DENMARK: PROTEST AND PRAGMATISM

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In 1968, Denmark experienced the mixture of protest and pragmatism that is typical of Scandinavian political culture. The country witnessed student actions and demonstrations that were on a par with other confrontations on the European continent, but at the same time there was a collective will to find a pragmatic solution to the conflict. This applied to both the students’ demands for greater say and the young revolutionaries’ desires for an alternative culture and lifestyle.

Reforms of higher education

The most important events of the year 1968 were the actions taken by students at the University of Copenhagen to have some say in university affairs. For many years, psychology students in particular had gone through official channels to be allowed a share in the decision-making. Inspired by an activist milieu, which had come into being especially in anarchist circles in Copenhagen, a little group gathered students in grass-roots assemblies to organize sit-ins at their department.

This action reverberated through the rest of the student population, which began organizing rallies and other protests. The rector stepped in and set up negotiations, and it was not long before an agreement was reached: psychology students were given greater say in the daily running of their department, but not in research. This resolution soon extended to the rest of the university. Shortly afterwards, the Danish government started to draw up a law based on the compromise reached in Copenhagen.

Christiania, the social experiment

History shows how protest movements have been able to combine their demands with a broader agenda. Danish politicians had long hoped to modernize the universities, and the rector of Copenhagen University had wanted to introduce reforms. Before 1968, politicians had met with resistance from the professors, but now they were able to make use of the student revolt to push their program through and break the professors’ hold on power. In the 1960s, Danish authorities had launched a modernization program. They were resolved to break with old traditions to rationalize society, on the one hand, and to increase individual freedom as part of a cultural program, on the other.
In this spirit, countercultural projects often received direct financial and political support, or authorities sought to find compromises.

The clearest instance of such a compromise had to do with the “free city” of Christiania. In September 1971, several young people occupied a disused military barracks and declared it their home; it soon turned into an alternative “town within a town.” Politicians decided not to clear the site; instead, an agreement was made to supply it with electricity and water, and Christiania fell into the category of “social experiment.” Christiania stands as one of the very visible testimonies both to the countercultural scene of the 1960s as well as to Scandinavia’s famous tolerance. It remains, however, an enclave with a largely symbolic value that should not overshadow the general development in education and social norms in society as a whole. The “free city” can and should first and foremost be seen as an example of the constructive interplay between the counterculture and the political authorities that generally characterized the Danish 1968.

**Radicalization of the movement**

The groups representing protest against established society—the rebellious students, the left-wing intellectuals, and the countercultural forces—worked together with the authorities at first. However, around 1970 the movement became more radical. Student thinking took on a more Marxist character, and many of the former student rebels began to discuss creating a genuine revolutionary party. From the universities, a political movement emerged that was unmistakably revolutionary. However, as primarily students were involved, the movement remained very theoretical.

The radical movement’s aim was, first, to find the correct Marxist analysis of Danish society in order to formulate an objective revolutionary strategy afterwards. Hence, a large part of the activities consisted in studying Marxist classics: solidarity groups were much weaker than in neighboring Sweden and Norway. This was a left-wing parallel culture that appealed especially to the youth. The Danish student movement of the 1960s was small, shaped by just a few hard-working activists, but, in the 1970s, the movement gained enough support to return the old communist party, the DKP, and the new left-wing radical party, VS (Veststresocialister [Left Socialist]), to the Danish parliament [Folketing].

Nevertheless, around 1980, the former student rebels had grown disappointed that the revolution had failed to take place in Denmark or
anywhere else in the world. Capitalism had gone through a tough crisis, but the working classes had not risen up. At the same time, many were disillusioned by the Cambodian-Vietnamese War (1975–1979). From the 1980s, a new generation of activists came on the scene, swapping the dream of revolution for the slogan “No Future.”

When, in August 2007, Der Spiegel referred to Copenhagen as “cool, cultural and creative,” the weekly German news magazine mentioned two phenomena that had contributed to the economic growth and the creative scene in the city: Christiania and the Roskilde Festival, an annual rock music festival begun in the early 1970s. To a large extent, both of these are products of the 1960s Copenhagen cultural scene with its emphasis on social experiments and direct participation. Christiania is still obviously indebted to the 1960s cultural scene and the early squatter movements. This is visible in the aesthetic identity of the area, as well as in its government, which is based on anarchist-inspired structures with authority in the common assembly (Fællesmødet) of all inhabitants. In the present (2009) process of “normalization” initiated by a liberal government supported by extreme-right nationalists, the fate of Christiania is an open question. The Roskilde Festival, too, has retained a large participatory element. It engages local volunteers in the organization and remains a non-profit event even though it is in the top league of international music festivals.

The compromise between the state and the economy

The spectacular economic growth that has made Denmark a model for the early twenty-first century is connected to developments from around 1968. Many of the ideas from that time have been assimilated into society and have helped to develop the very capitalism the protests aimed to abolish. One obvious example is the reform of higher education. Overcoming the power of the professors meant that
younger researchers had greater independence, and education came to serve a variety of ends. Pro-reform politicians worked with student rebels to create educational courses that were more problem-oriented and independent.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the new experimental university RUC (Roskilde Universitets Center) in Roskilde outside Copenhagen. Students and politicians had different goals in founding the university, which generated conflict in the 1970s: students wanted the freedom to pursue Marxist studies, while the politicians wanted courses of study that catered to the labor market. In the end, though, the Marxist direction lost out and RUC became the darling of commerce. Like many of the reforms, this development carried forth the Scandinavian compromise between the state and the economy, with the state providing the structural framework for economic growth so that it could then finance a generous public welfare system.

**Breaking down hierarchies**

All of Danish society has experienced the breaking down of hierarchies and traditions since 1968. For example, the formal pronoun of address (De) has largely been abolished, replaced by the informal form (Du). Similarly, titles have fallen out of use: Hr. Direktør Jensen has become Hr. Jensen. The importance accorded to equality of the sexes is another very obvious example. Denmark was quick to say farewell to the traditional nuclear family as a foundation stone of society. Women were to be able to work, and the state was willing to provide the services, particularly child care, to make that possible. Both these views had a direct impact on the economic system.

The breakdown of hierarchies led to the typically Danish “flat enterprise,” that is, a democratically organized business with close daily communication between management and workers. Women’s entry into the labor market was the answer to the labor shortage and generated the potential for long-term economic growth. In summary, one may say that the revolutionaries lost. The reform of culture and society may have been radical, but it took place on the system’s terms.

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