filmmakers to these places, to advertise them. Our natural beauty was being treated like it was a TV program: if there is nobody there, that means it has very low ratings, it must be a very unpopular place. It's kind of a New Speak. So all of a sudden we were had to educate the whole nation about the highlands, and what was at stake. And so that was something that artists like Björk and Sigur Rós could participate in because they could get the public's attention, and people would notice these places that were about to be given over to industrial development.

DG: And so the film *Heima*, for example, which goes to 30 small villages in the inside of Iceland, participates in that, attempting to forestall the predatory activity of aluminum companies that might want to see remoteness as vulnerability.

ASM: Yes, if you offer a remote village 400 jobs, you will overturn that village. It is easy for a large corporation to exploit our national treasures or national resources by offering a small gain to one small village. They could even sink the whole nation into debt because of it. And what we have seen in Iceland is how the promise of industrial development has been distracting attention away from each individual's ability to create a smaller, individual contribution to the economy, which is the norm, really. There is this idea of a Big Solution that will create this post-5-year-plan industrial village, which many of us don't really believe will happen the way the glossy advertisements de-

scribe it, and which the Icelandic economy itself doesn't really gain much from.

It is very valuable to have insight into how a multi-national company like Alcoa works, how it uses figures, how it creates an image. For example, they supported a national park here in Iceland. So the government supported Alcoa with about 30 million dollars to help them build the smelter. Alcoa then supported the government with \$200,000 and became the main supporter of a national park covering one third of Iceland. So now Alcoa can advertise and show pictures of our glaciers and stuff and say: look, we came to Iceland and gave them not only a smelter but also all this (laughs). And it is so terrible to see how your own leaders are messing things up, being so naïve and blind. It's almost like hearing these stories of people accepting glass pearls for their land; it's literally just like that.

DG: If you were Minister of Economic Development, what kinds of policies would you go for?

ASM: I think we should go for the Nordic and Canadian model. The Nordic model, I think, is the best one. The other model, the right-wing model, says that you should be rewarded for risk. I do believe in some sort of free market and entrepreneurship and the wealth that is created by individuals being able to interact with each other. But that has gone into some strange ideas of risk, for example, that if you take some kind of risk you should be rewarded with a private jet.

But when it comes down to it, 10 years ago there was no "risk" in Iceland. Risk was impossible. A sailor takes a risk, because if his ship sinks, then he drowns, but if you started a computer company that went bankrupt in the dot com boom, or you got fired, then the worst case you would be that you would live in a smaller apartment. You would still get your heart surgery through the governmental plan, your parents would go to a home for the elderly, you would have a pension, and your children would still go to school. You would not fall farther than that, so literally you could say that there was no risk, because you could be perfectly happy in a small apartment, it's just a question of mentality.

But now we are seeing that all these rewards for risk that have happened in the banking system were literally on our behalf. And what is even worse is that they

were even risking all our fundamentals values. The risk was so immense that it was more than the cost of our total healthcare, our total educational system, our total road infrastructure, and our total energy grid. They were taking more risk than all our GDP put together. So literally they were risking that maybe my grandmother could not have heart surgery. That was the risk. But they themselves would never fall farther than to end up being a moderate millionaire.

I believe that this Nordic model that we had kind of helped you to take a risk: to become an artist, to become an entrepreneur, because you could never fall further than down to a normal, maybe living off your wife or something, or your parents. But now we have seen risk taken that would really put the national below the level of the safety bet, which is almost criminal.

DG: By the "Nordic model" do you mean the social democratic safety-net model?

ASM: Yes, that is the model, so that whatever risk you take, your children will be secure, you will not be hungry, you will have a house. Even though you can be quite libertarian in thought, I think that this is really something that enables everybody to take chances, to quit a job and start a new company, write a book, form a band. And democracy benefits, too, if you aren't threatened with falling below the safety net, which would cause more extreme political views to take hold.

DG: Is there some relationship between the Vikingar and the Russian oligarchs?

ASM: Yeah, even friendship, and the longing for yachts, jets and English football clubs. It all went together. But it's kind of strange to look at it in hindsight, why everybody falls into this luxury trap, why nobody was like Yngvar Kamrad, the founder of IKEA, who still has his old Volvo. It's something almost like gangster rap lifestyle.

DG: With bling ...

ASM: With bling, yes, that's right, with lots of bling.