

## **The changing university context and its implications for the future of critical approaches to society – the case of Denmark from the perspective of a philosopher**

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### *Background*

In Denmark the idea of science was until the 1960s backed up ideologically by positivism, first in the original French sociological version and later as it was understood by the logical positivists of the Vienna circle.<sup>1</sup> The critique of logical positivism was as elsewhere inspired by Popper, Kuhn, and critical theory. Marcuse's major works were translated in the 1960s, Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Horkheimer & Adorno's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* in the early 1970s, and some of Popper's and Habermas's minor texts also. These had a major impact on the Danish understanding of the role of the University

Compared to the idea of science, the idea of the university has not been so well-developed. Idealism was important around 1800 in Denmark,<sup>2</sup> and institutionally was associated with the Humboldt model. However, due to the prevailing positivism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it lacked the idealist superstructure connecting the scientific seminars and the national spirit. Nonetheless, every university student was required to take a philosophy introduction course before entering their major line of study.

The University of Copenhagen was originally an independent institution with its own legal authority. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, universities in Denmark became owned by the state, which since then has provided almost all the funding.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century added four new universities to that of Copenhagen, and since 1970s there have been five of them in Denmark. Universities are traditionally the name for a multi-faculty research and teaching institution. Higher vocational education was traditionally – until recently – carried out on so-called 'high schools', which also carried out research at a university level (e.g. for engineers, business, pharmacists, dentist, veterinary surgeons etc.). Medium vocational education (teachers, nurses, midwives, social work etc.) have been taught on non-research institutions, which are not called universities, but sometimes 'university colleges'.

The university situation in Denmark is therefore mostly a matter of politics, statutes and ideology, and not directly subject to a market economy.

### *The student revolt*

In the 1960s the elite university was transformed into a mass university. Until around 1970 the full professors had primary authority, but this was changed by the rebellion of students and assistant professors. The political result was a radical university reform supported by both business and the political establishment. Business in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. Carl Henrik Koch: *Dansk filosofi i positivismens tidsalder*, København: Gyldendal, 2004. Cf. also G.H. von Wright: "Introduction" in Raymond E. Olson and Anthony M. Paul (ed.): *Contemporary Philosophy in Scandinavia*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press, 1972, p. 1-12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Oliver Cauly: *Les philosophies scandinaves*, Paris: PUF, 1998, p. 49-71

Denmark mainly consists of small and medium size enterprises, who are more engaged with distribution than production. The political establishment consist of social liberal parties and a social democratic party, which, in Denmark, traditionally is anti-elitist and anti-intellectual. As leaders of a state that provided all the funds for universities, they were keen to take the opportunity to 'modernize' the universities.

A side effect of the reform was that the students were no longer required to study philosophy or theory of science, and in the following decades university philosophers were not very much in demand.

The resulting university law was structured around a two-tier hierarchy of elected councils. The political-economical aspect of the university was decided by councils, where 50% were professors. Assistant, associate and full-professors now all counted the same; indeed in the late 1980s full professors were not appointed at all in Denmark due to a strong egalitarian ideology at the universities. The other 50% of the seats were divided equally by students and administrative-technical staff. The content of the study programs were decided by councils, where 50% were professors, and 50% students. Some of the democratic aspects of the statutes were weakened along the way, but in principle this university structure was in function from 1970 until 2002.

Until about that time higher education was also provided totally without tuition, but since the late 1970'ies regulated by a governmental admission system based on examination grades from the 'gymnasium' (alias high school), secured by a national censor corps for each discipline (e.g. physics, philosophy etc.).

### *Restoration*

The 1980s gave rise to an ideological shift of focus in the discussion of science and university. Lyotard's *Postmodern condition* was translated into Danish, and became a huge success. Richard Rorty, Baudrillard, Foucault, deconstruction etc. came into fashion. Although traditional philosophy of science (*Wissenschaftstheorie*) and critical theory remained very influential ideologically up through the nineties, the postmodern perspective displaced the intellectual focus from science to culture, and the discourse about science was increasingly made in terms of economy and technology. Norms like truth and justice were ridiculed, whereas utility and aesthetic fascination came into fashion.

The 1980s was also a decade of right wing government in Denmark. The 1990 brought the social democrats back to power, but to them the logic of science, university and academic freedom has never been important. They do not recognize that without critique there is no truth, and that honest critique can only be expected on the condition of job security. And they have little respect for classical hierarchies of scientific knowledge. Utility and technological solutions are the main concerns from their perspective.

The civil society the 90s saw a successful campaign launched by business organizations such the chambers of commerce and industry. Their 'slogan' was research should be useful to society, by which they meant business. The accusation, repeated again and again, was that university research was internally-oriented and

self-sufficient, and that something should be done about it; politicians should require the universities to assist Danish business.

This campaign was ideologically backed up by the arguments in Gibbons (et al) *New Production of Knowledge* and their distinction between mode 1 and mode 2 knowledge. In the same period Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* became a bestseller in Danish. Schön represented a simplified and technical version of Dewey's pragmatism, which argued that there was no difference between applied and basic science, that everyday practice actually was equal to scientific experiment etc. This ideology appealed both to those in non-research based institutions and to business lobbyists in their critique of the perceived privileges of universities and academic research

### *The university act of 2002*

The rightwing parties came back into power in 2001, and together with the social democrats they introduced a radical university reform in 2002, which removed all – I repeat, *all* – influence of professors and students from the political and economic management of the university. The university was to be run by professional managers. They were expected to be drawn from higher education, but they were no longer elected by their peers, but appointed from above. The result was a hierarchy of department leaders, deans and a rector subject to a board, where the university law now requires that the majority must be from outside higher education. It was this university act that embarrassingly placed Denmark in the bottom group in a comparison of academic freedom in 23 European countries in 2007.

Whereas rector, dean and department leaders used to be peers also in terms of salary, they were now given contracts with double the salary of ordinary professors. There is now in process of developing a class of university leaders that circulate a between universities.

The appointment of new professors is also fully in the hands of the managers. Before the new reform an evaluation committees would make a priority list that would determine an appointment. Now such committees can only decide if each applicant is qualified or not; they are not allowed to make a priority. It is now the dean that takes the decision without having to give any reasons.

Until a few decades ago university employees – both scientific and non-scientific – were state officials, who in Denmark were employed for life. The general idea of a public servant with job security has been dismantled in Denmark since the 1980s, and it has not been possible to persuade anybody that there might be an idea in keeping tenure for academics. So in the last decade we have for the first time in Danish history seen dismissals of university academics simply for strategic and/or economic reasons.

The legitimacy of this has been made possible by a merger into a single system of traditional (Humboldtian) universities, higher vocational schools for professionals (dentist, veterinarians, pharmacists etc.) and governmental research institutions. Where the research institutions traditionally were run by temporary grants and with academics employed only on a temporary basis, some schools and all universities had regular tenure. After the merger, job conditions at the universities are slowly

beginning to look like those on the former research institutions. For example, in departments of natural science at the University of Copenhagen there are now some where temporary academics outnumber the regular professors. Ideologically this is made invisible to outsiders, because the job titles are now the same. Before one could distinguish, who was temporally employed and who had a regular position; this is not possible anymore.

In 2008 about two third of all Danish scientist signed a very critical petition, and one result was that the politicians decided to review the university law. They did so by consulting the boards, the rectors and the deans – unsurprisingly, they were very satisfied with the law! This result of the commission was presented in 2009, and while I am writing – in May 2011 – some changes in university law are being passed in the Danish parliament with a great majority, giving even more power to the rector, although with an expressed but unspecified and thus vague intent of including the employees more in the decision processes. This is in spite of a growing series of university scandals at the Universities of Copenhagen and Aarhus and at the Copenhagen Business School, which are difficult not to link to the present governance structure of the universities. Even the mainstream press are now convinced that there is a internal connection between the governance structure and the scandals. But, The right wing government and the social democrats, which will succeed them this year, agree that academics cannot be trusted to run universities. They prefer stronger leadership!

#### *Recent changes in the funding of scientific research*

Worth mentioning is also the development of the funding of scientific research over the last decades. A steadily increasing number of millions of Danish kroner have been spend on research in recent years, but it is not academic research in the traditional sense, and this means that the funding often does not end up at universities. Traditionally, academics participated in a research funding system, where senior academics were involved in the evaluation of applications. In the climate of suspicion toward universities and academics in the 1990s this system was accused of nepotism and corruption. The charges were never substantiated, and the core system is still largely unchanged. However, its funding has been kept more or less at the same level, and instead a new system of additional funds for strategic and applied research has been developed. Here applications are decided by business mangers. The distinction between science, research and development has been blurred, and under this system product development in private companies can be supported under the heading of science.

#### *Conclusion*

The prospects for critical thinking within universities in Denmark are, thus, not that promising. Even though the job conditions for university employees, in general, are above average in the western world, and both Aarhus and Copenhagen University are within the top 100 in the world at different ranking list, personally I might be interested in a job internationally in the years to come!

PS!

Most of the documents referred to in the text are in Danish. Anybody interested in details and/or documentation is welcome to write to me: [aso@dpu.dk](mailto:aso@dpu.dk)