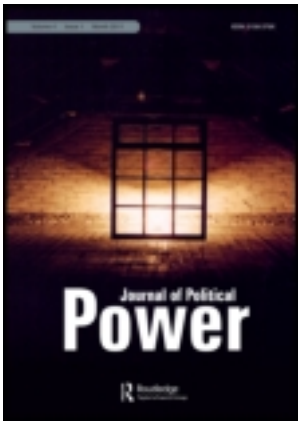

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Doing Danishness: identity as a three-dimensional process

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Doing Danishness: identity as a three-dimensional process

Being Danish – Paradoxes of Identity in Everyday Life, by Richard Jenkins, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2011, 355 pp., US$47.00 (paperback), US$61.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-87-635-2603-6.

Richard Jenkins is well known internationally for his work on identity processes, and his new book, *Being Danish: paradoxes of identity in everyday life* will no doubt enhance this reputation. In this monograph we learn about identity processes among Danes in a medium-sized town in Denmark (Jutland). The setting is Skive, but it quickly becomes apparent that the paradoxical identity processes at work here, which are the main focus of Jenkins' analysis, could well be any medium-sized town in any northern European country. Or could it? One of the strengths in this monograph – as with successful anthropological monographs in general – is its ability to produce a double analysis that captures both the general and specific elements of what it takes, in this case, to be Danish.

Jenkins discusses the general aspect of identity work in chapter one (the interaction between internal self-identification or group identification and the external categorisation impressed upon the self by others), while in the rest of the book he discusses the specificity of identification processes among Danes. These perspectives combine in the idea of identity as a 'three-dimensional' process: 'being Danish' is about 'about *doing* stuff, as well as thinking it' (p. 292). This process relates to the Danes' particular history, culture and organizational arrangements.

Potentially, the book has many readers: the scholar who wants to get a handle on how to study identification processes in this 'three-dimensional' way; the scholar who wishes to understand the many paradoxes of identities in (welfare) states; the foreigner who has just moved to Denmark and wishes to acquire assistance in adapting to a new environment; or any Dane or Scandinavian for that matter – people who want to understand everyday life, as seen from an outsider's perspective. I belong to most categories just mentioned, and from these various positions (except the position of the foreigner) I have to say that I have learned a lot from reading this book.

Jenkins' clear style of writing makes his analysis of how historical, cultural and identification processes relate both enjoyable to read and easy to follow. And the same goes for his analysis of how the paradoxes of welfare states such as Denmark relate to neoliberalistic trends (my term). Belonging also to the category of 'any Dane', I must admit that I was often greatly amused by Jenkins' insights and observations. All nations should have an anthropologist visit them – the outsider perspective gives a perfect opportunity to get a closer look at all the taken-for-granted-aspects of one's daily life. Do we really wave flags as much as Jenkins notes? Why

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do we wave flags when we say we are not nationalists? Should we be more worried about our Central Personal Register (CPR, more on this below)? And why do we 'thank' each other all the time when we are always telling foreigners how impolite we are as a people?

The book's 12 chapters shed light on how being Danish is negotiated with reference to a range of different aspects of identity, among them the geographical, the religious and the historical. The research conducted by Jenkins should also be noted. As well as a longer period of fieldwork from 1996-97 and a shorter one in 2008-9, he also examined a large body of documents from local historical archives.

Jenkins does not focus explicitly on the question of power in this book, and yet there are many passages in *Being Danish* that deal with the subtleties of power. His take on power follows in the tracks of the symbolic interactionist tradition in sociology (the external/internal dimensions of identity), as well the work of renowned sociologists/antropologists such as Bourdieu, who focus on the less visible aspects of power (*doxa*). It is the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life that hold Jenkins' interest, and because power is seldom explicit in the routine interactions of people (they just do what they have always done), one can argue that his approach captures the hidden aspects of power relations, namely how situations are defined, what constitutes the 'normal' way of behaving in different contexts, and so forth.

As suggested by the title, paradoxes feature prominently in the book. Jenkins asks, for example, why most Danes 'espouse egalitarian social democracy while adoring their monarch'; and why Danes 'disavow nationalism while waving Dannebrog (the Danish flag) at every available opportunity'? (p. 145). He finds that the monarchy and the Danish flag belong both to the state and to the people, and in analysing the meaning of monarchy/flag he departs somewhat from the symbolic interactionist approach to identity. In the case of the flag, its identity changes according to the situations in which it is used, and it is by developing this insight that Jenkins' theoretical approach proves so effective in 'explaining' the many paradoxes that people live with and reproduce in their daily lives. Jenkins' analysis shows that despite the fact that the state and nation can be seen as 'effectively invisible', both are emotionally and politically powerful in the context of everyday Danish life (p. 146).

Another interesting observation on the paradoxes of identification processes is Jenkins' analysis of the Central Personal Register (CPR) in Denmark. The CPR-register supplies all newborn Danes with a personal identification number (birth date followed by four digits). This number is used daily by Danes in a variety of situations – banking, work and sporting activities etc. Danes use it regularly and – surprising to Jenkins – they don't mind doing so. Jenkins argues that Danes like and perhaps even love the feeling of Big Brother watching over them. Given popular political rhetoric concerning the intrusiveness of state surveillance, this appears to be another paradox, but it melts away once we learn that that the CPR is associated with the Danish welfare state, which is precious to Danish citizens. And the logic seems to be that, in order for the welfare state to function, one needs to supply all citizens with a personal security number. Only in this way can the Danish state 'watch over' and care for its citizens – and Danish citizens want to be cared for.

Being Danish includes a number of other interesting examples of how everyday practices (for example jokes about other people/nations) relate to history, culture and different ways of organizing. Jenkins, for example, never heard Danes joke

about their southern German neighbours, while jokes about Swedes (Denmark's eastern neighbours) were numerous. Jenkins sums up this complex set of relationships in the final chapter when he explains that:

> Everyday life in Denmark has something to tell us about everyday life in general. In particular, it suggests that we should not draw too sharp a line between everyday life and politics, for example, or between civil society and the state. Although general distinctions such as these are necessary, how and where they are drawn in practice – and the nature of relationships between the state and civil organisations, and between organisations and individuals – will vary from place to place. (p. 295)

Taking this as a point of departure, being Danish turns out to be a robust, and yet also a fluid, identity. It changes according to who 'the Other' is, and geography is apparently important: being Danish is quite different if the Other is respectively a small neighbouring village, the second largest city in Denmark, the capital of Denmark (Copenhagen), a Swede or a German, etc. Thus difference is diminished if the contrast is between Danes and Germans. In these stories, being Danish is something that connects all Danes, making them into a homogenous nation. But if a 'Skibonit' (a local from Skive town) contrasts himself to his neighbour in the next village, then being Danish becomes an identity that includes only a very few Danes, hence making the category 'Danish' heterogeneous. But perhaps more importantly, Jenkins argues that identity not only relates to places of origin (small versus large city, Zealand versus Jutland etc.); more recently it also seems to relate to 'race' and culture, the meaning of which is accentuated by ongoing political debate concerning 'strangers' in society.

One of the strengths of the book is the way it brings political sentiments into the analysis, which is shown to make a difference to what it is to be Danish. Historically important episodes are likewise brought in to the analysis – for example, the Maastricht treaty in 1992 when the Danes voted 'no', or the 'cartoon controversy' of 2005 when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons of the prophet Mohammed – to show how these episodes influence local identification processes among Danes.

The monograph *Being Danish* delivers on the micro-sociological level of identity processes among real people in real situations, while also relating these processes to present politics, culture and history. The book is an important contribution to our understanding of the many paradoxes that constitute modern life in modern (welfare capitalist) states. In terms of how it relates specifically to the question of power, it makes a strong contribution by reminding us that power is (also) the untold, the unarticulated, the-taken-for-granted, the *doxic*, etc. Studies like this remind us that analyses of power must not only be occupied with the obvious power structures of a society, but also engage with the salient aspects of how power organizes society and individuals even when power is rarely talked about, as in the case of *Being Danish*.

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