

## **Ethnicized Ontologies: From Foreign Worker to Muslim Immigrant How Danish Public Discourse Moved to the Right through the Question of Immigration**

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My thesis, in one sentence, is that the entire political discourse in Denmark (and in many parts of Europe) has moved to the right through the debate on immigration in the last two decades. The left/right distinction is pushed to the background and a cultural one - the “Danish people”/“the Muslim immigrant” - has come to the foreground as the main dividing line. In other words, through the articulation of a new internal division based on culture, a new basis for social identification has become hegemonic.

The new hegemony is based on a culturalized ontology of the social. The (re)production of immigrants as a threatening force is maintained through a constant focus on cultural issues that are considered as anti-society. In many parts of Europe, cycles of moral panics are created around issues such as honor killings, gang rapes, animal slaughter, violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriages and headscarves. These issues produce an unbridgeable divide between Muslim immigrants and Danish culture. The orientation towards these issues disperses various social and political actors along the antagonistic divide, often creating insolvable tensions and fractions within social movements. The result is the rise of racist, nationalist populist movements all over Europe; these movements define the questions to be discussed in public discourse.

Chapter 1: The first chapter (based on qualitative interviews with ordinary Danes) creates a theoretical framework for understanding this change through Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony. However, their theory is highly abstract and difficult to apply to concrete data such as interviews, newspaper clips or ethnographic observations. One of the principles of their theory is that the social is inherently heterogeneous and open. However, in their works, heterogeneity is treated as a philosophical feature of language (the logic of signification) rather than through an examination of actual discourse. The objective of Chapter 1 is to show the rhetorical nature of meaning – that both the meaning of a discursive element (such as the category “Dane”) and the categorical distinction itself are determined interactively in a dialogic relationship.

However, an emphasis on interaction as the locus of meaning formation in an ongoing interpretative process makes it difficult to conceptualize hegemonic formations, which requires some kind of fixity of social categories. The second objective of the first chapter is, then, to discuss how and where exactly meaning becomes fixed. Although an understanding of meaning as rhetorical would imply that the meaning of a category can only be fixed in its immediate context, I argue that the opposite is true: *the meaning of (social) categories – if they are to be repeated across contexts – can only be fixed if they are emptied of content.* It is the empty character of categories that provides a basis for maintaining social distinctions (e.g. “we” and “they”). Appeals to common sense in actual discourse work on the basis of these empty and abstract categories, which fix meanings and produce social formations. The particular ontology (e.g. Danes and

immigrants) works as a magnetic focal point that pulls discourse towards the center (the antagonistic divide between Danes and immigrants) and disperses subject positions along the dividing line.

Chapter 2: In this chapter, I answer the question: how do we know something is hegemonic? It is easy to demonstrate that immigration discourse has become culturalized but this does not mean that discourse *beyond the topic of immigration* is also culturalized. This chapter argues that this is exactly what happened in Denmark: the debate on immigration has moved into the center of public discourse and has redrawn the social map along ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries which are themselves produced in the same process. That is, the racist ontology of the social has moved into the center of public discourse in the sense that power is structured around a racist system that excludes immigrants from the collectivity which is now imagined culturally. An important indicator is the intense preoccupation with Denmark's ethnic composition in the past and future, which reflects the hegemonic perspective of contemporary discourse so much so that social divisions are no longer imagined in terms of class, gender, environment, etc., but in terms of cultural/ethnic differences. Gender equality, for instance, is no longer viewed as the result of decades-long struggles by feminist movement but as a part of Danish national culture as opposed to immigrants' "Muslim" culture, which is represented as women-oppressive. The new ontology has an especially big impact on the debate on welfare state. The welfare system is now viewed as the result of the homogeneity of Danish nation rather than a slow adoption of working class demands into an ever-expanding social state. Once articulated this way, immigrants become a "threat" to the welfare system. Paradoxically, the threat by immigrants is also used as an argumentative resource to promote a "reform" (dismantling) of the welfare system.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 asks, how did we come to this point? I argue that there was a sudden increase in the numbers of incoming refugees in 1984 and the then Justice Minister and other right-wing forces (e.g. the police) used the numbers to create a moral panic to pressurize the parliament into imposing restrictions on immigration laws. All this happened in an environment of profound dislocation: the neo-liberal government was trying to dismantle the welfare system, introduce cuts in welfare benefits and unemployment payments, and reduce the power of labor unions, while the Social Democrats tacitly had accepted the basic tenets of the neo-liberal ideology: a comprehensive privatization program based on the idea that market forces are the best sources for social regulation. In an environment of such profound displacement, it was relatively easy for the populist right to point to immigration as the main threat to society (associated with the welfare system) and to articulate an antagonism between the people (silent majority) and the political and cultural elite that let immigration happen. The moral panic around immigration got out of control and created a deep hegemonic crisis, opening up the field of discourse for a counter-hegemonic intervention by the extreme Right in 1986. The impact of the intervention was immediate. By 1987, the debate was thoroughly culturalized and has remained so through a successive series of moral panics, which continuously reproduced immigrants as a cultural threat to the unity of Danish nation.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4 is a closer analysis of the hegemonic intervention by the extreme Right in 1986 and asks: why and how did the intervention succeed? Why did the key figure of the intervention, Søren Krarup, have an almost unlimited access to public discourse – an access that he did not have to the same extent before September 1986? He claimed to represent “the silent majority” (or Danish people) against a dictatorial political elite who were about to destroy Denmark. The main argument is that the moral panics around the numbers of incoming refugees created a deep hegemonic crisis that provided an opportunity for Krarup to present himself as the representative of the “silenced” masses. The chapter is a detailed rhetorical analysis of the discursive environment that made possible his intervention.

Although this dissertation is about Denmark, many European countries show similarities in terms of the discursive change and have experienced similar trajectories with different actors and chronologies. This dissertation is a case study that can be used to understand the state of European public discourse(s) on European/national identity, immigration, and distribution of wealth. It is also about how the discursive shift happened in the course of a decade; who had access to and influence on public discourse and the role of the media in this process. In short it is about the nature of hegemonic interventions in discourse. Analyzing hegemonic interventions are crucial if we are to consider ways in which we can block the path to power of racist and nationalist populism and construct an anti-racist hegemony based on other types of political identities than cultural-ethnic-religious ones.