Introduction

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Like many other developed countries in recent years, Denmark has seen an intensification of public debates about national identity.[1] Like elsewhere, the main causes of this development are commonly seen to be a growth in immigration and the general globalisation of the ways and means of daily life. Again following a common pattern, national history is much in demand as an argumentative resource in these debates. In so far as there is anything peculiar about the Danish debate, apart from the occasional stridency in an otherwise somewhat sedate culture, it may be the extent of agreement about what Danish history is. Across otherwise deep divisions – in politics, ideology and cultural values – there seems to be a surprising unanimity about some very basic features of the history of Denmark.

First of all, there is the assumption that the history of Denmark is indeed a *Danish* history, a matter of the life and times of a distinct and homogenous people easily identified in terms of nationality and geography. Closely associated with this is the idea of the continuity of this Danish history. Across apparently big political, social and economic transformations, there is a strong tendency to discern underlying steady factors, often of a cultural, even spiritual, nature. The R-word is used with great hesitation, if at all, be it about 1536 (the Reformation), 1661 (the introduction of absolutism), or 1849 (the adoption of the free constitution). These events may be deemed revolutionary in this or that respect, but rarely a Revolution. Often, of course, a good deal of progressivism goes along with such perceptions of continuity; if contemporary Danes are so similar to their forebears and have issued so smoothly from them, the history of Denmark is really an account of the emergence and eventual flourishing of modern Denmark. And so the Reformation, although of course a religious upheaval, was somehow really sowing the seeds of the secular society; the absolutist system, despite all its faults, was really laying the foundation of the rule of law; the successive abject military defeats of the nineteenth century, although they led to the loss of vast areas of the realm and prolonged economic and social depression, were for that very reason really the clarion call

to the dormant Danish spirit of solidarity that is the supposed backbone of the welfare state; the parliamentary constitution of 1849, while a momentous step into the modern world of democracy, was in fact also a ratification of notions of freedom and equality with deep roots in the Danish spirit; and so on.

Along with ideas of distinctiveness, homogeneity, continuity and communal progress, one normally finds exceptionalism, and, indeed, the notion that Denmark is unique is wide-spread even in the more serious literature. Some degree of exceptionalism is, of course, a common denominator in most forms of nationalism. It tends to have an evangelising edge to it – distinctly so, for example, in the Swedish version – and this may tempt to aggression, as with the United States of America. But this is not so in Denmark, and here we may be approaching something with a serious claim to Danish peculiarity. Those who trumpet Danish uniqueness have rarely shown much interest in converting the outside world – Olof Palme would have had a difficult career in Denmark – let alone in doing so forcibly. Danish exceptionalism is strikingly inward looking, indeed, that is its very point. We are led to believe that only those who are of Danishness can see it; that it is a spiritual quality, not easily adopted or even absorbed and certainly not something to be conveyed by simple means. The long-standing and strong pacifist element in modern Danish history is not least to be seen against this background. It is this inwardness combined with a certain preciousness and exclusiveness that strike outside observers as very difficult to understand. Indeed, one such spectator to the ways of contemporary Danes came to the conclusion that they live to such a degree in imaginative seclusion that they must be considered a tribe more than a modern nation on a par with others.

In this collection of essays we prefer to see the matter in a historical rather than an anthropological light. What I have outlined here in simple terms is of course a special case of the survival value of romantic nationalism. The self-conception that is being displayed in modern Danish debate and undergirded by a great deal of historical writing is a direct legacy of the ideas of Denmark as a nation state and of its nationality as identical with Danish ethnicity conceived in cultural and spiritual terms and issued with a history made up to fit the bill. What gave this common European story a special twist in the case of Denmark was the defeatism that comes of defeat, mingled with the grandeur of a

communal spiritual experience supposedly closed to all outsiders and to be maintained closed (as reflected, for example, in the relatively poor record of translation of great Danish literature compared with literatures of similar size).

If the producers and consumers of Danish history would take quite seriously the possibility that several of the most elementary premises for the history they are producing and consuming are themselves the outcome of a distinct episode, or series of episodes, in the history of Denmark in the nineteenth century, then much might be gained. First of all, people would discover what at present only a relatively few specialists appreciate, that Denmark has a long history as a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, intercontinental country. Similarly, it could become common knowledge that while this complex country had its ups and downs, it drew upon a range of shared European ideas in the early modern period of the political, institutional, economic, military and ideological means that were required to maintain unity. For example, it might be salutary to reflect in particular upon the fact that Denmark partook of a broad European political tradition that emerged in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and which saw a close conceptual and practical link between patriotism and absolutism. For while few would have any appetite for absolutist rule – however rosy an image may have been painted of the Danish variety thereof – the more general idea that patriotism got its modern shape as a value centred on an institutional arrangement, a form of government, and not as an inherent part of ethnicity or nationality, might be worth updating for liberal democratic circumstances. Along with such practical lessons from pre-romantic and pre-nationalist times might come a more flexible idea of how to account for the history of Denmark. For despite all its obvious limitations, the history writing of the Enlightenment is a liberating acquaintance simply because it has not yet adopted the monotone consensus that has narrowed the Danish horizon so disturbingly for nearly two centuries.

When we turn to Danish historiography in the Enlightenment, we see that its narrative follows a basic pattern that is well known in other historiographies (Kidd).[2] It is a tale of pristine Northern – "Gothic" or "Celtic" – liberty, spread across parts of Europe, antithetical to Southern unfreedom, eventually lost to feudal lords and now defining the true task of, or challenge to, the existing polity. Within this general history

of liberty we find a repertory of ideas and events that bear upon questions of identity in the Danish realm. However, the document that more than any other brought about an ongoing explicit debate about the nature of the Danish political nation was in fact more concerned with the ideological moorings – domestic and European – of the English, Irish and Scottish kingdoms under their new ruler after 1688 (Hayton). This was Sir Robert Molesworth's neo-republican version of the history of liberty lost across most of Europe – as epitomised in Denmark – but now re-secured in the virtuous republican monarchy of England and its dependencies. This provocation set off a series of Danish responses based upon the most recent developments in Protestant natural law, a circumstance that may appear paradoxical and which has not been well understood. For it has long been recognised that Denmark had been outside the profound influence of Roman civil law that most of Europe to the south had experienced, and consequently Danish thinkers did not live with the main source material for the Protestant renewal of natural law from Hugo Grotius onwards. Not only that, but it became a mark of perceived Danish identity that the realm had remained more or less un-Romanised in law and politics. Here the contrast with Scotland is instructive, for while she likewise had remained largely outside of Rome's tentacles, her status as the junior partner in the conglomerate British state made it attractive to accentuate her distinctiveness by modernising her law through the means of Roman law, and with this came the modern developments in natural law that became so central to the Scottish Enlightenment (Cairns).

When Denmark nevertheless eventually took up natural law, it was because a variety thereof had become available during the closing decades of the seventeenth century which suited the state of its political culture particularly well. This was the immensely influential theory of Samuel von Pufendorf and, of special importance in Denmark, its development by Christian Thomasius. While natural law theories had taken many forms, they had in common the suggestion of some form of transcendent, in the end religious, source of the validity of all normative structures – moral, political and legal. In these various theories the distinction between natural and divine law was a matter of how their source was accessed, by "natural reason" or by revelation. Pufendorf dramatically changed the approach to natural law when he suggested that while the divinity was the ultimate ground of natural law, as of everything else in creation, human reason had no agreed-upon access

to what this meant and had to rely on the simple empirically ascertainable "norm" that we have to seek peace in order to live. How we do this, what sort of polity we adopt, is a matter of time and circumstance. While Pufendorf's immediate aim was to deprive orthodox Lutherans and other confessional religionists of their claims to privileged access to the character of divine law, he did in fact provide an argument that was aimed against all forms of foundationalism in morals and politics.

It was in this argumentative realm that early Enlightenment thinkers in Denmark could offer a coherent response to the likes of Molesworth. As the great Ludvig Holberg spelled out for the Englishman, the state's primary purpose was peace and security, not moral uplift (Olden Jørgensen), a point re-inforced by Jens Schelderup Schneedorff (Tamm). In this perspective Denmark's absolute monarchy could be presented as modern and progressive, having left behind traditional moralised and moralising structures of authority. This line of argument had obvious and important religious targets in both Church and State, as demonstrated in a famous confrontation between Thomasius himself and the Danish court preacher Hector Gottfried Masius (Olden Jørgensen), but that is a topic too extensive for this volume.

The idea of civil society as a purely conventional means of seeking peace and security in a fractious world was of course well suited for early-modern polities that were conglomerates of several very different peoples, such as the Danish empire. For as Colin Kidd points out, there were no expectations in early-modern Europe that political communities had to be based on ethnic uniformity and integrity. In hindsight we might say that in a Pufendorfian perspective ethnicity and nationality are similar to transcendent religion and metaphysics in their assertion of a privileged ground of justification that stands outside of the mere flow of events. For the Pufendorfian, all of these are sources of the very opposite of the political state's purpose, namely peace.

At the same time, Pufendorf had opened up a historical perspective on society, law and politics. If these normative structures are conventional responses to the need for peace, then they are to be understood in their particular circumstances and, what is more, the account of them – their history – becomes a tool for the rhetoric to justify them and secure them. In this regard, too, Holberg initiates a modernisation of Danish historiography in both theory and prac-

tice with his major national and dynastic histories. Much of the historical work that ensued was concerned with patriotism but, as mentioned earlier, a patriotism focused on the institutional apparatus that tied together the conglomerate state and which was personified in the official person of the monarch. This form of patriotism – common in early-modern Europe – was obviously particularly well suited to a polity without ethnic or political uniformity. In addition, on a Pufendorfian understanding of a state such as Denmark, patriotism could be seen as an Ersatz public morality much more serviceable for civic peace than the higher grounds clamoured for by religionists. It is therefore hardly surprising that there was an ongoing debate in eighteenth-century Denmark about the nature and requirements of patriotism (Olden-Jørgensen, Feldbæk).

The exploration of forces that secure the cohesiveness of civil society did, however, go much beyond patriotism among thinkers concerned with the nature of the Danish state. Christian Thomasius, Pufendorf's greatest disciple, had put forward sophisticated ideas of how mores, fashion and conventional forms of behaviour function to stabilise society; they are in effect a social contract by other means. This line of argument was forcefully propagated in the Danish realm by an array of very different thinkers, such as Christoph Heinrich Amthor (Eskildsen), Holberg (Eskildsen, Laursen), Otto Thott and Bolle Willum Luxdorph (Laursen). But Thomasius's argument was given an important twist. Whereas Thomasius himself had tended to focus specifically on French fashion as normative, Amthor saw fashion as the expression of local custom, thus further strengthening the historical particularism that we have noted earlier and that is integral to Pufendorf's conventionalist philosophy. Much more important and effective in public debate was, however, Holberg's pursuit of this programme in his plays and much of his essayistic oeuvre where he analysed an astounding ensemble of personae and offices from different parts of the Danish conglomerate state. Nobody before or since has done more to capture the question of identities in a state such as Denmark (Eskildsen). Against this background, the popular rejection of the short-lived Prime Minister Johann Friedrich Struensee's drastic Enlightenment reform programme acquires a deeper ideological dimension; for here was a man who – perhaps on the basis of Cynic philosophical ideas – simply rejected the importance of conventional forms altogether (Laursen).

If the conglomerate Danish state with its absolutist form of government in the first half of the eighteenth century could be analysed by its leading thinkers as perfectly intelligible in Pufendorfian and Thomasian terms, it was also well prepared for receiving the comparative and historical approach of Montesquieu. True, Holberg rejected the Frenchman's climatic theory as swiftly as he had done away with all the other attempts to anchor politics in something over and above its own sphere, which was the concern with security and the business of day-to-day life. But Holberg appreciated the historical interpretation of *The Spirit of Laws.* The latter was also pursued by Peder Kofod Ancher who elaborated the importance of national particularity, stressing how the North had remained independent of Roman and German law, and how the special path of Denmark had led to a regime that was absolute without being despotic (Tamm).

This new historicism was significantly boosted through the work of Paul-Henri Mallet who adapted his Genevan republicanism to a theory of Danish monarchy as rooted in a distinctively Nordic aboriginal liberty. Secure outside the reach of Rome, Nordic peasantry had enjoyed a singular liberty which they eventually planted in the slavish South as opportunity arose (Kidd; Horstbøll). Monarchs were elective; government was by consent, as also Peter Frederik Suhm insisted. But all was lost to feudalism, from which only strong monarchy provided safety. With its emphasis on peasant freedom as the justifying objective, this was a line of argument with at least ambivalent political implications. However, much the most original Danish thinker in this vein, Tyge Rothe, saw that while peasant servitude must be condemned, a modern society could not be based upon small landholders. Having re-told the story of Nordic liberty in the brilliant terms provided by Book III of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations,* Rothe stressed the structural importance of trade between country and town and suggested that in a country such as Denmark this could only be effective if an agrarian capitalism was encouraged (Horstbøll). Concern with the distinctive problems of Denmark could hardly have led to a more un-Danish argument.

The importance of Pufendorfian and Thomasian themes in the major Danish attempts at self-understanding in the first half of the eighteenth century is perhaps unique in Europe. Even so, it was not by any means unrivalled; in fact, the philosophy of Christian Wolff was soon a major

intellectual factor on many fronts, especially in the academic world. It is striking, however, that several Danish thinkers were particularly concerned to bring about the unlikely marriage of Wolffianism and historicism. The most obvious explanation is that the need for a historical approach already had set down deep roots due to the earlier impact first of Pufendorf and Thomasius, then of Montesquieu. Thus the previously mentioned legal historian Kofod Ancher saw himself as a student of Wolff while at the same time pursuing his historical inspirations from Montesquieu. The key was the common Enlightenment idea that there is a universal human nature – to be deduced with Wolffian precision – but that this humanity expresses itself under such different circumstances through time and across space that it has to be studied comparatively. This was worked out with particular originality by the greatest of the Danish Wolffians, Jens Kraft, once he took up Joseph-François Lafitau's extraordinary work on indigenous Americans. But while Lafitau's overriding concern was, through a comparative study of American with ancient civilization, to show how a basically static humanity had spread across the world from the original couple while preserving the kernel of true religion, Kraft was a thorough natural historian. For the Dane had read Fontenelle and argued that while human nature was universal, it was progressive and could be studied by the comparative method without presupposing fanciful diffusionist ideas pressed by confessional religion (Aarsleff).

While the philosophical basis might shift, the Danish interest in historical anthropology persisted, especially the concern to explain the special path of Nordic freedom. This got a new and dramatic political twist with the – ultimately successful (1788) – campaign to abolish the adscription (serfdom) of the peasants. In one of the most remarkable public relations coups of the absolutist Enlightenment, the government succeeded in marshalling the old idea of the king as the true protector of the ancient liberty of the peasant and in closely associating this with the rhetoric of patriotism. If the king was to be the restorer of liberty, he had to be supported by the patriotic loyalty of his subjects. This led to a wave of patriotic activities, mainly the formation of patriotic societies for anything from agricultural improvement to the support of widows. While this line of argument was good government policy, it also opened the way for a rather more modern tenor in the argument about the kind of liberty that was being protected and restored, namely a discernibly individualistic tendency so that the old language about

patriotism, peace and security now was joined by personal freedom. In this connection it is remarkable that the Danish debate already as a matter of course employed the locution of human rights (menneske-rettigheder) (Bregnsbo).

This pursuit of patriotism as the epitome of peace, safety and freedom was seen and cultivated as the highest form of civic virtue and became a distinctive and long lasting feature of the late absolutist Enlighten-ment in Denmark (Lundgreen-Nielsen). In its very structure it was of course "non-political" in the sense that it did not concern itself with the sovereign rights of the monarch. Yet the very fact that such a de-bate was undertaken with all the attendant efforts to create new social institutions contributed significantly to the building up a social sphere in which public opinion was crucial (Munck), and this was a legacy of great importance for the political changes of the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

In the eighteenth-century debates about the nature and direction of the state of Denmark, the importance of the comparative historical ap-proach played an absolutely crucial role, as we have seen. This was the main way in which the participants in these debates could achieve some degree of external perspective on their place in the world. However, as the century wore on, this received an important supplement in the form of outside observation by contemporaries. In a literature of travel, ethnography, reports of oral testimony and other genres, subjects of the Danish realm, including many who were not "ethnic" Danes, com-plicated the self-perception of the latter through their accounts of the far flung peoples of the realm (Harbsmeier). This growing new litera-ture had important ties to the historical anthropology of the North that had been central to Danish Enlightenment thinking.

In a very short span of time, the developments in the late Enlighten-ment's political discourse were themselves to be transformed out of all recognition. Patriotism became nationalistic, and nationalism became ethnically defined, especially as defeat in war and loss of major parts of the realm occurred. At the same time, the idea of liberty as individual freedom based on productive landholding – however mythical, perhaps exactly because mythical – was transformed into dreamy notions of spiritual freedom through self cultivation, but a self that was collectiv-ized by an ideal of community as the only authentic means of evoking

self-realisation. Ultimately this was a religious matter. And once ethnic nationalism and spiritual liberation were coupled with a distinctively folkish evangelical Christianity, the foundations were laid for a national historiography with little appreciation of the complexities exhibited by the Danish realm and its multiple attempts at self-understanding in the Enlightenment. This volume does not pretend to offer more than a series of glimpses of these complexities, especially since we deliberately have shied away from religious developments as being too much for the present occasion. However, Enlightenment in glimpses does not seem inappropriate for its Danish version.