

Keeping an eye on a neighbor. A German look on Denmark

Bernd Henningsen
Dänemark

C H Beck. 2009
229 pages
(From the series: Die
Deutschen und ihre
Nachbarn)

- cy 1939–1945], Stockholm 1973, pp. 220 ff.
- 3 In the German debate, the term *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* has conservative connotations, but it can also be used purely cognitively. In the case of Finland/Sweden, we may just as well speak in terms of “communicating vessels”. – See also Torkel Jansson, *Riksprängningen som kom av sig* [The realm break-up that drifted off course], Stockholm 2009.
 - 4 By a fortunate coincidence I discovered that the article by Professor Bruce Hopper in *Foreign Affairs* to which Myrdal refers was ghost-written by Swedish senior diplomat Gunnar Hägglöf. See Gunnar Hägglöf, *Diplomat: Memoirs of a Swedish Envoy in London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow & Washington*, London, Sydney & Toronto 1971, p. 203. Graham Green wrote the book’s preface.
 - 5 According to information conveyed to the Swedish banker Jacob Wallenberg by his good friend Carl Goerdeler, Germany did in fact have plans for an assault on Sweden as late as in February 1942 – plans that were given up because it involved a force of 600,000, which could hardly be spared from Russia, where problems were mounting. – See Gunnar Hägglöf, *Var försiktig i Berlin: Möten med Hitlermotståndare under krigsåren* [Be careful in Berlin: Meetings with Hitler opponents during the war years], Stockholm 1986, p. 124.
 - 6 This is a recurring theme in a majority of the interviews preserved in the Labour Movement Archive and Library (ARAB) in Stockholm, for example in James Angresano’s interviews, which have also been published.
 - 7 Einar Maseng, “Hvem var det som dro Norge inn i krigsulykken?” [Who drew Norway into the misery of war?] (*Nationen*, April 26, 1955.) Quoted, here, from Mjøset’s “Introduksjon: Einar Masengs politiske biografi” [Introduction: Einar Maseng’s political biography], pp. xlviii–xlix, Maseng 2005, vol. I.
 - 8 Here, the relationship between Denmark and Sweden is made into somewhat of a feel-good story, with an account of how the two former mortal enemies became, during the 1800s, good neighbors and put aside old conflicts. – In 1809, Denmark and Russia could have eliminated Sweden and forced through a Polish solution. Such plans did in fact exist.
 - 9 According to Hägglöf, Foreign Minister Günther, on hearing about Germany’s assault on the USSR, is to have exclaimed: “One has to have luck at least once.”
 - 10 Gunnar Hägglöf (under the pseudonym Frank Burns), *Paradis för oss* [Paradise for us], Stockholm 1952, p. 247.
 - 11 Journalists once asked Harold Macmillan what was most difficult to handle in politics, to which he answered: “Events, boys, events.” History contains a long series of fateful coincidences.
 - 12 “First defense” is also the title of Swedish diplomat Håkan Berggren’s authoritative work *Första försvar: Diplomati från ursprung till UD* [First defense: diplomacy from its origin to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], Stockholm 2008.
 - 13 Like the fictional characters Backlund and Stoltz, two members of the “leisured classes” who in Birger Sjöberg’s novel *Kvartetten som sprängdes* [The quartet that broke up] stand on the beach, commenting on what the lifesavers ought to have done, with shouts and “good” advice.
 - 14 Available in Myrdal’s *Nachlaf* at ARAB.

NOWHERE ELSE CAN ONE find the kind of thankfulness that exists in Denmark, writes Bernd Henningsen in his book about the Danes, their culture, and their mentality. People are thanked for a recent dinner or party, and are expected to be thanked for the food. “Say hello to grandma.” – “Yes, thanks.” “Thank you for noticing.” “What will it be this time?” – “A Pilsner, thank you.” Denmark is, in sum, a thanking society, where, indeed, thanking occurs not infrequently as an intensifier to itself: “Thanks thanks.” This, like so many other external characteristics, is something Danes share with other Scandinavians. That it becomes especially clear in Danish society may depend on the fact that in Denmark, there is a lot to be thankful for; for the Danes are, according to all available survey data, the happiest people in the world. They feel at peace with themselves and their social and economic system. They are satisfied with their material abundance, their functioning labor market, their healthy public finances – and their high taxes. Self-satisfied, a foreigner would say. Bernd Henningsen, born in the historic border area between Denmark and Germany, has no problem with that word.¹

HENNINGSSEN, A CULTURAL historian working in Berlin, with a research focus on Northern Europe, has published a book in a new series of short texts on Germany’s neighbors. Helmut Schmidt and Richard von Weizsäcker, former Chancellor, and, respectively, former President of the Federal Republic of Germany, are the patrons of the series. The contemporary historical context, of course, is that Germany – surrounded, or as it is sometimes said, “encircled”, by many neighboring peoples – has a great need to understand and learn about the social climate and political culture in its immediate vicinity. But it is also without a doubt true that the surrounding peoples are interested in how they are perceived and assessed by the state which again may take itself to be able to set the general direction that Europe shall take, if not also, in a formal sense, to be the leader of Europe. Henningsen’s outlook is German, and it is normative. The European project to which Germany has committed itself after its defeat in the war bears fruit for everyone. Those who do not want

to bite into the apple need to explain themselves. In Henningsen’s view, the Danes have much to explain.

IN DANES, THERE IS A mildness of disposition that has been driven too far, says Henningsen. They translate *sophrosyne*, moderation, with mediocrity. The truth lies in the middle, extreme accomplishments do not impress, the competitive spirit is not particularly prominent in social life. Restraint in a Dane can be the same as laziness, yet still not be regarded as a vice. “When a Tuborg tastes best?” the down-and-out man asks his friend. “Every time.” This collective declaration of satisfaction, or even love of pleasure, prevents the Danish people from dealing with serious matters, the Union for example. Denmark is the most reluctant of all EU countries. In several referendums a majority have rapped politicians on the knuckles, forced exemptions and concessions from Union commitments. The Faroe Islands, a remaining possession in the North Sea, chose at the time of Danish entry in 1972 to remain outside; Greenland, with overwhelming voter support, decided at the time of the achievement of autonomy to withdraw.

What annoys Bernd Henningsen in Danes’ view of the EU is that they simply expect economic benefits from it. They joined because they had to – because the United Kingdom, their main trading partner, won entrance. They cannot leave the Union, even if they wanted to, because of concern for their business relations with the Continent, particularly Germany. This is simply to cherry pick, or to use the more expansive Swedish expression, “to pick the raisins out of the cake”. No responsibility is taken for anyone other than oneself. It is a “lovely country”, as we hear in one of the country’s two (!) national anthems, the language spoken is considered to be beautiful, although not even the closest, neighboring kindred peoples can understand it fully, people do not focus on realizing great works, since the greatness of the country lies in the past, where it rests, quite comfortable and uncomplicated. The “de-imperialization” of the Danish kingdom – which once controlled the Baltic Sea and large parts of the British Isles, where the “Danelaw” was in force – has created among the Danes of later years a kind of pathos of defeat, a patriotism of loss, which is not the same as listless-

Continued. Keeping an eye on a neighbor



ANDERS BJÖRNSSON

Editor-in-chief of *Baltic Worlds*. Has contributed to Nils Erik Forsgård, *Maktbalans och stormaktskrig 1722–1814: Kriget om Östersjön V* [Balance of power and Great Power wars 1722–1814: The wars for the Baltic Sea V] (2008), edited the anthology *Skandinaviska vägval: Det framtida norsk-svenska samarbetet* [Scandinavian routes: The future of Norwegian-Swedish cooperation] (2008) together with Bjørn Magnus Berge, and published the book *Palatset som Finland räddade* [The Palace that Finland rescued] (2009).

ness or indifference; but it is indeed difficult to impress a Dane!

NOW, BERND HENNINGSEN has not lampooned the Danes here.² On the contrary, Henningsen's method is both empathetic and sympathetic. Thus he can simultaneously be honest and unreserved. He recognizes the many features of the Danish society that must arouse admiration and perhaps also are worthy of imitation. The Danish welfare system is flexible and decentralized. If "The Law of Jante" – according to the Danish-Norwegian novelist Aksel Sandemose's dictate, that "you should not believe that you are anything" – has become something of the "goals" clause of the Kingdom of Denmark, and rules out feats in the present, it has also given rise to a healthy pragmatism and a consensual atmosphere in society as a whole. Despite the kingdom's having been amputated in war after war, there is very little that has broken in the actual core of the country. There is an institutional inertia or continuity that the Danes have been able to fall back on even in adversity – they have allowed themselves to be thoughtful instead of getting carried away. Mediocrity is the philosophy of the middle class, and Denmark the showpiece society of the bourgeois middle-class.

IN SOME SENSE, Denmark is still Scandinavia's bridge to Europe, though perhaps less so than when there was no fixed link between Skåne and Zealand (Danish: *Sjælland*). Traveling from Malmö to Copenhagen can be a circuitous route for those trying to reach the Continent; on the other hand, that large parts of the Skåne landscape have been integrated into the Danish labor market has become obvious and can be seen as a return to a previous state of normalcy. In his little book, Henningsen makes it clear to the reader the kind of richness Danish culture – in particular during the 1800s, the period of state bankruptcy and humiliating retreats – has constantly been able to offer: the two golden ages, with Søren Kierkegaard and Georg Brandes as fixed stars, belong without question to the common European cultural heritage. And yet: Kierkegaard published his important works under pseudonyms, and Brandes, as a Jew, went into a multiyear exile in Berlin. Were they too great for the ordinary Dane? Johann Friedrich

Struensee, a German from the then Danish city of Altona, had, in his capacity as the head of government, tried to make the country modern in the spirit of the Enlightenment freedom for one and a half years in the early 1770s, but was tortured and killed by the forces of Reaction, his body publicly displayed. Struensee is Henningsen's man – a strong and energetic European who takes time by the forelock.

And in the same way, Denmark, in Henningsen's interpretative framework, is the isles of missed opportunities. A man is, in a Peer Gyntesque sense, "sufficient unto oneself", and that will do fine. It goes quite a long way. That Denmark, perhaps Europe's most demilitarized country, has provided the military alliance NATO's recent Secretary General – *das lässt tiefblicken*. This book helps us keep our eyes open.

anders björnsson

- 1 According to data from the OECD, Denmark has fallen on the list of prosperous countries and has been surpassed in recent years by Sweden, Australia, Austria, Ireland, and the Netherlands. The country is now in eleventh place. The main reason for the decline is low labor productivity in the economy. (*Dagens Nyheter*, December 24, 2009.)
- 2 Far from all commentators are as averse to the Danish EU-profile as Henningsen. Anglo-Saxon praise was received by the Danes in connection with the 2009 spring elections to the European Parliament. *The Economist* praised the Danish model for strengthening the influence of the national parliament in the decision-making of the EU, namely, summoning to the Folketing (the Danish Parliament) "government ministers every Friday to give them mandate for the following week's meetings of national governments in the EU's Council of Ministers. If Danish ministers wish to depart from this mandate in the course of negotiations in Brussels, they have to consult the Folketing's European committee by telephone." (June 6, 2009)



ILLUSTRATION: RAGNI SVENSSON

A new textbook.

THE 1990S WERE a golden age for professional historians in Russia. Various "veterans" of the 1960s "thaw" (*ottepel'*) resurfaced with publications on subjects about which they could not have published anything during the paralyzing "stagnation" (*zastoi*) ushered in by Brezhnev's inept re-Stalinization efforts in 1965. Following the primarily journalistic efforts of the *glasnost* era, archive-based research began to be published