

Commentary

Embracing or avoiding diversity? Yet another hostile policy against 'non-Westerners' in Denmark

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Abstract

This short commentary is intended to open a further discussion on diversity in Denmark, particularly in response to the announcement made by the Minister of Interior and Housing, Kaare Dybvad Bek in 2021 regarding Denmark's plan to restrict the number of 'non-Western/non-White' residents to avoid 'parallel societies'. This news was not surprising yet still disturbing, especially considering the recent taxi law requiring taxi drivers to speak Danish, along with migration, ethnicity and education research communities being accused of 'pseudo-scientific' research. To contribute to the pursuit of socially inclusive, multicultural, sustainable and just society, I comment not only on the recent (re)surge of racism and 'resistance to diversity', but also on higher education's stand and social scientists' role in addressing these issues in Denmark, wider Europe and beyond.

Keywords: academic freedom under threat, diversity, multiculturalism, parallel societies, pseudo-science

Forward thinking society moving backward?

Denmark has presented itself as a forward-thinking society, yet policies hostile to 'non-Westerners', especially migrants, over the last 30 years suggest otherwise (Jensen et al. 2017; Phillipson 2019; Rytter 2019; Salö et al. 2018). This is the case with the recent announcement by Minister of Interior and Housing Kaare Dybyvad Bek concerning a 10-year plan to avoid 'parallel societies' by restricting the number of 'non-Western/Non-White' residents in neighbourhoods throughout the country (Birk 2021; Skopeliti 2021). Such an institutionalised form of racism is unfortunately not surprising yet continues to be justified by the Danish government and public in the name of 'integration' and universalism (see Jensen 2010; Rytter 2019). Using top-down, command-and-control and Western epistemological approaches, authorities and urban planners pursue 'integration', when, in reality, 'Indigenous/Tribal, Minority and Minoritised' languages and people (ITMs) (Skutnabb-Kangas 2020) continue to be culturally, economically, linguistically, physically, politically and socially excluded and marginalised in Denmark and many other countries. It is therefore highly doubtful that the social process of residential segregation can be reversed without addressing and overcoming its very root causes. This is also the case in many other European countries and beyond.

Making matters worse, this political agenda is not unique to the right-wing Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party) and its supporters. This mentality is preponderant across party lines

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in parliament (and amongst the Danish public) such that both right- and left-wing parties, both liberal and conservative parties, supported an amendment to the taxi law requiring taxi drivers to be competent in the Danish language (The Local Denmark 2021). This amendment is not genuinely driven by concern for the public interest as claimed by Transport Minister Benny Engelbrecht (Transportministeriet 2021). Is Denmark trying to get rid of taxis from the road to reduce CO2 emissions? Do customers wish to have mundane chats with taxi drivers in Danish? No. It is simply another 'linguistic penalty' (Roberts 2013) for non-ethnic Dane taxi drivers – mostly people with refugee or migrant backgrounds – who do not speak Danish fluently.

The Danish dilemma

It seems evident that Denmark still promotes its internationalisation and multiculturalism but somehow wants to avoid 'parallel societies' – a term originally coined by Wilhelm Heitmeyer describing the belief that segregated ethnic or religious minorities are living separately from the majority, which is deemed culturally, ethnically, linguistically and religiously homogeneous. There is an obvious ideological-level dilemma. The multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual and multireligious Danish demographic reality continues to be viewed as signifying 'parallel societies to avoid', instead of 'diversity to embrace'. Diversity can only be promoted after 'outsiders' successfully integrate into the dominant society (Jensen 2010). Thus, the very precondition for 'outsiders' to be included in Denmark is cultural and linguistic assimilation (Phillipson 2019; Salö et al. 2018). Indeed, Denmark does not recognise multiculturalism and racism in political debates (Jensen et al. 2017; Rytter 2019). However, it appears reasonable to propose that this oppressive ideology does not target all foreign languages, cultures, and people. Some migrants are deemed more acceptable than others. The hierarchy has been established, depending on the social forces in different time and space. Applied linguists note that, due to the English-mediated internationalisation and the global hegemony of English, Denmark and other Nordic countries have already developed 'parallel monolingualism' (Heller 2006). Hence, the parallel societies of Danish-speakers and English-speaking Westerners are the acceptable form of multiculturalism and multilingualism (Phillipson 2019).

However, even English-mediated internationalisation has come under criticism recently. Members of the Danish parliament, including Minister of Education and Research, Ane Halsboe-Jørgensens, are pursuing their political agenda by further reducing English-taught courses and programs in Danish tertiary education (Myklebust 2021). It is apparent that Danish politicians and public are still worried that European Union students come to Denmark to take advantage of the Danish Financial Support Statens Uddannelsesstøtte to study English-taught courses. Or, as with 'diversity', Denmark conceptualises 'internationalisation' and 'multiculturalism' in their own way so that less-desired 'outsiders' will not take advantage of their welfare system. It seems as if egalitarianism has been developed based on the homogeneous ideology and it works within their own 'bubble' where there is less cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity.

Higher education's stand and social scientists' role

Denmark's universities are dependent on central government and the private sector due to the nature of the funding schemes. This can be highly problematic if it means our institutions feel pressured to avoid making a stand and remain quiet on certain public issues, including those related to migration, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and diversity discussed above. Although Aarhus University's Chancellor Brian Bech Nielsen and Dean Johnny Laursen (2021) made a clear statement that 'the researchers are not obliged to agree with what a given parliamentary majority might think about a given area [machine translation]' (para.20), parliamentary members, including Ane Halsboe-Jørgensens, have recently accused researchers focusing on

migration, ethnicity, diversity and education equity of producing work that is 'pseudo-scientific' (Fahrendorff 2021). Academic freedom has been traditionally strong in Scandinavia, but this now appears to be under threat. Academia is supposed to function as the critic and conscience of society, contributing to a forward-thinking, rather than backward-thinking, society.

Inside every problem lies an opportunity. The COVID-19 global pandemic, and indeed any disaster event, has exposed the otherwise invisible social problems in any societies, Denmark included. There is abundant evidence of ITMs in Denmark being systematically disadvantaged and, thus, being more susceptible to damage, loss and suffering due to the pandemic (Karrebæk & Sørensen 2020). However, the major issue here is that voices of 'non-Western/non-White' residents in Denmark are, with some exceptions, missing in the academic and public debates. For example, a group of Danish social scientists (the HOPE project) presented some key findings from their large-scale survey study that high trust between government agencies and citizens has allowed the country to successfully manage the spread of COVID-19 (Peterson 2021; Peterson & Bor 2021). However, non-ethnic Danes – non-Western/non-White migrants – seem excluded from this equation, and their voices are largely absent. Their recommendation for successful pandemic governance was to build high trust relationship between authorities and citizens and to, particularly, avoid 'naming and shaming' their fellow citizens (Peterson & Bor 2021). However, their survey-based research overlooked the fact that non-ethnic Dane migrant communities in Aarhus were indeed 'named and shamed' for the higher infection rate by the mayor of Aarhus, Jacob Bundsgaard, other politicians and media, which resulted in an escalation of discrimination against the local Somali and other marginalised migrant communities (Jensen 2020; Karrebæk & Sørensen 2020). This is problematic.

I moved to Denmark in March 2020 for work and happened to be there to observe this (see Uekusa, 2022 for my experience of living and working in Denmark through the first-phase of the COVID-19 pandemic), yet it is a critical issue to address in academia worldwide, well beyond Denmark. Migration, ethnicity and diversity scholars, especially in sociology, qualitatively explore and address underlying social issues from the perspectives and lived-experiences of those who are impacted. As standpoint theorists would stress, oppression can be best understood from the view of the oppressed, not from the oppressors (see, e.g., Smith 1989). That is how we continue to progress our social theory and knowledge for the public good and the just society; conducting research in the areas of gender, sex, class, migration, ethnicity, race, diversity, multiculturalism and education is not a matter of self-interest. This is yet another opportunity for sociologists to, following Buraway (2005), practice public sociology and contribute to more public understandings of these critical issues in Denmark and beyond.

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Biographical Notes

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