Diversity, Citizenship & National Identity in Denmark

Bashy Quraishy

Bashy Quraishy is President of ENAR (European Network Against Racism) in Brussels, as well as a member of the Board of Trustees at the Dutch Foundation More Colour in the Media. He contributes regularly to the Danish and European press with essays, chronicles, and TV debates, and holds lectures on various issues concerning ethnic minorities in the western world, multiculturalism, globalization, racism and resistance, and the integration dilemma.

ABSTRACT

Bashy Quraishy explores the Danish national identity and the place of ethnic minorities in Denmark where a negative public discourse and an unfortunate lack of cross-cultural understanding fuels not only extreme far-right movements, but also mainstream politics. The author is supportive of minority rights, emphasizing that these pose no concrete threat to the Danish identity. He implores those who believe in pluralism and democracy to encourage the search for a more meaningful and manageable diversity.

From 1945 until the middle of the 1970s, particularly during the rapid expansion of the industrial sector that took place between 1960 and 1975, the import of labour was a marked feature of all industrially advanced western countries. Many employers were looking for a young, cheap, and flexible workforce, and temporary foreign workers matched this requirement. They provided labour as was needed, without having any adverse effect on inflation or wage settlements, and without overburdening social expenditure.

Denmark opened its door

Denmark was no exception in this regard. From 1965 to 1973, it also admitted a relatively small number of unskilled migrant workers from developing countries. Later on, it allowed refugees from different parts of the world to come and settle within its borders. Migrants were initially referred to as "guest or foreign workers", but contrary to expectations, they stayed and became immigrants.

According to the latest official figures, there were 430,689 immigrants and their descendants in Denmark per January 1, 2003. Denmark's total population is 5.3 million. The above numbers also include 265,424 foreign citizens in Denmark, meaning people with non-Danish nationality. The Danish society and state makes a clear distinction between different nationalities. The term immigrants and their descendants, does not apply to people from Scandinavia, the E.U. or North America.

Break down (of Ethnic Minorities in) Denmark

Europe	225,679
Africa	43,386
North America	8,205
South and Middle America	7,567
Asia	142,552
Far East	1,585
The Rest	2,717

All these groups consist of 160 nationalities.

National identity in progress

Historically Denmark did permit small numbers of European immigrants and refugees from France, Poland, Sweden, Germany, and Spain to come to Denmark. A small German-speaking minority lives in southern Jutland; a mostly Inuit population inhabits Greenland; and the Faeroe Islands have a Nordic population with its own language. As one can see from this short examination of Danish history, Denmark has not always been a static society. Denmark has, as most of the countries in the world, been affected by, and benefited from, the eternal migration of peoples, and the intermingling of many different cultures. In discussing the formation of the Danish national identity, one cannot avoid mentioning that Danes describe their culture in terms of an unchanging entity. Danes consider themselves a homogenous Gothic-Germanic people, who have inhabited Denmark since prehistoric times.

Somehow, Danes seem to forget that their unique culture, which they claim forms their national identity, is a combination of the basic ideas and behaviours of a people influenced by the history, language, religion, social and material levels, institutions, artistic, and literary progress of their country. In short, how and why one thinks and acts the way one does. Most cultures are dynamic and evolving, very few cultures can evade change. Danish culture is no exception.

Another interesting aspect of national identity is that nowadays, many Danes mistake technological development for cultural progress, and thus draw the conclusion that some races and cultures are better than others. These ideas have of course been proven wrong by anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, and historians through scientific studies. The presence of different nationalities in Denmark then leads us to ask an essential question.

Is there a multicultural society in the making in Denmark?

Clearly, the situation at present would indicate that a cross-cultural understanding in Denmark is a condition still in the process of being achieved. For example, the cultural pluralism gained in recent years is being challenged by economic upheaval, and by the increased negativity surrounding the ethnic and religious discussions taking place.

Professor Samuel Huntington, from Harvard University, is a modern day prophet of doom, but very popular in Denmark. His book, *Clash of Civilizations,* which is based on an assumption that Western civilization should be the guiding light for human development in the future, is often used in intellectual discourse.

Over the course of many years, the Danish attitude towards immigrants has been steadily hardening. The borders have been closed since 1973, so that only refugees and family members have been allowed to enter the country, and unlike the countries of southern Europe, Denmark has never be subject to the influx of sizable ethnic groups that settled and formed their own cultures.

Since many Danes have been frightened into believing that ethnic minorities might actually change Danish culture for good, they insist, not only on maintaining their own cultural dominance, but also on arrogantly dismissing everything that is non-Danish. This officially prescribed denial of the multicultural reality has created self-sustaining subcultures, which are forced to turn their backs on the majority culture, which of course will always be Danish.

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Public debates

In addition to the media, there are also intense discussions taking place in almost every political and social debate forum regarding the presence of the ethnic minorities in Denmark. Whether or not these discussions are being held in Parliament or on the street, by intellectuals or by common people, it is interesting to note that they usually give rise to more questions than answers.

Some of the questions which are often raised by the Europeans are: Why do people from the developing world specifically want to come to Denmark in search of a new life? Does the presence of ethnic minorities endanger the local culture and a common sense of identity? Compared to these complex theoretical questions, ethnic minorities find themselves asking two very basic questions: Are we welcome to stay here, be accepted, respected, and allowed to live in peace? And if so, under which conditions and on whose terms?

Such debates have been exploited not only by the extreme far-right movements, but also by the mainstream political establishment in Denmark. The resulting reactions can be summarized as the following:

- Tightening of asylum rights, visa, and family reunion laws
- Rise in Islamophobia and anti-Semitism
- Attacks on ethnic minority communities
- Focus on exclusive practices in the society
- The virtual introduction of forced integration through penalizations and penalties
- Renewed calls for a "cultural struggle and clash of civilisations" against ethnic minorities
- Inclusion of openly racist parties in the government

In political discussions, expressions such as "floods of refugees," "hordes of asylum seekers," and "immigrants will take over" are continually applied. Worst of all, this engenders a feeling of powerlessness among minorities, forcing many to react by "turning their backs on society." It is taking hold with an alarming rate, driving some young people to crime, and others into the clutches of ignorant and exploitative religious movements.

Citizenship

Citizenship undoubtedly gives ethnic minorities legal protection, equal rights, and a sense of security on paper, but it plays a very insignificant part in the process of real integration. And even this basic right is now under threat. Legislation passed in the Parliament gives the

Danish State the right to withdraw citizenship from a minority person who in the State's opinion has acquired it under false pretext.

The law is retroactive and would be applicable to all, even if they have lived in Denmark for 30 years. It is thought provoking that this proposal was initially advocated by the extreme right-wing People's Party in the year 2000. The same party which is now the third largest political party in Denmark, and which forms the basis of the present government, and which also has many new proposals in the pipeline.

The national industrial society as it evolved in the 19th and 20th centuries articulated three elements: Society, Nation, and State. Society referred to an economic and social system based on rational principles within a bounded territory. State referred to a political system based on secular and democratic values, capable of regulating economic and political relations and change. Nation referred to a people defined on the basis both of belonging to the territory of the state and having a common ethnic, cultural, and religious background.

Is the classical definition of citizenship changing?

The fine difference between being a national and citizen of Denmark is now brought forward by nationalist forces in the country. It means that ethnic minorities who live here must also adhere to the majority culture and ethnicity.

Citizenship is a very broad term and for many ethnic minorities it has meant being "legally secure," living without fear. Belonging to a nation is often neither possible nor desired. The new age of globalization has proven that citizenship is not necessary to live, work, raise a family, or travel with ease. This has been compounded by the ever-expanding globalization, which is challenging and affecting the concept of citizenship. According to Castles and Davidson: "Globalisation affects citizenship in many ways, both directly and indirectly. First of all, globalisation questions the concept of (the) nation-state and its sovereignty over its citizens. It indirectly breaks down the territorial boundaries on which a state is built." (Citizenship and migration 2000)

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Does citizenship produce a feeling of belonging among ethnic groups?

As citizens, their rights depend on the national laws of Denmark, local political establishments, the economic situation, as well as media discussions. But a feeling of belonging to the Danish nation, or of sharing a common identity with the majority population depends on many factors. We believe that:

1. The notion of identity must not be based on imaginary shared values. Identity must be fluid and dynamic. It must progressive and not be confined by fixed boundaries.
2. Identity must be inclusive and not exclusive. It requires power sharing in decision-making and listening to dissent.
3. It should be based on an individual's own choices and needs, and not on forced and artificially constructed demands for regimentation. People cannot be photocopied!
4. If there is to be clearly defined parameters, these should be for all to follow and not only for the newcomers.
5. Identity must not be based on uniformity produced by multiculturalism, but diversity based on intercultural coexistence.
6. Respect for the newcomers' initial sense of belonging, history, values, traditions, and place in the society. It takes generations to supersede even the most trivial of habits and ways of life.

Basic rules of society

Since an individual is not an island, he or she has to function within the society in which he or she lives. This requires an effort to create a space for oneself, without hassle and pressures from one's surroundings. There are certain basic rules of society that everyone should follow – minorities included. Minorities should:

- Learn the local language
- Respect the laws of the land
- Have good neighbourly relations
- Adapt to certain aspects of the local culture (but minorities should be able to choose the tempo and scale of adaptation to the majority culture)

Ethnic minorities have a right to retain their cultural values, food, clothes, literature, mother tongue, and religions. Although this is not acceptable to many Danes, there are many instances, such as in the UK, France, Switzerland, and Holland, where minorities live separately from the cultural norms of the majority society, and they function perfectly well. Sometimes it is better to be divorced and happy rather than live in a bad marriage and be miserable for the rest of one's life.

Ethnic minorities are not a threat to Danish national identity. In contrast to the popular belief, the presence of these ethnic groups poses no threat to the host nation's identity, culture, or religion. This is true for a number of reasons:

- Ethnic minorities in Denmark comprise no more than 6% of the whole population. This is a relatively insignificant number.
- Minorities have no power – political, economical, social, or military. Power lies with the majority (the natives).
- The Danish sense of identity has been shaped over many years by an ideology glorifying what is white, Christian, and "culturally superior to all and everything." This is so deeply rooted in people's subconscious that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to change, challenge, or destroy.
- Minorities very rarely challenge the locals on a cultural level. This, they know, is not the reason for their being here. They do not consider themselves cultural crusaders. For example, different Muslim communities which constitute nearly 70% of all religious minorities in Denmark, hardly ever propagate their religion publicly. Their activities are restricted among themselves.
- Denmark, with its technologically advanced society, media monopoly, and economic superiority, is strong enough to withstand any crisis, or any test it may encounter from a relatively small percentage of highly motivated immigrants.
- If there is any challenge to the host nation's identity because of the presence of ethnic minorities, it can only be positive. By learning about (as well as from) ethnic minority values – for example, family ties, respect for elders, hard work, social networking, strong religious beliefs, great hospitality, and pride in their own culture – Denmark has an opportunity to rediscover the strength in it's own "long-lost" values.

In Denmark, people often mix different terms such as identity, citizenship, and nationality with relation to society's functional harmony. On the surface, these terms may intermingle, but they have specific meaning and use in their own right. This mixing up results in decisions being forced and not reached after a consultative process has been completed. The great Lebanese philosopher and poet Khalil Gibran once said, "Love is not looking at each other, but looking in the same direction."

The quest for diversity

There is a tendency in Denmark to move away form concepts such as anti-racism and anti-discrimination. Instead, the concept of diversity is taking over as being the best way to create a society where all its citizens are included. Concepts such as diversity and management are good tools, and work constructively towards creating more inclusive spaces, especially within organizations. However, sacrificing anti-racism at the altar of diversity will not achieve a just society. What is important is that a well thought out and well-defined concept of antiracism is maintained to deal with different forms of racism, and not lost in the world of "diversity management."

If after diversity management policy has been talked about and implemented there are still "losers," then the victims need to have mechanisms they can turn to in order to redress the balance in their favour. Legal tools based on well-defined race discrimination concepts can provide that. Without these the "unwanted" have only the good will of others to rely on. But in order to influence a political system, it is necessary for one to understand how it works; something that can only be learned through experience. Therefore, minorities must demand the right to be represented by themselves and not by surrogates. This wish can be transmitted publicly through the media and through the political system.

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Finally, a just word of caution. Influence will not be served up on a silver platter; it has to be gained through political struggle, based on a clear analysis, doing away with wishful thinking, and with the close cooperation of those Danes who still believe in human rights, pluralistic development, and most of all, in keeping their society democratic. Ethnic minorities and the progressive forces within society must join forces, and this cooperation must be above party politics, political ideology, and human pity. To build a society, free of prejudices, bubbling with tolerance and heart-felt openness is the task ahead. Let us grasp it!

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