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A Curious Case of Identicide

Professor Andersen's Night by Dag Solstad

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In the opening sequence of Dag Solstad's 1996 novel, *Professor Andersen's Night*, the title character, Pål Andersen, a 55-year-old literature professor at the University of Oslo, is celebrating Christmas. Pål wants to make the celebration look casual, but with an enormous Christmas tree in his apartment, Christmas carols on TV, and traditional Christmas dishes on the table it looks anything but casual. Quite the contrary, it looks very serious, and it feels so too. With all the props in place, it doesn't take long before the Christmas spirit sets in. After giving it some thought, Professor Andersen decides to indulge in it:

'Here I stand, half-drunk and sentimental [...] A 55-year-old professor who has opened his mind to his inner nature, and is thus enabled to imbibe ancient tales of religious origin, and a feeling of peace arises in his mind, is that how it is, perchance?' he wondered. 'Yes, it must be so,' he added. 'And let it be so,' he added further, thoughtfully. 'I am a non-believer, but belong to a Christian culture, and without a touch of irony I can let the Christmas spirit fill my mind.'

That's when strange things begin to happen. For a moment, as if in a flash of epiphany, Pål believes that celebrating Christmas is a vital part of who he is, for a moment he believes he belongs to a Christian culture, for a moment he believes that 2,000 year old religious images and symbols is what keeps society up and going. For a moment Pål endorses all that. He is what he believes, without the slightest touch of irony, if we are to believe him of course.

But then comes the final and most disturbing act of this revelation. Professor Andersen peers out his window and witnesses a murder in an apartment across the street. Right there in front of his eyes. A young girl murdered by a man. Pål's immediate thought is "I must call the police." But he cannot bring himself to do it. One part of the problem is this: did he really see that murder happen or did the insidious Christmas spirit make him believe he saw it? All in all, professor Andersen believed so many strange things that particular night that he (and we) simply can't know whether the murder was real or imagined.

Picking up the phone would amount to a declaration of faith, it would define all that professor Andersen stands for, perhaps even make him a part of a greater scheme of things. Ignoring what he saw and not giving it any further thought would likewise amount to a declaration on professor Andersen's part. So, in the end, what does Pål stand for? That's the other part of the problem: he isn't quite sure. He can't bring himself to believe, and he can't fully disbelieve either. The murder is truly a revelation, it exposes professor Andersen's identity deficit and leaves him wondering — who am I, where do I belong, what shall I do?

If this sounds like an opening of a typical identity crisis novel, it's because it is. *Professor Andersen's Night* could be sided with a long list of other texts which suggest that we – as individuals and communities – are unable or unwilling to define ourselves and will probably live to see the end of whatever it is that nourishes our identities: a culture, a civilization, a set of values, a ritual, a religion. Such sentimental, clichéd doomsday prophecies usually flag a good deal of moral panic and reveal some sort of personal nostalgia for "the good old days." But they can have one saving grace. Most identity crisis novels are a response to processes of ongoing social and cultural change, with an ambition not only to document the change but also interpret and understand it. This is definitely the case with *Professor Andersen's Night*.

If we look at it from that angle, Solstad's novel examines the processes that created Pål's inert non-identity. In doing so, the book traces the formation of Norwegian cultural and social identity in the second half of the 20th century, and situates this development against the backdrop of a more universal context of Western European postmodernism. This paper will follow professor Andersen in his search for answers, and will consequently take up two lines of inquiry. The first one centers around professor Andersen's implicit critique of the cultural elite in Norway who, according to professor Andersen, have gradually deconstructed (murdered) both individual and collective patterns of identity. The second one centers around professor Andersen's irrational and perhaps paranoid fear that an "other" cultural mindset might replace (murder) the identity vacuum he lives in.

The word *murder* in parentheses signals that the changes in prevalent patterns of identity are forced, or marked by violence, which brings us to the notion of identicide. Now, the term identicide is usually associated with the grim reality of war and genocide. It involves killing – the killing of people, of course, but also the killing of memory (memoricide), social patterns (sociocide), democratic practices (democricide), and all other aspects of public and private life our sense of self hinges on. Admittedly, Solstad's novel doesn't describe the horrors of war. What it does, however, is that it pictures an identity in a state of violent conflict. Or in fact a double conflict, if we take a closer

look at the murder in the opening scene of *Professor Andersen's Night*. On the one hand, we have an intrusion upon a fragile sense of "self" and "us" which is conjured up by the rituals of the Holy Night. On the other, we have a destructive self-analysis, an inner deconstruction, triggered by the question: "Shall I call the police?", which leaves Pål disempowered and unable to act. This is the narrative backbone in *Professor Andersen's Night* – a twofold identicide, one perpetrated from the outside, by intrusion, the other one from the inside, by self-deconstruction.

Professor Andersen's Night is far from being the only modern or contemporary literary work that can be interpreted along these lines. We'll notice the same underlying narrative backbone in Michel Houellebecq's Submission³ and Julian Barnes' England, England⁴, with the former underscoring identicide by intrusion, and the latter highlighting identicide by self-deconstruction. Submission is set in the near future and tells the story of Francois, a middle-aged literature professor at the Sorbonne who finds himself right in the middle of a momentous cultural change. When a Muslim candidate wins the presidential election in France and launches a systematic overthrow of the prevailing sociopolitical system, Islam-inspired laws and regulations intrude into everyday life, leading up to Francois' final act of submission. England, England, on the other hand, tells the story of a visionary tycoon, Sir Jack Pitman, who decides to translate his patriotism into a business enterprise and replicates England, complete with all its landmarks and national narratives, on the Isle of Wight. While the island is transformed into a successful theme park, "real" England is consumed by chaos and emptied of all its identity content. Both these works present surprisingly similar depictions of a postmodern landscape of non-identity marked by ongoing identicide, and they will both be referred to throughout the paper.

To map the identity patterns we are dealing with here, and to trace their development through history, we need to begin with the self-analysis and self-deconstruction theme. From the way I described professor Andersen's Christmas celebrations, it might look like his sense of self was firmly anchored in tradition. When thinking about "observing the traditional customs," Pål admits that he would have felt "emotionally stunted" if he were to skip that part of Christmas. The traditions professor Andersen seems to be so fond of are obviously linked to Christian faith and some kind of national or regional patriotism. There is no better articulation of this concoction than the enormous Christmas tree decorated with Norwegian flags in professor Andersen's apartment. In reality, however, Pål feels a bit ambiguous, if not outright uncomfortable, about the tree:

[...] he could easily have managed without the Christmas tree, for instance, no one would have reacted to him not having a Christmas tree;

on the contrary, the people he could count on visiting him during Christmas would be more likely to express surprise at him having a Christmas tree, and such a big Christmas tree, bigger than he was himself, in fact, and he might as well begin right now to dismiss the witticisms which would rain down on his poor head because of this, he thought and had to laugh.⁵

The Christmas tree, a potent symbol furnished with networks of meaning, is the epitome of Lyotard's⁶ grand narrative, a totalizing and coherent story which creates and legitimizes social, cultural, and political systems, and offers seductive answers to existential questions. Some of these narratives, like professor Andersen's Christmas tree, are bigger than their creators, that is us, and consequently make us appear grotesquely insignificant, dwarfed. Some, like the colonial narratives of Western culture, might even have a dehumanizing potential. Pål is sharply aware of that. That's why deep inside he feels it's necessary to dismiss the Christmas tree controversy with a laugh. In a similar way, he gives an air of reservation to everything else he does and thinks. Pål agrees that Christmas celebrations are somehow "ingrained" in him, but only after making it clear it's "weird"⁷ that it should be so. He also confesses that he likes "to indulge in [...] Christmas rituals," but in the same sentence he adds that they "mean nothing to him," and that he is not tied to them with "deep and sincere emotions."⁸

It's not just Christmas traditions professor Andersen feels so ambiguous about. It seems quite obvious that he has the same sentiment towards all social conventions and rituals — no deep and sincere emotions there, either. Sure, professor Andersen sits down at his Christmas table simultaneously with other Norwegians, and other Scandinavians as he is quick to stress, to commune over a meal and thereby partake in a sacred social practice, that of cementing bonds and cultivating a collective identity. But he does so with a long list of serious reservations. Professor Andersen is acutely aware of the fact that a community's existence is a play of symbols, a ritual of imagination, and in the end just another grand narrative. That's why he distances himself from it, quite literally by letting the walls and windows of his apartment separate him from other members of the community, but also in his usual manner, that is by never letting the fantasy of belonging get the upper hand.

As we might have already gathered, professor Andersen cannot override the awareness that all forms of identity are just mental constructs. Only those with a "childlike nature" believe identity is real, every (post)modern man or woman knows identity exists only insofar as we believe it does. And for profesor Andersen believing things, especially believing in identities, is naïve, reactionary, perhaps even dangerous. That's why if identity needs to be discussed at all, it has to be discussed in negations, tongue in cheek. It's as if

identity was a little game we played with ourselves. In other words, for professor Andersen, identity can only exist ironically, must be handled in a playful manner and burdened with self-awareness. Just like when he says:

'Soon it will be the Holy Night. But fortunately I have my limitations [...] I cannot utter the words «the Holy Child» without it automatically becoming the «Choly Hild»', professor Andersen thought, and felt laughter bubbling up inside of him.¹⁰

A similar display of playful irony and self-awareness can be easily detected in *England*, *England*. Already in her school days, Martha Cochrane, one of the main characters in Barnes' novel, sported a rather contrary attitude. This is what we learn about young Martha: "Martha was a clever girl, and therefore not a believer. In morning prayers, her eyes tight shut, she would pray differently:

Alfalfa, who farts in Devon

Bellowed be thy name.

Thy wigwam come.

Thy swill be scum

In Bath, which is near the Severn.

Give us this day our sandwich spread,

And give us our bus-passes,

As we give those who bus-pass against us,

And lead us not into Penn Station,

Butter the liver and the weevil.

For thine is the wigwam, the flowers and the story,

For ever and ever ARE MEN."11

Also Francois, the main character in *Submission*, has a lot in common with Pål Andersen in this regard. It is no coincidence that both protagonists are literature professors. They subject all potential identity-forming content to a peculiar mode of analysis, as if they were dealing with clusters of signifiers that can be taken apart and examined bit by bit. Or better yet, as if identity was a text. Like when, shortly before the murder is committed, Pål sees an angel appear "in his mind's eye:"

In his mind's eye the desert sky was stretched over Judea in the December of the year which starts our reckoning of time. The thousands of stars, which twinkled and twinkled in the deep blue sky. The shepherds in the fields outside Betlehem. An angel standing in front of them and declaring tidings of great joy. Professor Andersen saw the angel in his mind's eye [...] and derived pleasure from visualizing the angels in the dark night.¹²

Professor Andersen allows himself to get transported by the fantasy not because he feels emotionally bound to its content (loosely based on the gospel of St. Luke), but because he can treat it as a piece of literary fiction, as a product of "his mind's eye" (note the reference). And even though Pål assures us that he is a "non-believer" he finds pleasure in the images he sees, a pleasure derived from dwelling in a fictional, textual world where both belief and disbelief can be suspended. In *Submission*, the main character treats identity in a similar fashion, as a textual space rather than a real-life, ideological commitment. Francois has a fond reverence for Christian mysticism, fantasizes about conversion and seeks religious inspiration, but he does that only as a reader and fan of the French writer Joris-Karl Huysmanns. Pål and Francois can handle identity for as long as they can read it like a text, for as long as they are aware that it can be analyzed, manipulated, undermined, ironized. This gives them power over identity narratives, but also deprives them of the ability to believe in them.

It is interesting to note that the ability to believe, both in a religious and "secular" meaning of the word, is coupled with the question of identity in all the three novels discussed here. *Submission* plays with this idea quite openly by making Christianity and Islam parties to an identity conflict with socio-political repercussions, turning belief into a fundamental element of social cohesion. *England*, *England* makes a similar point when Sir Jack Pitman's theme park engineers a national identity that is quite literally all make-believe. And finally in *Professor Andersen's Night* Pål's inert identity is stirred up when he needs to decide whether he can believe what he saw. The question here is not just about establishing facts, mind you, because what Pål saw was a community with shared values and a uniform culture, more, even a possibility of an identity that doesn't need irony to exist. Last but not least, he also saw all of it being murdered.

Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that professor Andersen can't make up his mind. Like all the other protagonists (Martha, Jack, Francois), Pål lives in a reality of deconstructed non-identities, that is identites perpetuated by means of negation, play, irony, duplicity, and existing only in the modalities of contradiction, derision, disownment or subversion. This is why he is paralyzed by what he sees. His identity feeds on already existing narratives but is itself impervious to identification, at it's core there is a stark refusal to be defined or fixated. To be himself Pål needs identity content, be it religious, social, or political, which he can take apart and ironize, but by all means not believe. It is this decontructive compulsion that has opened up a void – an identity deficit – in professor Andersen and made answering the question "Shall I call

the police" impossible for him to handle. In the long run this compulsion is a slow hollowing out that leads to self-annihilation, or (self-)murder.

The identity vacuum all the main characters are suspended in has a biography. It overlaps not only with the history of European postmodernism but also with the biography of the cultural elite Professor Andersen now belongs to. The roots of this elite go back to the 1960's, a time of political, cultural, and moral revolt, and are deeply grounded in a "lifelong infatuation with the spirit of modernity" which fuelled a new, radical humanist project: authority was to be undermined, art was to be transformed, intellectual and religious orthodoxy was to be ridiculed. But it was not just remainders of the cultural past that were to be attacked, the dogmas of modernity were also to be opposed. Professor Andersen's generation didn't actually embrace the ideals of modernity (or modernism) as such, their ambition was rather to seek "the New" or "the distinctive modernity of their time" time" time".

That was supposed to be achieved by subjecting established patterns of thought to the stern scrutiny of a subversive gaze, a particular mode of analysis, now simply called deconstruction, best illustrated by professor Andersen's relationship with art: "[Pål Andersen] didn't seek the structure he was brought up to see and understand, but the disintegration of that structure." A similar gaze, channeled into political activism, or other forms of participation in public life, defined all of professor Andersen's friends. As a result, their trademark was that of being in opposition, of being contrary, never identifying with a particular worldview, always ready to dismiss and reject authority. Even when they assumed the position of authority themselves:

"They were consultants, heads of administration, senior physiologists, celebrated actors and professors of literature, but in their innermost thoughts they believed, every single one of them, that they had not adopted the attitude that was expected of them. They were still against *them*, the others, althought they could scarcely be distinguished from them any longer [...] They continued to be against authority, deep inside they were in opposition, even though they were now, in fact, pillars of society who carried out the State's orders, and no one besides themselves [...] could perceive that they were anything other than State officials, part of the state fabric [...]."¹⁷

Never mind that for some of Pål's friends the way into the elite circles was not so much a matter of staying true to their radical views but merely a hypocritical career choice (as it was for Pål himself for whom research on the plays of Henrik Ibsen was just a door-opener to the academe); the point is that the intellectual and ideological *modus operandi* of this group was stunningly simple – to oppose, no matter what, even if it's ourselves we're opposing. Thus the cultural elite professor Andersen belongs to, along with the culture it represents,

became a prisoner to an ideology of compulsive self-subversion set on a course for self-annihilation or, again, (self-)murder.

In all the three novels discussed here the program of the radical humanist project is followed all the way through to its extreme consequences. In Professor Andersen's Night, when the cultural elite to which Pål Andersen belongs symbolically reunites at a Christmas reception the day after the murder takes place, the main subject of conversation is a television show launched by the Norwegian state tv-company, NRK, where celebrities from the fields of Norwegian politics, finance, and culture are "profaned" just for entertainment's sake. The show is hosted by the daughter of one of professor Andersen's friends, which of course implies that both the program and its host are a product of their ideology. What began as a program of political dissent and pursuit of personal freedom, ended up as grotesque, meaningless and destructive entertainment. Similarly in Submission, the radical humanist project which created the secular and democratic Republic of France, arrives at a tipping point where liberal, postmodern ideals become an oppressive burden. The leading role in this process is ascribed to members of the cultural elite, like Francois, whose decadence brings on the demise of a whole civilization. In England, England, the same intellectual currents that allowed to take an ironic take at a country's culture and history turn out to be divisive, exclusive, rigid, and limiting. By the time Jack Pitman's project becomes fully operative, the people left behind in "real" England are impoverished and have little to say about what Englishness means to them, only the chosen few running the park have the power to define and shape national identity.

The radical humanist project started by professor Andersen's generation created a unique space of intellectual plurality valorizing dissent or, if you prefer, created the modern liberal mindset. It allowed for a critical examination of power relations, it shook the notion of institutional authority, and opened the public space for alterity. But at the same time it gave birth to a free flowing identity vacuum which, in turn, produced the inert Pål, the decadent Francois, and the cynical Sir Jack Pitman.

All three novels play with the possibility that the identity vacuum the main characters live in might be vulnerable to external intrusions. The idea that some intruder is taking the life of the radical humanist project of post-modernity is perhaps best developed in *Submission*, with Islam presented as a foreign and hostile socio-political force quickly consuming whatever is left of the cultural West. The theme of identicide by intrusion is no less important in *England*, *England* where external threat comes under the guise of a global economic competition which consigns all unsellable identities to oblivion. And finally, in *Professor Andersens's Night*, we have a murderer on the loose.

His name is Henrik Nordstrøm, although we can never be fully sure whether he actually committed the crime or not. When professor Andersen finally "identifies" the murderer, it is again while he is standing at the window in his apartment, probably looking through his mind's eye as much as through the window pane. But Pål has a distinct feeling that there is something unusual about Henrik. And indeed there is. He doesn't belong, he is an outsider, or at least this is how professor Andersen sees it, which we quickly gather from the way he thinks about the crime Henrik committed and which he, professor Andersen, failed to report.

Murder is the ultimate act of opposing or transgressing all moral codes of a society. By committing murder, Henrik places himself in opposition to those moral codes. And as he fails to report the crime, professor Andersen fears he has landed on the margins of society together with Henrik:

Society exerts a tremendous influence over one. That was what I didn't understand, despite always having preached it — to my students, for example. Why have I set myself up against society in this way?¹⁹

Furthermore, murder is, as professor Andersen concludes, not only a moral crime, but also a crime that threatens civilization: "No civilization can accept and defend the notion that someone who witnesses a murder could fail to bring it to the attention of society. It is surely the primordial crime."²⁰

Henrik remains then in opposition to the community professor Andersen somehow feels bound to. Which community is it exactly that Henrik doesn't belong to and threatens with his violent crime? The line between "us" and "them" is drawn only vaguely in the novel but, nevertheless, when looking out his windows on the Holy Night, professor Andersen sees a number of families gathered round their Christmas tables in their apartments. Quite unexpectedly, he feels rapport with the people celebrating Christmas:

On this evening, as the hours moved towards twelve o'clock and the Holy Night was about to begin, in which he wanted to take part, at least for a few short hours, even if they didn't give that a thought and he personally was also far removed from it, nevertheless there was now a rapport between professor Andersen and those he was watching from his window, who were sitting in a drowsy torpor in their apartments, because they were all participants in this deep-rooted cultural ceremony [...].²¹

The line between "us" and "them" is drawn by means of a collective celebration, a cultural and religious tradition producing a sense of belonging. The fact that Pål's sudden and unexpected feeling of rapport is conjured up on the Holy Night likens the existence of the community to a miracle, a miracle of social cohesion which professor Andersen, despite his suspiciousness towards social

narratives, now seems to be considering as a possibility – not because he believes the miracle, but rather because the feeling of guilt is simply too much of a burden. In any case, the point is that Henrik doesn't murder a single person, but a culture, a society, a civilization, which makes professor Andersen tremble with fear because it's the very same culture, society, and civilization that allowed him to revolt and oppose, creating at the same time a safe space for his identity vacuum to thrive.

There is one more thing that makes Henrik an outsider. Henrik has links to the Far East which in the novel presents itself as a contender to cultural world domination. When professor Andersen invites Henrik up for a drink to his apartment, Henrik remarks about the Far East that it: "is now at a great turning point where everything is changing and bursting forth. It's teeming there. Everything's being transformed. And East is West, and West is East... ."22 This is how, in Solstad's novel, an alien and abstract East poses a threat to the familiar (and perhaps equally abstract) West. That the rise of the Far East is a real threat to Western culture becomes clear when Henrik sizes up the impressive book collection in professor Andersen's apartment and says that when the transformation in the Far East is complete: "these books can't tell you anything any more [...] And you who have all of that in your head! Poor you!"23 Indeed, professor Andersen has spent his life filling up his head with narratives which are now about to be supplanted and forgotten. Perhaps it is so, it all depends on whether a culture can believe its own narratives or not, and we know that professor Andersen's culture cannot, it can only deconstruct. It seems that Henrik Nordstrøm is well aware of that and sums up his own remark in a sinisterly ambiguous manner: "it's everyone's right to believe what they like."24

In the beginning, Henrik plays the part of an outsider, an intruder. But after some time this changes. When professor Andersen finally takes a closer look at the murderer, his impression is that of neither – nor. Neither likeable nor unlikeable. Neither this, nor that. Undefinable. In fact, Henrik could easily pass for the prototypical other. On the one hand, as mentioned above, he triggers anxiety and fear in professor Andersen who feels that the crime Henrik committed transgresses all moral codes of his culture, society, and civilization. At the same time, professor Andersen, despite his fear, is fascinated and emotionally bound with Henrik Nordstrøm:

I know all of this and am unable to disagree with it, but at the same time: I am also unable to report him. Not then and not now, either. Am I suffering from a boundless feeling of sympathy? In other words compassion beyond all bounds? [...] Why don't I want him to disappear from my life? Why do I fear that he'll disappear from my life?.²⁵

It is striking that Pål doesn't want the murderer to disappear from his life. More than that, he is afraid of such a possibility. He sympathizes with him and imagines a bond of suffering connecting them. All things considered, maybe it's not that striking. Being true to the postmodern spirit of his culture and time, Pål is fascinated with all forms of alterity and difference. After all, professor Andersen spent his life transgressing moral codes, subverting cultural norms, undermining political narratives, endorsing and exploring otherness. Is this why professor Andersen feels emotionally bound to Henrik? Because he secretly envies him taking that last step towards absolute otherness? Perhaps, all in all, the murderer and professor Andersen have more in common than we might suspect. Both take actions which subvert the foundations of moral and social order — one commits the primordial crime of murder, while the other commits the primordial crime of not reacting to murder. Is it possible that professor Andersen recognizes himself in the murderer? Is it possible that professor Andersen is his own victim? It is, but even if he was, he wouldn't believe it.

Footnotes

- Solstad, D. *Profesor Andersen's Night*, trans. Agnes Scott Langeland, London: Vintage, 2012, p. 8
- 2. Solstad, D. Profesor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 11
- 3. Houellebecq, M. Submission, trans. Lorin Stein, London: Vintage, 2016
- 4. Barnes, J. England, England, London: Jonathan Cope (Random House), 1998
- 5. Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 3–4
- 6. Lyotard, J.F., *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowladge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, 1984
- 7. Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 1
- 8. Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 3
- 9. Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 9
- ^{10.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 8–9
- ^{11.} Barnes, J. England, England, 1998, p.12
- Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 7–8
- ^{13.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 8
- ^{14.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 49
- 15. Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 40

- ^{16.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 34
- ^{17.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 46
- ^{18.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 57
- ^{19.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 90
- ^{20.} Solstad, D. *Professor Andersen's Night*, 2012, p. 91
- ^{21.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 7
- ^{22.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 130
- ^{23.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 130
- ^{24.} Solstad, D. *Professor Andersen's Night*, 2012, p. 130
- ^{25.} Solstad, D. Professor Andersen's Night, 2012, p. 91