

THE CARTOON AFFAIR AND THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN DENMARK

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Abstract: This article relates the Danish cartoon affair to the question of cultural diversity. The argument is that the Danish position on cultural diversity constitutes a paradox between multiculturalism and assimilation, which reflects tensions between notions of equality and difference. The cartoon affair illustrates the tensions that follow when difference becomes reality. In this way, the cartoon affair both expresses tensions in attitudes towards multiculturalism in Denmark and offers new formulations on and conditions for considering the question of multiculturalism. The cartoon affair and its aftermath thus reflect the frictions that accompany the process of integrating immigrants in Danish society.

Key-words: Denmark, multiculturalism, Islam, identity, transformation

INTRODUCTION

Immigration in Denmark is a relatively recent phenomenon. The major wave of immigration started at the end of the 1960s, with the appearance of immigrants mainly from the former Yugoslavia, Turkey and Pakistan. Today, immigrants from non-Western countries constitute about six per cent of the Danish population of five million inhabitants. This presence of immigrants appears to be in contrast to the voices in Danish public debates on immigration, which tend to negate the existence of multiculturalism. This negation refers to Denmark as an old and culturally homogenous nation state. Heterogeneity represented by immigrants tends to be seen as a threat to the country's social cohesion and welfare. The term that Danish

debates on immigration uses is “integration”, which implies a political project aimed at absorbing immigrants into the majority society.

The Danish cartoon affair can in many ways be interpreted as related to the question of cultural diversity represented by immigrants. This article endeavours to interpret the cartoon affair in the light of a Danish position on cultural diversity. The article maintains that this position entails contradictions and tensions between multiculturalism as an ideal and assimilation as a necessity. The article argues that the Danish cartoon affair both expresses the tensions in attitudes towards the question of multiculturalism in Denmark, and offers new formulations on and conditions for multiculturalism in Denmark.⁴

This article first illustrates Danes’ ambiguous positions between multiculturalism and assimilation with reference to international surveys, Danish history, and policies on immigration and integration. The following section describes the religious field in Denmark and attitudes toward Islam. Finally, the articles analyses the cartoon affair in the light of the question of cultural diversity.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN DENMARK

According to one typology of multiculturalism, Denmark takes a colour-blind liberal tolerant position on the question of equality. This position is based on safeguarding rights to participate in society’s social, economic and political programmes and activities guaranteed by anti-discrimination laws. It furthermore assures the right to free exercise of one’s own cultural practices, and the right to the liberal practice of collective symbols (Mouritzen, 2006b: 90).

Still, the Danish position reflects a certain ambiguity towards the question of cultural diversity. The survey by EUMC/SORA (2001) shows that Denmark favours questions concerning both “multicultural optimism” and “assimilation”, and is above average in comparison to other European countries in its support for both dimensions.⁵ This simultaneity of both multiculturalism and assimilation somehow constitutes a paradox. On the one hand, Denmark expresses the strongest support among the European countries for the statement that a country’s “diversity in terms of race, religion and culture adds to its strengths” (ibid: 45). On the other hand, Denmark is among the countries that voice the greatest demand for assimilation, e.g. by supporting the argument that “...people belonging to these minority groups must

⁴ This article is a product of the author’s participation in the *Ethnobarometer* project on “European Multiculturalism Revisited”.

⁵ The dimension “multicultural optimism” is defined as consisting “of attitudes towards the enrichment of a society’s cultural and social life by minority groups” and the dimension “cultural assimilation” as regards the promotion of “cultural assimilation of minority groups” (EUCM/SORA, 2001: 17).

give up those parts of their religion and culture which may be in conflict with (Danish) law” (ibid: 49). Besides, Danes strongly support the statement that “the presence of people from minority groups is a cause of insecurity” (ibid. 53).

Some of the notions that represent a positive evaluation of rights to cultural diversity are found in ideas about equality, open-mindedness, liberalism and democracy that date back to the Danish theologian Nicolai Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) and are rights that appear in the Danish constitution of 1849. The work initiated by Grundtvig resulted in the formation of independent or “free schools” (*friskoler*), the organisation of *folk* high schools, the foundation of local unions (*foreninger*) and the creation of voluntary alternative church congregations, which formed the basis for the peculiarly Danish structure of unions. Unions, free schools and freedom of worship are values that support cultural rights. Today, immigrants’ cultural rights are encouraged by Danish traditional rules governing private free schools, which are supported by the public purse. These rules have been put in place to fund Muslim free-schools, which numbered 19 in 2006, the highest number in Europe relative to Denmark’s Muslim population (Borchgrevink, 1999), which in 2006 counted approximately 200,000 practising Muslims. Furthermore, Denmark does not have any legal restrictions on the public practice of other religions. And as regards immigrants’ rights to participate in Danish society, integration policies focus on bestowing equal rights on immigrants on the same footing as ethnic Danes. In comparison to other European countries, immigrants in Denmark have increased opportunities of participating in the political process.

Still, the very same values that originate in Grundtvig also tend to reflect monocultural notions of the “Danish people” and “Danishness”. This may be due to the notion of equality, in the sense of “imagined sameness”, that characterises civil culture in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries (Gullestad, 2002: 83). The notion of imagined sameness indicates an urge to suppress difference and disagreement including uneasiness with and reluctance to acknowledge difference (Knudsen, 1996; Salamon, 1992). Uneasiness in relation to difference represented by “others” is reflected in the ways that Danes generally refer to immigrants as “strangers” and “foreigners”, *i.e.* as people who do not belong, or as “guest-workers”, emphasising guest-host relations (Hervik, 2004). The predominant identity structures (Bauman, 2004) that characterise the relationship between a Danish “self” and foreign “others” either reflect polarisation, *i.e.*, distance and opposition, or “encompassment”, *i.e.*, hierarchical subjection related to the idea of assimilation (Sjørsløv, 2004). Danish civil culture is furthermore characterised by a particular

universalism expressed in an inclusive discourse on universal liberal values and citizenship that in practice excludes strangers (Mouritzen, 2006a).

The notion of assimilation is present in the Danish welfare system, which relies on homogeneity and equality, and thus tend to represent both a cultural and economic obstacle to the integration of immigrants (Hedetoft, 2006a). Restrictions within policies on immigration and integration since 2000 also emphasise assimilation. These restrictions include both acquisition of citizenship, cultural rights such as mother-tongue teaching to immigrant children, and normative restrictions on free schools. Besides, public debates increasingly formulate immigrants' cultures as obstacles to integration and reflect a normative political discourse on culture (ibid: 407). The emphasis on Danish democracy as open to all appears to an increasing degree to refute questions of ethnicity, and hence denotes assimilation. As a result, ethnic minorities are increasingly unable to represent minority interest in political life. As regards the question of citizenship, the co-existence of a formal openness together with quite strong and real calls for assimilation involves tensions (Togeby, 2003: 58).

The Danish position in cultural diversity thus represents a contradiction between multiculturalism as an ideal and assimilation as a necessity. The inevitable tensions involved in this contradiction become visible in the question of immigrants' religion. The next section deals with the question of religion in general and Islam in particular and serves as a context for the analysis of the cartoon affair.

THE RELIGIOUS FIELD IN DENMARK

Church and state are not separated in Denmark, which has freedom of faith, but not equality. Different religious communities do not have the same legal rights. They are requested to undergo a process of approval, and are distinguished as either "acknowledged" or "approved" faith-based communities. The acknowledged communities were until 1970 defined by royal resolution, with the rights of full civil validity of rites, of keeping ministerial books and issuing certificates. The only acknowledged non-Christian community today is the Jewish "Mosaic faith society" (*Mosaisk Trossamfund*). No other faith group has been acknowledged since 1970, when the procedure for approval changed from royal resolution to the provisions in the Act of Matrimony. Instead, the term "approved community" is used, though in relation only to the individual religious leader, who is entitled to perform the rite of marriage with civil validity. Approved communities represent other minor Christian denominations, Hinduism, and Islam. In the Danish religious field, Muslim congregations have only to a limited degree become integrated into the systems of

religious privileges (Kühle, 2004: 202). They have not received any public acknowledgement, and have thus have not profited from the symbolic value associated with such acknowledgement. Therefore, while Denmark is developing into a religiously pluralistic society, the meaning of this pluralism is limited, not least because of the managing role of the state (ibid: 259).

The 1998 ISSP-survey on religion shows that Danes' attitudes towards religion are the most negative among the 30 countries participating in the survey. This attitude is explicitly related to the question of religion as a catalyst for conflict and intolerance (Goul Andersen and Tobiasen, 2002: 86). Danes construct in particular the image of Islam in opposition to ideas of anti-secularism, individualisation and privatisation of faith (ibid. 98). Yet both xenophobia and disapproval of religion *per se* represent antagonism against Islam. Danes' attitudes toward Islam are interrelated with attitudes to immigration as a threat to national peculiarity,⁶ which in particular relates to xenophobia rather than to religion as such (Tobiasen, 2003: 352). Furthermore, Islam is increasingly becoming the "point of condensation for the aversion to strangers" (ibid: 361, my translation). In Denmark, the polarisation between "us" and "them" is often phrased as an opposition between "Danes" and "Muslims", whereby the category of "Muslim" includes anyone of immigrant status. Muslims are thus perceived as "foreigners", and Muslim identity tends to be seen as incompatible to Danish identity (Jensen, 2008).

THE CARTOON AFFAIR

The Danish cartoon affair somehow started with the murder of the Dutch film director of "Submission", Theo Van Gogh, in October 2004. This murder had its ramification in Denmark, where it raised a debate on freedom of speech. The Muslim population in Denmark asked for stricter legislation on blasphemy. Their request was, however, perceived as sympathy towards Van Gogh's murderer. This hidden accusation was accompanied by other incidents in the Danish public sphere, where the media started cross-examining Muslims about *sharia* versus "Danish democracy".

It was in this climate that the cartoon affair erupted the following year. The liberal right-wing newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* was alarmed by the fact that some Danish cartoonists, presumably out of fear of the ban on images in Islam, had refused to contribute pictures of the prophet Muhammad to a book whose writer is known for his controversial representations of Islam. On September 30, 2005, *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 satiric cartoons picturing the prophet Muhammad. The act provocatively

⁶ This appeared from two purely Danish additional questions in the ISSP-survey in respect of dealing with sympathy for Islam and immigration as a threat (ibid: 22).

played on the argument that freedom of speech grants the right to do such a thing. It was considered that, if Muslims want to become accepted and integrated in Denmark, they have to accept this. The publication of the cartoons thus aimed at showing Muslims that, in a democratic society, one can be submitted to scorn, mockery and ridicule. The defence of freedom of speech was formulated in a polarised discourse, arguing for the necessity to defend this democratic value, perceived as threatened by Islamic communities wanting to restrain Danish culture and democracy in order to impose *sharia* law (Hedetoft, 2006b: 1). The editor of the newspaper thus expressed his indignation against the Muslim claim on particular religious rights, which he saw as directly incompatible with secularism, democracy and freedom of speech. On October 12, several ambassadors representing different Muslim countries complained about *Jyllands-Posten* to the prime minister, who responded that he was unable to do anything about it since it would go against constitutional freedom of speech. On October 29, eleven Muslim organisations accused *Jyllands-Posten* of blasphemy and discrimination.

The publication stirred a worldwide debate. This was partly mediated by a team of Danish *imams* who travelled to the Middle East to inform Muslim leaders and governments about the Danish cartoon affair and what they experienced as a general Islamophobic climate in Denmark. For Danish Muslims there were several issues at stake. In the foreground was the charge that the cartoons were a provocation to the ban on images in Islam, particularly of the prophet Muhammad, especially since some of the cartoons were quite obscene.⁷ It was thus not so much the fact that Muhammad was pictured, but the way in which he was represented that was regarded as a provocation. Additionally, the timing of the event, representing a culmination of the newspaper's already discriminatory line against immigrants of Muslim background (Hervik, 2002), and the government's reluctance to engage in a dialogue about the affair should also be considered.

The Danish public debate on the cartoon affair revolved around the question of freedom of speech as opposed to respect for cultural differences. The debate involved Denmark's relationship beyond its national boundaries, i.e., the international scene. National pride also influenced the public debate in Denmark. However, for others it was a matter of shame, both in relation to the idea of Denmark as a multicultural society, and because of the impact it had on international public opinion. The international scholarly debate furthermore revolved around the discussion of

⁷ Especially the cartoon picturing Muhammed with a bomb in his turban.

cultural respect versus liberal values, and the question whether the cartoon affair should or should not be interpreted as a form of racism (Modood *et al*, 2006).

THE CARTOON AFFAIR AND THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The cartoon affair was not put on public trial, and did not produce any explicit winners or losers. Retrospectively, the general conclusion in Denmark seems to be that it was worth the scandal. The more positive evaluations express that it has “cleared the air” of shrill voices in the debate, allowing more nuanced points of views (www.ugebreveta4.dk, 2007). Public polls indicate a somewhat ambiguous picture: Danes appear to have become more negative towards Islam and Muslims (Catinét Research, 2006). At the same time, immigrants and refugees appear to feel less discriminated against, while the majority of ethnic Danes presume that discrimination has become more widespread. This has been interpreted as an expression of Danish self-criticism and bad consciousness.

The cartoon affair might have led to an increased polarisation between “Danes” and “Muslims”, illustrating the image of the so-called “clash of civilisations”. There are, however, many levels of such a polarisation. A common positive evaluation is that the affair has contributed to an awareness of “our national heritage”. This evaluation points to a tendency to draw the boundaries between “our Danish values” and the others” (Muslim) culture. The affair may thus have resulted in legitimising a cultural struggle expressed in a political rhetoric of cultural fundamentalism and exclusion (Stolcke, 1995). A recurrent question is that of particular cultural rights, and by that the recognition of multiculturalism, which fundamentally runs counter to the Danish notions of equality, universalism, and democracy.

However, the affair also appears to have opened a dialogue among Danes and Muslims, and to have shown the face of Denmark’s multiethnic reality. Danish arguments that emphasise “dialogue” as an outcome of the cartoon affair point out that it has been a lesson in many ways, e.g. that freedom of speech is a right and not a duty; that Denmark is not a “closed” society unaffected by globalisation; that Danes have learned more about Muslims and Islam, not least about their diversity, and this has changed stereotypes (Thomsen, 2006: 234). Additionally, the affair may have challenged Danes’ self-perceptions as being a homogenous, harmonious and tolerant people, and has exposed their lack of knowledge about their immigrant co-citizens, while giving them insight into their lives and self-perceptions as a minority group (ibid: 274). A variety of new Muslim organisations and positions have emerged on the public scene. Furthermore, various Muslim organisations have signalled dialogue by initiating debate meetings and conferences explicitly for non-Muslim

Danes, addressing subjects such as the cartoon affair itself, *sharia*, political Islam, terrorism, etc.

The cartoon affair can thus be seen as a breakdown of the “old” Danish model of relating to others, by transgressing the gap between “self” and “other”. It has thoroughly spelt out respective prejudices and frustrations. It also reflects a development from assuming sameness to realising difference. In that sense, the cartoon affair has led to a realisation of cultural diversity as a descriptive fact in Danish society.

A possible interpretation of the cartoon affair is that it expresses an implosion of the existing identity structures based on a relationship between “us” and “them” that no longer work in practice. In contrast to the London bombings that led to reflections about the failure of multiculturalism (Modood, 2005), the Danish cartoon affair may reflect an implosion of the Danish ambiguous attitude towards cultural diversity. The affair thus defies assumptions about Danish society’s openness towards cultural diversity. From the Muslim immigrants’ point-of-view, the cartoons were seen as a last straw that broke the camel’s back of imposing Danish cultural core values (in the form of freedom of speech), to a point where the imposed culture hurts. Their reaction can be seen as a request for recognition. The cartoon affair thus illustrates a core issue in the debate on multiculturalism and recognition in terms of difference or of equality. In so doing, the affair serves as a catalyst for a more realistic exploration of the question of cultural diversity in a Danish context.

Conflicts have transformative power. The current noise of the debate on immigrants might reflect a deconstruction and transformation into another position on cultural diversity that has to consider the question of multiculturalism, starting from scratch. In that light, the cartoon affair in an old nation-state such as Denmark reflects the current frictions that accompany the process of integrating Muslims into European society, and can be seen as part of the progress of Europe’s already long history of integrating new social projects (Henkel, 2006). While this process is definitely not an easy one in Danish society, it still may indicate new understandings and negations of culture, diversity and national identity.

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