DIIS Brief

Multiculturalism in Denmark and Sweden

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Danish controversies over multiculturalism and integration can be enlightened by a fresh look at the ostensibly polarised differences on these questions between Denmark and its closest neighbour Sweden. Danish integration policies appear to be assimilationist in effect, if not in intent, while Sweden has openly pursued an official multiculturalism towards its ethnic minorities for over thirty years. Differences rooted in history and political tradition are real, but there appears to be some evidence of convergence today. Multiculturalism in Sweden looks increasingly unviable as a compromise, and vulnerable to the current political atmosphere, while in Denmark local policy implementation and pragmatic international adaptation to 'diversity management' belie the hostile tone of national politics. Both countries are wrestling with the adaptation of long standing traditions and institutional forms – particularly those of the welfare state – in a difficult international environment. The convulsions over multiculturalism are typical of the adaptive politics and symbolic difficulties of small states in the face of wider global transformations.

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AS THE infamous cartoon case has demonstrated, Denmark and multiculturalism are strange bedfellows. Indeed, in a very real sense "Danish multiculturalism" is an oxymoron. Over the last decade, leading Danish politicians, from all agenda-setting parties, not just the present government, have repeatedly stressed that Denmark is not and does not intend to be a multicultural society; positive discrimination is never contemplated as a solution to integration problems; descriptive representation of ethnic minorities in political life is rejected; mother-tongue instruction is actively discouraged; and cultural diversity more broadly is officially frowned on as an alien, "un-Danish" notion. Thus, for quite some time multiculturalism has been portrayed as out of sync with the successful political culture of this small, homogeneous nation state, both by political actors and public intellectuals (Hedetoft, 2003 & 2006a).

All this is obviously not a reflection of a nation state which has successfully stemmed ethnic diversity, kept globalization at bay, and halted migration at the Danish borders. Rather it articulates the principled view that an increasingly (though reluctantly) multi-*ethnic* society does not have to become politically multi*cultural*, but can insist on (and impose on immigrants and descendants) its cultural and historical identity in the face of global challenges. In that sense, Danish integration policies are necessarily assimilationist, though the word itself is usually eschewed. And though they can appear both contradictory and irrational, they do have their own historical logic. This is a logic, however, that is currently under siege and is leading not just to more stridently cultural nationalism, shriller islamophobia and increasingly nostalgic notions of Denmark for the Danes, but also to an ongoing, but somewhat covert, re-articulation of integration policies and discourses in order to take account of diversity and cope with unprecedented consequences of globalization. In this sense, Denmark is a country characterized by closet, street-level diversity policies, though the closet is only opened temporarily, and multicultural initiatives are only introduced covertly and as temporary makeshift measures by officials operating at lower levels of municipal integration, or in private businesses, where diversity management enjoys increased popularity.

Against this background, this brief will cast Denmark in the interesting comparative light of Denmark's Scandinavian sibling Sweden where, unlike Denmark, multiculturalism has been

official integration policy for over 30 years. The point is both to demonstrate that in spite of similar historical paths toward modernity and similar political and social structures, small welfare-states based on culturally homogeneous histories do not *necessarily* spawn assimilationist integration policies. But it is also to expose the current normative problems of multiculturalism in Sweden (as well as a host of other countries) in the context of the problems ethnic assimilationism is encountering in Denmark. The conclusion is that we are seeing new configurations emerge between diversity and monoculturalism in both countries, and that it is reasonable to interpret these developments as a reflection of increasing convergence between two formerly very different models for handling diversity.

Homogeneity vs multiculturalism: a Danish/Swedish comparison[1]

In a global age, it is particularly appropriate to emphasize that nation states are different, not only with regard to size, economic strength, natural resources and geo-political position, but also concerning history, form of state and government, institutions, demographics, and national identity. Nation states have grown into modernity in different ways and have developed diverse political, administrative, and institutional cultures in the course of history. In addition, the constitution of national consciousness and auto-perceptions has taken place against the background of different images of alterity and through nationally specific interactions between political and social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

For the same reason, the ways nation states talk about, legislate for, and cope with ethnic and historical minorities differ from one another in significant ways, in spite of the indubitable fact that in all these cases we are dealing with the same universal object, *the* nation state, and that in many ways it makes sense to deal with its forms of manifestation analogously, as a reflection and outgrowth of the same form of political and ideological organization. Nevertheless, national migration and integration regimes (Favell 2001; Spencer 2003) – specific, institutionalized configurations of closure and openness, cynicism and idealism, political and economic interests – vary on important dimensions. These variations, in turn, are intimately linked with differences of frames for national identity perception and different models for active citizenship.

These reflections also apply to nation states which normally appear to be very similar, because they structurally represent the same type of social formation, comparable interactions between state and citizens, and analogous political and cultural histories. An obvious example is Sweden and Denmark – both of them Scandinavian welfare states, both homogeneous "people's homes" ("*folkshem*", as a Swedish term has it) with well-developed democratic structures, both old monarchies, both small states with a pronounced sense of social equality and just distribution, and both nurturing a perception of the other party as Scandinavian kith and kin, with whom one feels culturally and socially connected.

In spite of these similarities, the migration and integration regimes of the two countries are in many ways divergent, their interpretation of integration and ethnicity is different, and their public debates about these subjects and about the way they are dealt with in the other country are frequently at loggerheads. Danish homogeneity faces Swedish multiculturalism; a closed, exclusionary regime encounters one that is open and inclusive; assimilation contrasts with official recognition of difference; ideas that frame "them" as the problem confront ideas framing the national society as a barrier to integration; welfare is variously projected as hindrance to or a path toward integration; "they" are seen as victims of or responsible for their own destiny; institutional rigidity faces flexible adaptation of institutions to new groups; and demands for single, exclusive citizenship stand in opposition to possibilities for multiple citizenship. In this light, the two countries are worlds apart; Danish discourses of national self-sufficiency seem to collide with a Swedish regime carried by international moralism and accountability, which in Denmark is pejoratively cast as "political correctness" preventing a free debate and open acknowledgement of what and how huge the "real problems" are.

If nothing else, these are the prevalent ideal types, substantiated by seemingly ever more divergent developments and mutual stereotypes over the past 5 or 10 years. They reflect an incontestable fact regarding public discourses and government policies in the integration domain. They are less expressive of the practical implementation of policies at the regional and local levels; and they match even less specific, measurable effects of integration in decisive societal areas like the settlement patterns of ethnic minorities (where "ghettoization" is still widespread in both countries), gender-specific labour-market

integration, participation in social networks and civic institutions, or political representation – although on most of these counts, Sweden does have a slight edge.

That said, debates in both countries have changed somewhat recently and now less readily live up to stereotypical perceptions. In Sweden, immigrants now more frequently become framed as a source of social problems, no doubt under the influence of the Danish politicization of immigrants and integration; whereas in Denmark, critical parts of the Danish debate have been inspired by perceptions of Swedish tolerance and diversity practices. And while it is no doubt true that there are "no votes in xenophobia in Sweden", as Fredrik Reinfeldt, the new Swedish prime minister (representing *Moderaterna* – the Conservatives), has put it,[2] public debates on these issues have become more polarized, and objections that used to be taboo can now be articulated. Another significant indicator is that although 2006 has been proclaimed the official "Year of Multiculturalism" ("*mångkulturår*") in Sweden, government reports – like *The Blue and Yellow Glass House* ("*Det blågula glashuset*")[3] – are less concerned with depicting and managing a multicultural polity than with combating "structural discrimination". This is a change which (together with the existence of the Swedish Ombudsman for ethnic discrimination) in subtle ways refers to a much less rosy reality than what has so far been painted with traditional brushstrokes. It is also a reality which uncannily resembles Denmark. Conversely, well hidden behind a wall of assimilationism in Denmark and somewhat perversely spurred on by the negative experience of the Cartoon affair, we find a dawning realization that global challenges require more "diversity management" in corporate Denmark, more openness toward and recognition of ethnic minorities, and a more flexible migration regime. These changes can now be defined pragmatically as being in the undisputed economic and demographic interest of a small nation in search of continued economic growth and successful adaptation to globalization.[4] Even the Danish People's Party has recently revealed small chinks in the armour of national romanticism and welfare chauvinism on these counts.

Sweden has evolved from the paternalistic multiculturalism of the welfare state, through anti-discriminatory strategies, into an incipient acrimonious debate, where exclusionary strategies and integration demands firmly embedded in the values of the host country can now also be articulated, but are still in opposition to the dominant consensus. Denmark has

moved from conditional tolerance in the 70s and 80s, through demands on newcomers for acculturation and financial self-sustenance, into a polarized debate, where exclusionary strategies and demands for integration on the conditions of the host country assume ever greater domination. But there is now also a growing interest in the negative effects of institutional discrimination, a greater openness toward a proactive immigration policy, and an incipient moral rejection of the marginalizing consequences of monocultural power.

Common to both nation states is, apart from comparable political systems, the external context: the global challenge, and the image of the Islamic risk factor. However, there are limits to the extent and depth of the convergence between the immigration and integration regimes of the two countries. First, the discursive relations of power are differently configured. Multiculturalism is still official politics in Sweden and should be compared to the official Danish model of ethnic homogeneity. The implication is that the direct Danish correlation between political rhetoric and practical policies ("consistency" is here the official codename) does not exist in Sweden, where the gap between the two is still both apparent and tangible.

Secondly, the two welfare models (once generally referred to as "the Nordic model") are constructed on the basis of two different pathways toward consensus and social success. The Swedish one is corporatist, basing itself on centralized institutions, political co-optation, and top-down security for social and cultural interest groups. The Danish is based on decentralized networks, acceptance of freely-concluded labour-market contracts, and an elastic and malleable flexicurity model. In cultural terms, the Swedish model is geared to attempts to engender consensus, whereas cultural and identitarian monoculturalism is the implicit precondition for the functionality of the Danish.

Thirdly, both in Denmark and Sweden it is also true that *institutions matter* and tend to create their own path dependencies – handed-down patterns of thought, assessment, and social practices – even in the management of ethnic and immigrant issues. It is no coincidence, for instance, and not without social consequences, that Sweden has fostered the idea to create an ombudsman to deal with cases of ethnic discrimination, while Denmark has not (the idea has been rejected on several occasions); that Denmark has a law

for the creation of government-sponsored civic (including ethnic and religious) associations; or that the Swedish Foreign Minister, Laila Freivalds, in March 2006, was compelled to withdraw from her position due to ambiguous handling of a ramification of the Cartoon affair in Sweden, while her Danish opposite number has stayed put and can rely on even stronger popular backing after the affair.

In sum, while it may be true that there is a greater degree of convergence between the two countries now, it is probably more precise to say that specific relations between divergence and convergence have undergone a number of significant changes, where some are related to an increasingly globalized migration context, others to internal changes in social structures and national heterotypes, and yet others to shifts in political accent, climates of debate, and discursive environments. The Freivalds case just mentioned is emblematic. Although her *faux pas* was due to a multiculturalist knee-jerk reaction to stop the dissemination of the Mohammed cartoons in Sweden and thus prevent the tainting of Sweden's international image, the reason this act – which might well have gone unnoticed or even been publicly supported in the past – now ended in public disgrace was the very same principle that allegedly created the uproar in Denmark in the first place: the right of free speech, specifically to publicly disdain ethnic minorities, particularly Muslims (Hedetoft, 2006b).

Small states in a global age

The Danish model of integration mixes ethnic and civic-republican virtues (as well as attendant demands on the "new Danes") on the assumption that the integration process can only accept difference and deviation from the traditionally practised notion of equality to a limited extent and on for pragmatic-instrumental reasons. This makes the model strongly path-dependent, meaning that the ideal of homogeneity is still adhered to – despite a new and unprecedented globalization context – because it has previously proven its worth as a successful template for international adaptation, and because Danish decision-makers apparently have great difficulties in departing from well-tried and established practices. Therefore it is still an open question whether the process of increasing politicization of the ethnic field in Denmark should be regarded a "luxury problem" for a well-functioning

welfare state, which is left with basically just this one really hard crunch to resolve; or, which is more likely, if we are witnessing a more thoroughgoing and universal challenge to small states in a global age (Katzenstein, 1985), whose survival and prosperity vitally depend on the degree to which previous strategies will prove adaptable or dysfunctional. One way or the other, and regardless of the fact that in many ways the Danish case is probably unique, developments more generally, in the rest of the west and especially Europe, indicate that it is reasonable to regard Denmark as representative of comparable processes in other small and medium-size nation states (Campbell et al, 2006).

The Swedish dimension can be viewed as representative of the inverse problem: i.e., the current crisis of multiculturalism (socially, politically, and normatively) at the intersection between the transformative process of national identity and transnational forms of belonging. Forms of identity and belonging find themselves in a process of transmutation, because societies are becoming more multi-ethnic, whilst multiculturalism is increasingly experienced and debated as an impossible, unrealistic, even conservative model of resolution – and now in Sweden too. "The nation", in politically communitarian forms, is striking back by tightening the net of demands around immigrants and descendants, often in populist forms, and making access to national spaces more and more difficult, even dangerous. Concurrently the values carrying and legitimizing these stringent policies become more clearly universalized. It becomes ever harder to tell apart the specific national features of states, which nevertheless project themselves as highly particularistic. This is happening simultaneously as national sovereignty and the differences between welfare regimes are severely challenged by global pressures. Further, in the transnational spaces a decoupling of nation and state is taking place. National forms of consciousness, communication, and belonging are "stretched out", while the state itself tends to remain as the form in which civic-political belonging is organized. Finally, these new – regressive, conservationist, or expanding – forms of nationalism are complemented by other ideologies, which are properly cosmopolitan, the preserve mainly of global elites.

The entire field is thus in a process of thoroughgoing reformulation, partly due to globalization, partly to other political or economic transformations. Tendencies toward a re-nationalization of forms of belonging are no doubt real, but framing conditions are different

from the heyday of nationalism. The intimate linkage between nation and state can no longer be taken for granted. In this way demands based on national cultural legacies and myths are radicalized at the same time as border-transgressing tendencies are becoming more pronounced. This double process – symbolically articulated through the tension between single citizenship (Denmark) and dual citizenship (Sweden) – is threatening to relegate homogeneous nationalism to the status of a modern anachronism, at a time when there is as yet no satisfactory and exhaustive alternative to the identity of the nation state in sight (religiosity is the one possible exception). In this respect, multiculturalism as we know it will not do – it is too politically contradictory, too culturally essentialist and, on the personal level, too unable to combine ethnic and civic dimensions of allegiance and belonging in a stable yet forward-looking way.

Notes

[1] For a detailed investigation of the differences and similarities between Danish and Swedish immigration and integration policies, see Hedetoft, Petersson & Sturfeldt, 2006.

[2] See article by Kristina Olsson in Politiken, December 4, 2005.

[3] Statens Offentliga Utredningar [Government Papers], Stockholm 2005, no. 56

[4] As is apparent from, for instance, the report of the Danish Welfare Commission, December 2005, and the recommendations of the Government's Globalization Council, March 2006.

Further Reading

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Statens Offentliga Utredningar [Government Papers], Stockholm 2005, no. 56: "Det blågula glashuset"