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### **A new kind of history? Changing ideals in Danish historical research**

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Academic history in Denmark — let it be said at the outset — is neither monolithic nor uniform. Danish historians pursue very different aims and research strategies in their work — approaches ranging from clear-cut empiricist to more decidedly structuralist ways of thinking. In this respect, the Danish historical profession is very like that of most other European countries.

Yet, it is possible to identify changes that have taken place in the principal questions that are raised, the research methods that are favoured and the overarching aims that are pursued. Changes of this kind seldom, if ever, affect the whole range of ongoing historical research. Nonetheless, shifts in questions, methods and aims can be seen to have a fairly significant bearing on the identity of the historical profession as a whole since they indicate that the prevailing paradigms of historical research are undergoing change.

#### ***History of society or democratization of history***

Several new ideals of historical research emerged in Europe during the 1970's and 1980's. One of the most influential of these was the idea that the overarching aim of historical research was to produce an integrated history of society. The idea was outlined and propagated in Britain by Eric Hobsbawm in his seminal essay *From social History to*

*the History of Society* (1971-1974). In Germany, it was especially Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka who vigorously promoted this new ideal under the name of *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*.

The idea of working towards an integrated history of society gained many adherents in Denmark as well, as from the mid-1970's. It did so especially among historians who defined themselves as belonging to the 1968 generation. Throughout Denmark, university students and junior staff worked together arranging seminars and establishing journals that were designed to promote new and alternative approaches to the study of history. The most successful and influential of these new journals was *Den jyske historiker*, based at the University of Aarhus in Jutland. It gained, and still has, contributors and subscribers from all of Denmark.

These attempts to develop a new ideal of historical research had several features in common. Firstly, the whole idea of working towards a history of society was seen as counteracting the tendency towards an ever-increasing specialization and fragmentation of historical studies. It was not conceived as yet another disciplinary specialization, alongside such well-established specializations as political, economic and social history. Rather, the whole venture was a deliberate attempt to prevent disciplinary fragmentation in the study of history.

Secondly, if such a holistic approach was to be realised, it demanded that historians developed strategies of research in which theories of society or social process were an integral part and functioned as the guiding principles of analysis and explanation. Wehler and Kocka attempted to establish such a research strategy in a German setting by critically merging the social theories of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Among younger Danish historians there was a definite preference for variants of marxist theory, and such theory formed the basis upon which the first attempts to write a more integrated history of Danish society were made: *Klassestrukturen i Danmark 1870-1920* (1974) and *Det danske classesamfund 1920-1940* (1976).

Thirdly, these approaches all tended to view and treat society as a social system. They tended to focus attention on social structures rather than modes of human action and to see economic structures as the more decisive or determining ones. Consequently, it was characteristic of these approaches to the writing of a history of society that people tended to be viewed as victims rather than as agents of social process.

However, the attempt to move towards an integrated history of society was not the only important new development in history writing

during the 1970's. An endeavour to democratize history was another new ideal of historical research — an ideal that became rather influential as from the late 1970's. There were different variants of the attempt to democratize history but, compared with the prevailing conceptions in traditional historical scholarship, they all implied a radical shift in the type of perspective employed in the writing of history.

There was the whole move from “a history from above” to “a history from below”, the latter seeking to see socio-historical process from the viewpoint of those who had been the governed, the harassed or the repressed. Related to this was the shift in the focus of cultural history from elite culture to popular culture that sought to understand the multiple challenges and achievements in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Last, but not least, there was the widespread attempt by feminist historians not only to populate history with women and children but also to view and assess socio-historical process from distinctively feminist points of view.

The relationship between the adherents of the two new approaches to historical research — one committed to the idea of an integrated history of society, the other to the idea of a democratization of history writing — was frequently complex and sometimes obscure. When the issue at stake was an attack upon the established traditions of history writing, the adherents of both groups formed on occasion a common front. Yet, there were also issues which not only divided but which in some settings actually brought the adherents of these two new approaches into open conflict. This conflict hinged to a significant extent on the fact that the concept of culture played a pivotal role in the works of many of the historians committed to a more democratic or populist approach to history. The concept of culture, as employed by them, underscored the importance of peoples' experience and consciousness — a viewpoint that had little or no place in a structuralist approach to the study of class and society. Such conflicts arose in Britain as well as in Germany.

At the centre of the controversy in Britain were on the one side E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams and on the other Stuart Hall, Perry Anderson and Richard Johnson. The debate filled the pages of several issues of *History Workshop Journal* and reached a climax at the History Workshop meeting on *People's History and Socialist Theory* at Ruskin College in Oxford in December 1979, where the arguments for and against a “culturalist” approach to history were spelled out. The publication of *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590-1914* (1981)

exemplified as well as highlighted the many issues at stake in the conflict between a democratic-culturalist and a structural-holistic approach to the study of history. And some of these issues were clearly political. This point was made by Simon Clarke in *History Workshop Journal* in the following way: "This debate is not simply of academic importance. What is ultimately at issue is our understanding of socialist politics, for the way we understand history cannot be dissociated from the way in which we try to make it".

In Germany, it was the publication of *Klassen und Kultur* (1982) that initiated the controversy. In this book, historians such as Alf Lütke ans Hans Medick — who were both inspired by the work of Thompson and Williams — began to challenge the assumptions that underlay Wehler and Kocka's approach to the writing of a history of society, developed during the 1970's. Kocka responded immediately to this challenge by writing a review-article which he polemically entitled *Klassen oder Kultur? Durchbrüche und Sackgassen in der Arbeitergeschichte* (1982). The long and very heated controversy about *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* versus *Alltagsgeschichte* had thereby got under way.

The tensions and conflicts between a more democratic-culturalist and a more structural-holistic approach were also experienced by many Danish historians. But, in contrast to the situation in Britain and Germany, these tensions did not spark off any major controversy in the late 1970's or early 1980's. There was a reason why no such controversy emerged in Denmark. Historians associated with the afore mentioned journal *Den jyske historiker* had set themselves the task of trying to merge or fuse elements from a structural-holistic approach with elements from a democratic-culturalist approach. In this way they avoided getting into the position — as had been the case in Britain and Germany — of having to opt for either the one or the other of these two approaches.

### *History of society as cultural history*

The venture of *Den jyske historiker* had a dual starting point. On the one hand, the whole venture was occasioned by a growing insight into the analytical and explanatory shortcomings of the available variants of Marxist theory. The turn towards culture and mentalities, therefore, was not only seen as a move to open up new fields of historical

inquiry; it was also perceived as a way of overcoming some of the limitations and shortcomings of a Marxist approach.

Yet, on the other hand, it was agreed from the outset that the focusing of attention upon culture and mentalities was not to imply the abandonment of the ideal of writing an integrated history of society. On the contrary, attending to the worlds of culture and mentalities was seen as a way of exploring the possibility of developing a new and better kind of history of society. There were even those who saw the merging of Marxist history with the histories of culture and mentalities as a way of reaching a fruitful re-formulation of the debate regarding the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

The attempt of *Den jyske historiker* to find a way towards a better kind of history of society took as its theoretical starting point an exploration of the relationship between culture, mentality and ideology. "Culture" was here seen as the whole system of norms regulating human action, "ideology" as more or less coherent and manifest systems of ideas about society and "mentality" as pre-conscious patterns of perceiving and thinking. It was precisely the merging of a Marxist approach with the *Annales* approach to the history of mentalities which, in the understanding of some, made this Danish approach to a history of society into something novel and special.

This shift to culture and mentality created a setting in which a series of new historical studies were produced during the mid and late 1980's. It started with *Fejekosten og Surdejen. Civilisationsprocesser i Europa 1200-1800* (1983) in which different sides of elite as well as popular culture were explored. Then came *Staten og civilisationen* (1984) which was a first attempt to outline the changes in mentality that had taken place in Denmark during the eighteenth century. This was followed by *Kultur, mentalitet, ideologi* (1984) which was devoted to the discussion of general theoretical problems as well as to the study of how national political cultures were made. *Livsformer og kultursammenstød* from 1985 studied different ways of life and clashes of culture on the level of local history.

*Mod en ny samfundshistorie?* (1986) attempted to clarify the challenges that had to be met if a new and better kind of history of society were to be written. *Det skrevne ord i historien* from 1986 explored how the culture of writing and of printing entered oral and popular cultures and how they were used in the establishment of national cultures. Then came *De andre. Udskillelse og anderledeshed* (1987) in

which attention was focused on how minorities and strangers, deviants and dissidents had lived and had been treated. The next in the series was *Pa Jord min Himmel. Kærligheden i historien* (1987) which explored various aspects of the history of sexuality, love and marriage through a series of case studies. And *1788 i 1988. Traditionen utro* (1988) was devoted to a critical analysis of the establishment and history, the functions and ramifications of a very powerful tradition in Danish political culture.

This new approach to history writing became increasingly popular during the 1980's and particularly influential among younger historians. The mounting success of the whole venture was duly celebrated in 1988 with the publication of a major collection of essays: *Historien i kulturhistorien*. This book attempted to demonstrate to a larger public how the new research strategy worked in theory as well as in practice.

When it came to pinpointing the distinguishing features of the approach of *Den jyske historiker*, it was done against the background of well-established traditions or paradigms of historical research. It was argued that this new kind of cultural history was not an historical specialization in the way that cultural history traditionally had been treated. It was presented rather as an attempt to formulate a holistic approach to the study of history. At the same time, it was pointed out that this approach differed from the available models for an integrated history of society. In the words of the editor of *Historien i kulturhistorien*: "Cultural history... is culture seen in the perspective along the time axis and as the history of society it is understood from a holistic point of view or, if you prefer, an over-all view, and where culture and society do overlap but are *not* identical wholes or holistic abstracts for it" (p. 375).

*Historien i kulturhistorien* (1988) also included the presentation of a new and different kind of analysis of the Danish road to modernity. It is Uffe Oestergaard's extended essay on *Peasants and Danes. Danish national Identity and political Culture*, which is so far the most outstanding attempt to outline what an alternative holistic analysis of modern Danish history and society implies in terms of both method and substance. His essay not only sought to pinpoint what was specific about the Danish transition to capitalism; it also sought to relate this issue to an analysis of what is unique about Danish mentality and political culture. Oestergaard's central assertion is that there exist some very special and unique peasant roots of Danish modernity and political culture — roots that go back to the work of Grundtvig and especially to his

concept of "*folkelighed*". Thus, in terms of mentality, all Danes are said to be essentially peasants of the type shaped by Grundtvig's national and educational thinking.

Historians associated with *Den jyske historiker* also produced a history of Denmark to be used in secondary schools in Denmark. Their three volume *Danmarks historie* (1988-90) is an attempt to employ this new holistic conception of cultural history in the writing of a history textbook. Cultural history is defined here as the study of the socio-cultural patterns which can be detected in the interrelationship between the living conditions, modes of behaviour, attitudes and ideas of human beings at different times.

### *Success or failure?*

A critical discussion of what *Den jyske historiker* had actually achieved, with the shift towards the analysis of culture and mentalities, began in 1990. The debate was initiated by Bernard Eric Jensen who set out to determine in *Kulturhistorie — et nyt og bedre helhedsbegreb?* whether the whole venture could be said to be pointing towards a new and better kind of history of society. His critical intervention has been followed by other articles debating not only the actual achievements of *Den jyske historiker* but also raising the question of the standards by which such achievements were to be assessed.

Some of the achievements — all parties seem to agree — are not merely alleged but real and substantial. The effort to extend the field of historical study beyond its traditional limits has been one such notable success. For instance, *Den jyske historiker* has made a significant contribution to changing the issue as to who "populates" Danish history. Groups that were wholly absent or only given scant attention in traditional history books are now both visible and active: peasants and workers, women and children, minorities and dissidents. Moreover, there has been a similar extension as regards the range of human social activities deemed worthy of treatment in history books — family life, popular culture, sports events or political rituals can, nowadays, figure prominently in Danish history writing.

The journal has also contributed to modifying or getting rid of the more blatant forms of social or economic reductionism which were an integral part of most Marxist modes of analysis and explanation in the 1970's. Moreover, in conjunction with this, there has been a tendency



to at least modify, if not move away from the very manifest forms of structural analysis and explanation — thus giving more attention to people as agents rather than victims of historical process.

Two main objections to the present pursuits of *Den jyske historiker* have been raised. The first concerns the way in which concepts and models from different traditions of theoretical thinking have been used. At the core of the whole venture, it has been argued, there is a clear tendency towards eclectic thinking in the bad sense of that term - i.e. a haphazard and uncritical mixing together of concepts and models which actually belong to competing and incompatible traditions of social scientific thought. Thus, there is a very real risk that this tendency towards eclecticism may legitimate the idea that virtually anything goes when it comes to using concepts and theories from the social sciences in historical research.

The second main objection concerns the role which the concept mentality has played in the attempt to establish a new and better kind of history of society. It is a very questionable venture — it has been argued — to place the concept of mentality at the centre of this new history of society. It is a dubious starting point because, at present, there do not seem to exist any clear theories regarding what a mentality actually is and how it is established and formed, maintained and changed. Thus, there is a very real risk that a “mentality” becomes a reified or hypostatized entity — i.e. an independent and arbitrary force which can be used to explain virtually anything and everything.

These two criticisms were brought to bear on Oestergaard's analysis of the specific character of the Danish road to modernity, as a case in point. It was argued that his analysis is founded upon a mixture of radically different and incompatible research strategies, in a manner that is insufficiently thought through — a fairly traditional Marxist analysis of social change having been combined with a rather traditional idealist approach to the study of ideas and social movements, the two having been linked together by means of the mentality concept. Oestergaard's analysis was taken as a clear demonstration of the kind of untenable pseudo-explanations that follow from placing the concept of mentality at the core of a new history of society.

Yet, there are also those who defend the way in which *Den jyske historiker* has sought to establish a new kind of history writing in Denmark. Ole Marquardt, for instance, has argued that what from one point of view is seen as a deeply problematic and untenable form of eclecticism, can from another point of view be seen as a research strategy

that is fully in accordance with the tenets of present-day post-modernist thinking. Thus, as he sees it, the overarching aim of historical research nowadays should not be conceived as the writing of an integrated history of society, but rather as the writing of many different and incompatible histories of cultures.

### *Challenges ahead*

The attempt to further the development of a new and different kind of history writing on the part of *Den jyske historiker* in Denmark has been an exciting as well as a daring project. All parties to the debate can probably agree, I think, on that much. But there is no such agreement when it comes to judging the future prospects of the venture. The issues that are seen to be the crucial challenges ahead entirely depend upon the position from which the project is viewed and assessed.

One important dividing line stems from different appraisals of the contribution of post-modernist thought to historical studies. This involves a rather complex set of issues as the ongoing debate on *History and Post-Modernism* in the pages of *Past and Present* makes quite evident. Post-modernist thinking, as I see it, should neither be accepted wholly nor rejected outright. It had some fruitful and worthwhile contributions to make on several points. Yet it is imperative at the same time to reject certain positions within post-modernist thinking: for instance, the assertion that there is no reality outside language — an assertion that has led to a radical elimination of the reality principle, to a complete obliteration of the difference between fact and fiction and to a reduction of history writing to mere literary conventions. This position can be used to legitimate the idea that the aim of historical studies is to produce a multiplicity of different and incompatible histories of cultures. But there are no good reasons for conceiving this as a new and better kind of history.

The original project of *Den jyske historiker*, as I see it, continues to be a worthwhile and exciting project. It remains an urgent task to counteract and overcome the ongoing specialization and fragmentation of historical studies by seeking to establish new and better models for writing integrated histories of society. But it is also clear that there are still many challenges to be faced before a new history of this kind will have been established.

One such challenge concerns the need to handle the problem of eclecticism in a critical and constructive way. If one sets out to explore

new territories and possibilities, there can be little doubt that this will involve a fair amount of experimentation with different approaches and categories of analysis. Experimentation not only entails developing new approaches and categories, but also using well-established ones in new and different ways. This is a legitimate and worthwhile procedure as long as it is done in a critical and principled way. It must be done in such a way if one is to guard against the possibility that the end result will be no more than a hodge-podge mixture of incompatible concepts and theories.

Another important challenge concerns the need to pinpoint as precisely as possible the crucial shortcomings and deficiencies of the available models for a history of society. One of the key problems here pertains to the relationship between "structure" and "action". The tendency to treat social structures as if they were virtually hypostatized entities is very problematic indeed. There is, therefore, a manifest need for new ways of thinking about the limiting and determining conditions of human action. One possibility here is to give more attention to the processes of socialization and identity formation than has been the norm in historical research — thus seeking to grasp how modes of human action are structured and limited in concrete ways.

A further challenge regards contemporary conceptions of the central and overarching categories of historical analysis. During the last decades new categories have started to play an increasingly pivotal role in historical analysis — categories such as "culture", "gender", "mentality" and "ethnicity". There is a dual task to be performed here. There is the need to undertake a critical analysis of the relationships between these new categories: are they compatible-complementary or incompatible-competing categories? And then there is the further need to critically examine one's understanding of traditional categories of historical analysis — categories such as "production", "politics" and "power" — in the light of the new categories.

Yet another challenge concerns the temporal perspectives and viewpoints to be employed in the writing of histories of society. There is a need to give more emphasis to the analysis of historical process from the perspective that Reinhard Koselleck terms "past futures" (*Vergangene Zukunft*) — i.e. a perspective that regards the field of experience as well as the future expectations of historical actors. In this context, there is also a need to give greater emphasis to the analysis of how the same historical process is perceived differently from the multiplicity of socio-cultural viewpoints in a given society.

Finally, there is an evident need today for a re-newed discussion of the political and cultural purposes of history writing. This issue was only given scant attention in Denmark during the 1980's. Yet it is not tenable to work on the development of a new kind of history without considering in some detail the purposes that history writing is intended to serve in present-day society. One of the overarching aims, as I see it, must be the promotion of relevant and adequate forms of historical consciousness — thus mediating insight into why present-day options are as they are, as well as insight into the differences between the possible and probable futures which face us today.

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