



Denmark, a Boat in Placid Waters?

Interview with Prem Poddar, Associate Professor, Institute of Language, Literature and Culture, University of Aarhus, Denmark
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To understand the construction of a national Danish identity, we have to ask what determines the necessity of this construction. The canonizing of Danishness in the field of culture and a general quest for common values have dominated the public debate in Denmark/Europe during the last couple of years. Can it be understood in a postcolonial light, or is it provoked by recent events?

What do you see as the motive for this search, why is has it become so pressing to be able to pinpoint Danishness?

Anxiety and insecurity are at work here. Any attempt to fix the “-ness” of a nation essentially signifies desperation. The urge and the following intellectual and political investment to construct a self is nothing but a bordering device, a technology of exclusion. The threatening foreign elements can then be consigned to another space. That space is then either demonised or a demand is made to tame it such that it comes close to a degree of acceptability. Cultural and critical theory has detailed this to a point where it's impossible to make a counter-argument. The interesting question is: where do you stop once you have identified something that is considered foreign? Does one go on endlessly until a point where everything finally turns out to be foreign in some, if not all, measures?

Can you try to characterise the Dane for us, what do you see as particularly Danish?

No matter what attributes one comes up with as quintessentially Danish – *hygge* [a typical Danish concept of cosiness – ed.], *frikadeller* [Danish meatballs – ed.], *Jante's Law* [a social code between egalitarianism and oppressive group mentality thought to be particularly Scandinavian – ed.], take your pick – and then argue that they are exclusively, purely, uniquely of Danish provenance, you are going to get into difficulties. But to be a little provocative, allow me to say that

if there is a characteristic that stands out, it is the amazing ability that has been demonstrated to me time and again by all sections of this pretty country – the remarkable capacity in the easy denial of prejudice against outsiders. I suppose it's the comforting belief and trust in national culture.

*The European or Western identity rests in its opposition to the "other".
What is this present "other", and is this a construction you recognise from past times?*

There is no question about it that the "other" today in Europe is the figure of the Muslim. That you don't really have to be a believer in Islam to qualify, for this honour is clear from the routine racial profiling now conducted in the name of security and defense of our way of life. You just have to "look" Muslim – that brown skin and facial hair is far from a felicitous combination is driven home to me every time I try to get myself on a plane. Even getting on a bus in multicultural London these days can result in being officially reported as suspicious. I am not a Muslim or a believer of any kind and really worry about young Muslim males being nabbed for no reason and given the treatment. Anger, especially among Arab and South Asian communities, is at an all time high. It's easy to see why radicalisation can be so attractive in such a climate.

Of course there is a long history of how Muslims (or Orientals or Africans) have been represented. An aggressive and self-righteous Europe provoking resistance from Islam is nothing new. The language of regime change, the mission of civilising, economic exploitation and political skulduggery date back at least to the 18th century. What we must clearly recognise is that all this again marks an agenda for domination and imperial control.

Also the Danes have had foreign possessions/colonies, with the oppression and exploitation of the subjects to follow. Even now, the people of The Faroe Islands and Greenland have not achieved full independence. How does one justify this? How do the Danes tolerate this, do you think?

Well, the phrase that is commonly bandied around in Denmark is "benign colonialism". The idea that Danes ruled Greenland for the benefit and benevolence of the Inuit is the justification often provided. An extension of that logic in the liberal sphere is the question: what do we do now? Do we renounce our responsibilities and give up supporting the Greenlandic communities that can hardly return to their traditional hunting ways? Put that way, the dilemma is meant to project a heightened moral sensibility. As for "tolerance", it is high time the liberal myth is exploded.

Seen in the light of the massive protests against Denmark, during the “Cartoon War”, how do the present “obligations” and double standards meet with the image of a pacifist and democratic nation that condemns suppression and inequity?

This is a long question and goes to the very heart of issues that are nothing if not contentious. To assume that liberalism – the end-of-history-triumphalist ideology of our times – has all the answers to our problems is both naïve and dangerous. Simply put, free-speech fundamentalism cannot but be seen in the context of Islamophobia. To begin with *a priori* principles, as if they were universals good for all time and place and then make all people conform to them, bespeaks of a certain fundamentalist attitude. A proper consensus (or universalism, if you like) around principles is good, when it is inclusively produced and *not* assumed to be good because it is good for you and your kind. When the largest-selling daily paper here in Denmark published the cartoons as a protest against self-censorship and Islamic fundamentalism, was it not being as reactionary as the Islamists it was mocking? As Denmark struggles with its squinted immigration policy, one thing the cartoons have done is lifted the veil over the often disavowed interconnectedness between labour, capital and markets. The nation’s borders are to be secured against the hordes, whilst complete freedom of movement for all is to remain a non-issue (thereby flying in the face of liberalism’s cherished basic right) and national interests are protected abroad. If people here believe that they are right because they do the same to themselves, then they also believe that their way is the only way to go about. But couldn’t then these very folk in turn be called fundamentalists because the nation considers itself fundamentally homogenous and uniquely Danish? I recall a response to my lecture at the Royal Danish Library some years ago. The gentleman scholar described the country as a boat in choppy waters with refugees swirling and desperately swimming around it to get on board. He said, “We don’t have space here for them. We need to be who we are. We need to continue with our liberal values.” If that is the beguiling argument, then it is time Denmark signed itself out of international treaties, organisations, obligations, trade.

It may yet become a boat in placid waters, consistent and principled.