

# Statehood, Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Case of Denmark

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## Making sense of Danish history in a comparative perspective

From a cultural and historical, sociological perspective, the Danish nation-state of today represents a rare situation of virtual identity between state, nation and society. That is a more recent phenomenon than normally assumed, in Denmark and abroad. Though one of the oldest monarchies of Europe with a flag that came "tumbling down from heaven in 1219" - ironically enough an event which happened in present day Estonia - the present Danish national identity is of a late date. Until 1814 the word 'Denmark' denominated a typical, European, pluri-or multinational, absolutist state, second only to such powers as France, Great Britain, Austria, Russia and maybe Prussia. The state had succeeded in reforming itself in a revolution from above in the late 18th century and ended as one of the few really "enlightened absolutisms" of the day (Østergård 1990). It consisted of four main parts and several subsidiaries in the North Atlantic Ocean plus some colonies in Western Africa, India and the West Indies. The main parts were the kingdoms of Denmark proper and Norway, plus the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. How this particular state came about need not bother us here. The only point worth mentioning from a comparative point of view is that the three provinces in the southern part of present day Sweden, lost in 1660, originally constituted the central core of the 'Danish' lands, if one can use such national terms in pre-modern times.

From almost any cultural historical point of view the people of Scania, Halland and Blekinge were more 'Danish' than Jutland, not to speak of the island Bornholm in the Baltic which was forgotten at the peace conference in 1660 and opted for Denmark in something close to a popular referendum, a rare phenomenon in pre-modern times. Nowadays, however, the people of Southern Sweden speak an impeccable, though heavily accented, Swedish. How come? A

closer investigation reveals one of the few instances of a successful change of national identity of a whole population.

The Swedish government succeeded in the years between 1660 and 1700 where the Austrian emperor failed in the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia a few decades earlier. The intentions were comparable but the Swedish government of Stockholm succeeded in changing the official language of the three provinces by systematic indoctrination carried out by newly appointed parish ministers and a brand-new university established in Lund. These provinces still nowadays feel close to Denmark and more specifically to its capital Copenhagen and retain a certain distance from Stockholm. Yet, they are undeniably Swedish. This came out clearly as early as the first decade of the 18th century. Whereas virtually the whole of the population supported the Danish armies during the first of the Swedish-Danish wars 1685 to 1689 they demonstrated a completely different attitude in the "Great Nordic War" 1700-1721 (Fabricius 1906-58). This is the only known example of a successfully engineered switch of national identity of a whole population in the whole history of nation building. It therefore, deserves closer inspection by comparative historians. However that is not my aim in this article. Here I want to confine myself to try solving the riddle of the Danish national identity. I hope it will turn out to make a contribution to the ongoing debate as to whether there is such a thing as 'national identity', and if so, how it can be analysed in an intellectually satisfying manner.

The problem I do want to address is the character of the Danish nation-state that resulted from the Napoleonic Wars and the German Unification. Norway was lost in 1814 because of some bad military and foreign policy dispositions, and Bismarck used the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein as a vehicle for bringing about German unification under the Prussian King. This is all well known diplomatic history. Probably less well known are the internal repercussions of this foreign policy catastrophe and the results in terms of a peasant ideological hegemony over the homogenous political culture in the remaining Danish state, a type of ideological hegemony which to my knowledge is almost unique. This is not to say that peasant values do not permeate the cultural values of most industrialised societies. Of course they do. But it is a far cry from the existence of some cultural traits to an ideological hegemony over all parts of society. And this latter seems to be the case in the Danish

society of this century even after the industrialisation of the country in the decades after the second world war.

In contrast to the situation in most other emerging nation-states at the time, the sheer smallness of the amputated state allowed a numerous class of relatively well-to-do peasants, who had become independent farmers through the reforms of the late 18th century, to take over, economically as well as politically. Gradually, throughout the latter part of the 19th century, though not without opposition, the middle peasant farmers took over from the despairing ruling elites. These latter were recruited from the tiny urban bourgeoisie, the officials of the state trained at German style universities in Denmark and elsewhere, and the manorial class. They had lost faith in the survival of the state after the debacle of 1864, followed by the subsequent establishment of a strong united Germany next door. Some even played with the thought of joining this neighbouring state which already dominated the culture of the upper classes. But, an outburst of so-called 'popular' energy proclaimed a strategy of "winning internally what had been lost outside". This witticism turned into a literal strategy of retrieving the lost agrarian lands of Western Jutland. It also took the form of an opening of the so-called "Dark Jutland" in an attempt to turn the economy of the peninsula of Jutland away from Hamburg and redirect it towards Copenhagen. This movement is sometimes nowadays provocatively called "the exploration of Jutland", meaning the exploitation of Jutland by its capital Copenhagen, situated on the far eastern rim of the country as a leftover from the former empire, rather like Vienna in present day Austria. This battle is not yet over as was amply demonstrated in the recent heated controversies about building a bridge between the islands Fyn and Sjælland or connect Sweden and Copenhagen directly with Germany over the Fehmern Sund. The attempt to keep the Danish nation-state together and Jutland away from Hamburg won out as the bridge is now being built. However, it was decided by a narrow margin, and the decision will probably turn out to be economically unwise.

What is more important, though, is the cultural, economic and political awakening of the middle peasants who became farmers producing for an indefinite market precisely during this period. The reason for their success lies in the late industrialisation and the relative weakness of the bourgeoisie in Denmark. The take-off did not occur until the 1890's and the final break-through as late as the 1950's (Hansen 1970). The middle peasants developed a conscious-

ness of themselves as a class and understood themselves to be the real backbone of society. Their ideology supported free trade, which is no surprise as they were beginning to rely heavily on the export of food to the rapidly developing British market. Economically speaking, indeed Denmark must be considered part of the British empire from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. What is more surprising is the fact that their ideology also contained strong libertarian elements because of their struggle with the existing urban and academic elites. The peasant movement won out basically because it succeeded in establishing an independent culture with educational institutions of its own. This again was possible because of the unique organisation of the agrarian industries based on the co-operative.

Basic agrarian production was still predominantly individual production on independent farms, albeit, somewhat larger than usual in a European context. However, the processing of these products into exportable commodities took place in local farm-industries run on a co-operative basis. As they put it themselves: "the vote was cast by heads instead of heads of cattle" (i.e. one man, one vote). This pun (in Danish "hoveder", heads and "høveder", cows) is less true when one starts investigating the realities of the co-operatives. Yet, the myth stuck and produced a sense of community which through various political traditions has become a hegemony that has lasted so long that it today has become an unspoken common mentality. Such a mentality is hard to define as it is precisely what makes it possible for members of a community to communicate by means of words, symbols, and actions. Humour and understatement thrive on a common understanding that precedes spoken words.

The libertarian values, though, were not originally meant to include the other segments of the population. The agrarian system was based on a brutal exploitation of the agricultural labourers by the farmers. These, together with the urban elites, were often not even considered part of 'the people' (folk) by the peasants. However, in an interesting and surprisingly original ideological manoeuvre, Social-Democracy adapted to the particular agrarian-industrial conditions in Denmark and developed a strategy very different from the Marxist orthodoxy of the German mother party. Danish Social-Democracy even accepted to the formation of a class of very small farmers called "husmænd". In this way they reflected the aspirations of their landless members among the agricultural

workers, but simultaneously undermined their chances later on of obtaining an absolute majority in parliament, as did their sister parties in Sweden and Norway.

This apparently suicidal strategy, including later compromises in housing policy, ruled out any possibility of a Social-Democratic monopoly of power, such as was to occur in Norway and Sweden (Esping-Andersen 1985). Yet, as far as we can judge today they did it knowingly and on purpose. During World War I it became clear to the Social-Democratic leadership that the party would never be able to achieve an absolute political majority. Under Thorvald Stauning's thirty-two years of charismatic leadership (1910-1942), the party restructured its line from a class-based to a more popular one. The popular line was first openly formulated in 1923, and was later expressed in such slogans as "the people's collaborating rule" and, somewhat less clumsily, "Denmark for the people". The platform resulted in a stable governing coalition, from 1929 to 1943, of the radical liberals ("Det Radikale Venstre") and the Social-Democratic Party. The Social-Democratic leaders apparently accepted the ultimate check on the influence of their own movement in the interests of society at large. Or maybe they did not distinguish between the two. Many things might have turned out differently if German Social-Democracy in the 1920's had tried to appeal to the people as a whole, and not just to the working class in the Marxist sense.

The eminent German socialist theoretician Karl Kautsky (1854-1938) never really understood the role of agriculture in modern societies. He saw it as something of the pre-capitalist past which would be better run according to the principles of mass-industrialisation. The Danish Social Democrats had a better understanding of agriculture, though they failed to turn this into coherent theory. At the level of doctrine the party stuck to the formulations of the 1913 program. These reflected international debates in the Second International rather than Danish realities and the practical policy of the party. The fact that the program of 1913 was not changed until 1961 testifies to the low priority given to theory in this the most pragmatic of all reformist Socialist parties. Danish Social-Democracy never was strong on theory, but the labour movement produced an impressive number of capable administrators and politicians, at least until recently.

This lack of explicit strategy enabled remnants of the libertarian peasant ideology to take root early on, in the party and in the labour movement. The Social-Democrats embarked upon a policy for the

people as such, and not just for the working class, as early as 1914 (Finnemann 1985). This testifies to the importance of the liberal-popular ideological hegemony dating from the last third of the 19th century. This also proves that the leadership realised from an early date that they would never attain power on their own. Farmers proper constituted only a fragment of the population, but small-scale production permeated the whole society then, just as it still does today. In the early seventies I argued this in a book; later and more comprehensive research seems to prove me right (Østergård 1974, Finnemann 1985, Lahme 1982, Grelle 1983). Somewhat ironically it has to be admitted that the Marxist who understood Denmark best was Lenin. In his 1907 discussion, *The Agrarian Program of the Social Democracy* he has a long section on the Danish co-operatives which he had studied on the spot (in the Royal Library in Copenhagen that is). He was quite favourable towards their strategy of self-reliance but refused to endorse it for Russia. Maybe this was one of his biggest mistakes.

That a strategy directed towards the majority of the people would turn out more successful seems pretty obvious from today's point of view. Yet, a sophisticated socialist party like the German Social-Democracy only embarked on the strategy as late as 1959 in Bad Godesberg; the British Labour Party and the French Socialist Party still do not seem to have made up their minds; and what will happen in Eastern Europe remains to be seen. The main reason why a libertarian ideology of solidarity ended up dominating a whole nation-state was its small size. This in turn was the result of 'historical accidents' that is there is no particular logic to the development. It is a unique case, and I want to argue that it should be given more attention by students of comparative, historical sociology. Barrington Moore argues in the introduction to his sweeping analysis of the main roads to political and economic modernity that the smaller countries such as Switzerland, Scandinavia, and the Low Countries should be left out of a systematic comparative treatment because of their small size and relative lack of importance. Barrington Moore poses question in this way:

How is it possible to generalise about the growth of Western democracy or of communism while excluding them? Does not the exclusion of the smaller, Western democratic states produce a certain anti-peasant bias throughout the whole book? To this objection there is, I think, an impersonal answer. This study concentrates on certain important stages in a prolonged social process which has worked

itself out in several countries. As part of this process new social arrangements have grown up by violence and in other ways which have made certain countries political leaders at different points in time during the first half of the twentieth century. The focus of interest is on innovation that has led to political power, not on the spread and reception of institutions that have been hammered out elsewhere, except where they have led to significant power in world politics. The fact that the smaller countries depend economically and politically on big and powerful ones means that the decisive causes of their politics lie outside their own boundaries. It also means that their political problems are not really comparable to those of larger countries. Therefore, a general statement about the historical preconditions of democracy or authoritarianism covering small countries as well as large would probably be so broad as to be abstractly platitudinous. (Barrington Moore 1966 pp. X-XI emphases added).

I accept the latter part of Barrington Moore's argument as much as I disagree with the first part. The small countries are dependent, all right, but precisely because of their relatively small size certain factors determining differences in political culture and nationality in nation-states come out in a more clear-cut way in smaller countries.

It has been hotly debated amongst Danish historians and sociologists whether peasant ideological hegemony resulted from a particular class structure dating back to the 1780's or even to the early 16th century, when the number of farms was frozen by law, or whether it was this ideology that created the particular class-structure of the Danish 19th century society. Put in such terms the debate is almost impossible to resolve, as both of the protagonist's positions contain part of the truth. My contribution to the debate is an investigation of the important but virtually untranslated and untranslatable philosopher, priest and poet Nikolaj Frederik Grundtvig who lived from 1783 to 1872.

Grundtvig was a contemporary of Kierkegaard but has attracted much less attention outside Denmark. In Denmark on the other hand his influence is much greater. He wrote more than 1500 songs, and his psalms take up almost half of the official psalm book today. More than any other single person he is responsible for those two most peculiar Danish institutions, the Folk High School and the church. The Lutheran church in Denmark is not a state church and does not have an official constitution; yet it comprises more than 90% of the population. Although very few actively attend service nowadays, and everybody hates paying taxes, more than 90% have decided not to leave this institution and keep paying an extra 1%

taxes although tax-evasions and tax-protests are the liveliest themes in current Danish political debate. This is surprising, as is the prevalence of a liberal free-market economic policy in a country with a huge public sector dominated by an ethos of libertarianism and solidarity, and where the Conservative party is more socialist than most socialist parties in Europe: such are examples of that particular national identity or mentality I intend to analyse now.

### What Is National Identity?

Nationalism and national character have always been very problematic concepts. They were almost run out of scholarly debate after World War One, which was widely perceived as a result of unrestrained chauvinism. Europe, on the other hand, was reorganised according to the principles of national self-determination; not all too successfully though, and World War Two, which really ended only in 1989, had to be fought to create a European and eventually, a World order of nation-states. True enough, the United Nations consists of states instead of nations. One only has to think of the number of aspiring nations without statehood to realise this. But, the fundamental political institution of today is the state aspiring to turn its subjects into loyal national citizens. So far very few have succeeded, but those who have set have the norm. Yet, serious research into national identity hardly exists (the mayor exceptions are Hayes 1928 and Kohn 1944).

In most European countries the old nationalist history was totally discredited by the chauvinism of Nazism and Fascism. The attempt by Americans to apply approaches from the behavioural sciences in the study of "national character" after World War II ranging from Gregory Bateson (1941) to Ruth Benedict (1946) and Margaret Mead (1961) was hailed throughout the fifties even by many historians (Potter 1954). Nevertheless, the multi-disciplinary approach came to a halt at the end of the fifties when, in the words of David Riesman:

the psychoanalysts returned to their patients and the anthropologists to their tribes (Riesman 1961 p. XXV).

Riesman himself had been one of the leading students of collective identity (1950). Yet he almost called the whole thing off in his inaugural lecture at Harvard in 1958. In this talk and a new introduction



to *The Lonely Crowd* (1961) he drew attention to the methodological deficiencies of the wartime attempts of Benedict, Mead, and Gorer:

When anthropology was poor, anthropologists were autocratic and aristocratic; by this I mean that, like the early psychoanalysts, they were ready to generalise on the basis of scanty evidence. They practised an art requiring imagination and confidence in themselves, ability to observe and record. Such brave adventurers as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Geoffrey Gorer were willing under the impact of the war to attempt holistic or configurational interpretations of the United States, Japan, or the Soviet Union (.....) The younger anthropologists seemed to steer clear of so controversial an area. (Riesman 1961, XXIV-XXV).

He happily endorsed this tendency and suggested that the study of national character be left to the historians because

the differences among men that will increasingly matter will not arise from geographical location and will hence be more within the reach of the individual (...) I can envisage a world in which we shall become more different from each other than ever before, and in which, as a result, national character will be an even more elusive concept than it is at present. (Riesman 1958, 603).

One of the most celebrated and ridiculed ideas of the "Research in Contemporary Cultures" was Geoffrey Gorer's "swaddling hypothesis" - his attempt to explain the "Russian character" on the basis of the Russian practice of swaddling babies in order to make them stop kicking and go to sleep. This habit, he suggested, made Russians grow up to be suspicious and despotic. Enemies soon nicknamed national character studies "diaperology" (Howard 1984, 277-78). But a few brave political scientists ventured into the field. They were led by Seymour Martin Lipset, who approached the subject from a solid historical platform. As a political scientist, Lipset opposed the historical and the comparative approach. Yet, the merits of his investigation of the revolutionary elements of the American political culture are due to the fact that he did not overemphasise the difference between the two:

The analyst of societies must choose between a primarily historical or a primarily comparative approach for a given piece of research. He must choose simply because each of these requires a different mode of generalisation. But, even if he chooses one approach, he cannot ignore the other. Without examining social relations in different

countries, it is impossible to know to what extent a given factor actually has the effect attributed to it in a single country. For example, if it is true that the German Ständestaat (rigid status system) has contributed to the authoritarian pattern of German politics, why is it that similar status systems in Sweden and Switzerland are associated with very different political patterns? (...) On the other hand the analyst obviously cannot ignore specific historical events in attempting to assess what is common to the evolution of different nations (...) In the end the choice between a primarily historical or a primarily comparative approach is a matter of relative emphasis. (Lipset 1963, 9-10).

A few years later a whole field of comparative studies was opened under the heading of "political culture" (Pye and Verba 1965). Unfortunately, these studies did not follow Lipset's sound advice regarding the historical specificity of their investigations. Interesting descriptions of different political behaviours and values in various countries were presented but very often they only amounted to sheer platitudes. This happened because, as is so often the case in comparative studies, they worked from an underlying assumption which they never explained either to their readers or to themselves. The basic idea was that a two-party system of the Anglo-Saxon type is the only viable form of democracy.

These endeavours came to an end in the late sixties under the combined onslaught of the student rebellion and the demand for quantitative, methodological refinements. Out went any talk of 'national identity', in came race, class, and gender. The sociolinguists dropped the notion of 'national language' as they were only able to define it as a dialect (sociolect) with an army and a navy. Each person had his or her own linguistic 'identity'. The onslaught of the numbers through the introduction of quantitative methods turned out even more devastating. Very few people seemed to be able to remember the original questions as they continued refining their tools in order to come up with more precise answers. Charles Tilly would not agree, I am sure, but he seems to me one of the few who has kept trying to apply the numbers game to the grand questions (Tilly 1975 for instance). The result is that we know more and more about less and less. Hence the popularity amongst historians of the French Annales School. Somehow they never got fascinated by numbers for their own sake. An influential segment of the group even returned to the grand old questions of nineteenth century historians under the label of "histoire des mentalités". Interestingly

enough they rarely, if ever, addressed the question of national identity. The reason could be that the school after all is French!

In the last decade or so the interest in nationalism and national entities came back in force. Old books are being reissued (Kedourie 1960/85), and many new ones have been produced. The most convincing position is probably the functionalist explanation championed by the Czech-British anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner (1983). He describes nationalism as the result of and precondition for an industrial society. Nationalism's, as he sees it, invent nations that did not previously exist. Traditional society was determined by structure, whereas modernity relies on culture. This is why the boundaries of a nation-state are determined by the monopoly of its university degrees. The only thing this approach does not explain is how these entities happened and why precisely these. This has given range to a different line of thinking, the so-called "primordialists" who concentrate on the "ethnies" preceding the modern nation-states (Smith 1986, Armstrong 1982). This approach is weak on defining "ethnos" in terms more scholarly than Aristotle and Plato. In chapter 7 of his *Politics* Aristotle writes:

The races that live in cold regions and those of Europe are full of courage and passion but somewhat lacking in skill and brain-power; so while remaining generally independent, they lack political cohesion and the ability to rule over others. On the other hand the Asiatic races have both brains and skill but are lacking in courage and will-power; so they have remained enslaved and subject. The Hellenic race, occupying a mid-position geographically, has a measure of both. Hence it continues to be free, to have the best political institutions, and to be capable of ruling all others, given a single constitution. (Aristotle *Politics* transl. Sinclair, 269)

This is probably the way most people think about the subject. Like Plato and Aristotle they have no qualms in discussing the subject in terms of primitive ethnography. But, scholars do, and therefore, we tend to favour other approaches to ethnicity. Benedict Anderson has tried to moderate between the two antagonistic positions of functionalism and primordialism through introducing the term "imagined communities" (1983). By this he means that:

the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson 1983, 15).

Where does this leave us today in the attempt to find a methodologically defensible approach to national identity? For we do keep talking as though the national stereotypes exist out in the 'real' world. Even the most refined scholar who would never dare enter such a word in his or her professional work lapses in or back to "primitive ethnography" when going abroad and attending learned conferences. Everybody knows "French" rhetoric, "American" aggressiveness, or "Scandinavian" moodiness, despite the many occasions one has been proved wrong. But, why not take these very stereotypes as a point of departure and see where they lead us?

### What is 'Danishness'?

In the year 1694 Robert Molesworth (1656-1725), former British ambassador to the king of Denmark, published *An Account of Denmark as It was in the Year 1692*. Molesworth hated everything Danish, their petty peasant slyness and short-sighted scheming. He apparently loathed every minute he had spent in the country. The conclusion runs as follows:

To conclude; I never knew any Country where the Minds of the People were more of one calibre and pitch than here; you shall meet with none of extraordinary Parts or Qualifications, or excellent in particular Studies and Trades; you see no Enthusiasts, Mad-men, Natural Fools, or fanciful Folks; but a certain equality of Understanding reigns among them: every one keeps the ordinary beaten road of Sence, which in this Country is neither the fairest nor the foulest, without deviating to the right or left: yet I will add this one Remark to their praise. That the Common People do generally write and read. (Molesworth 1694, 257).

The book is presented to the audience as a travel account but the actual intention was to warn the English aristocracy who had recently expelled James II about the dangers of absolutism. Denmark had become proclaimed an absolutist regime in 1660 after its disastrous military defeat by Sweden. One might say that it was the most absolutist regime of all Europe, since its absolutism was actually put into writing in 1665 ("The King's Law", *Lex Regia*). This had not happened in the France of Louis XIV, where absolutism was invented. Since Molesworth was aiming to warn his fellow countrymen about absolutism, one should perhaps treat his descriptions as

comparable to those of his friend and contemporary Jonathan Swift when describing Lilliput or Brobdingnag. Yet, his characterisations remind us of any number of subsequent descriptions of Danes. What varies are the valuations of the mediocrity and mundaneness of the society; some see it as the utmost boredom, others as an egalitarian heaven on earth.

There is a certain unpretentious, self-ironic note in Danish national discourse. It is hard for foreigners to detect because it is considered bad form to be a nationalist in Denmark, as in most other First World countries. Nevertheless, the intrinsic nationalism surfaces immediately when foreigners start criticising anything Danish. We love to criticise everything ourselves, but go on the defensive as soon as a foreigner finds a fault with anything Danish. Luckily we are seldom confronted with such criticism, as Denmark has had a surprisingly good press in the international community - that is when it is not mistaken for Sweden. This is mainly a reflection of the relative lack of importance attributed to this small country in world affairs. But, it has helped bring into existence a distinct attitude, which I have baptised "humble assertiveness" (Østergård 1988c). We know we are the best, therefore we don't have to brag about it. So do not be deceived by apparent Danish or Scandinavian humility. It often hides a feeling of superiority. Over the last ten or fifteen years this security has been challenged by the arrival of a fairly small number of immigrants, some 100.000 foreigners out of a net total population of 5 millions, i.e. little more than 2%. Many of these have been uncomfortable with the unspoken Danish way of life and have challenged it in ways never experienced before. That has produced a certain uneasiness. Perhaps the reason why there was no racism earlier on could be that there was nobody to discriminate against? An American friend of mine, a sociologist who has lived in Denmark for more than twenty years doing research on immigrants characterises Danish culture in this way:

Danish Academic culture, like agriculture, tends to be enclosed, fenced in and hedged. The gård (farm) likewise, is self-contained, and even the house is surrounded by protective trees and bushes. What is Danish in Denmark is so obvious to the foreigner here. Hygge (cosiness), Tryghed (security) and Trivsel (well-being) are the three Graces of Danish culture and socialisation. Faces look towards a common gård (yard), or a table with candles and bottles on it. Hygge always has its backs turned on the others. Hygge is for the members, not the strangers. If you want to know what is Danish about Denmark, ask first a Greenlander and then a guest worker (...)

An American asked me the difference between Denmark and America. I ventured an answer. In America there's one politics and fifteen ways to celebrate Christmas. In Denmark there are fifteen political parties and one way to celebrate Christmas (...)

»Denmark is a little country«. That's canon number one. A close second is »Danish is a difficult language«. How many times have I been chastised for my foreign accent? (Schwartz 1985, 124).

He tried to return to the United States last year but returned to Denmark within half a year! Something seems to happen to even the most stalwart protagonists of the plurality and unlimited possibilities of bigger countries. This blend of pettiness, libertarian values, prejudices, self-irony, and longing for warmer and bigger countries is well reflected in some of the national songs. A recent hit runs like this:

*There are other peoples than the Danes.  
They live in caves and fight each other all day long.  
This we Danes never ever have done.  
The hot countries are a pile of shit.*

The Lilliputian chauvinism inherent in Danish national discourse is evident in the lyrics of a contemporary pop singer, Sebastian:

*Denmark you are a dumb and delightful hussy,  
tempting to take you while you sleep.  
Denmark when you arise from your slumbers,  
you will be screwed up by German dollars.*

This last song deplores the future of little Denmark in the Big Common European Market. There is a long tradition for such lamentations. The first and most famous explicit mention of the state of 'Denmark' is the Latin poem *Planctus de Statu Regni* ("Denmark's Complaint") from 1329. The genre reached its full blossoming in the 19th century. The further from Denmark the songs are written, the more nationalistic they are. A good example, Sophus Claussen's *Abroad* (1880), runs like this;

*Abroad, in a foreign language  
Was I asked my name and position  
From whence I came, to where I was headed  
- Denmark we call our land.*

The opposite side of this longing for everything 'Danish' is the present attempts to market 'Danishness' as good value for the tourist's money. The former director of the Tourist Association of Copenhagen once put it like this:

Our greatest tourist attraction is nothing less than ourselves. The Danish friendliness, Danish cosiness (*hygge*), the entire Danish mood and atmosphere.

Small, democratic, egalitarian, boring, suicidal and welfare along with bicycles, blondes, sexual permissiveness, and drinking: these are the most common descriptions of Denmark. This, of course, does not amount to a scientific description of the Danish 'national character'. But, still it may reveal something which will help us in the investigation of the peculiarities of this small but long-established nation-state.

### **Danishness or folk culture? The legacy of Ludvig Holberg**

Nationalism was born with the French and the Industrial revolutions. From the early 19th century onwards many existing states entered upon a systematic propagation of 'national' values to promulgate a 'national' identity among their subjects. Until then, the legitimacy of states vis-a-vis their own populations as well as vis-a-vis other states lay in the willingness of the peasant populations to pay taxes to their noble or royal rulers. From a functionalist point of view the right to levy taxes and raise armies constituted authority in pre-modern times. This authority was in turn bolstered by religion and custom. Pre-modern states were loose agglomerations of regions, landscapes, and age old principalities. If it is possible to speak of 'national identity' in such states it takes the form of 'state patriotism' (Japsen 1979). This term covers such examples of pre-modern 'national identity' as those described by Simon Schama in the Netherlands of the 17th century (1987), Charles Wilson for Britain (1965), and Denis de Rougemont for Switzerland (1953).

An early, 'pre-modern national identity' has often been claimed to be expressed in the writings of Ludvig Holberg. Famous playwright, historian, philosopher, and enlightenment moralist, he was born in Bergen on the West coast of Norway in 1684 and died in Copenhagen in 1754 after a highly successful career as a writer and university professor. His comedies equal those of Molière (1622-73)

and Goldoni (1707-93), his history of Denmark-Norway measures up to the standards set by August Ludwig Schlözer (1735-1809) and Johann Christoph Gatterer (1727-99) of Göttingen, and his political philosophy rivalled that of Montesquieu. In 1753 he published a book in French intended as a refutation of Montesquieu's *De L'esprit des lois* (1748). In his writings one can detect a realistic and pragmatic undercurrent that resembles the values often attributed to a peasant culture. The German historian Bernd Henningsen sees Holberg as a typical embodiment of the non-authoritarian, democratic political culture of Scandinavia. According to Henningsen Holberg shows no sign of any historical, speculative interpretation of human or social reality. His historical consciousness is not characterised by speculative, metaphysical obsession but by a) observable fact and b) his motive of applying critique as a means of socialisation (Henningsen 1980, 104).

Holberg's thinking was centred on common sense and limited by experience. Using narratives, fables and the like, he forced people to recognise the truth. His philosophy was a philosophy of the concrete; he would always seek the truth in human experience, and never in a system. In 1729, Holberg published *Description of Norway and Denmark*, which concluded:

The Danes are nowadays considered to be a well-tempered and very civilised people (...) The Danish nation is compliant and dependable, and curiously obedient to authority. There is no country where revolt has less place than in Denmark, nor where theft, robbery, and murder are less frequent. (Holberg 1729, in *Værker* I, 76).

Holberg, like Molesworth, emphasised the fundamentally middle and mediating character of the Danish people. They are neither backward, nor extremely clever. The "middle way" is considered a basic virtue. His Epistle no. 72 entitled *On Surprising Changes in the Danish National Character* praises the Danes

as a people who do not drift easily into extremes but take the middle way in all things. (Holberg *Værker* XI, 79).

For him "virtue consists in mediocrity" (ibid. X, 30). The late nineteenth century philosopher Harald Høffding (1843-1931) suggested that Holberg's "mediocrity" should be translated as "harmony". If this is correct, one could understand Holberg's reflections less as a description of an existing situation and more as a prescription for a



future national community dominated by civic virtues. Politically Holberg argued in favour of the absolute power of the king. But he did this to forestall the undue influence of the aristocracy. His ultimate political goal was "an absolute monarchy guided by public opinion", an apparent contradiction in terms which was actually put into practice in the Danish-Norwegian monarchy for a short time in the 1780's and 1790's until the outbreak of the French revolution made all talk of enlightened reform obsolete. The term "absolutism guided by the public opinion" was invented by the Norwegian historian Seip (1958). In a recent essay I have investigated this political doctrine in a comparative context (Østergård 1990a).

But is it correct to interpret Holberg as an early representative of a separate and particular 'Danishness' as it is done by Bernd Henningsen? A Danish literary historian and Marxist, Svend Møller Kristensen, has questioned the rather widespread assumption that Holberg is 'Danish'. Scepticism and irony, keeping one's feet on the ground, shunning pathos, pomposity, and all sorts of affection and affected styles, may reflect a peasant or popular view of life rather than a particularly Danish or Norwegian point of view. According to Møller Kristensen, Holberg should be understood as part of:

a generalised reaction from below, partly defensive and partly an attack on the upper classes, their grandeur, pomposity, and splendour, their stiltedness and possible hypocrisy, known from hundreds of satires, comedies, parodies, and slapsticks, from jesters and storytellers, and popular anecdotes. This is the spirit which lives in Holberg. The critical spirit which ridicules the false skin, the empty shell, the imagined importance, and points to the real, the sensible, the natural instead (...) It is not simply the bourgeois spirit which Holberg expresses, but a bourgeois 'popular' spirit - ordinary, practical, and ironic. He incarnates simultaneously a 'broader' and a 'lower' mood. (Møller Kristensen 1970, 36-38).

There is a certain logic to the fact that it was Denmark-Norway and not neighbouring Sweden which was celebrated by Holberg, as Swedish society and spiritual life was characterised by an aristocratic grandeur due to more than hundred years as a leading European power. Elite culture in Denmark, on the other hand, appropriated many of the features of popular culture which had arisen from the limited size of the country and the king's absolute dominance over the feudal nobility from 1660 onwards. It was simply difficult for the feudal nobility and later the bourgeoisie to accumulate enough wealth to distinguish themselves from the other

classes. This is why the relations between elite culture and that of the common people follow a different pattern in Denmark than in most other European countries.

Peter Burke has established a model for the 'normal development' of relations between elite and popular cultures in Western Europe from 1500 to 1800 (Burke 1978). In the Middle Ages, popular and elite were two sides of the same cultural coin. Transcending the boundaries between the two was unthinkable, which is why they could exist in close physical proximity, literally at close quarters. It was unnecessary to practice the almost racist segregation which came to characterise the industrial cities of the Victorian era. The line between the two groups was only stepped over during carnivals and festivals, and this only served to underline the fundamental character of the division. During the next two centuries, the two groups grew more and more apart. By the late 18th century the elite culture (re)gained an interest in the life of peasants, but this took the form of a romantic Utopia about the good, unspoiled, and natural life of the rural natives. A typical example was the pastoral tableau's at the court of Marie-Antoinette, where ladies dressed up (or more correctly, down) as milk-maids, accompanied by some forlorn animals brought in as ornaments. Another expression of this renewed elite interest was the collecting of folk ballads and tales. All this culminated in the Romanticism of the early 19th century. The endeavour of the urban artists was to seek the presumably lost 'wholeness' of life out in the countryside and deep down in the populace. This search evolved into bourgeois dominance over popular culture, an urban cultural hegemony in most European countries.

This urban interest for the so-called 'folk' happened at a time of rapid change in the living conditions of most people throughout Europe. Hence, the attempted reconstruction of 'original' folk cultures was often an imaginary construction. One prominent, relatively well-researched example is that of 'folk costumes'. Rather than being centuries-old results of peasant traditions, 'folk-costumes' were influenced by the same fashions as the costumes of other strata of society. Peasant clothes changed like those of other groups. In Denmark, regionally specific costumes first appeared after the 1840's, when national romantic artists and intellectuals went out into the countryside and painted peasants - mainly women - as they 'ought' to be, namely unspoiled, centuries old creatures of nature. This later led to a demand for authenticity which has

spawned today's gamut of counterfeit, imitation, or down right kitsch antiquities (Lorenzen 1987). This is a part of what has now been termed the "Invention of Tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). However, it is also interesting to investigate where Denmark does not fit into this general European pattern. That was the case in the 19th century when modernity came to Denmark as agrarian capitalism combined with a popular ideology well suited to further the transformation from peasant agriculture to modern capitalist and industrial farming.

### **Agrarian capitalism and the Grundtvigian synthesis**

How do Grundtvig, capitalism, and class struggle relate to each other? In the thinking of some observers, not at all. In the song *Far whiter mountains shine splendidly forth*, or *Denmark's Consolation* to give it its official name, Grundtvig expressed his version of the 'Danish' virtues. The song was written in 1820 to commemorate the parting of a friend for the West Indies. It has not been adapted as national anthem but serves in many ways as the unofficial anthem. Its formulations are often taken as highlighting the real 'Danish' peaceful and egalitarian national identity, in contrast with the aggressiveness expressed in other national anthems such as the French *Marseillaise* (1792), the British *Rule Britannia* (1740), and the German *Deutschland über alles* (1841). This ignores the very bellicose official national anthem *King Christian* written in 1779. It runs like this:

*King Christian stood by towering mast,  
In smoke and spray.  
His sword was hammering so fast,  
Thro' Gothic helm and brain it past.  
Then sank each hostile stern and mast  
In smoke and spray.  
"Fly!" they cried, "fly, all that can!  
Who stands 'gainst Denmark's Christian.  
Who stands 'gainst Denmark's Christian in fray?"*  
(Balslev-Clausen 1988, 90).

The problem was that the Swedes actually did "stand 'gainst Denmark's Christian" (the naval battle at Kolberger Heide in 1644) and roundly defeated him and subsequent Danish kings in the wars

of the 17th century. The song has now fallen into relative oblivion, whereas another the audience sings the other national anthem from 1819, with the idyllic title *There is a lovely land* every time the national soccer team plays. Unfortunately, the melody is rather difficult. All this aside I would still argue that the most typically 'Danish' of these songs is the one composed by Grundtvig in 1820. It begins like this:

*Far whiter mountains shine splendidly forth  
Than the hills of our native islands,  
But, we Danish rejoice in the quiet North  
For our lowlands and rolling highlands.  
No peaks towered over our birth:  
It suits us best to remain on earth.*

The song ends on a note of flat-hill self-satisfaction,

*Even more of the ore, so white and so red [the colours of the flag]  
Others might have gotten mountains in exchange  
For the Dane, however, the daily bread is found  
no less in the hut of the poor man;  
when few have too much and fewer too little  
then truly we have become wealthy.  
(Grundtvig, *Langt højere Bjerge* 1820, my translation U.Ø.)*

This is the ultimate 'Danish' discourse of everybody being in the same boat. Yet, in the social reality of the 19th century it served as a class ideology for the struggling popular movements: first for the dissenters from the official church, then for the political organisations, and, last but not least, for the co-operative movement in agriculture and the independent educational institutions such as the folk high schools. That a class ideology come to dominate the outlook and discourse of the other classes is nothing new. What is surprising is the peasant nature of this ideological hegemony. It has to be explained from the nature of the economy of the core lands of the Danish monarchy left over after the debacles of the Schleswig wars in 1848-50 and 1864.

The agrarian reforms of the 1780's created a unique form of agrarian capitalism based on approximately 60,000 tenant farms. The size and number of the farms date back to the 16th century when the king, to protect his fiscal resources, succeeded in freezing

the existing farmsteads so as to save them from being swallowed by the manors. Denmark proper switched from an East-Elbian model of serfdom to something closer to the norm in Western Europe (Anderson 1974, Blum 1978 and Østergård 1982). The seigniorial class dominated the polity until 1660 and continued to dominate the administrative structure under the Absolutist regime. Its inroad into the economy, though, remained restricted to the estates proper. The lands directly cultivated by the manors, the demesnes, were the highest yielding, but they only accounted for 8 to 12% of the arable land. The tenants belonged to the estates in the sense that the aristocrats administered the tenant farms and were responsible for paying their taxes. Serfdom in the German sense, however, was never introduced north of Holstein. The crown did not allow the owners of the manors to incorporate farms into the manors as they had done in the Middle Ages. In the late 18th century most of the biggest aristocratic landowners realised their interests in getting disposable capital for investments through the selling of their unprofitable copy-hold lands. That is why the reformers of the 1780's succeeded in transforming most of the 60.000 larger tenants into entrepreneurial independent farmers in a surprisingly short time. (Tønneson 1979, Horstbøll and Østergård 1989).

More than 30,000 tenants bought their farms on easy terms in the 30 years following the reforms of 1784-88, and the rest followed in a gradual process during the rest of the 19th century. The same reforms broke up the old system of common cultivation within the villages. The peasants left the secluded and restrictive life of the village community to live or die on their own as entrepreneurial farmers. Now they were free to succeed, to introduce new methods in farming - but also to go bankrupt and commit suicide if they failed. The last remnants of the feudal system were not abolished until 1919, but in the period under review 90% of the farmers owned their farms. 60,000 of these were middle peasants ("gårdmænd") or peasant farmers, their holdings ranging in size from about 30 to 120 hectares accounted for 70% of the cultivated lands. In a population of a little more than 2 million, the 60,000 farmers managed to become the economic, political and cultural backbone of society, through protracted political struggles in the sixty years following the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 1848-49. But it took more than sixty years of political struggles before the principle that the government should be based on the majority in parliament, was recognised. Then, in 1901, Denmark had its first prime minister of

peasant origins, J.C. Christensen, a former teacher from the westernmost town of Jutland, Ringkøbing. The departing members of the ruling elite proclaimed that they would never return to seats "soiled by the manure of peasants". This turned out to be a sound prediction.

The economic basis of this unique political development was the co-operative organisation of industrial processing of agricultural products. In 1882 the first co-operative dairy was set up in the westernmost periphery of the country. By 1903 co-operative dairies processed more than 80% of the country's total milk production. This does not mean that all production took place in middle-sized farms or that all agricultural processing was co-operatively organised. 10-15% of the land was still cultivated by large estates, and for a long time they were the real innovators, in part helped by the capital created by the selling of their copy-hold lands. In the decades after 1882, however, the co-operatives gradually took the lead as the main technological innovators and providers of capital. This type of organisation later spread to the newly created smaller cottagers known as "husmænd", who mainly specialised in animal husbandry and dairy production, and who farmed the remaining 10-15% of the cultivated land.

In this way two economic spheres came into existence, a rural one and an urban one. They interacted in a complicated way, constituting what my colleague Vagn Wåhlin and I have labelled "the Danish road to agrarian capitalism" (Wåhlin and Østergård 1976, Wåhlin 1981). It is not a very precise notion, but it serves as a reminder that Danish society was thoroughly dominated by market exchange mechanisms long before the industrial revolution of the 1890's and 1950's and the emergence of an industrial working class. Most of the basic production in agriculture and the agricultural industries still took place in units with ten employees or less. But these units could co-operate on a fairly large scale, and for this reason they were able to compete on the world market. A fair number of employees would often belong to one family, and the employers themselves would normally participate in the work and life in the countryside as well in the small towns. This lent a certain flavour of security to life but also of patriarchal oppression. One should not ignore, however, that this type of society accorded an equal though separate role to married women as heads of their part of the household. Contrary to the situation in Iceland this important role was not reflected in separate surnames and independent

economic status. In social reality, however, the relations between the sexes was more equal than the juridical abstractions suggest, at least within the class of middle farmers.

### **Grundtvig and Grundtvigism**

Depressed by the defeat of Denmark by Great Britain in the war 1807-1814, the young priest Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) took it upon himself to re-establish what he took to be the original 'Nordic' or 'Danish mind'. He translated the Icelandic Sagas, the 12th century history of Saxo Grammaticus, the Anglo Saxon Beowulf poem and hundreds of other sources of what he considered the true but lost core of 'Danishness'. His sermons attracted large crowds of enthusiastic students. His address on The Light of the Holy Trinity, delivered in 1814 to a band of student volunteers willing to fight the English, inspired a whole generation of young followers, including the priest Jacob Christian Lindberg who was later to become the organiser of the first Grundtvigian movement. When he embarked upon a sharp polemic with his superiors in the church on matters of theology, he was banned from all public appearances. This drove him into an inner exile in the 1830's. In this exile though, he laid the foundations for a revival of the stagnant official religion. When the ban was lifted in 1839 he burst out in a massive production of sermons, psalms, and songs, a literary legacy which at least until few years ago was the core of the socialisation of most Danes. He created an all-embracing view of nature, language, and history. In 1848, after the outbreak of the war over Schleswig, he produced a refined definition of national identity which helped set the tone for a nationalism less chauvinistic than most in the 19th century. As is sometimes the case with prolific writers, his most precise theoretical expressions were to be found in the restricted form of the verse:

*People! what is a people? what does popular mean?  
Is it the nose or the mouth that gives it away?  
Is there a people hidden from the average eye in burial hills and behind  
bushes, in every body, big and boney?  
They belong to a people who think they do,  
those who can hear the Mother tongue,  
those who love the Fatherland  
The rest are separated from the people, expel themselves,*

*do not belong.*

(N.F.S. Grundtvig, *Folkelighed* 1848 my translation U.Ø.).

This definition, though produced in the heat of the battle with the German speaking rebels in the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, resembles most of all the definition of national identity produced by the French Orientalist Ernest Renan (1823-92). His definition was provoked by the 'scientific war' with Germany over Alsace-Lorraine after the French defeat in 1870. In a famous lecture at Sorbonne on March 11 1882 Ernest Renan defined nationhood as follows:

Une nation est donc une grande solidarité, constituée par le sentiment des sacrifices qu'on a faits et de ceux qu'on est disposée a faire encore. Elle suppose un passé; elle se resume pourtant dans le présent par un fait tangible: le consentement, le désir clairement exprimé de continuer la vie commune. L'existence d'une nation est (pardonnez moi cette metaphore) un plébiscite de tous les jours, comme l'existence de l'individu est une affirmation perpétuelle de vie. (Renan 1882, 904).

This has become the standard formulation of the anti-essentialist definition of national identity. It might be labelled voluntaristic-subjective as it stresses the importance of the expressed will of people. The rival definition in modern European thinking could be called the objective-culturalist definition. It dates from Herder and has permeated all thinking in the 19th and 20th centuries up until Fascism and Nazism (Østergård 1990b). It is surprising to find a Dane putting forward this democratic definition as early as 1848. No military defeat had preceded it as was the case in France. Until 1870 French thinkers had defined nationality in terms no less essentialist than any German would after that date. On top of that it must be remembered that Grundtvig wrote these lines in a highly explosive political situation after the secession of the two predominantly German-speaking provinces of Schleswig and Holstein. Admittedly Grundtvig left those who opted for the German language to their own choice as non-Danes, which in his opinion was a most deplorable fate. But he left them the choice and would never dream of interfering with it.

There is a lot more to say about the thinking of Grundtvig but it comes out badly in translation. The core of his thinking was the assumption that culture and identity are embedded in the unity of life and language. Although this kind of thinking invites the



labelling of chauvinism, Grundtvig himself, like his opposite number Herder, did not assume a hierarchy of nationalities. Cultural diversity yes, cultural dominance no. Whether these assumptions are really viable need not concern us here. Probably they are not, since completely incompatible cultures tend eventually to make war on each other. What does concern us, though, is the fact that his thinking caught on among a class of people in the small state left over from the wars of the middle of the century.

It began with the students immediately after 1814. The breakthrough only happened in 1838-40 when different religious and political movements decided to transform his thinking into practice. First, it influenced the revivalist religious movements; later, the more explicitly political movements; and eventually, his thinking would serve as the foundation for independent economic and educational institutions. Grundtvig himself did not seek such popular support. He delivered his message either in writing or orally, and then stood aloof when others decided what to make out of it. This is why some of today's guardians of the thoughts of Grundtvig speak of him as having been "taken prisoner by the Grundtvigian movement" when his message was transformed into an ideology by the name of "Grundtvigism". No doubt, there is some truth in this, as is always the case when an individual's thought is transformed into social practice, for example with Marx and Marxism. The only ones who do not suffer such fate are the likes of the existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who formulate their ideas without reference to their relevance for society. Grundtvig's thinking, however, did strike a chord with some out there, only he didn't care whether it did or not. He normally refused to meet people, and, if he did, he talked incessantly and never listened. Consequently, the reasons for the influence of his thinking are not to be found in his personal behaviour, but in the thought itself and its relevance for the surrounding society.

The revivalists came to Grundtvig of their own accord. This religious movement of the first half of the 19th century resembled many other Pietist movements throughout Europe. Because of the negative attitude of the official Lutheran state church, they chose to meet outside the churches, and were called "Forsamlings bevægelsen" (the meeting movement). They were attracted by Grundtvig's independent interpretation of the Lutheran heritage. Grundtvig, however, succeeded in giving an optimistic tone to the normally somewhat gloomy Pietism of German origins. In their struggles with the

officials of the absolutist state these revivalists learned an organisational lesson which they would soon put to political use. The leaders of the peasant movement of the 1840's were recruited from their ranks. Initially, working under the tutelage of the liberal intellectuals, the peasant party gradually broke away from the National Liberals, as they called themselves.

The liberal party initiated a debate over Schleswig with their fellow liberals in Kiel in 1842, hoping to attain popular backing in their bid for power. In 1847 they fused with the peasants in a party called "Bondevennerne" (Friends of the Peasants). After the death of the king and the subsequent peaceful revolution of 1848-49, the National Liberals came to power at the cost of a war with their opposite numbers in Kiel who had entered a similar alliance with some of 'their' peasants. In Schleswig-Holstein however, the liberals joined the all-German movement in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt, and abandoned their peasant power-base as fast as they could. The Danish National Liberals were completely dependent on the political support of the peasants (this is one of the reasons why Marx denounced the Danish "counterrevolutionaries" along with the Slavs of Austria). The peasants did most of the actual fighting in Schleswig as there was no general conscription before the constitution of 1849. The peasant Danish armies went to war singing the verses of Grundtvig and other national songs (one of these, called "When I left (for war that is U.Ø.) my girl wanted to come along" is still very popular). This was how the peasants learned to be Danish, an abstraction which until then had never meant much to them. In the 1850's the National Liberals and the peasant party gradually fell apart over domestic policies. A proof of the estrangement are the utterings by a former National Liberal Orla Lehmann (1810-70) at a mass meeting in Vejle March 29 1860. Disappointed by their apparent "lack of gratitude" and the deterioration of the political life he declared that the political power should belong to "the Intelligent, the Educated and the Rich".

Such experiences led the various political factions of the peasant party to establish independent institutions. These began with the church. With the transformation of the monarchy from an absolutist to a constitutional regime, the organisation of the church had to be changed accordingly. The result of these endeavours, though, differed in important ways from the otherwise comparable situation in the Lutheran monarchies of Sweden and Norway. A state church with a proper constitution never came into existence, though it had

been envisaged in the constitution of 1849. This was a result of the influence of Grundtvig and the revivalist movement: they wanted guarantees of religious freedom, so the church should be the creature of the state, or its agent of socialisation, as it had been under Absolutism.

Denmark has acquired a most peculiar mixture of freedom and state control in religious matters. There is a minister of religious affairs called Minister of the "People's Church" – a contradiction in terms that does not seem to bother Danes. He or she presides over church administration and the upkeep of church buildings. All this is financed by a separate tax. However, it is left to individual priests and their congregations to interpret the actual teachings of the church. Local councils, elected every four years, run these congregations. Nowadays the most influential groups are the fundamentalist Inner Mission and the Social Democrats! They often collaborate to control the free speech of the priests. These latter are normally academically trained at the universities and represent an intellectually refined Lutheran theology which does not appeal to ordinary believers. Yet most of the apparently non-religious Danish population belongs to this church in the sense that they pay the taxes even if hardly anybody attends service except for Christmas, christenings, burials, and weddings. Still, I think, the Lutheranism of the People's Church plays an enormous and insufficiently recognised role in defining the political culture.

In the 1870's the ideological battle was carried into the educational field. The National Liberals who now sided whole-heartedly with the conservative owners of the manors in a party called "Højre" (the Right) wanted a comprehensive school system under the supervision of the state. This, the majority of the farmer's party "Venstre" (the Left) resisted vehemently. They believed in the absolute freedom of education and attacked the "black" schools of learning where Latin was still taught. This they could do because the peasant movement from 1844 had established a network of "Folk High Schools" throughout the country. Over the years Grundtvig had produced a series of programs for a new and more democratic educational system. Like most of his other thoughts they did not constitute a coherent system. Rather, they can be seen as an appeal for a practical schooling in democracy. However, what these schools lack in coherent programs they make up for in flexibility. Today most of them are institutions of adult education, catering mainly for the drop outs from the cities, and senior citizens.

On top of this, the anti institutional thinking of Grundtvig permeated the Danish educational system so much that even today there is no enforced schooling, only enforced learning. How one is educated is a personal choice. Again, this might not sound terribly surprising for an American audience, but taken in the context of the highly centralised European states with a Lutheran heritage it is most surprising. What is more, these schools helped produce an alternative elite. Until very recently there were two or maybe three different ways of recruiting the political, cultural, and business elites. The university system was one, the workers movement another at least until the democratisation of the official educational system in the sixties. Both are well-known in other countries. The third line of recruitment through the folk high schools, however, is a peculiarly Danish phenomenon. Grundtvig and his followers accomplished what amounts to a real cultural revolution. He hated the formal teachings of the official school system and favoured free learning with an emphasis on story telling - "the living word" - and discussion among peers. This program gave rise to a system of free schools for the children, plus folk high schools and agrarian schools for the farmer sons and daughters in their late teens and early twenties.

A small but significant and highly articulate proportion of the population, was educated within this alternative system; and it has left its mark throughout educational practice in Denmark. Even in today's tightly controlled Danish society there is no compulsory schooling just compulsory learning. The present minister of education never had any formal education until he went to university. As a consequence of this freedom of choice in the school system, the state has for years supported an openly Marxist series of free schools even though the explicit intention of these schools was to bring down the existing political and social order. As long as the parents come up with 10% of the funding, the state is compelled by law to provide the rest. This system also applies to the Danish schools in present-day Schleswig-Holstein in the Bundesrepublik, and these schools have attracted a number of children from thoroughly German parents of the 68-generation who see them as an attractive alternative to the more authoritarian German schools. On the other hand, Danish children north of the border often attend German high schools in order to learn more and become more competitive.

It is difficult to estimate the importance of the Grundtvigian schools in precise quantitative terms, as their influence has been almost as great outside the schools as in them. There is no doubt, however, that the very fact of the existence of two competing elites has helped agrarian and libertarian values to make inroads into the mainstream of Danish political culture and has thus contributed heavily to defining 'Danishness'. The informal and anti systematic character of the teachings of Grundtvig was the reason why they always suited the peasant movement so well. They could provide inspiration without restricting innovation. It also helps explain why Grundtvig has never been a favourite of academics; his thinking does not amount to a coherent theoretical system. His enmity toward all systems let him even to deny that he himself was a "Grundtvigian" (much as Marx denied that he was a "Marxist"). "Grundtvigians" never used this term themselves. They talked of "Friends" and organised "meetings of Friends". This organisational informality too turned out to be a major advantage, at least in the beginning of the movement. Furthermore, it is the reason why the influence of this farmers' ideology was able to cross the boundaries of the class it originally served so well.

The teachings of Grundtvig were permeated by a fundamental optimism with regard to people's capacities. He demanded economic and ideological freedom and the right to education for everybody. This program corresponded precisely to the needs of the large class of highly self-conscious and class-conscious farmers, men and women alike. In Danish literature and history it has become a commonplace to interpret Grundtvigism narrowly as the religion of the well-to-do farmers. This identification of class and ideology dates back to the communist author Hans Kirk (1888-1962). He contrasted the farmer religion of Grundtvigism with the more traditionally revivalist Inner Mission ("Indre Mission") founded in 1853. This competing religious movement better suited the poorer farm hands and fishermen. While the Grundtvigian farmers could reap their rewards in this life, the lowly farm workers and fishermen would have to wait until the next. Kirk's interpretation originated in his own upbringing in north-western Jutland in area where wealthy farmers and fishermen lived geographically close but socially wide apart. He translated this interpretation into a very powerful novel in 1928, a novel which has helped form succeeding generations. In a later short story with autobiographical overtones, he expressed it as follows:

My father and mother belonged to two clans with different gods. This a child quickly understands. In the well-off region of Thy, a fatherly old peasant God ruled, while in Harboør Jesus ruled. He was severe and demanded prayer, repentance, and obedience. In rich Thy one enters heaven after one's death as long as one has otherwise done something good among people. In poor Harboør, it is terribly difficult to avoid Hell and Devil, and one must anoint oneself with the blood of the lamb (...) This I learned from the farmers when we visited (his father was a country doctor U.Ø.) (...) At home much good came without either God nor Jesus. We did not go to church. We did not have time for it. Neither were we afraid of the Devil, for he doesn't really exist. (Kirk 1953, 67-68).

In this very convincing description we are presented with three different social environments, each with a specific religion. A most satisfying materialist explanation which has dominated Danish social history ever since; a good example is the overview by Lindhardt (1953). It has even caught on the broad public, as the 1928 book has been made into a powerful film. The only problem with the explanation is that it is wrong. Research done at my home university has called into question the simplistic association between class position and religious belief (Thyssen 1960-75 and Wåhlin 1987). Examinations of membership lists of Grundtvigian parishes, for example, show that they included more than just well-off farmers. The general pattern turns out to be that entire parishes were either Grundtvigian, or Inner Mission, or nothing at all. The determining factor seems to be the choice made by the elite of the parish. In most parts of Denmark, in spite of openings toward other social classes, the well-off farmers were the core of both Inner Mission and the Free Grundtvigian churches. But they also dominated the great number of parishes that did not undergo any sort of revival whether Grundtvigian or Inner Mission. These "dead" parishes accounted for 50% of all votes at the first parish church council elections in 1909.

These results do not refute class-based explanations of religious beliefs, but they do force us to refine them. It turns out that Grundtvigism was not the only relevant ideological medium for the rising class of petty bourgeois entrepreneurs. What is important, however, is the function of both ideologies as a means of obtaining self-reliance. Both revivalist movements had their roots in, and helped to express, the needs of this class vis-a-vis government officials and influential businessmen. The difference lies in the

content of the religious doctrines, whereas their function was similar. Apparently it did not matter what was said; what was important was that it was independent of the authorities. Most countries witnessed the spread of revivalist movements such as Inner Mission during the transition to industrialised modernity. The United States is full of them. What is particular for the Danish Grundtvigism is its underlining of the unity of land, country, God, and people ('folk'). It turned out to be virtually impossible to export this particular synthesis. This is why Grundtvigism has played a negligible role among Danish immigrants to the Mid-West. Today it has almost vanished in those communities mainly in Iowa and South Dakota where it was transported in the 19th century, whereas Inner Mission is still thriving (Simonsen 1990). "Grundtvigism" is thus to be understood as a shorthand for all the revivalist ideologies of self-reliance thriving in Denmark at the time regardless of their precise teachings.

### **Danish exceptionalism?**

It is conceivable that traditional business corporations could have managed the transformation of Danish society just as successfully as did the co-operative enterprises. However, it is difficult to know, since there are no comparable examples of such a massive and relatively smooth restructuring of an entire agrarian society. That something peculiar happened in Denmark between 1864 and 1914 is demonstrated by the fact that Northern Schleswig, whose agrarian structure resembled that of the rest of Denmark, did not undergo a similar modernisation while it was part of the German Kaiserreich. This produced some despair among its inhabitants when it was reincorporated in 1920 - or "repatriated" as it is typically expressed in Danish books on the subject. This province lagged behind in agricultural productivity, and it caught up only recently with the rest of the country.

The only case I know of which is comparable to the Danish system of successful popular self-education and self-reliance among a farming population is the Canadian province of Saskatchewan in the period immediately after World War II. The young political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset did the research for his dissertation on the co-operative movement in this state. It had successfully staved off the economic crisis of the inter-war period and still dominated cultural and political life in the period when Lipset was there.

In the course of his fieldwork he encountered a society which ostensibly lived by Grundtvig's principles:

Saskatchewan is a unique and rewarding place for a social scientist to do research, for the province contains a larger proportion of lay social scientists than any other area I have visited. The farmers are interested in their society and its relations to the rest of the world. Winter after winter, when the wheat crop is in, thousands of meetings are held throughout the province by political parties, churches, farmers' educational associations, and co-operatives. There are informal gatherings, also, in which farmers discuss economic and political problems. Not hedged in by the necessity of punching a time clock daily, these farmers, who have come from every part of Europe and North America, have frequent sessions in which they consider the ideas of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, William Morris, Henry George, James Keir Hardie, William Jennings Bryan, Thorstein Veblen, and others.

Almost every English-speaking farmer subscribes to three or four farm weeklies, which are veritable storehouses of economic and political debate. In their correspondence columns the more literate and vociferous farmers argue the merits of religion, systems of government, the Soviet Union, socialism, socialised medicine, Social Credit, and schemes for marketing wheat. In travelling about the province I soon learned not to be surprised when a farmer whom I was interviewing would open a book by Morris, Henry George, Veblen, Major C.H. Douglas or some technical social scientist. (Lipset 1950, 11-12).

However, this Jeffersonian Arcadia did not last. As explained in the introduction to the second edition of the book, the co-operative movement, its political party, and its welfare-system lost out to the larger corporations and banks in the 1950's exactly as had happened in other grain producing North American states south of the border earlier in the century. And with the independent economy went the high level of consciousness. In Denmark, however, a climate of popular learning such as the one depicted by Lipset is still to be found. I encounter it every so often when lecturing in local meeting-houses or at the still thriving folk high schools. Denmark seems unique or at least it did until the early 1970's. Since then, the agriculture and the agricultural industries have been completely restructured and centralised, so I am probably addressing a vanishing phenomenon. It has, however, existed for so long that it has set its stamp on the national character regardless of class, trade, region, sex, and age. I am very well aware that such an argument for



Danish uniqueness or exceptionalism assumes an unprovable negative - that there are no other cases just like it. Historians traditionally mistrust arguments of that type. Who knows whether or not there may be other examples of the same kind out there? Of course I don't know for sure, and it is precisely to find out that I call attention to the Danish case.

### **Populism versus "folkelighed". Danish political culture and the transformation of peasant values**

Peasant values do not normally resemble farmers' values. This is one of the important results of many years of comparative peasant studies (Shanin 1971). In my analysis though, communitarian peasant traditions of solidarity were transmitted from pre-modern village society to the Social Democracy of the 20th century, not directly but through the intermediary of the "Grundtvigian synthesis". A number of qualifications have to be made to this statement though. The time when "Grundtvigism" served as a farmers' class ideology, the period from 1870 to 1901, witnessed the most intensive exploitation of landless agricultural workers in the history of Denmark. The farmers conceived the 'Folk' only as their own class and despised all others.

When representatives of the farmers took over the administration of local affairs in 1841 following a communal reform, the provisioning for the poor deteriorated drastically. And it stayed at a very low level until after the turn of the century when Social-Democracy and a newly created smallholders party "Det radikale Venstre" (the radical left) gradually succeeded in putting pressure on the liberals in the farmers' party, "Venstre". This is the origin of the Danish version of the welfare-state. The actual outcome of this development resembles that in other Scandinavian countries and Western Germany fairly closely. Its ideological roots, however, are very different. This may help explain the considerable differences between the Social Democracies and the different workings of the welfare-states in the Scandinavian countries as they are analysed by Gösta Esping-Andersen (1985). The Swedish welfare-state resulted from a long tradition of state control and authoritarian benevolence whereas the Danish system has a libertarian and anarchistic tinge. This explains why it often works pretty badly, as does the economy which is unable to regulate industrial development or to promote innovation in a systematic way. However, this is also the reason

why Danish society at times when left to itself at times has been able to leap quite unexpectedly into a new structuring. This happened in the 1870's, again in the 1950's, and may very well happen again in the 1990's.

What we have witnessed in 19th century Danish society is how the ideology of a class of very self-conscious capitalist farmers jealously guarding their newly won influence was taken up in the urban and agrarian working classes. We have also noticed how this same discourse undermined the class exclusiveness of these farmers, at times at least. One possible explanation is that the farmers had not broken completely with their peasant traditions; - but I doubt if this is so - another is that there was something libertarian in the discourse itself, something which was not restricted to its class origins, i.e. not purely functional. This can be demonstrated in the concept of "folkelighed".

As we have seen, the farmers originally monopolised the right to speak for the entire people, much to the annoyance of the rest. Farmers tended to see themselves as heads of their households, their villages, their parishes, and ultimately of the entire country. This kind of monopolisation is characteristic of all populist movements. It is well demonstrated in the United States in the 1880's and 1890's. In this period American populist farmers' movements in the Midwest and the South explicitly distanced themselves from the Eastern "plutocrats", i.e. unproductive owners of capital (primarily railroads) while they perceived themselves as the only real producers. These movements, however, had great difficulty deciding whether the poor black petty farmers of the South belonged to the real (American) "people". Southern farmers generally decided against including Blacks (Canovan 1981, 26-30). This ambiguity would have led to splits within the movement at a national level had the populists come to power in 1892 or 1896. In that case they would have had to confront the dilemma of all populists: who does and who does not belong to "the People"?

Very few populists have had to confront this dilemma because they have hardly ever achieved power in a national state. Few Latin American populists really tried, except Vargas and Peron. And those who have, have not fared well. The Nazi movement in Germany sets a frightening example. A "völkisch" definition of the 'real people' led to the Nürnberg laws and Holocaust. In Denmark, the populist farmers, represented by the Liberal Party ("Venstre"), came to dominate the parliament after 1870 and formed the

government in 1901. Yet this seemingly populist party did not exercise dictatorial powers though for a short time it attained an absolute majority in both chambers of the parliament. This I attribute mainly to their Grundtvigian ideology, even though some pragmatic reasons may also have played a role. Somehow the majority of the farmers were able to free themselves from the potentially authoritarian outlook of their populism and maintain a genuinely open mind toward the rights of others, admittedly not all the time, but surprisingly often. One obvious explanation for this is the small size of the country and the homogenous character of the population. The inherent libertarian qualities in the Grundtvigian discourse, though, also played a significant role as I see it. The secret is hidden in the concept "folkelighed".

The root of the word "folkelig" is "folk". It is normally translated into English as "populist" and into German as "völkisch". I would suggest "popular" if it has to be translated, but basically the term seems to be untranslatable as the connotations are so different in different languages. In English "popular" has a derogatory connotation of being approved of by the ignorant masses. The connotations of the word "folkelig" when used in a political context, however, suggest an informed, responsible, tolerant participation in the exercise of power. One notices the difference when reminded that the German "völkisch" is often rendered as "Nazi" in English and American textbooks. This of course is incorrect, but it is undeniable that the radical nationalistic "völkisch" movements in Germany did lead to Nazism whether directly or indirectly.

At a time when the overwhelming majority of intellectuals in a Europe of rising nation-states talked of "Nationalisation of the Masses" (Mosse 1976), Grundtvig developed an ideology centred on the concept of "folkelighed" denominating a common feeling in the population. According to him the feeling originates in a historically developed national community and is manifested in actions of solidarity. He is closer to Anthony Smith (1986) than to Ernest Gellner (1983) but does not fall into the culturalistic-objective trap. At the level of ideological discourse Grundtvig succeeded in transforming the traditional amorphous peasant feelings of community and solidarity into symbols and words with relevance for a modern industrialised imagined community. It remains yet to be seen whether the resulting mentality can survive the transplantation to entities larger than the Danish nation-state. Maybe it cannot. However, it was capable of influencing the majority of an industrial

working class and establishing a welfare state. By means of easily remembered lyrics and bon mots such as "Freedom for Loke as well as for Thor" (1832) Grundtvig influenced the mentality of a whole nation. Danes learned those concepts by heart at school and at home until the 1960's. Whether people live by them is of course another matter. Yet, at the level of discourse, i.e. in the political culture at least, they have had great impact, by determining what can be expressed and what not, what does not have to be expressed at all, and which values are considered worth pursuing.

This is what is meant by "peasant roots of Danish modernity". This 'peculiarity of the Danes' probably helps explain why the folk high schools have not really struck roots in other countries. A few have been set up in India, one has functioned in France for more than thirty years because of the enthusiasm of its leader Erica Simon. There still exist two or three in the Mid-West. The idea was introduced in Germany around the turn of the century but was rapidly co-opted by the official educational system. In Norway and Sweden, where they are to be found in fair numbers they have not produced an alternative elite or an alternative political vocabulary. Grundtvig and Grundtvigism have made a difference.

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