



## **Presentation of the Privileged**

Interview with Jørgen Callesen/Miss Fish,  
performer and activist  
by Vision – den om lighed

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*Is it possible to describe a specific Danish identity?*

The thing that I think is unique with Denmark is that it is a small nation with an agrarian culture, which has survived through history by its people banding together as one, with a very strong national identity. We have set our mark on the global scene, and Copenhagen has a reputation as a metropolis with a steady stream of visitors from all over the world passing through it – and at the same time we are so few. The constant stream on the one hand needs to be received, which is difficult when we have a tradition of scepticism and resistance to change. We are quite aware and well-educated, but it can be a little difficult to always act as one should when we are confronted with the very people we normally compare ourselves with.

The idea that we are among the world's elite permeates our national identity. We're similar to Holland, with a very conservative countryside where the base values of land ownership and hard work dominate. We don't really understand culture or the wild things that happen in Amsterdam or Copenhagen, which are cities that represent our external representation.

I believe that this can at least partially explain the current xenophobia being experienced in both countries. This strong sense of national identity can be seen as a shield against the perceived threats from the outside world that small states have a tendency toward. In other words, a small, homogenous population internally united in its fear of being overrun by foreign cultures, which would result in a loss of national identity. This idea of community is threatened by all that globalisation represents.

The larger empire building states have developed a different capacity for absorption because of their size and have interacted with foreign cultures in a

way that we never have. You could say that we've been sheltered from this, and the consequence has been a fear of foreigners.

We in the North are perceived as intellectuals, melancholics, people without passion. I believe that we've created this image as a defense mechanism, dictated by the fear of losing our status quo: no one here thinks they are better than anyone else. We're all equals. We are one.

*There is another aspect to the story of how the Danish people stick together, says Jørgen. It's the story of the welfare state. We have a well-functioning democracy. We don't have any colonies. There are no political prisoners here. No one is threatening us with war. We fought the Nazis. We support the Third World. The downside is that we are regarded as arrogant and isolationist because we allow ourselves to have a consensus as to how we do things here. If someone questions this, we go into the offensive, we say: "Everything is under control here, nothing to see." According to Jørgen, this is where we find the explanation for the recent Mohammed Drawings Crisis. The fact that we have a model society that scores very high on the democratic scale means that we have time to defend the freedom of speech. We feel that it is our right to say or believe anything we put our minds to. We just can't comprehend that outsiders can react the way they do. The real problem lies elsewhere. We have a head of state who walks hand in hand with the American president, a white, Christian fundamentalist. Whilst our allies are at war in Iraq, we published drawings in a newspaper that defame an established religion. This would be unheard of in England. But we stand firm on the matter and allow ourselves the right to do so, convinced that this is a right which we have fought for, and which is therefore our privilege. What we have is a situation that does not match our perception of ourselves as Danes.*

*This fear of exposing ones self and seeing what we in reality are is the reason why the Danish People's Party (which is actually just the Social Democrats without the cultural trappings) enjoy the support they receive from the Danish people. It becomes an assurance that it's everyone else that has the problem, and as for self-reflection, well that's for everyone else as well.*

*How can this be acceptable?*

The queen called it "being dumbsmart". We are convinced and we have a position, which allows us to scoff at anything and anyone. This double meaning

allows us to say what we want to under the cover of “good intentions”. The fact that what we say can be insulting or stigmatising, doesn’t concern us. Instead, we see the insulted as people with no sense of humour. Humour is a privilege reserved for those, who can distance themselves from a subject; a fact that I think the Danes are unaware of!

Our opinion is that we are where we should be in the global political scheme of things, and the way we react to foreigners bears signs of this. The Dane expects to be approached because he believes that he has what others should be striving for. But in order for this meeting to bear fruit, a space in which both parties have equal value must first be defined.

*Do you see a connection between this and the advances made by the Danish People’s Party (DF)?*

The political leash in Danish politics is not long. I think the rise of DF opens our eyes to how long we have allowed the Social Democrats (S) and Venstre (V) to promote a culture where materialism and ego hold the most sway: it’s all about what you can get, so do your duty and demand your rights! The Social Democrats have been unable to construct the bridges that must be in place in order to raise themselves beyond the level of DF’s politics, and the current political turmoil is a result of this. We have been unaware that minority groups have experienced the effect of this polity for years. Our welfare system was intended for us alone, which is why we see these extreme nationalistic and racist demands to foreigners that they should wash off their own culture in order to get accepted as deserving a slice of our welfare pie. The true measure of any society is always the way in which it treats its weakest groups. The elderly, the psychologically disturbed, minorities. We don’t rate very highly.

I experienced the self righteous nature of Danish society when I, in my youth, travelled to Paris, and later London. My family comes from the countryside in Southern Jutland, where from an early age I felt different and lonely and had to leave home so that I could experience other perspectives than those a little closed society could offer. In London, I experienced in meeting ethnic minorities a confrontation with what it means to represent the white, middle class and how segregated this status is in a rigidly classist society. In Denmark, we are witnessing an awakening to the consequences of a discriminating and outdated politics. It is only recently that we stepped on to the global, political stage and we’re just beginning to realise that we are not as perfect as we once thought. Our development as a nation has drifted to the right and we now resemble a

conservative, nationalist country with some of the most discriminating immigration rules in the world and an attitude towards our ethnic minorities that none of the countries we normally compare ourselves with would ever accept. The breaking point in Danish politics revolves around the survival of the welfare state. We will not recognise that we have created a class-ruled society. The power that the middle class represents binds us to taking responsibility for the weak groups in our society, and we can no longer assume that we are immune to criticism.

When international organisations criticise our laws, they damage our ego and provoke angst that our self-image may come from a lack of self-critique.

*Where do you see this self-critique?*

It's unfortunately not very strong and the few intellectuals, artists and others, who try to promote an open discourse are mostly overheard by the majority. Within the margins of the dominant culture, we're quite good at self-critique and we have a well-developed sense of irony and are known to be unabashed. Unfortunately, this is an exclusive club reserved for just one culture. Many minorities, lacking in any kind of official representation, organise themselves and attempt alternative methods of influencing debate and creating a space for their different lifestyles and development.

A large stumbling block for this development towards a real self-critique is, in my eyes, the role that Christianity plays in our national identity. Denmark is regarded as a secularised society, despite the fact that the church is a strong focal point, anchored deep within the state. This coupling of Christian fundamentalism and a democratic society is dangerous because it teaches us that Christianity and democracy are united, but Islam is not included in the equation. Democracy disguises Christianity and hides the influence it employs culturally. That is why a person with high societal status like Danish author Dan Turél became so provocative when he converted to Buddhism. One of the main principles of Buddhism is that everything is in motion, in a state of change, flowing, and in direct opposition to Christianity's static position as the absolute truth.

Resistance and revolt against these structures is something I see primarily in art. Art attempts to open discussion of difficult themes outside the political domain, thereby giving inspiration to reflection on problems that politicians are not dealing with sufficiently.

I believe that it is within these groups that new thinking takes form. One can say that loneliness and alienation from the dominant culture make these people accumulate resources, and through their constant opposition they find each other and are able to reject the values accepted by the majority. I see this in the arts, as well in the world of research that I work in every day – these are areas that produce a clear image of which societal structures are oppressive.

What I would like to see in Denmark is greater visibility of other cultural expressions, but we are about 10-15 years behind our neighbours in that regard.