The Price of Goodness: Everyday Nationalist Narratives in Denmark

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Abstract: One of the most important political issues in Denmark today is the new upsurge of nationalism. This reached its height at the two latest general elections in Denmark, which in many ways struck the left with surprise and shock. The purpose of this paper is to try to make sense of this situation. The paper falls into four parts. After introducing the problem and contextualizing it in the "new" Europe, we provide a short presentation of the theory, methodology and analytical strategy behind the article. In the third section, we identify two conflicting discourses in current Danish debates on this issue. In the fourth section, we argue that in order to understand the present situation, a much more differentiated understanding of nationalism and its (re-)construction in everyday life is needed. Here such an understanding is pursued on the basis of an interview analysis of narrative constructions of nationalism conducted in a medium-sized Danish town. This, finally, is taken as the background for discussing the present advancement of nationalism in Denmark as interference between particular and more "universal" factors.

In our age, it seems as if an aura attends the very idea of nationhood. The rape of motherland is far worse than the rape of actual mothers: the death of nations is the ultimate tragedy, beyond the death of flesh and blood. (Billig 1995:4)

Introduction: “A Small, Hysterical Country”? National identity is the subject of increasing attention in many countries. In Denmark it is a matter for lively discussion: what will be the future development of Danish culture and Danish identity? And what are the essences of Danishness? These are the questions that are marking the current public debate in Denmark. At the same time, to an increasing degree they are being linked with questions about the acceptance and integration of refugees and immigrants. These “strangers” are described as a threat to “true Danish identity”, a disruptive element hindering enjoyment of the authentic national culture (an example is the rhetoric of the right-wing party, Dansk Folkeparti, in its campaign in the last two national elections). The political and popular discourse that culminated during these elections struck the left and the humanist centre of Danish politics with surprise and shock. We are not naively suggesting that Denmark (or other Nordic countries for that matter; see Pred 2000,
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Why this preoccupation with Danishness? There seems to be a complex relationship between processes of globalisation, constantly challenging national imaginations, and the re-establishment and reproduction of the systems of signification that produce our mode of inhabiting national spaces. This is true not only in terms of mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion creating “us/them” constructions, but in many different ways. It seems that, under the conditions of (late) modernity, and especially globalisation, at the same time as we are increasingly being made aware of the arbitrariness and permeability of spatial identities, we are also gripped by an obsession with these identities and their future(s).

Often nationalism in the eyes of the western world is regarded as the property of “others”: the periphery, revolutionaries, fascism, separatism or guerrilla groups. The image of Denmark is usually one of a well-established and relatively homogeneous nation state, situated in a peaceful corner of the world, while nationalism is viewed as something far removed and distant in time and/or space. This image flickers momentarily into a newly circulating image of Denmark as a small, hysterical country (in the words of the German author Günter Grass 2002), which in a short period has turned from an open, liberal and tolerant nation into a nation marked by racism, xenophobia and a radical shift to the politics of the right. Now, it is not only this visible hysteria that constitutes the new configuration of nationalism. Nationalism in the western world (and Denmark) reaches far beyond right-wing politics: in an unreflected manner it occurs all over the political spectrum, and it can be a driving force even within the traditional social democratic virtues.

We are not, of course, arguing that this development is an exclusively Danish one. On the contrary, it has to be seen within the broader international context of globalisation, the end of the Cold War and the European Union and its Eastern enlargement. In this context, national identities appear as historic–geographical imaginations re-negotiated in multi-scalar practices of othering, where the “Significant Others” can be “internal” as well as “external”. Triandafyllidou (2002) has suggested that the re-articulation of nationhood in the emerging new Europe is taking place within a “tri-polar” identity space: transnational or European, that of the nation or member state, and local or regional, including minorities and immigrant communities. According to her, the European integration process has posed (at least) two challenges. On the one hand, it has suggested that some sense of Europeanness should be integrated into in-group identity, with fellow member states no longer being seen as external Others, but as part of the in group. On the other hand, the European Union itself has grown into an, inspiring or threatening, external
Other for many European countries (including Denmark). How the fall of the Berlin Wall erased Western Europe’s main threatening Other and rearranged the identity spaces of Europe is another part of this process, one aspect of which is a differentiation in the imagination of “Eastern” Europe, a distinction between “good” Western-oriented countries (now becoming part of the European in-group) and “bad”, backward, violent, extremely nationalist countries, which are identified as Others in relation to EU. The “West”, with its “civilisation” values, is the uncontested norm which EU and NATO accession countries have to follow to be embraced by the “centre”. Thus, the relationship between Europe and its Others is monitored and regulated through a system of disciplinary discourses and techniques invoking the Oriental East as Europe’s threatening external Other. Borders between Western and Eastern Europe are being redefined, not by eliminating the distinction, but by moving the border further eastwards and inscribing otherness in East–Central Europe (Agnew 2001; Kuus 2004; Neumann 1994). In this way, the changing identity space of a Europe harbouring a resurgent Orientalism is not only manifested in Europe’s relations with its external Others, but also in its growing hostility towards its internal Others. Newly created openings towards a “European” identity are apparently accompanied by an increasing internal hostility towards different groups of immigrants, no less manifest during the “global war” against “Islamic fundamentalism”.

In this paper, we try to understand the new configurations of nationalism in Denmark as an articulation between such “universal” factors and issues that are more specific to the Danish context. After a short presentation of the theory, methodology and analytical strategy of the research that underlines the paper, we identify two conflicting discourses (designated Orientalism and Humanism, respectively) in the current Danish debate. However, by taking an approach to national identity that is based in the practices and narratives of everyday life, we argue that such a dichotomous understanding is inadequate to grasp the complexity and ambiguity of the contemporary construction of nationalism. A much more differentiated analysis is needed, as attempted in the fourth section of the paper, where we identify five additional narrative strategies or nationalisms, here designated “welfare”, “social conflicts”, “critique”, “history” and “space and landscape”. In the concluding section we offer some preliminary “explanations” of the present upsurge in and reconfiguration of nationalism in Denmark by discussing the articulation of the different narrative strategies and re-inserting them into their broader historical/political context. Some of our main points concern the way in which the everyday character of these “nationalisms” and their transverse interweaving into the political spectrum make them insidious and difficult to combat, but also that an acknowledgement of their complexity and contradictions is a necessary precondition for the identification of fissures and openings.
The Analytical Approach

The approach we take to nationalism is inspired by Michael Billig’s notion of “banal nationalism” (1995) and the “social poetics of the nation-state” of Herzfeld (1997). These terms describe how, in established nations like those in Europe, everyday practices reproduce national identities in ways so ordinary, so commonplace, that they escape attention altogether. This may happen in speech acts, routinely and unconsciously using homeland-making phrases; small unnoticed words such as “we”, “the” people, “this” country, “here”, “society” etc; or media announcements such as “the” weather, “home” news and “foreign” news etc. Or it may occur through the use of material but symbolic items such as coins, banknotes or flags, hanging unnoticed from public buildings or used at birthday parties and other informal celebrations. When using these linguistic and material markers regularly, “we” are unmindfully reminded who we are and where we are. National identity becomes a routine way of talking and acting, a form of life.

This daily and routine form of banal nationalism operates as a particularly strong social and political force right at the heart of western society, creating the continuous background for powerful political discourse. It equips us with an identity and ideological consciousness, encompassing and internalising us in a complex series of themes about “us” and “them”, about the homeland and the world at large. It is instrumental in placing us in time and space, in a moral international world order, a larger world of nations.

Banal nationalism is “the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced” (Billig 1995:6). It has in one way or another been passed over and has escaped out of sight. In this context “banal” should not be understood as something benign or innocent just because it apparently is a mechanism that ensures normality. Here banality is not synonymous with harmlessness (Arendt 1963). On the contrary, this banal nationalism reproduces powerful institutions which control large depositories of weapons. It ensures support for wars and repression and the continuation of an “imagined community”, which can mobilise and prepare for the campaigns ahead. An example is the Danish involvement in the war in Iraq.

While Michael Billig’s empirical analysis of banal nationalism is performed on the media, we build upon an investigation of how nationalism is also connected to everyday narrative practices. Our thesis is that narrative practices in everyday life constitute a central sphere inviting studies of the struggle over community and meaning. We follow Ricoeur (1984), who theorizes narratives in a way that on the one hand retains a connection between narrative and the world of practices and experiences, but on the other hand recognizes indefiniteness in this connection, one that is approached (but never remedied) through emplotment or the poetic
of narrative (Simonsen 2004b). In our analysis we furthermore illustrate how everyday life narratives on national identity are linked to historically sedimented myths (Barthes 1973) and more active institutionalized discourses (Foucault 1982). The main part of the analysis is based on a case study with fieldwork conducted in Hundested, a medium-size town in northern Zealand situated 65 km from Copenhagen. It is based on qualitative in-depth interviews collecting narratives on national identity by informants representing different social groups in Denmark. The informants were selected in order to obtain variation in terms of gender, age, education, employment and political belief. The purpose is to reveal diversity and distinction in the ways of signifying the Danish nation in the everyday lives and narratives of the informants (Koefoed 2006). What emerges from the analysis is a differentiated nationalism based on everyday practice and narrative perspectives. To illustrate how these narratives are linked to broader discourses and myths, we draw on examples from the public debate on and existing analyses of national identity and nationalism in both the Danish and European contexts.

**Dominant Discourses: A Dichotomous Debate**

Analyses of the media debate, as well as the interview analysis, reveal the dominance of a dichotomous debate over Danishness in the contemporary public sphere. Two opposing discourses stand out, which in some sense are two sides of the same coin: they both articulate themselves in relation to immigrants and refugees, discussing how far, by what criteria and with what possible consequences should the national “home” open its doors to “foreigners”.

The first, and at the present time dominant, discourse is an Orientalist one (cf Said 1985) that appeals to a cultural racism naturalizing and essentializing cultural difference. According to that, immigrants are bound to cultures that are alien to the “Danish” one and resist integration into Danish society (see also Simonsen 2004a). Immigrants are a threat to Danish society, not only because they are supposed to “pollute” Danish culture, but also because they allegedly intend to “exploit” the Danish welfare system. According to this discourse, “Danishness” is characterized by tolerance, enlightenment and equality. These alleged qualities are mobilized to support xenophobia by representing Muslims as intolerant fundamentalists who should not be tolerated in a tolerant society and Danes as a naïve people trying to do good for everybody but merely opening themselves up to exploitation. For example, a couple of years ago one tabloid paper ran a campaign labelled “The Price of Goodness”, trying to illustrate by examples how immigrants received disproportionate help from public funds compared with Danes in social need, and how this was what attracted immigrants to Denmark. Danish society and Danish culture are then represented as threatened, first and
foremost by (Muslim) immigrants, but also by the “elite” who allow these immigrants to “pollute” and “exploit” the Danes.

Paradoxically, at the same time as a rooted Danish culture is represented as being threatened, the contradiction between “us” and “them” in this discourse is formulated in terms of modernity versus tradition. This is done in relation to issues such as human rights, enlightenment, religion and not least gender relations. Gender equality is represented as something that we have and they do not, “they” being (Muslim) immigrants deeply embedded in their “medieval” culture. Problems of gendered power relations and patriarchal structures are changed into an “immigrant problem”, at the same time rendering invisible power relations within Danish society and reinforcing distinctions between “Danes” and “immigrants”. In the Orientalist or nationalist discourse, gender equality is articulated with other positive values, such as “freedom” and “democracy”, as being synonymous with “Danishness”.

In this way, the “progressive” values of welfare and democracy are placed at the service of repressive and exclusionary ends, for instance, in the traditional “New Year speech” about the state of the nation given by the current Prime Minister in 2003. He used a third of his speech to talk about immigrants and “Danish values”:

Many of these values we have taken for granted, because among other things we have developed them over many years. But at present they are being challenged. It strikes us with horror that small girls should be subject to injury through circumcision. It fills us with disgust that imams in this country support the death penalty by stoning. And it is appalling when an imam at the Friday prayers expresses understanding for suicide bombings. This is religious medieval thinking that we must meet with dissociation and active opposition. We have freedom of speech . . . But Danish society is built on certain values that you have to accept if you want to live here. In Denmark we keep politics and religion apart. In Denmark an inviolable respect for human life exists. In Denmark women’s equality with men is a matter of course. And we will not accept that these civic rights should be suppressed by referring to the Koran, the Bible or other holy scriptures. (Rasmussen 2003, our translation)

In this extract, the Prime Minister mobilizes a range of well-known opposites: modernity versus tradition, secularized Christianity versus backward Islam, emancipated gender relations versus the more or less violent suppression of women. He does so in a way that establishes a race and gender hierarchy in which “equal” (civilized?), white Danish men and women find their opposites in “threatening immigrant men” and “suppressed immigrant women”.

Another example underlines these stereotypical representations. In a newspaper feature entitled “Whore and Madonna again” (Thomsen 2000), a “feminist” author blames Muslim women who wear scarves for
sexual assaults carried out by Muslim men. She connects such assaults to the gendered practice of Islam, not, for instance, to social marginalisation. Muslim men become the violating ones, and Muslim women, because of their religious markers as “pure women”, are claimed to legitimize men’s violations. Wearing a scarf embodies the traditional, the patriarchal and the repressive, desexualizing its wearer by rendering her unapproachable, while at the same time sexualizing non-wearers. In Thomsen’s view, then, “we Danish emancipated women” become “the sexualized others”, and in some strange way Danish men become invisible in the analysis. This piece of clothing, the scarf, is then articulated as unacceptable in the encounter with modern, secularized, emancipated “Danishness” and made to symbolize “the alien” and “the backward” influencing “Danishness” and gender equality negatively.

Both examples show how certain recognizable embodied markers of difference, functioning as objects of fantasy and fear in relation to the national Danish “we”, populate the nationalist discourse. They are “the suppressed immigrant woman”, “the patriarchal immigrant man” (the suppressor) and the young male “second generation immigrant” (potential rapist and gang member). In a discourse where nation, ethnicity, gender and sexuality coincide, women’s bodies once more become a battlefield on which Danish identity is consolidated.

This Orientalist discourse (Said 2004) also seeps into everyday life and into how one understands oneself as Danish:

It is such, altogether, the Danish way of being, isn’t it? It is difficult, just like that, to define what it is to be Danish, isn’t it? But altogether you do know in some way, don’t you? But it’s not Danish, you see, to wear scarf or turban and all those different things ... They are very different, aren’t they? They are ... I don’t know much about Somali culture. They have their way, you know ... where it is the father who decides everything. And it has to be his way, hasn’t it? And if the children do something wrong, then they get ... then they nearly get decapitated, don’t they? It doesn’t take much. Where we maybe go to the opposite extreme. Where we say, well, the children come home with ... as 15–16 years old with four cans of beer for having a nice time with their friends ... and then a packet of condoms and a few other things. And that might be at the opposite extreme. That might be too much ... Where the others, they are ... we put ours ... the Muslims, they simply set the Danish back; they set them back to the eighteenth century, don’t they? Or something like that—the nineteenth century. They live in an old-fashioned way, don’t they? ... It is also, I mean it is possible to prove that many of those terror organisations, they also have roots in Denmark. (Interview extract, our translation)

In this narrative, the difficulties of defining and articulating what it is to be Danish finds its solution in the practice of othering. It gives meaning to Danishness through a semantic leap to its opposite, to what is
definitely not Danish (wearing a scarf or turban). By that move, an Orientalist orientation is given to the narrative, which continues by comparing the two imagined geographies (Said 1985) of Denmark and Somalia, where the latter also represents (our) Muslims in general. The distance is marked by cultural difference; an authoritarian and patriarchal culture is opposed to the ultimate freedom exemplified by the enjoyment of alcohol and sexual freedom. The rhetorical move is an example of time–space separation (Gregory 2004), which connects a distant barbarian place (Somalia) and a traditional past (eighteenth century) to a specific group of people, the Muslims in Denmark. These Muslims are represented as a threat because they push back the Danish nation to the eighteenth century, and because they are allegedly connected to terrorist organisations. In this way, Orientalist nationalism constructs an axe of threatening Others connecting threats on different scales, both outside and within the nation’s borders. The imagination is traded between different spatial and temporal scales.

This Orientalist nationalism is not what Billig (1995) characterizes as a “hot” nationalism of “exotic, rare and often violent specimens”. When it comes to the presence of extreme right-wing nationalist, racist and violent groups, Denmark is probably better off than many other countries. What we experience instead is a “small” (and in a way more insidious) everyday racism, showing itself in a gradual slide in what it is socially acceptable to say and suggest—in political discourse and everyday talk—in relation to “foreign” Others. On the other hand, the new nationalism is not “banal” in the sense of unnoticed either; it is definitely articulated, penetrating into different spheres of everyday life.

Even though it is currently gaining prominence, the Orientalist discourse is, of course, not alone on the public scene. On the contrary, an “identity struggle” is performed over the definition of Danish identity and national space. The counter-discourse involved in this struggle may be designated a “humanist” discourse (Frello 2000). According to that, Danish culture cannot be defined exclusively, and immigrants are not necessarily a burden on Danish society. They can just as well be an enrichment, as regards both culture and the economy. The major argument here is about humanism, tolerance and equality, concepts that are therefore not reserved for one discourse. Instead they are “floating signifiers”, contested concepts fought for and decisive in the discursive struggle over “Danishness” (Frello 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In the orientalist/culturalist discourse equality is articulated with similarity, and the values referred to are seen as pre-given, inherent qualities of “Danishness” that the Others do not have, while in the humanist discourse they are something that ought to exist but do not necessarily do so. They therefore have to be nurtured and reproduced through decency in practice. If they are threatened, it is not by the immigrants but by the proponents of the Orientalist discourse.
This struggle is not only fought in the public sphere but also in everyday life:

And what we talked about earlier, the fact that the world has become smaller, it’s actually also a gigantic thing, isn’t it? But it also takes some effort by each one of us. Yes, that we . . . what can I say? . . . for example that Hundested [informant’s hometown], it isn’t the hub of the Universe. That we in some way more . . . that we have to say, “I need to learn something about other people. For instance I need to learn something about Islam”. I have a friend who has started to take classes in the history of religions because she thinks that she should damn well know something about Islam, because she can’t just sit there and listen to all the shit they are telling her, can she? She wants to know something about what it really is. (Interview extract, our translation)

For this person, cosmopolitanism, the issue of inhabiting cosmos and polis, is not just some abstract spatial feeling, but something that concerns her everyday life and the place where she lives. Hundested is, as she metaphorically formulates it, not “the hub of the Universe”. The fact of living in a smaller world is something that concerns her as a human being. If the world is no longer out there at a safe distance but in here in the form of other religions and other ways of thinking, then we have to break with self-centredness and become cosmopolitans. The alternative makes us passive consumers of negative stereotypes (“shit”) about the Other. Each human being has to navigate in that “smaller world” by acquiring knowledge about the things that are represented as Other (here Islam) in order to understand and avoid excluding it. This woman has a cosmopolitan attitude that, in her words, is “gigantic”, demanding and placing a responsibility on each and every human being.

In this sense, we can identify an identity struggle between an Orientalist and a more cosmopolitan way of being/becoming Danish, a struggle that was accentuated during the “cartoon crisis” of Spring 2006.

Differential Nationalism(s)
Notwithstanding the strength of these two discourses, the scope of nationalism is much more differentiated and blurred than they suggest (Koefoed 2006). Focusing on them alone means overlooking otherwise significant voices, practices and perspectives on the nation. In the following we shall attempt to bring out the complexity and ambiguity in nationalism by revealing five different narrative strategies which give rise to alternative/supplementary modes of negotiating and making sense of the nation in everyday life. These different perspectives reflect at a deeper level practices and discourses producing other types of nationalisms. It is, of course, important not to reify these different nationalisms, but to see each of them as part of a complex and contested narrative that together construct everyday Danishness.
Welfare

Welfare is a central topic in public debates and is particularly relevant in the Scandinavian context. Welfare nationalism is found in stories that tie the wider imagined community intimately to the welfare state. The plot in these stories is how globalisation (e.g., mobility and immigration) and the European Union are posing a fundamental threat to the Danish welfare system. In all this, “we” are articulated and naturalized as the welfare state. Consequently, global and European mobility, the restructuring of public services and the re-scaling of political power are articulated as a loss, a dramatic change challenging the integrity of the nation.

It is of enormous value that we all have the right to go to school, that we all have the right to go to hospital, and that none of us has to die of hunger. (Interview extract, our translation)

It is not just you and me. In reality it’s our parents, isn’t it? Who started building up the Danish welfare society? And that makes me happy. You can say that even if it looks like people don’t talk so much to each other—that we don’t visit each other so frequently—we are still all together in taking care of each other economically. In this perspective, you must understand that nobody is left out as such. That’s the way it bloody well is! (Interview extract, our translation)

Welfare is as a concept full of positive connotations, which in the myth of Danish civilisation symbolizes wealth, progress, community and a good life (Højrup 2003). In the international context, in contrast to other societies and nations, the Danish welfare state is perceived as something unique and valuable for the imagined community. As suggested in the extract, the Danish welfare system consists of a comprehensive set of rights related to public services, education, health and income distribution. In the extract, welfare is naturally tied to the national community. As the narrative illustrates, it is “our” welfare and “we” have the right to public services. In this sense it is perceived as a strong and familiar welfare community, something that is made meaningf ul over generations. The history of the Welfare State is a story beginning with the intimate family: “it was our parents who created the Danish welfare society”. The welfare state ties the community together in a common history and destiny of this family; it equips the imagined community with meanings through discourses and practices of solidarity, equality and security.

Welfare nationalism has three different narrative ramifications in the way it is organized as a meaningful category in everyday life. First, the welfare state is narrated as a labour community, emphasizing that it is something that we actively create and contribute to through hard work and high taxes. It is not a story of an abstract system or institutions, but a nationalism focusing on daily routines and practices related to a
disciplined labour market. Secondly, it is articulated as a risk community: throughout our lives we are all exposed to different kinds of risk related to age, health, employment, education and housing. Here the welfare community is something that guarantees “us” a basic set of rights. The Danish welfare system is an integrated part of daily life and naturally related to the establishment of social security. In this case the imagined community is tied together in common expectations. Thirdly, welfare nationalism is a story about great challenges, whether from above, through globalization and the European Union, that is, through a re-scaling of political and economic power, or from below, through labour mobility and immigration. These challenges are articulated partly through expressions of anxiety and partly through an invisible slide towards Orientalist discourses and stereotypes. The story of the Danish welfare community becomes the story of the threatening Other:

They are only moving up here because they want us to support them, right? They are not coming because they want to help us. They are coming because they want something. It is our values. They want our benefits, right? That our older generation has created. They want their bloody part of the cake. (Interview extract, our translation)

Our welfare society has deteriorated. It has started to deteriorate. In the hospitals we have waiting lists and people die like flies. And I don’t understand how one can accept that as a doctor. All Danish doctors should go on strike saying: “we have made a doctor’s promise that we should keep people alive.” And I know that the person who is lying in there, if he does not get his operation tomorrow—if we wait another two weeks for space on the waiting list—then he will be dead. I saw it with my mother-in-law. She was lying there with a bad heart and needed help. And she was lying there for such a long time nearly getting really ill. She had her operation and that gave her ten good years. That was a good thing. But I mean . . . it’s exactly in such a case that one is saying: “They should just have all the resources that they need”. Yes, but where would they get the money from? And in this case we notice that we have used too many resources on foreigners that we could have used in the Danish society instead. (Interview extract, our translation)

In this narrative the mobility of the Other represents a threat to the productive and imaginative welfare community. The external Other in the narrative is a mobile group of people attracted by “our values”. The restructuring in the health sector is directly linked to the threatening mobility of immigrants and refugees. They become part of the same story. The internal Other becomes the explanation for any kind of difficulty or crisis in the service sector. The informant explains that the “welfare system has deteriorated”. On the other hand the person says that “we have used too many resources on the foreigners”. In this narrative the
internal Other is implicitly preventing the welfare system from saving lives. The narrative stages this as a conflict or a choice between “us” and “them”.

**Social conflicts**

Social nationalism critiques the formation of divergent *social* positions in the Danish society, that is, how the question of “who we are” is asked in a context of class conflicts and stratification. The central plot in these stories is the opposition between the people and the elite.

I think that they are too busy interfering here and there, right? We are lagging too much behind ourselves. But it is when someone is moving up the steep stair, then they can’t look down at the grass field. Then they are looking out all over when they are moving all the way up there. But we also have a responsibility for ourselves, the people in Denmark, haven’t we? Politicians are busier with the world outside than with what is going on here. They don’t even know what is going on in Danish society. Among other things, the schools are run down. And they are cutting down on the hospitals, right? And they are so busy with what all the others are doing. So, they are interfering politically in all other countries. Now, as they are saying, we are moving into Afghanistan and Iraq and they are doing this and that. But they don’t even think about how people are sitting in rags in the schools with mould on the walls. (Interview extract, our translation)

Social nationalism organizes the nation as a *social space* with different social positions. In this narrative the central axis of social division is between the elite and the ordinary people, social positions that are created and narrated through metaphors of orientation (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The elite is “up” and “over” (upper class), the ordinary people “down” and “under” (under class). This orientation of the elite and the people not only produces abstract positions, it symbolizes concrete spatial conflicts, inequalities and differences between social groups.

In this narrative, the elite has failed in its responsibilities in three different ways. First, it has not fulfilled its mission as trailblazers: instead it is perceived as a social group whose members opportunistically protect their own interests and help themselves to power and resources. Secondly, the elite as a group is more engaged with what is going on outside the national territory: it is international and cosmopolitan. Thirdly, it has not been able to govern in an effective way inside the nation but has failed to take care of the people, with important national welfare institutions like public schools having become dilapidated.

A central driving force in nationalism is the struggle over the people, a notion that is far from innocent (Korsgård 2004). To invoke the people is to invoke symbolic power. The axis between the people and the elite is articulated and produced as a set of meaningful categories.
in practice in three different ways. First it is a division of class that demonstrates that the nation state is a class society marked by economic and social inequalities. Secondly, it is articulated as a division between expert systems and people’s democracy. Thirdly the axis is produced discursively as something signifying the difference between “high” and “low” culture.

Social nationalism can be found in two different versions constituting different trajectories. The populist track appears in stories telling how the (political) elite do not care about the ordinary people, and how they make alliances instead with the international, rootless, cosmopolitan elite and the immigrants against the “people”. Members of the elite are seen here as the forerunners of the multicultural society. In the narrative, they not only betray the people in a social sense but also in terms of culture. They betray the ordinary people who are produced discursively as the true bearers of the nation. The other trajectory criticizes the class division in society. This narrative is concerned about the apparent division of the nation into two parts. The people and the elite are not able to communicate, it says, because they speak two different languages. Therefore, the social division in society is seen as weakening the community and as undermining the social cohesion of the nation.

Critique
What we call critical nationalism is first of all articulated as critique of international and global capitalism and neoliberalism. It is told directly or in a reflexive way, imagining other futures, visions or ways of practicing everyday life, or questioning “the taken for granted”, the unquestioned “facts” of social discourse.

One could say that... anyway if you drive from here to Copenhagen you will pass five to six McDonald’s restaurants. And they are not especially Danish in my opinion. And that is how it is, always. Multi-national companies, right? You don’t even notice it. Coca-Cola among other things. Not because it... it tastes damned good, but it kind of occupies and takes up an incredible lot of space in our... and there is nothing less Danish than that... Yes, I don’t like these tendencies. I don’t like it. But it’s very hard to fight against it. It’s capital that rules. We can take our own case here. When the ferry was closed down. It was capital that decided to close down the ferry. It was solely economic considerations. And that is what’s happening, unfortunately: the Danish Steelwork among other things [closed down in 2002]. It was also economic considerations, right? So, these kinds of things. I don’t like it. But you can’t do anything about it. So, the world is already arranged. It is the capitals that govern, right? (Interview extract, our translation)

This narrative is a spatial story expressing a critique of the hegemonic and dominating triad of international capitalism, cultural imperialism
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and global neoliberalism imposing their products, taste and economic rationality on the Danish community. It is a story about the domination of space. Moving through the Danish landscape, the informant finds himself surrounded by multinational companies like McDonald’s and Coca Cola. He likes the taste of Coca Cola but he feels that these companies basically represent something alien to Danish culture. Instead, they rise in the landscape as very visible symbols of how global capitalism has spread, invading the local and transforming it. Global capitalism in this narrative comes from the outside like a juggernaut, an external attack which is structurally linked to local history. The dynamic global expansion of capital is dialectically linked to a weakened local community illustrated by the loss of work places and the restructuring of the labour market. What this narrative suggests and dreams of is a place free from external control and domination. But as the informant concludes: how and from where can we act against global capitalism? The narrative implicitly finds its own solution in the national community.

In our material, the critical perspective is articulated as nationalism in three different ways:

1. As a left-wing critique of global capitalism. The left has difficulties with the idea of nationalism, which it interprets as a language coming from the right. Nevertheless, in its speech acts capitalist domination is often mapped by way of contradictions between nation states and multinational companies (Tomlinson 1991).

2. As a thesis of cultural imperialism, claiming that the authentic, traditional communities of the world are dominated and controlled by the imperial power of the United States by means of commercial products and media images. The main question becomes a national one: how can the nation or the local culture protect itself as a community? This question has been widely discussed in the public sphere, in national governments and in international organizations such as UNESCO (Tomlinson 1991). The cultural imperialism argument claims that capitalism is a culturally homogenizing force that eliminates plurality and local specificity.

3. As a critique of transnational governance, in Denmark mostly articulated in relation to Danish integration into the European Union (cf Hansen and Wæver 2002). In the public debate this has been discussed in terms of the undermining of sovereignty, democracy and the welfare state. The EU has been seen as an external control undermining national government and self-determination.

**History**

Historical nationalism focuses on time or rather the temporal construction of coherence in Danish identity. Here, the narrative strategies and navigations of everyday life involve activities that combine and give
meaning to the nation in the complex of past–present–future (cf Ricoeur 1984). However, this is also combined with attempts to negotiate present spatial conflicts and dividing lines within the nation.

I think that Danishness always will persist. We are stubborn enough to . . . I don’t think that we should be afraid that Danishness will disappear because of immigration. It is something rooted deep inside us. And, as he told us [in a film sequence], you should not even try to mention the church, because people really react, even though they don’t use it at all. It is something that one should not touch upon. So Danishness is deeply rooted in us . . . no one can change that. And our Midsummer bonfire and all these kinds of things will bloody well always be there. (Interview extract, our translation)

I think that Danes will be something that you only read about in 100 or 200 years from now. The Danes will be someone that you read about in the universities or libraries. (Interview extract, our translation)

The temporal aspect of the nation is established through the alternation of two different temporal myths. The first is the myth that stages the nation as eternal and naturalizes it as something unchangeable. “Danishness will always persist”, it says, with the small word “always” connecting past, present and future. Traditions are perceived as something frozen in time, something deeply rooted in the national subject. The second myth stages the nation in relation to processes of change—that is, the nation and our lives are transformed over time. This myth constructs the nation as perishable and fragile, as something that is just passing by. In the extract the informant tells us his belief that in the future the nation will be transformed into mere text. He produces a narrative of loss and nostalgia. In this way, historical nationalism construes a double story by telling how “everything changes” and at the same time in a strange way emphasizing that “nothing has changed” at all.

In everyday life, historical nationalism does not reproduce a linear history of the nation celebrating “big” national events precisely located in time and space. Instead, through the negotiation of multiple temporalities it constructs how, in everyday life, we understand ourselves as part of a larger imagined community. The central driving force is orientation: where do we come from, where are we now, and where are we going? Historical nationalism is forged out of the myth of this temporal and spatial movement. In everyday narratives we find two significant perspectives: a generation perspective and a life perspective. The generation perspective expresses the more universal side of the rhythm of human lives, the one that stages conflicts as well as continuity. It makes it possible to ground the narrative in between the “new” and the “old”: by telling about conflicts related to generations, it is possible to negotiate important lines of conflict within the nation, such as the opposition between the two temporal myths revealed above.
The life perspective, on the other hand, suggests that there is no clear distinction between life stories (intimacy/life-time) and national stories (imagined community/nation-time): they are very closely mixed together. How the self makes sense of life in time is very closely related to how we make sense of different passages and changes in the national history. The narrative construction of national history in everyday life is created through intimate connections between the self and the imagined community. The life perspective thus connects two different temporalities: life-time and nation-time. Life-time is characterized by the fact that life has a direction going from life to death, while nation-time stretches out in a long duration (cf Anderson 1991; Smith 1999). However, narratives of the nation inscribe into our identities links to both the dead and the yet unborn and impose a structural feeling of cultural re-generation. Thus, historical nationalism imaginatively bridges, making our identity immortal through mythical connections. Or, with Anderson (1991:12), nations “always loom out of an immemorial past, and still more important, glide into a limitless future”.

Space and Landscape
Finally, there is what we might call a local nationalism. The narratives demonstrate that the nation is also habitually produced and reproduced by spatial and embodied practices—that is, the nation comes into existence through movement and bodily experience. In this way, the narratives organize the changing relationship of places and spaces:

Funnily enough, when you are moving around in Canada, the first thing you will see, long before you come to a town, is the corn silo. Very high silos that rise 25 meters into the air. The first thing you see when you move closer to a town in this country is the church tower. That is what characterizes the Danish landscape and society. (Interview extract, our translation)

Local nationalism organizes places and produces spaces. As de Certeau (1984) argued, stories carry out the labour of transforming places into spaces and spaces into places. The story above is a spatial story, movement that organizes the spatial distinctions. It is a tour and the bodily experience connected to it that constructs Canada and Denmark as two distinct landscapes.

If you are looking for the origins, then it is clear that the city is only a façade. It is absolutely not here that you find the origins of the Danish national spirit, if you can call it that. You will find it in the provinces, not in the big cities.

The typical Danish landscape is grain fields, country roads and farms. This I understand at as the deepest culture in Denmark. Yes, it is us. (Interview extract, our translation)
This extract constructs an image of a romantic landscape where the nation is represented by “grain fields”, “country roads” and “farms” (cf Olwig 2003). It is related to historical nationalism by mythologizing a landscape that practically no longer exists in Denmark. Interestingly this narrative of a national romantic landscape also rests on a spatial distinction: it relates to a narrative that grounds the nation in the countryside that is taken to signify the authentic Danish spirit in contrast to the shallowness of the big city. It thus draws on a Babylon myth of town and country, signifying the rural idyll and the urban evil, and constituting a kind of “provincial nationalism”.

What Went Wrong in Denmark?

What went wrong in Denmark? How has it come about that cultural racism and ethnic nationalism have gained terrain at the expense of humanism? Now, as suggested above, the new configuration of nationalism and the emphasis on national “values” are not a particular Danish phenomenon, but are happening all over Europe, and probably also in other parts of the world. However, the development in Denmark has apparently occurred at a steeper and faster rate than in most other European countries. What interests us here, therefore, is how analytically to grasp this development and reveal some of the factors that characterize the Danish case specifically. It is our thesis that some of these emerge from specific interweavings of the different forms of nationalism identified in the analysis above.

One such interconnection can be argued to combine historical, spatial and social nationalisms. The myth of Danishness that “will always persist” can be connected with “Grundtvigianism”, named after a strongly influential national romantic poet and theologian living in the nineteenth century. Danish identity was for him rooted in Christianity, Nordic mythology and agricultural landscapes of fields of waving grain. And, even more importantly, he celebrated the idea of Denmark as a small power with a large spirit under threat from outside influences. Denmark had lost territory to Sweden, Norway and Germany and had become a small, ethnically homogeneous nation. Subsequently, a narrative was put forward by Grundtvig and other national romantics based on the saying that “what is outwards lost should be inwards gained”. Other places might have higher mountains, greater achievements, wiser people or greater wealth, but “we”, the narrative says, are a coherent, morally and culturally superior people. Small is good, and small is beautiful. In this way a myth of Danishness was constructed, depicting a small but morally superior nation doing best by bounding itself from the outside world and relying on its own (superior) social values. In the above, we can, for example, see it revitalised in the self-congratulatory campaign “The Price of Goodness”. Part of that narrative is also a celebration, both positive and negative, of the plain or ordinary
man. Grundtvigianism contained an internal contradiction between on the one hand an ideology of enlightening the people, encouraging its spiritual development, and on the other hand contempt for scholarship and intellectual knowledge. Historically the enlightenment won a dominant position, but it always contained an internal struggle between “intellectual” and “popular” knowledge. This struggle we recognise today in a part of what we have called the “social nationalism”, which gains its strength from a discursive opposition between “the elite” and “the people”.

In general, Danish national feeling became identified with values that we normally identify as democratic. It was based on endeavours to produce equality and the abolition of class barriers, of being a country where “few have too much and fewer too little” (another of Grundtvig’s sayings). To this should be added the values of freedom, mental breadth and tolerance. It was, however, a democracy that never stood its test because its unspoken precondition was the ethnic homogeneity of the population. The same was true of the development of the welfare state during the twentieth century. Denmark is a nation that regards itself as liberal and tolerant and places a high value on social equality and social cohesion, promoted through a well-developed welfare system. It has nurtured a long-standing interest in global humanitarian issues, in this way building an image of external as well as internal solidarity. This solidarity is the foundation stone of the welfare state, but what has gone largely unrecognised is the degree to which it has been based on a cultural concurrence of equality and likeness. In many cases, the unacknowledged presupposition of solidarity is a relatively homogeneous population (for a Scandinavian perspective, see Molina 1997, Gullestad 2002). This is what we experience in “welfare nationalism”, when the internal Other is seen as undermining “our” welfare state and exploiting resources created by “ourselves” and our ancestors.

This welfare nationalism, originally based on progressive values such as solidarity and equality, can be found in all Scandinavian countries. It is, as the interviews show, narrated with reference to values relating to rights, public services and security, and basically imagined as a strong community. In welfare nationalism, “we” are the welfare state. This narrative of the welfare state has been connected with social nationalism, which focuses on welfare for the ordinary people in Denmark, and has become visible in the debate over Danish membership of the European community. The extensive EU scepticism, which in Denmark originally mostly came from the left of the political spectrum, was articulated from a critical position as a critique of the external power of governance, which was destroying and undermining Danish sovereignty, democracy and welfare. The EU was the external threatening Other, which, in alliance with the national elites, was undermining Danish
culture and the Danish welfare state. In this way, to a great extent welfare nationalism (together with critical nationalism) became a left-wing project.

In Denmark, as in many other European countries, the challenges of globalization and immigration have strengthened the reproduction of a historical Orientalist discourse. Racism, nationalism and populism have in many places been connected into a coherent political discourse. The myth is one of social nationalism, which claims that the political and cultural elites have formed an alliance with rootless international elites and with foreigners (immigrants and refugees) threatening the values of ordinary people, the rooted and the homeland itself (Dyrberg 2000). This has primarily been a right-wing project. What is special to the Danish case, however, is that the triad of social, welfare and critical nationalism have cut across the axis of left and right. In this way, nationalism has entered the scene from both sides of the political spectrum and thereby made the national discourse more open and vulnerable to the system of Orientalism and to the turning of “progressive” social values into a basis for chauvinism and racism.

What we have tried to do in this paper, by way of an analysis of the differential narrative (re)constructions of nationalism in everyday life, is to encourage a possible understanding of what we regard as a new configuration of nationalism in Denmark. The “new” refers to relatively recent additions of threatening Others—global elites, the European Union and immigrants from Other cultures—reactions to whom are articulated with historical myths about a small but morally superior country. The analysis illustrates that nationalism has many voices and consequently should be treated as a plurality. These nationalisms are not only produced and articulated by radical and regressive forces, they are an integrated part of everyday life. They are both contradictory and contested, but what we can observe in the current phase is a slide, particularly within the social/welfare/critical triad, towards Orientalist stereotypes and discourses. The story of the welfare state and the ordinary people becomes the story of internal and external threatening Others.

Acknowledgements
This paper was first presented to the ICCG in Mexico City, January 2005. We thank the participants in our session for a fruitful discussion. We also thank Allan Pred for his helpful comments on the paper, and James Anderson and two anonymous referees for constructive feedback.

References


