

Denmark: The little country that thought it was alone (first part)

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Why was it in Denmark that the affair of the caricatures of Mohammed started? Is there a “Moslem community” there? If so, who are its self-proclaimed representatives? What effect has this crisis had on relations between Danes and their “Moslems”? And on relations between “Moslems” and their own “representatives”? Two articles will attempt to answer these questions. The first deals with the relationship Denmark has set up with its immigrants - or rather with those of them who have been identified as “Moslems”.

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Up until the 1990s Denmark was no doubt the most likeable country in Europe. It had the charm of tradition – a kingdom that had been united since the 10th century – together with political modernity: a parliamentary democracy with rigorously separate powers, its freedoms jealously safeguarded by a constitution. A tradition admittedly sullied to some extent by a few typically European failings; but Denmark had succumbed to these less and for less long than other countries. True, it had possessed some minor tropical colonies and had taken part in the slave trade; but it was also the first country in Europe to ban slavery. The anti-Semitism which infected Christian Europe during the 19th century had not spared Denmark. But in 1943 the Danish Resistance (in which the Right Wing played an active part) organised the escape of practically all Danish Jews to Sweden – a neutral country – with the support of the mass of the population [1].

Since 1945 this little country had devoted itself to major humanitarian causes. Its idyllic image of had never faded. It had never wavered in its denunciation of apartheid in South Africa. Very early on it had granted unconditionally substantial economic aid (1% of GDP) to developing countries. Its military contingents were always to be found in peacekeeping operations. Denmark was a political and social miracle, haunting our democratic imagination. More than 85% of Danish voters took part in elections. Danish civil society was irrigated by an incredible number of voluntary associations. The Danish press stood up stoutly to competition from television. Last but not least, the Danish welfare state, financed by taxation which, though heavy, was accepted by all, ensured an exemplary degree of social solidarity.

Today, within only two decades, this political paradise has become one of the most racist countries in Europe [2]. There are three reasons why the history of this decline should be told. The first is that it brings out an often unnoticed feature of European immigration policies – the heedless way in which they have been cobbled together in a bricolage of uncoordinated measures, each intended to right the unexpected effects of former decisions which had initially seemed insignificant. Secondly, because racism is not, as is sometimes suggested, merely a bad answer to a good question (on how to integrate immigrants); in fact, far from being a mere reaction, racism often emerges before the

social problem arises. Lastly, history teaches us that racist ideology and policy can take root durably in a relatively short time; it does not necessarily have to be preceded by the centuries of build-up experienced in France in the cases of slavery and colonisation.

From «guest worker» to «immigrant problem»

Between 1969 and 1972 the Danish economy expanded briskly, drawing in some twenty thousand workers from Turkey, Pakistan and Morocco. They were warmly welcomed by the local population. "There were so few foreigners there", a Turkish woman recalls, "and so few people with dark hair, that the Danes found us fascinating. They would give us sweets, money, bicycles, clothes... They liked us so much that they'd clap their hands whenever they saw us. Those two first years were really magical." [4] As far as the Government was concerned, the migrants were *gæsarbejdere* («guest workers»), or *fremmedarbejdere* («foreign workers») [5], that is, by implication, temporary residents. Then in 1973 the oil crisis brought this experiment in economic immigration to an end. By this time most of the foreigners, who had entered Denmark legally and held residence papers, had decided to remain in Denmark and to bring their families to join them there. Their Danish hosts, however, were unaware of this intention and had taken no measures to integrate them.

It was then (in 1974) that the Party for Progress emerged on the Radical Right Wing. It did not attack the workers from the Third-World, however (this group formed only 0.4% of the population); it denounced the heavy taxes needed to finance the Danish Welfare State. A gifted agitator, the lawyer Mogens Glistrup, appeared on television, spectacularly proclaiming his refusal to pay tax and calling on his fellow-citizens to follow his example. The State, he claimed, cost far too much for what it was worth and stifled individual initiative. It should wither away. With the Cold War in full swing, he suggested that the Ministry of Defence be replaced by a tape recorder broadcasting in Russian a single message: "We surrender!" The political elite dismissed Glistrup as a clown. The Party for Progress, however, was an instant success, winning 28 seats out of 179, becoming the second-largest group in Parliament. Though the other parties blackballed it from governing coalitions [5], its herald, Mogens Glistrup was constantly re-elected for the next ten years, always on the strength of his call for tax resistance.

Between 1974 and 1983 the number of foreigners living in Denmark gradually increased. In addition to the families of the economic immigrants, political refugees flowed in from Latin America and Vietnam. In the eyes of the Danes, however, these refugees formed a separate category: on the one hand there were the poor from the Third World, and on the other democrats who had been persecuted [6]. Recognising that many «guest workers» had settled in Denmark, the civil service redefined them as "immigrants", *indvandrere*. In 1983 it went further, discovering an *indvandrerproblematikken* ("immigrant problem"). This term appeared in the report of a commission established to set up a programme of research on this "problem". At the time, the authorities did not doubt their ability to solve the problem. Xenophobia was still so inconceivable in Denmark that the very same year a Conservative government passed an extremely liberal Foreigners Act, with the full support of public opinion. Humanitarian feeling still formed the foundation of the national ethos. Only the Party for Progress saw shadows in the future, prophesying that the Act would simply encourage further immigration and that this would result in more «racial violence». For the time being, however, Mogens Glistrup, serving a sentence for tax fraud, had little political impact.

One type of racism absorbs another

Yet by the next year the situation had begun to deteriorate. As a result of the Act, the number of

refugees went up from 332 to 4,231 - still an absurdly small figure compared with an overall population of more than five million, but large enough to catch the eagle eye of Mogens Glistrup. In an interview published in *Jyllands-Posten* he protested that among the refugees there were Iranians (an unexpected consequence of the Khomeini revolution). The public was by now aware that in Denmark the normal application of law and operation of institutions could open citizenship to any refugee. A skillful agitator, Glistrup sensed potential in this:

"The Mohammedan is a Mohammedan. This fact determines the whole of his life and all his opinions. We in Denmark are Christians, and it is that that determines our lives and our opinions. How can Mohammedans be "integrated" into our community unless we ourselves cease to be integrated? It's impossible, by nature. A fantasy of this sort can no doubt be generated in the square heads of politicians and planners; but here in the real world people are either Mohammedans or Christians. And here in Denmark we are Christians."

Discourse of this sort, however, was far too essentialist to appeal to a population that took pride precisely in *not* being "racist". A Lutheran pastor, Soren Krarup, who had set up a "Committee against the Foreigners Act", came up with a more acceptable formulation. He shifted the focus to the sense of nationhood:

"For more than a thousand years, we in this country have built up a nation founded on a common religion, a common language, a common history and a common culture. One cannot brush away this national community with a flick of the wrist, merely to satisfy ideological or economic interests. Love of one's country is the noblest of human feelings. It alone can generate a sense of honesty and decency. The national community of a venerable Nation-State is the sanctuary of the family and of the people."

Of course, we can receive guests. And indeed we should open our doors to those that are in need, and even afford them permanent residence. But on one condition: that it be acknowledged that there is a difference between host and guest. If this much is not clearly stipulated, our native land will become a mere hotel. The family and the native community will be endangered. Conflicts of all sorts will arise: conflicts that cannot and will not be peacefully resolved. A home is not a hotel. There are differences between Danes and foreigners, and differences between Christians and Mohammedans. All of these differences must be recognised and respected."

Noteworthy in this discourse is the re-emergence of the idea of "foreign guest". Previously it applied only to immigrant workers. Soren Krarup extends it to all people coming from the Third World, including political refugees. It applies in particular to "Mohammedans". From now on they would be designated as «the» problem in Denmark, that plucky little country that was tightening its belt to take them in. The presence of "Mohammedans" in the inflow of refugees made it possible to incorporate old Right Wing themes - hostility to tax and to the grip of the State on the individual - into a new ideology that can only be described as Islamophobic.

In 1985 the consequences of the Foreigners Act gathered momentum: 8,698 refugees were granted political asylum; within the space of two years their number had been multiplied by 26. Mogens Glistrup had by now become a skinhead idol; he had adopted the rhetoric of biological racism and was broadcasting his diagnosis to the four the winds on the media. The "Mohammedans" in Denmark were «a drop of arsenic in a glass of pure water». The skinheads went into action, attacking a hotel in which Iranians were staying. Press and television were up in arms: political violence was totally foreign to Denmark, a country so peace-loving that even rape and murder statistics were negligible. The media, however, did not condemn the aggressors; instead, they turned on the victims - these foreigners who had forced «us», the most peace-loving people in the world, to abase ourselves to a violence we had always rejected. Public opinion was already taking up, in

euphemistic form, the arguments of the Party for Progress: “Mohammedans” were so fundamentally criminal that «they» had perverted «us».

As before, the Reverend Soren Krarup refused to abandon this terrain to the “racists” - Glistrup, skinheads, Neo-Nazis and their like. In 1987 he founded a patriotic organisation, Den Danske Forening (DDF: “The Danish Association”). DDF claimed to consist of former members of the Resistance (among them Jews) determined to oppose this «new Occupation» of the fatherland “submerged by a tidal wave of mass immigration from the Third World” [7]. “I myself am a child of the Occupation”, the Pastor told the press. “In the autumn of 1942, my parents went underground to take part in the resistance fighting the Germans. Like so many other children of the Occupation, the meaning of freedom and the independence of our country were indelibly impressed on my mind.”

Unlike the violent groups that preached an imported ideology - that of the Third Reich - the patriots of the DDF defended Danish “cultural identity”. At the heart of this identity lay a sense of democracy, from which flowed the constitutional principles which had given Denmark its moral grandeur, its freedoms of expression and of association [8]. This is why the Association intended confining its future action strictly to the field of discussion and persuasion, and rejected alliances with “anti-democratic elements”. This new trend in the politics of the Danish radical Right assumed that there were two contrasting sets of ideological values: those that are native, peace-loving and democratic, and those that are foreign, violent and totalitarian. By virtue of this assumption, only Neo-Nazi militants could unanimously be considered “racist” - the only racists in Denmark.

Within weeks DDF’s political proposals triumphed. Soren Krarup and the leading members of the Association were omnipresent on television and gave innumerable interviews to the press, airing their views on all social issues. They launched campaigns to influence public opinion, encouraging their members to write to bombard newspaper editors with letters [9]. Most of this ideological work consisted in translating into the relatively respectable terms of difference theory the abusive and pseudo-biological proclamations of the Party for Progress so as to have the euphemised doctrine confirmed by public opinion. Survey after survey, this laundered public opinion could now be seen as not in the least “racist”.

It should be recalled that until 1990 the proportion of immigrants from Moslem countries was so slight that the government services organising the reunion of immigrant families felt little need to stiffen conditions of admission. Parliament, which had to approve applications for naturalisation, still did so willingly. Significantly, however, the statistics office did come up with a new category: that of «immigrants and descendants» resident on Danish territory, irrespective of nationality [10]. Danes were beginning to sense that the “immigrant problem” had in fact not really been solved and that it persisted into the second generation, despite the fact that «descendants» now spoke Danish and had become Danish citizens. The «problem» must stem - as some academics were already suggesting - from the original religious culture of these “descendants”, Islam.

Racism in power

By the end of 1995 some of heavyweights in the Party for Progress, weary of Mogens Glistrup’s inability to devise a way of getting into coalition governments, seceded to set up the Danske Folkeparti (DF) the Danish People’s Party. The movement was led by one Pia Kjaersgaard, a straight-speaking geriatric nurse of modest origin. Peter Skarup, who since 1990 had been general secretary of the Party for Progress, followed her lead. Soren Krarup, founder of DDF, was soon to join them. Unanimously elected to the chair at the first congress of the new party (1996), Kjaersgaard announced a radical programme. The main measures promised were a return to mono-ethnic

society, thanks to a new Foreigners Act; re-negotiation of international treaties; stiffening of penal sanctions; vigorous measures in favour of the elderly; rejection of any further dilution of Danish sovereignty within the European Union and the traditional cuts in taxes and shrinking of the State. In the 1998 general elections DF won 13 Parliamentary seats and took 7.4% of the votes; in 1999 it won a seat in the European Parliament – a promising beginning, though no more than that.

The new party sought a display that would distinguish it from both the irresponsible radicalism of the Party for Progress and the perpetual compromises of the parties in the governing coalition. The coming general elections, due in November 2001, were expected to cause a political earthquake. The Social Democratic Party, split over fundamental issues, undermined by internal quarrels and eroded by long exercise of power, would probably be beaten. It would no doubt drag down in its fall the smaller formations on the Left. The parties on the Right (Conservatives and Liberals), however, would be unable to form a government, even counting their minor satellites. The time was ripe for the People's Party to win a new share of the electorate. If it succeeded in doing so, it would become an unavoidable partner in the new Government. The doors seemed at last to be opening.

In its opening moves in the election campaign, however, DF cut the wrong figure, appearing to be simply a clone of the Party for Progress, racist and unthinking. In February 2001, its Youth branch published an advertisement in a student paper. It took the form of two pictures. One was captioned: "Denmark Today": three pretty Scandinavian blondes, complete with trees, sunshine and blue sky. The other, "Denmark in Ten Years' Time", showed three bloodstained brutes brandishing a Koran. "Mass rape, violence, forced marriage, gang warfare. Is this really what you want?" Interviewed, party managers disclaimed the advertisement, attributing it to youthful tactlessness. Yet at the same time they found it odd that anyone should be shocked. Charges were laid against DF on the strength of an article in the Criminal Code that punishes racist statements and incitement in public places and before a large audience [11]. Pia Kjærsgaard was questioned by the police. In reaction, Peter Skarup protested in the newspapers. But as usual nothing came of it all. Even if action had been taken, DF would undoubtedly have won in the courts: as everyone knows, in Denmark freedom of expression takes precedence over all other principles. Racist, the People's Party? How could one even think such a thing? Shortly afterwards, however, a Council of Europe report denounced the "racism" of DF, cautioning against its growing influence in Danish politics. Peter Skarup demanded that the Prime Minister have the passage incriminating his party deleted from the report. "Our formation had been democratically elected and we have every right to express our opinions without being branded as racist."

In May, the Youth branch did it again. This time the picture showed three masked Moslems covered in blood: "Gang rape, savage violence, fear of insecurity," screamed the caption: "The promises of multi-ethnic society." Five student militants were charged. Skarup repeated that the Youth branch of his party had merely availed themselves of their right to free expression of opinion. It was then that Pia Kjærsgaard published her programme in the form of a book, *The Future of Denmark, Your Country, Your Choice*. Carefully avoiding any overstatement (by implication she conceded this privilege to young people), she enumerated the measures that would bring about a return to a mono-ethnic society. These included an immediate halt to all immigration; forced repatriation of most foreigners; those remaining in Denmark to be obliged to adopt "Danish customs" (no women's headscarves; only the Danish language to be used); and withdrawal of Danish citizenship from convicted delinquents.

Nobody will ever know whether the People's Party would have been able to keep up this rhetoric and contorted posture until the November elections. September 11, 2001 came just in time to make the tour de force unnecessary. After that, a few weeks were all that were needed to convince Danish opinion that the danger was "Islam". DF held its convention five days later, on September 16. On stage, the Youth leader led the "counter-attack": "Islam is not a religion in the traditional sense of

the term. It is a terrorist organisation. It seeks to dominate the world by means of violence.” Mogens Camre, member of the European Parliament, followed his lead: “All Western countries have been infiltrated by Moslems. Their good little Moslem boys are just waiting until there are enough of them to kill us off.” Party leaders let these speeches pass, but did not press matters further. Neither the police, nor the courts, nor even public opinion considered any of this to constitute “racism” [12].

This term now seemed to be applicable only to the Party for Progress. At the end of October, the latter arose reborn from its own ashes. Since its split, it had been thought that Glistrup was finished: he was “too racist”, a “political dinosaur”. Yet he managed to gather enough signatures to put up candidates, and he proposed a platform. In addition to the usual measures he advocated (abolition of income tax, dismissal of a million civil servants), he promised to deport all “Mohammedans”, whether Danish or not, irrespective of age - “otherwise in five years’ time we will have 820,000 of them here” [13]. Plagiarising national-socialist discourse, he maintained that he was campaigning to «free» his country from “Mohammedans”. His acolytes, some of whom went so far as to proclaim that they were “proud to be racists”, called for a solution of the “Moslem Question”. A delegate handed out illustrated leaflets showing rats reading the Koran: “What is the difference between a rat and a Moslem?” he asked the audience. The answer (“Rats don’t get social benefits!”) brought the house down. Despite proclamations of this sort, stemming directly from Nazi racism, neither the police nor the courts acted on the charges laid by a leftist MP whose parents were Pakistani. Public opinion, however, did admit that the Party for Progress was indeed “racist”.

Thanks to this, by October 2001 the Danish People’s Party was not considered racist. The Liberal Party, which was to lead the future coalition, had also been cleared, and now seemed even less racist than the People’s Party. Had it not declared that its platform was “Firm but fair”? Without saying so, it implicitly intended moving towards the ideal of a mono-ethnic Denmark, tightening the rules applying to refugees, to the regrouping of families and to immigrants’ access to social benefits. Despite the DF election poster - a Danish blonde, captioned: “By the time she retires, Denmark will have a Moslem majority” - the two right-wing parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, would have few qualms about allying themselves with the DF. A brilliant electoral victory was to come of this, followed by an immigration policy that Nicolas Sarkozy would hardly dream of, with massive support from public opinion and then, in 2005 an honourable re-election.

* The second part of this article: Jeanne Favret-Saada, [The Muhammad Drawings II : The leading astray of the Left](#)

Notes

1. This should not lead us to overlook the fact that, like France, Denmark did collaborate with the Third Reich in the so-called « policy of negotiation »; recent research has brought to light some shameful instances of Danish Jews being deported and exploited.
2. I would like to thank Karen Wren for communicating her article on the 1989-1995 period: « Cultural racism : something rotten in the State of Denmark ? », *Social and Cultural Geography*, vol. 2, n°2, 2001, pp. 141-162.
3. Wren questioned the interviewee in 1995. Cf. Wren, p. 146.
4. The Danish term *gæsarbejdere* is a transposition of the German *Gastarbeiter*.
5. In the Danish monocameral parliamentary system, the 179 seats are distributed between about ten parties of varying strengths, none of which holds a majority ; governments can be formed only by coalition.

6. Taken together, all these non-Danes formed only 1.9% of the 1980 population.
7. DDF also called for a struggle for «the right to independence of native peoples», of whom the Danes were supposedly the finest specimen. Cited by Wren, p. 154.
8. See the website www.dendanskeforening.dk
9. Recent research (1997) on Letters to Editors has revealed that the letters almost always came from the same core of DDF militants.
10. Any individual born outside Denmark either of foreign parents or of Danish parents born outside Denmark was considered to be an «immigrant». Any individual born in Denmark of parents who, even though they were Danish citizens, were not born in Denmark, was considered to be a «descendant».
11. This article, 166b, is indeed the only one that can apply to cases of this sort. Danish anti-racist associations have often protested - ineffectively - against the inadequacy of legal provisions in this respect.
12. The Youth branch leaders were in fact charged under section 166b, but were acquitted. Pia Kjærsgaard gave them constant support. Mogens Camre could not be charged, as the European Parliament refused to suspend his parliamentary immunity.
13. In actual fact at the time « immigrants and descendants » numbered only about 200,000.

P.S.

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