

Is Denmark a Multicultural Country? Reflections on the meanings of “multicultural” in the Danish General Election campaign, June 2015

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News:

In the campaigns leading up to the Parliamentary election in Denmark in June 2015, Denmark's status as a multicultural country was debated. Politicians seemed to agree that a less homogenous population was a future scenario to be avoided, whereas opinion makers used the term either describing the present reality or characterising a much wished for policy approach.

Summary:

On 27th May 2015, Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt called a parliamentary election to take place on 18th June 2015. During this period, the two candidates for the Prime Minister post, Helle Thorning-Schmidt from the Social Democratic Party, and Lars Løkke Rasmussen from the liberal party “Venstre” discussed Denmark's status as a multicultural country in a TV-transmitted debate which sparked a public debate in newspapers and on social media regarding Denmark as a “multicultural” country. In this news analysis, I argue that there are two very different implications of the term at play; a descriptive one as well as a normative one not to be confused. In making this point, I draw on examples from a British context.

Key Words:

General Election, Danish Politics, Foreigners, Multiculturalism

Analysis:

On 27th May 2015, Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt called a parliamentary election to take place on 18th June 2015. During this period, the two candidates for the Prime Minister post, Helle Thorning-Schmidt from the Social Democratic Party and Lars Løkke Rasmussen from the liberal party "Venstre" discussed Denmark's status as a multicultural country in a TV-transmitted debate.

During the debate between politicians and the following remarks in debates on social media, it became clear that the term was used differently by different actors in these debates: While the politicians used it as a normative concept describing a possible political strategy for handling minorities in the country, other participants in the public debate online used it as a descriptive term covering their reality in Denmark's bigger towns and cities.

Different uses of the term "Multicultural"

During the second of three TV- debates between the two Prime Minister candidates, the Journalist hosting the debate, Tine Gøtzsche, asked the two party leaders: "Is Denmark a multicultural country?"

The former Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt replied: "No, I don't think so". And her rival, the current Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, replied: "No, but we are in danger of becoming one".

What does this mean? What does "multicultural" imply? In this context, and given the very short answers – which was part of the set-up of the TV debate – it was hard to tell how the two politicians understood the term "multicultural". The way the question was phrased: "Is Denmark a multicultural country?" pointed to a descriptive content, i.e. when you look at Denmark today, is it multicultural? However, as the response in both cases was a "no" one must assume that they understood it in normative terms as a question of what kind of society they wish Denmark should become, and clearly they both agreed that a future scenario where Denmark is no longer dominated by one ("Danish"?) culture is not to be wished for. It seems impossible that anyone living in Denmark today would argue that we do not have representatives of different cultures in the country and that Denmark is the home of more than one culture – hence "multicultural".

However, the people responding critically to the utterings by the politicians in newspapers and on social media understood the question as well as the answers to be descriptive.

One of these voices belong to the Journalist Theresa Nguyen who stated the following in a feature in the daily *Politiken* on 14th June 2015:

“Dear Helle and Løkke [Helle Thorning-Schmidt and Lars Løkke Rasmussen, ed.], You talk about inclusion and probably mean it, but it is about time that you realise, that your rhetoric result in the opposite: Exclusion. Of everyone. Also ethnic Danes who wish to live in a multicultural society connected to the rest of the world”

And she continued:

“To those who still do not see the point, let me say that it is not a question of wanting a multiculturalism society or not. It is happening. So join in and take part in the development of a multicultural Denmark of the future rather than make pathetic attempts at shutting us out of global humanity.”

(...)

“Next time a journalist asks you if Denmark is a multicultural society, I hope you will answer with pride: YES!”¹

Nguyen’s feature is a good example of how most of the people debating the politicians’ utterances understood the term “multicultural”, namely as containing a mix of descriptive and the normative meaning. In stating that Denmark is multicultural and pointing to her own experiences as an individual belonging to an ethnic minority in Denmark – her family originates from Vietnam – and thus a representative of a cultural background different from Danish majority culture, she concludes that acknowledging her mere presence in the country is equal to acknowledging multiculturalism. Similarly, she concludes that if your answer to the question: “Is Denmark multicultural” is no, this means that she and her family are not welcome here.

However, this is not necessarily the case. Rather, it is necessary to distinguish between the descriptive and the normative implications of the term “multicultural”. In the following, we shall take a look at multiculturalism as integration strategy with a clear normative content.

¹ Nguyen in *Politiken* 14 June 2015: <http://politiken.dk/debat/kroniken/ECE2713355/journalist-jeg-foeler-mig-truffet-paa-vegne-af-samtlige-danskere-med-anden-etnisk-baggrund/> (translated by author, last accessed 5th July 2015)

Multiculturalism as a Normative Political Strategy

In 1966, the then British minister of the Interior, Roy Jenkins, laid the basis for what became Britain's strategy for handling of minorities up until 2005: Multiculturalism.² He said:

*"I do not think that we need in this country 'a melting pot'...I define integration, therefore, not as the flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance."*³

In his speech, Jenkins distanced himself and his government from the idea of erasing differences between majority and minorities. In line with this thinking, Race Relation Acts were written and in 1976, one such act contained guidelines for "positive action" as well as the establishment of *The Commission for Racial Equality*. The idea behind the Acts and the formed commission was to secure rights for race based communities in Britain, and as a consequence, British citizens were identified as belonging to specific races – for instance "White British", "White Other" or "Black" as was the case when registering for a library card when I studied in London in 2008.

When Labour headed by Tony Blair formed government in 1997, a commission entitled *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* contributed to the tradition from the Race Relations Acts with a vision for future integration in Britain as "a community of communities". Here, the focus on cultural diversity and the vision of being a community consisting of many communities were united in the phrase "*multiculturalism on one island*" by Adrian Favell in 1998. According to Favell's analysis, ethnic minorities had been institutionalised as belonging to distinctively different groups which were handled as such by social and political authorities in the British society.⁴ Put differently: Between the 1960s and 1990s Britain's minorities had become representatives of races, ethnicities and cultures and Britain had become a multicultural society accordingly.

In this political, normative implication of "multiculturalism", civil rights are attributed groups, and group identification weights more than individual rights. The late Danish political Scientist, Lise Togeby, explained "multiculturalism" like this:

"Multiculturalism springs from the idea that the autonomy of the individual is closely tied to its culturally defined social identity. Therefore, a mutual recognition between individuals de-

² Geddes, Andrew *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*, SAGE Publications, 2003: 44.

³ Here quoted from Christian Joppke: *Immigration and the Nation-state. The United States, Germany and Great Britain*. Oxford University Press 1999: 225.

⁴ Here taken from Geddes, Andrew *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*, SAGE Publications, 2003: 44.

pends on mutual recognition of the involved cultures. The holders of a given culture have a collective right to insist that the political community actively maintains and secures the necessary foundations for their culture to thrive".⁵

As seen here, multiculturalism as a normative political strategy implies a practice where authorities support the rights of minority groups to uphold distinct social or cultural behaviour. This strategy is problematic for a number of reasons: For instance, if you wish to tolerate culturally defined behaviour in a group you may be forced to ignore behavior conflicting with rights and wishes of other groups (example: a group decides that working is not compatible with their religious practice and thus claims the right to receive benefits instead). Another example of a possible problem would be the occurrence of parallel societies lacking loyalty to the state.⁶

In this manner, multiculturalism can result in relativism regarding values and rights and thus the emphasis on group rights easily prevent discussions of gender equality, political or religious freedom and individual rights.

Nevertheless, multiculturalism remained the adopted strategy for handling minorities in Britain up until the terror attacks on London on 7th July 2005. These events demonstrated with all clarity that securing groups rights did not result in much wished for loyalty to the state as the perpetrators were British born Muslims and not some external enemy.

"Is Denmark a Multicultural Country"?

Returning to the debate between Løkke Rasmussen and Thorning-Schmidt, I think the question posed: "Is Denmark a multicultural country" is a poor one as it is so easily mistaken for pointing at the descriptive meaning of "multicultural". The reality is that Denmark is the home of more people belonging to more than one country. Denmark is a multicultural country. This is a fact.

Looking at the normative meaning of "multicultural" and the strategy for handling minorities implied with it, this is not and never has been the adopted strategy in Denmark. Therefore, there is no reason for the politicians "no" to be a provocative answer. So why were people provoked?

⁵ Lise Togeby *Fra fremmedarbejder til etnisk minoritet*, Magtudredningen, Aarhus: University of Aarhus Press, 2003: 16.

⁶ For more elaborate discussions of multiculturalism see Kate Østergaard and Kirstine Sinclair "Danish Muslims, the Cartoon Controversy and the Concept of Integration" in *Global Dialogue*, 9 (3-4), 2007 and Kirstine Sinclair "Mind the Gap! Multikulturelle visioner og transnational islamisme i London" in *Transnational historie*. Odense: University of Southern Denmark Press. 2009: 79-93.

People like Nguyes were provoked, I think, because of the combination of the politicians' "No", Løkke Rasmussens follow-up: "but we are in danger of becoming one" and the general debate regarding asylum seekers and other immigrants.

When Løkke Rasmussen states that Denmark is in danger of becoming a multicultural country, he is not referring to a potential risk of his political opposition's adopting multiculturalism as official integration strategy in Denmark. Rather, he is talking about a future for the country, where more and more "non-cultural-Danes" settle in Denmark and lead "non-cultural-Danish" lives and thus challenge the Danish cultural homogeneity.

Because of the deliberate conflation of terms by the leaders of the two most dominant political parties in the election campaign, Danes of non-Danish origin felt addressed in a most non-including manner. If the conflated meanings of "multicultural" are hard to follow, the alarmed reactions in the public debate are not.

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