

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS - 8 SCHOOLS IN DENMARK: CONVERSATIONS
ABOUT EDUCATION AND PORNOGRAPHY
WITH THE THIRD REAL

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England.

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Soon after I walked into the room of the Third Real (tenth grade) English class at the Rosenvangsskole in Copenhagen I was asked: "What impressions do Americans have of Denmark?" My answer: "The land of Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales and pornography!" Of course this response was oversimplified. But the discussion which it provoked gave me some impressions about Danish education which I would like to share with you. These impressions complement but do not replace the general characterization which I ascribed to my fellow countrymen. Both Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales and pornography share much in common with contemporary Danish life in general and Danish education in particular. I shall return to this cryptic observation later.

Before one boards a bus at the Town Hall Square, he can see around him much of the tension and attractiveness of contemporary Denmark. There is the imposing Town Hall at one end of the square, which, while I was there, was the busy center for voting in the general elections. To one side is the beginning of the Stroget, the famous pedestrian walk, where porno shops and Danish furniture compete for the stroller's attention. To the other side is Tivoli, the happiest place in Europe: an amusement park whose elegant paths and lakes have on their borders lovely rides and games. Tivoli shows that the spirit of Hans Christian Andersen coupled with the design talents of other Danes provided fun for Europeans long before Walt Disney ever heard of Anaheim.

To get to the Rosenvangsskole one must take a bus north and east from the Town Hall Square and travel through residential Copenhagen. As one leaves the center of town, the architecture changes from both very old and very new to late nineteenth century, aged and in need of cleaning and repair. The people on the streets change from the gorgeous, young ladies, mini-skirted and blonde, and dapper young men

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to matronly, elder lady shoppers and old men talking. The dramatic age difference between the street people in the central city and those farther out results, I am sure, from the large percentage of men and women who both work, leaving mainly the retired in the residential areas during the day.

By the time the bus winds its way over canals and by lakes to Praestograde, where the school is located, the buildings have become lines of walk-up apartment houses. The area is inhabited by middle class families, many of them working in the civil service. On the corner by the bus stop there is an old building which is obviously a school. But the entrance to the school yard is on the side. When one walks around he finds a court-yard which is a beehive of activity. The yard is surrounded by the original school building, a set of "temporary" buildings, and a modern structure. The court itself is buzzing with teachers and children apparently working together on rebuilding the play equipment.

The students at the Rosvenvangsskole range in age from seven to seventeen. The school provides primary and some secondary education. The viceskøllinspector (vice principal) of the school, Mr. Meulenbracht, outlined the overall curriculum of the school: in the first three classes, the emphasis is on learning Danish writing and reading, arithmetic, gymnastics, and religion. History and science are added to this list in the fourth and fifth grades. Also in the fifth year, students begin to learn English, which they continue to study until the end of their school years. In the sixth and seventh years the students split into two streams, based on teacher recommendation: one stream prepares for a final examination and the possible entry into gymnasium, the pre-university institution -- this stream is called the Real, after the final exam, the Realsexamen; the other stream shifts students into vocational classes until the required leaving age is met: these students do not necessarily prepare for an exam, although they have an option of taking some sort of school leaving qualification. (For a schematic presentation of the Danish educational structure, see Appendix I.)

The class I spent the most time with during my visit to the Rosenvangsskole was the English class of the third year in the Real. These students were in the academic track of the school; however, they had, for all practical purposes, missed their chance to go to gymnasium. Students who go to gymnasium qualify in the first or second year of the Real. Only about two students per year go on to gymnasium from the Rosenvangsskole, out of a potential population of about twenty in the first year of Real. The students I talked to were in the terminal year of their formal education. (At least for the time being; the Danes pursue all sorts of part-time courses throughout their lives.) Indeed, Mrs. Brattz, their English teacher, warned me before I met them that they were slow students: her exact word was "dumb." I did my best to discount this preview, for I knew that they had survived at least one rigorous selection process. Also, the expectation of slowness is a self-fulfilling prophesy.

When I entered the class I expected to be a passive observer. However, I was immediately introduced by the teacher and it became quite clear that I was expected to be both the subject and leader of the lesson of the day: here was a chance for the teacher to force the students to use their English and listen to mine, even though my accent was undoubtedly foreign to any other English they had heard or were likely to hear -- a mid-Atlantic Arkansas twang. The problem of being conspicuous has created difficulties for me whenever I visit a school to observe. Nevertheless, in this instance, by giving me control of the class, the teacher also gave me an invaluable opportunity to find out what the students thought of their education, among other things; an opportunity not to be missed.

My first question to them was: What is wrong with the Rosenvangsskole? The response was quite restrained. The only complaints which they articulated were not being allowed to smoke in school -- a common problem, regardless of country -- and not having the right to address their teachers in an informal manner -- a more interesting issue.

The issue of address arises from the character of the pronoun "you" in Danish: the formal you is "De;" the informal, "Du." The students wanted to address the instructors as Du. I asked them to explain to me why this matter of address was so important. The response was that it would show that teacher and student were friendly peers in the learning process and that this relationship would improve the environment for learning. No more detailed explanation of this last point was offered.

In my own teaching experiences I have been intrigued by the importance which students now attach to the mode of address. This interest grew out of my teaching experiences, because when I was a high school student and undergraduate in the early sixties I did not worry at all about what I called a teacher. My students in the Program in Public Policy Studies (see IJS 3 & 4) called me, quite ostentatiously at the beginning, by my first name. Whereas in my regular classes and seminars, I was always addressed as Mr. or Professor. The form of address was always at the students' initiative, never as the result of my statement of preference. My evaluation of the different learning situations and their relationship to address was that the learning environment was the occasion for, not the result of, the form of address. Also, I would not say that one was better than the other: they were just different. The character of the learning situation did affect the expectations concerning the teacher's role and therefore the most comfortable mode of address. But whenever mode of address becomes an issue, it really is a code for problems in the classroom; behind this issue lurks a more basic question about the appropriate style of teaching.

In the third Real English class, Mrs. Brattz, the instructor, herself characterized her methods as conservative. Undoubtedly these methods, more than address, were at stake. The same was true with other teachers in the school.

When the students raised the issues of smoking and address, Mrs. Brattz asked why they had not elected a representative to the school council, so that he or she could discuss these issues. The school council seemed to be a student organization which was one part of the overall governing structure of the school. The students' response was that the council had no power. This statement raised the issue of who controlled the Rosenvangsskole. The students had no helpful answer, but in my conversations with teachers and staff, I was able to piece together a partial picture of power in the school.

General school policy was made by a committee of the Copenhagen City Council and implemented by the Chief Education Officer of Copenhagen. However, each school has a governing board composed of the following members: three representatives elected at-large from the geographical attendance area of the school (these members were called "political members" by Mr. Meulenbracht, although it seems that they do not run as party members); two parents of students in the school, nominated by the at-large representatives but elected by the parents; two teachers elected by the school faculty; and two students elected by the student body. The powers of the board were not at all clear. The vice principal said that the board had little impact on the day to day life of the school. Its most important task seemed to be dealing with parents of students who had disciplinary and academic problems or who dropped out of school. The board would not deal with student complaints. Nor would it have any power in hiring and promotion of teachers and administrators. Personnel decisions were made by the principal, and decisions about principals were made by the Chief Education Officer of Copenhagen. However, it appeared that the local school board was then seeking a role in hiring of teachers and principals.

In Denmark, unlike Sweden and the metropolitan areas of the U.S., the teachers unions, though strong, seem to have a cooperative, not an adversary, relationship with the administration in a particular school. Both teachers and administrators at the Rosenvangsskole minimized labor relations problems.

My impression of the distribution of power in the Rosenvangsskole is that, in spite of democratic institutions, most important decisions are made by the principal and teachers, with only minimal influence exerted by students and lay board members. Obviously, the students in the Third Real English class agreed with me, because they felt that electing a representative to participate in the school council would be a waste of time. But of course this sceptical attitude helps ensure a continuation of their traditional impotence.

Although the students were not interested in the internal politics of the school, they were intensely interested in the politics of the world outside. I was visiting the class the day after the general election in Denmark. The walls of the classroom were covered with political posters. And a couple of days prior to the general election, the students of the Third Real had had a mock election. The result of the mock election was almost a draw between

the two major parties, with the minor parties having the balance. There was no clear cut electoral decision. The result of the actual election in Denmark was exactly the same. Indeed, on the day I was at the Rosenvangsskole, it was not clear who had in fact won the election. (Later Jens Otto Krag, the Socialist leader, was able to form a government.) It is quite interesting to see the division among the students reflect a similar division among their parents. The close balance between the Danish left and right does not seem to be affected by a generation gap.

This balance in opposing views was not restricted to party identification. There was a similar split in the class between those who favored the recent reform of the pornography laws which has opened up Danish society and those who strongly opposed it.

Much of the hour I spent with the Third Real was spent debating the pornography issue. I should admit that I encouraged the debate not only because I was interested in their opinions on this particular issue, but also because I believe that one of the two best measures of facility in a language is the ability to argue in it; the other is the ability to tell and appreciate a good joke.

The quality of the debate was uneven. I was able to involve only about half the class in actual discussion. Those in favor of the liberalization of anti-pornography statutes offered two arguments to support their position: first, there was an increase in personal freedom in this reform, and any such increase is good; second, the change had reduced "criminality." The latter argument was of course disputed by the other side; however, even the experts seem to disagree about the actual statistics, so there was no resolution. If one takes "criminality" to mean "sex crimes," then the Chief Constable of Copenhagen says such crimes have not decreased since liberalization; academic criminologists disagree.

The students who opposed the reform were less clear about their reasons. The first argument offered was that the change had violated Christian principles; this argument was not open to reasoned discussion of its premises, so no one took it up. The second argument was fascinating and deserved detailed consideration which the class could not give it under the constraints of time: the liberalization of the pornography laws had increased the freedom of the porno fans but had limited the freedom of those who did not want to see pornographic movies. The girl who made this point said it was almost impossible to find a film which was not pornographic. Other students in the class disputed the factual basis of this assertion, but I suggested that this sort of argument, which was open to factual investigation, ought to be pursued. No matter what its factual basis, the discussion of the argument in itself highlighted the nature of the concept freedom for the students and forced them to think again about what they meant when they invoked this particular value in an argument.

The most perceptive remark to come out of the discussion of pornography came from a young man who had been the most articulate champion of the liberalization of the pornography laws. He said his regret about the results of the change was that a few people were making so much money out of it. The commercialization of pornography violated his social and political views. I personally had been struck by exactly the same impression; indeed, this is my major complaint about the liberalization of pornography laws as it manifests itself in Denmark.

All in all the great debate over pornography in the Third Real English class demonstrated a facility in thought and debate which one would be hard pressed to find in ninety per cent of the advanced foreign language classrooms in American high schools. Many of the students in the class were silent and obviously did not follow what was being said; but those who participated in the discussion were quite satisfactory. I would not characterize the class as brilliant; but I certainly would not join their teacher in calling them dumb.

The Third Real taught me much about the relationship among Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales, pornography, and Danish education. The propensity toward fairy tales has made some of those in the educational system exaggerate the positive characteristics of Danish schools. And this attitude shares with pornography a satisfaction with vicarious thrills which inhibits dealing with the actual problems of the system.

Both problems may be illustrated by a remark made to me by some officials I talked to: they said that "Danish education was completely open and informal; there were no problems of teacher/student relationships. The only remaining problem, according to them, was making the process of education itself more fun. And this problem would be dealt with by teachers and students together, because Danish school democracy gave an important role to students.

The students of the Third Real would say that these preceding statements were fairy tales.

Maybe the students of the Third Real would be correct. Yet even if they are, the fairy tales of informality and democracy have the virtue of Hans Christian Andersen's best: they provide norms which can be invoked to justify changing the real world into something a little more like the land of the Littlest Mermaid, where indeed students and teachers (and others in the community too) together can make the process of education more fun.

Sincerely,



Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

APPENDIX I.

SCHOOL SYSTEMS - a GUIDE.

DENMARK.

DIAGRAM 1.

