

5 The necrogeopolitics of Danish welfare and the horror of responsibility

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Introduction

Under the title “Fair and realistic: an immigration policy that unites Denmark,”¹ the Danish Social Democrats, long-time workers party and leftist egalitarian beacon, launched their new initiative on how Denmark should approach refugees and migrants in a world where more people than ever are displaced. The initiative declares that Danish welfare is not for everyone, and that equality is a matter of degree. According to the initiative, applications for asylum will not be received on Danish soil, and anyone arriving in Denmark shall be sent to a camp in Northern Africa, where they will stay while their case is being decided. Those who are granted asylum will be “given over” to the UN Refugee Agency to be hosted either in the country of the camp, or in a UN refugee camp elsewhere. Those who are not granted asylum in the camp will be sent back to where they came from. Denmark, meanwhile, will yearly decide on a set amount of quota refugees it is willing to receive through the UN, based on an assessment of how many people can be successfully “integrated” into the Danish welfare state.

The positions in this initiative are remarkably similar to the immigration policies pursued by the center-right coalition government currently holding power in Denmark, and they underline an embrace of these sorts of policies by a large part of the Danish left as well. Even commentators in national left-wing newspapers have saluted the Social Democratic party for its new, “realistic” humanism.² They buy the idea that this new system would end human trafficking across the Mediterranean, and that it is fairer because it helps everyone equally instead of spending most resources on the “affluent” who can make their way to Danish borders. “Realistic humanism,” then, is to offer refugees and migrants to enter a camp instead of risking drowning in the Mediterranean, as if Agamben’s state of exception was a script and not a warning.³ The infrastructures of tracking and capture that this system would require in Denmark and Europe form a fascist story in itself and, not surprisingly, states in Northern Africa have flatly rejected suggestions about asylum seeker camps.⁴ In conjunction with this hardline approach, the Social Democrats also more sympathetically suggest that the EU and

the international community should band together to provide a “historical lift,” inspired by the Marshall plan, especially for Africa and some Middle Eastern states, by investing in infrastructure, education, and state building, and thus dismantling unfair relations between the EU and Africa in terms of taxes, trade, fish quotas, and so on. Finally, Denmark should restructure the aid it provides to double the amount it gives to humanitarian tasks and to vulnerable states by taking away aid from support projects in stable areas and resources spent on receiving refugees in Denmark. In large font “lifted out” of the surrounding text, the Social Democrats make it clear on the very first page of their initiative that these policies are necessary and legitimate because they are the only way to save Denmark, which is a priori a worthy cause. As they put it: “You are not a bad person if you don’t want to see your country fundamentally change. And you are not naïve if you want to help others to a better life.”⁵

The Nordic welfare states continue to be celebrated for their desirable combination of high levels of wealth, equality, and individual freedom. The much-admired Nordic Model, which produces the happiest populations in the world, consists of a strong welfare state combined with free-market capitalism. To describe the success of this setup, pictures of friendly reindeer and Vikings decorate news articles and journalistic reports in which excited commentators use terms such as “the next supermodel,”⁶ “northern lights,”⁷ or “cuddly capitalism.”⁸

This chapter seeks to nuance this enthusiasm by tracing the necrogeopolitics of the Danish welfare state as a privileged global player. The chapter describes how Danish welfare, reserved for the few, is dependent on suffering and death elsewhere. It shows how Denmark got rich and stays rich by taking advantage of global systems of inequality and exploitation. The chapter begins by introducing Slavoj Žižek’s psychoanalytical concept of the “national Thing” to explain how nationalism is tied to particular fantasies and ways of enjoying. I analyze how the Danish “national Thing” produces and upholds the idea that Danes are entitled to Danish enjoyment, which conceals necrogeopolitical aspects of Danish affluence and legitimates racism. Placing Danish affluence in a global context inserts a call for taking responsibility for the suffering one causes, even from a distance. The chapter ends with a discussion of the limits of liberal universality and the trauma of this responsibility.

The Danish national Thing

According to Žižek, nationalism cannot be reduced to symbolic identification. The element holding together a community is a shared relationship toward a “Thing” or toward enjoyment structured by fantasies.⁹ To Žižek, the social constructivist understanding that a nation is not a biological or historical fact but a social discursive construction misses the point because it overlooks “the remainder of some real, nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment

which must be present for the Nation qua discursive entity-effect to achieve its ontological consistency.”¹⁰ This Thing appears to be accessible only to people who belong to the community, while others are unable to grasp it even though they are said to constantly disturb it. Asked to explain what “it” is, the answer becomes an empty tautology: the Thing appears as what gives meaning and joy to the lives of people in the community, and it is simply “our way of life.” Nationalism, as it is bound in the national Thing, manifests itself in the way a community sets up festive events, arranges its language, its clothing, or various “national” artifacts, “in short, [in] all the details by which is made visible the unique way a community organizes its enjoyment.”¹¹ The existence of the Thing hinges on members of the community believing in it. More precisely, everyone must believe that everyone else also believes. The Thing “turns on the fact that ‘it means something’ to people.”¹²

The Danish national Thing has the welfare state at its core. Since the 1950s, the Danish welfare state has been “ideologized” to function as a total horizon for social orientation and political action.¹³ The welfare state is “one of the Danish community’s crown jewels.”¹⁴ Thus, the state is not perceived as the state per se, but as an “us,” a “community of identity.” In this context, we take care of each other; the welfare society is perceived as our narrative, our way of structuring society. This enjoyment does depend on people believing that everyone else also believes in it because the continuation of the welfare state is reliant on everyone working hard, contributing taxes, and only receiving benefits as needed. The “perverted,” and as we shall see “un-Danish,” way of enjoying participation in the welfare state is to lazily exploit it, thus reaping its benefits without doing any work to maintain it.

Mainstream Danish history portrays the ideas of Danish national homogeneity and Danish national identity as being heavily focused on equality and solidarity, both of which are said to be historically rooted. From a multicultural kingdom expanding over vast land areas, Denmark was reduced to the mere 44,000 km² it is today as a result of continuous land losses between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. By 1864, this context meant that the remaining Danish territory had to find a way to fulfill the idealized requirements of a nation-state (or perhaps merely the idealized requirements for an approximation of the perfect national simulacrum), with a complete overlap of state, language, and territory.¹⁵ Two main national ideologies were crucial to the task of shaping this very small, coherent country into a nation. One was the “internal front strategy,” whereby different classes had to collaborate to “bolster the defense of the nation by providing for the welfare of the population in ways that would unite it as a people—encouraging a unity that would help the nation resist future geopolitical threats should they arise.”¹⁶ These ideas eventually led to the establishment of a strong set of national institutions designed to reduce inequality and class differences.¹⁷ The second main ideology was based on

the peasantry and inspired by Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872), a Christian clergyman, writer, and poet.¹⁸ The “Grundtvigian movement” cut across social classes in its impetus toward the importance of individual freedom, classical liberalism, voluntarism, free association, popular education, and the development of civil society and social solidarity.¹⁹ Grundtvigian “folk schools” emphasized the teaching of Danish literature and served as key mechanisms for the spread of the Grundtvigian cultural perspective and the development of a Danish national identity. Historian Knud J. V. Jespersen writes:

Although in essence the Danish model, which was developed during the twentieth century, is a system of welfare and social security, it is in fact much more than that. It actually permeates the whole of society in all its aspects, from the system of taxation to the way in which the citizens conduct themselves. It would not be an exaggeration to talk of a whole philosophy of life, tightly linked to being Danish and a particular Danish way of doing things.²⁰

This national Danish narrative, of course, takes precedence over other possible narratives. After the 1864 war, Danish historians engaged in an “active and conscious effort in a politics of remembrance,” instigating a new version of history in which Denmark was said to have been a coherent power with a rich national history for centuries.²¹ Left out of the Danish national narrative with its emphasis on modesty and solidarity was, for example, Danish colonization, and wealth acquisition based on the slave trade and on sugar plantations across the Atlantic Ocean, which was at its height in the second half of the eighteenth century. Denmark sold its colony in the West Indies to the United States as late as 1917.

The prevailing Danish notion that the Danish nation is a homogenous people is largely informed by this Grundtvigian legacy, particularly in its embrace of a secular Christianity, which also frames Danish enjoyment for holidays, rituals, and traditions. These are Christian events and celebrations, but they are also performed and enjoyed without any particularly deep-felt sense of spirituality. The Danish conservative folk party, which is part of the current coalition government in Denmark, stresses on its website that:

Denmark is, and shall continue to be, a coherent community based on a Christian foundation. It is not enough to merely uphold Danish law, if one wishes to become part of the Danish society. A fundamental understanding of Danish history, culture and language is also necessary. This type of cohesion will in and of itself contribute to creating more mutual understanding and lessen conflicts. [...] We cannot accept that foreigners come to this country to take advantage of our welfare system or commit criminal acts.²²

The terms “coherent” and “cohesion” are key. The Danish word “*sammenhængskraft*,” which is used across the political spectrum to describe an ideal Danish society, directly translates as “cohesion-force,” and it refers to an innate force in Denmark that supposedly keeps the country united. Everything that threatens this cohesion is a threat to the Danish national Thing. The worst threat to Danish cohesion is so-called “parallel-societies,” that is to say, non-Danish groups or even societies within Denmark that may destroy the Danish unity.

Ideals of humility and solidarity stretching back to the “internal front strategy” bring “Danish design” into the Danish Thing, as Danish design is linked to a Danish way of life, and it displays Danish exceptionalism as represented in various everyday objects. Minimalist and functionalist design thus becomes part of the national narrative about a population that, after losing large areas of land, turned its energies towards working with and sharing what they had. As one author puts it, “Perhaps this lack of natural resources more than anything else is what has made the Danes a design-oriented society? Danish common sense certainly resulted in clean lines of design using natural materials.”²³

The ethos that informs Danish architecture, clothing, interior design, and furniture, for example, is characterized by a focus on modesty, simplicity, aesthetics, and functionality. Danish enjoyment is thus linked to putting such minimalism to use in everyday life. How one dresses, what sort of bicycle one rides or what car one drives, or how one decorates one’s home are showcases of one’s Danish way of enjoying. It makes no difference for Danish “coherence” and the Danish national Thing that modestly designed furniture and clothing actually require a privileged financial status, as well as the existence of a global warehouse of outsourced resource extraction, production, and waste.

The racism of Danish freedom fantasies

According to Žižek, tensions of racism and xenophobia turn on the possession of the national Thing. As Žižek puts it:

We always impute to the “other” an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. In short, what really bothers us about the “other” is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment, precisely the surplus, the “excess” that pertains to this way “the smell of ‘their’ food, ‘their’ noisy songs and dances, ‘their’ strange manners, ‘their’ attitude to work.”²⁴

In the Danish context, this tension partly revolves around a concept of superior Danish freedom secured precisely by participation in the welfare state. In Denmark, freedom is not freedom unless it is Danish. The welfare state is praised for being a social system that sets people free: free and equal

access to health care and to education, a flexible job-market, and free care for the elderly. According to Danish logic, the welfare model creates the security necessary to be free to create the life one wants. As the Social Democrats state, it is “freedom for the individual—created by and in a solidary community.”²⁵ When others do not find this freedom particularly liberating, Danes then may realize that what they unequivocally conceive as freedom-in-solidarity is in fact quite selective and very particular. For example, when “others” in Denmark ask for separate swimming lessons for girls, shower curtains in schools, no pork to be served in day care centers or hospitals, circumcision for babies, or the right to wear the burqa or niqāb at work, and further “pressure” public institutions into meeting these requests, some commentators and politicians believe that Danish democracy is under threat, particularly because religious considerations have been put before Danish democratic values. Of course, what is at stake here is not Danish democracy, but rather the Danish national Thing. However, today in Denmark, as the Social Democrats add, there are areas “where freedom does not exist for everyone. Where some are not part of the Danish solidary community.”²⁶ The Social Democrats thus call for a “new freedom fight” against “forced marriage, honor killings, violence, pressure to wear a hijab, re-education journeys, [and] prohibition against joining free-time activities.”²⁷ And then they set the record straight: “Either they become a part of Denmark, with everything that this entails in terms of contributing to society and supporting our fundamental democratic values. Or else they find another place to live that is more in agreement with their values.”²⁸

A recent bill passed by the sitting coalition government, with support from the Social Democrats, now makes it unlawful to cover one’s face in public. The bill asserts that fundamental democratic values do not count if the other does not wish to be “like us,” or be “Danish.” Covering one’s face in public is seen as a threat to Danish cohesion and the Danish way of life:

With this bill, the government wishes to make it clear, that it, according to the government, is not compatible with the values and cohesion in the Danish society, or the respect for our community, to hide one’s face in public space. The face is the foundation for recognition between people, just as the face allows for the possibility to read other’s signals and emotions. The face plays a central role in the interaction in our society. If one chooses to cover up, it is the understanding of the government that this is an expression that one does not wish to be part of the Danish society. [...] It wears on the cohesion in Denmark and can contribute to creating the setting for parallel societies with their own norms and rules.²⁹

Having to force the other’s “freedom” onto him or her is, of course, a failure of Danish liberal ideals that were supposed to be self-evident and that everyone in their right mind would not want to reject. Making laws that

prohibit burqa or niqāb becomes an exercise of forced “cultural enlightenment” imposed onto people who are seen as falsely enlightened as a result of their own preferred ideals.

The question arises, however, as to whether some people are, in fact, always-already unfit for inclusion, and whether the very production of Danish national identity is premised on the exhortation to “integrate,” while partially denying the possibility of such integration for some. It seems that the Danish national Thing embraces a myth of “successful integration,” but cannot co-exist with it in practice. Integration is presented as progress and emancipation, and will always be suspected of being superficial, imperfect, or simulated.³⁰ As Žižek argues:

The demand “Become like us!” is a superego demand, a demand which counts on the other’s inability to really become like us, so that we can then gleefully “deplere” their failure. The truly unbearable fact for a multiculturalist liberal is an Other who effectively becomes like us, while retaining its specific features.³¹

For Danes, it is “unbearable” for people to choose their own ways over the model of Danish freedom that has been offered to them because the Danish way of life is in fact seen as superior to others. Proper participation in the welfare state becomes a “civilizing mission” whereby “they” must learn to partake in a civilized manner in “our” superior way of structuring society. This also means that some people are a larger burden on Denmark than others. As the spokesperson on nationality for Venstre, the liberal-democratic party currently in power in Denmark, wrote in an op-ed:

We are already distinguishing between different countries. It is easier to come to Denmark for an Italian than for an Indian. And it is harder for a Somali than a Swede. Now we are expanding the list of countries. The countries have been chosen based on objective and factual criteria. And those are—naturally—neither religion nor skin color. If one is from a country with a high standard of living—broadly speaking—there is a higher chance that one will settle and thrive in Denmark without problems, and there is a smaller risk that one is coming for the wrong reasons.³²

Relying on the United Nations Human Development Index, Venstre suggested ranking otherness based on an assumption that people from first world countries would easily be able to integrate into Danish society whereas people from third world countries would not.

As Etienne Balibar points out, contemporary racism, especially as it pertains to western European nations, is in part ideologically bound in a mode of complete incompatibility between different cultures, whereby culture functions in a naturalized way akin to biological or genetic naturalism. Thus, it is constantly “locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into

a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin.”³³ Undesired behaviors or even aptitudes are explained by belonging to a certain culture and by an incompatibility between lifestyles and traditions.³⁴ Of course, such explanations hide the fact that this racism is still in essence biologically informed, as are biopolitical rationales regarding who may be saved and who may be killed, sacrificed, or ignored. The fantasy of a homogenous Denmark in idealized Danish history books is, of course, homogeneously white, overlooking for example the Inuit population of Greenland. By putting the often palatable idea of cultural differences front and center, racist discourse becomes politically accepted, and an argument about securing cultural diversity can become an argument for maintaining cultural distances and segregation (the primary mode of this sort of segregation is to insist on the presence of different nations).³⁵ Similarly, Žižek describes how a new racism that actually purports to be the opposite of racism legitimizes apartheid as an endeavor to prevent racial tensions.³⁶ He writes: “We don’t want anything foreign, we just want what rightfully belongs to us!”—a reliable sign of racism, since it claims to draw a clear line of distinction where none exists.³⁷

For Žižek, such illusionary lines of distinction persist because both the subject and social reality are constituted by a fundamental lack: neither can ever be complete, and the subject attempts to cover these gaps through different acts of identification. The role of fantasies is to tell us how (and what) to desire, and fantasy further fills in ideological gaps by offering the subject the possibility to envision a way out of the dissatisfaction with social reality.³⁸ Thus, as Adam Cottrel argues, “In this way, fantasy bestows reality with a fictional coherence and consistency that appears to fulfill the lack that constitutes social reality.”³⁹ Fantasy operates in such a way that the impossibility of wholeness is transformed into a prohibition or difficulty only, thus leaving the subject with the illusion that the impossibility (primordial loss) can still be transgressed.⁴⁰ Keeping the desire unfulfilled, the fantasy gives us an explanation for why our full enjoyment is missing: we could enjoy it, if only ... Žižek’s main example of an ideological fantasy is the role played by the Jew in the Nazi regime’s narrative:

What appears as the hindrance to society’s full identity with itself is actually its positive condition: by transposing onto the Jew the role of the foreign body which introduces in the social organism disintegration and antagonism, the fantasy-image of society qua consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible.⁴¹

According to Žižek, what is actually hated is our own inner antagonism, the overlap of lack and excess in the little incomplete tastes of enjoyment we experience. Hating the other’s enjoyment is hating our own excessive, unobtainable enjoyment. In the following excerpt from a column in a conservative national Danish newspaper, the author portrays a very ambivalent attitude toward his own (Danish) enjoyment:

My own frustration causes me to feel like the veil-women. I only dwell in Denmark because of my high income and the good health care system in line with many immigrants who are only here because of early retirement and sickness leave benefits. As soon as it is possible, I run away on a long weekend or a longer vacation abroad, where the weather is better and prices are lower. My country is turning into a defensive, masochistic amoeba that accepts that everyone exploits it. The only answer seems to be xenophobia, which is as alien to me as Morten Østergaard's naive and totalitarian acceptance of veils, children's checks to Romanians and elimination of the Danish language.⁴²

The message here seems to be that others have ruined this person's belief in the Danish narrative, and thus have destroyed the Danish national Thing, leaving the country as "a defensive, masochistic amoeba that accepts that everyone exploits it." The current situation makes this Danish commentator unable to enjoy being Danish, and instead forces him to enjoy Denmark in the same, perverse way that the immigrants allegedly do. In this sense, it is the immigrants' fault that he hates his own enjoyment. In terms of a possible solution, the author feels trapped between xenophobia, a stance he has arguably already adopted, and opening the borders of the nation completely, thus allowing the Danish way of life to be destroyed (something that, however, seems to already have happened for him).

Žižek reminds us that this logic of "theft of enjoyment" is not motivated by an immediate social reality about different ethnic communities living together. Rather, it comes from "the inner antagonism inherent in these communities." He writes:

It is too easy to dispose of this problematic by pointing out that what we have here is simply the transposition, the ideological displacement, of the effective socioeconomic antagonisms of today's capitalism. The problem is that, while this is undoubtedly true, it is precisely through such a displacement that desire is constituted. What we gain by transposing the perception of inherent social antagonisms into the fascination with the Other (Jew, Japanese ...) is the fantasy-organization of desire.⁴³

Danish nationalism structures fantasies by organizing a desire for a coherent Danish state free of antagonisms, something that cannot be fulfilled. Žižek calls it "the fascist dream," which emerges when a community fantasizes about being a capitalist society without any excess or structural imbalance.⁴⁴ This dream is perhaps what is encapsulated in the Nordic Model: free market capitalism in a homogenous, equal society of free, happy people. The Danish fantasy, then, posits that what is prohibiting the Nordic Model from functioning without friction is the presence of foreign immigrants who do not, cannot, or will not understand and respect the

Danish thing, and thus are destroying it. This fantasy covers up the friction that arises from Denmark's desire to partake as a wealthy core country in the global neoliberal world order while at the same time wanting the nation to be for Danes only.

Denmark in the world

Cuddly Danish capitalism is not so cuddly when seen from the perspective of a global structural/axial division of labor. As a core state, Denmark appropriates surplus value from periphery states, and it utilizes its power to ensure that money and goods will flow more freely across borders than labor and people. As Immanuel Wallerstein suggests, the nation becomes a claim for a position of advantage in the capitalist world economy, and the idea of peoplehood "resolves one of the basic contradictions of historical capitalism—its simultaneous thrust for theoretical equality and practical inequality."⁴⁵ The view that "the world is in many ways unfair, and Denmark's immigration politics can't solve the world's injustices and poverty problems,"⁴⁶ along with the Danish refrain "we want equality, but only for us!", are not only massive relinquishments of responsibility. They also naturalize the affluence of Danish people as something that is inherent to their nationality, and not something that depends on the global division of labor.

Only if one insists on viewing Denmark as a closed bubble may it seem as though the Danish model has succeeded in taming capitalism to gain only its benefits. A global perspective that acknowledges the fact that Danish affluence is dependent on cheap labor and resources in other parts of the world would suggest that struggles at the Danish borders are, in fact, class struggles between a Danish bourgeoisie and an unwelcome foreign proletariat that is viewed as a threat to the affluent lifestyles inside the nation. Denmark is not a success because of some internal miracle resulting from its national social system, but rather because it got the long end of the global neoliberal stick as industrialization and globalization catapulted Denmark into the global western elite.⁴⁷ As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote:

The socialistic bourgeois want all the advantages of modern social conditions without the struggles and dangers necessarily resulting therefrom. They desire the existing state of society, minus its revolutionary and disintegrating elements. They wish for a bourgeoisie without a proletariat. The bourgeoisie naturally conceives the world in which it is supreme to be the best; and bourgeois socialism develops this comfortable conception into various more or less complete systems. In requiring the proletariat to carry out such a system, [...] it but requires in reality, that the proletariat should remain within the bounds of existing society, but should cast away all its hateful ideas concerning the bourgeoisie.⁴⁸

Marx and Engels disdained the socialist bourgeoisie for silencing the proletariat within society. In the Nordic Model, the desire for a bourgeoisie without a proletariat has been fulfilled by pushing the proletariat, and thus any radical critique or revolutionary elements, out of the nation and out of sight. Marx and Engels viewed socialism as utopic because it would not surpass class antagonisms. The Nordic welfare states could claim to have fulfilled this utopia without the step of having to abandon capitalism. But class antagonisms are not absent from the Nordic Model; they have merely been outsourced.

Danish necrogeopolitics is therefore nested in complex assemblages whose causal links are conveniently invisible to many in Denmark. The Danish welfare state is dependent on a global system that includes zones where expendable and sacrificed populations are mundanely being put to death. As one worker in Apple's Foxconn factory in China says: "It wouldn't be Foxconn without people dying. Every year people kill themselves. They take it as a normal thing."⁴⁹ Every now and then, some of these deaths have been noticed in Denmark, as was the case with the Danish company Texman that had clothes made in the Rana Plaza factory that collapsed on April 23, 2013, killing 1,138 people.⁵⁰ But tragedies are quickly forgotten in the news cycles, and exploitation continues. In 2017, for example, it was revealed that the Danish company Bestseller manufactured its clothes in factories in Bangladesh where workers who were advocating for higher pay were thrown in jail with no due process and risked the death penalty as a result. Likewise, garment workers in Cambodia, also in Bestseller factories, have fainted by the hundreds every year due to malnutrition, overheating, and stress.⁵¹

Similarly, the narrow perspective on migrants who drown in the Mediterranean overlooks the many deaths that happen long before the shores are reached, in deserts, mountains, and camps out of sight from the European media. As Martin Lemberg-Pedersen notes, pushing the handling of asylum cases to states not in the European core displaces the deaths away from the European gaze. The human trafficking industry is in fact created by a necrogeopolitical unwillingness on the part of European countries to receive asylum seekers and by the subsequent closing of legal flight and migration routes over the last 30 years.⁵²

The Danish immigration system also produces death. In front of passengers in an Air France plane bound for Paris on November 20, 2017, an Algerian man lost consciousness after having been physically coerced for 30 minutes by three Danish police officers. He had been denied asylum and was being deported, and later died in the hospital.⁵³ At the time of the writing of this chapter, the Danish government was still trying to contact the remaining three (out of eight) sick asylum seekers who had been deported, even though this deportation decision was in violation of a ruling by the European Human Rights Council. It is feared that these individuals presently do not have access to the medicine they need.⁵⁴

In a recent speech on the occasion of the Danish national holiday, Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen (from the Venstre party) explained that he, along with several other European leaders, is not getting any closer in his efforts to devise a new European system to receive asylum seekers based on centers (camps) in Europe itself, and arranged in quid-pro-quo deals with European countries that are not members of the European Union, thus indirectly acknowledging that such centers in North African states are not an option. Such centers would, the Prime Minister assured, be placed “in a country that is not on the list of preferred destinations for migrants or traffickers.”⁵⁵ In a speech to the parliament in 2018, the Prime Minister expressed his satisfaction that elaborate ratifications of Danish immigration laws resulted in the lowest number of asylum seekers in Denmark in the past nine years.⁵⁶

What we witness in these Danish immigration policies and other immigration initiatives across the Danish political spectrum is how the world to which the Danish welfare state has outsourced the excessive and destructive elements of capitalism comes back knocking on the Danish front door, as the lives of the proletariat in peripheral countries have become intolerable due to extreme inequality, oil-related conflicts, environmental devastation, and so on. The Danes are thus confronted with their own excess as a result of their borders. Rather than critical self-reflection that could lead to take responsibility, the results of this confrontation with the returning world are more racism and xenophobia, as the national fantasy of a coherent welfare state based on a shared solidarity that is allegedly irreplaceable, precious, but also always threatened is the main framework through which the confrontation is understood.

The trauma of responsibility

One obvious critique of nationalism along the lines of what I have argued above would be to denounce nationalism and argue for a universal, shared struggle. Žižek writes:

If all sides do not share or respect the same civility, then multiculturalism turns into a form of legally regulated mutual ignorance or hatred. The conflict over multiculturalism already is a conflict about *Leit-kultur*: not a conflict between cultures, but a conflict between different visions of how different cultures can and should co-exist, about the rules and practices these cultures would have to share. One should thus avoid getting caught in the liberal game of determining how much tolerance we should show the Other [...] At this level, of course, we can never be tolerant enough, or else we are always already too tolerant [...] The only way to break out of this deadlock is to propose and fight for a positive universal project shared by all participants.⁵⁷

Such a “universal” struggle, however, runs the risk of becoming violent because of its inability to incorporate conceptions of freedom and of meaningful life that

do not fit the western liberal democratic definition. Similarly, Judith Butler encourages a new, radical form of egalitarianism framed by the term “precariousness” understood as a shared social human condition. Butler asks the left to move beyond multicultural conceptions of different (minority) identities within the framework of a nation-state in order to, instead, focus on state violence against precarious populations:

Precarity cuts across identity categories as well as multicultural maps, thus forming the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit and distribute precarity for the purposes of profit and territorial defense. Such an alliance would not require agreement on all questions of desire or belief or self-identification. It would be a movement sheltering certain kinds of ongoing antagonisms among its participants, valuing such persistent and animating differences as the sign and substance of a radical democratic politics.⁵⁸

Crucially, Butler leaves the door open for maintaining differences and antagonisms, hoping that underneath state-centric cultivated indifferences, we could find a fundamental, shared human condition that still would enable the differences that keep a democracy democratic.

Taking a different route from Butler and Žižek, the ethical framework offered by Emmanuel Levinas has denounced universalism in favor of the singularity of each face we encounter, and of the ethical claim that this encounter makes on us. Levinas challenges liberal ideals about freedom and the sovereign subject because, if the sovereignty of the subject is more important than intersubjectivity, competition between subjects, which can turn into war, will become the governing political dynamic.⁵⁹ In its emphasis on assimilation through shared belief or a shared human nature, liberalism does not remove itself far enough from the logic of war, and, according to Levinas, these internal tensions in the liberal ideals manifest themselves through the ongoing racism that pervades liberal societies.⁶⁰ Liberalism neglects the ethical because the liberal subject has no room for responsibility as exposure to the other and, as such, liberalism has not sufficiently protected itself against evil, or at least against a cultivated neglect of responsibility.⁶¹ For Levinas, the responsibility towards the other always comes before the subject’s own freedom, and such a responsibility is traumatic to a liberal subject whose enjoyment and satisfaction are disrupted by the needs of the other.⁶² Our responsibility towards others upsets our sense of sovereignty and subjectivity, and it destabilizes our comfortable sense of self-possession, even though we have never really possessed this sovereignty and subjectivity in the first place.⁶³

The immigration initiative of the Danish Social Democrats features only one face: the face of the party leader, Mette Frederiksen, displayed on the front cover of its key documents. This face is telling readers that they are not

bad people if they want their country to stay the same. Apart from this, no other face makes any ethical claims on those who read the party's immigration initiative, and migrants and refugees are reduced to charts and numbers.

However, Levinas (and Butler as well, as I suggested above) runs into a problem of ontology. We must be careful not to turn nationalism into an ideological fantasy of its own. Put differently, we cannot presume that the Danes would suddenly care if nationalism were to be removed. Butler's suggestion that, underneath state-centric cultivated indifferences, we could still find a fundamental, shared human condition presumes that something inherently good about people is in the current context being messed up by "bad things." But if we could somehow strip away certain cultural constellations and convictions, we could find an unmediated humanity, which would be ontologically defined through a fundamental caring about all others. Likewise, Levinas makes an ethical claim about responsibility towards the other, although his is not anchored in ontology. Humans are fully capable of encountering others and still not responding to any ethical claim whatsoever. Thus, we cannot presume that if we just removed nationalism, everyone would start living up to their ethical responsibilities. What Levinas calls the trauma of responsibility is therefore more aptly a horror of responsibility. It is the horror that, even though we know that the other is suffering and that our privilege is premised on this very suffering, we still have no interest in living up to our ethical responsibility towards the other. As Jairus Grove puts it, moral horror, as opposed to moral tragedy or moral failure, is the "horror of the inhuman as human," or the fact that "we live in a horrifying world, not a tragic one. Dehumanization is a lullaby we sing to each other, rather than face the horror that the suffering of others fails to awaken anything inside of us."⁶⁴

Nationalism is a dead end; multiculturalism is a dead end; and universalism is a dead end too because, in the end, Danes just do not care enough. Putting faces of suffering migrants and refugees all over the immigration initiative would not necessarily make readers feel the ethical pull that the initiative itself tries to avoid. It could just as easily make readers uncomfortable by being confronted with others that threaten their way of life. The absence of faces in the initiative itself suggests that an overwhelming visibility and intensity of such faces in Danish media outlets in general elicit insecurity with regards to the Danish national Thing.

In her book about enchantment, Jane Bennett writes about "the effect—always indirect—that a cultural narrative has on the ethical sensibility of its bearers."⁶⁵ Bennett does not presume that an "ethics of generosity" is ontologically present under the weight of cultural baggage. Instead, the bad has to be replaced with something better: we have to be enchanted by a certain ethical sensibility. The current Danish national Thing is an affective community organized around certain expressions of exclusion, exploitation, and racism. To start living up to its global ethical responsibility, the Danish welfare state needs a different Danish national Thing that is equally inspiring to all its

participants, but ethically superior. Danish narratives about solidarity-in-homogeneity and about the welfare state as the ultimate liberator are extremely powerful fantasies and modalities of enjoyment. To dismantle and replace them is an overwhelming endeavor.

Notes

- 1 Socialdemokratiet, *Retfærdig og realistisk. En udlændingepolitik der samler Danmark* (Copenhagen, 2018). All text from Danish political parties and newspapers has been translated by the author.
- 2 See, for example, David Trads, “Det er klassisk socialdemokratisme: Mette Frederiksens humanisme er faktisk smuk,” *Politiken*, December 28, 2017.
- 3 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 4 Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, “Om flygtningeudspillet fra S: Visionen vil indebære, at tusindvis af mennesker indfanges og tvangsdeporteres sydpå hvert år,” *Politiken*, February 2018.
- 5 Socialdemokratiet, 5.
- 6 “Special Report: The Nordic Countries,” *The Economist*, February 2, 2013.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Sara Miller Llana and Fabrizio Tassinari, “Nordic Cuddly Capitalism: Utopia, No. But a Global Model for Equity,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 11, 2014.
- 9 Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (London: Verso, 1993), 201–237.
- 10 Ibid., 202.
- 11 Ibid., 201.
- 12 Ibid., 202.
- 13 Jacob Torfing, *Velfærdsstatens Ideologisering*, Research Papers from the Department of Social Sciences, Roskilde University, 1999, <https://forskning.ruc.dk/en/publications/velfærdsstatens-ideologisering>, accessed July 31, 2018.
- 14 Lasse Koefoed, *Glokale nationalismer: Globalisering, hverdagsliv og fortællinger om dansk identitet* (PhD diss., Roskilde University, 2006), 140.
- 15 See Knud K. V. Jespersen, *A History of Denmark* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Uffe Østergaard, “Peasants and Danes: The Danish National Identity and Political Culture,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 1 (1992): 3–27; and Ove Korsgaard, *The Struggle for the People; Five Hundred Years of Danish History in Short* (Copenhagen: Danish School of Education Press, 2008).
- 16 John L. Campbell and John A. Hall, *National Identity and the Varieties of Capitalism: The Danish Experience* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 23.
- 17 Ibid., 23.
- 18 Korsgaard, *The Struggle*, 59.
- 19 Campbell and Hall, *National Identity*, 23.
- 20 Jespersen, *A History*, 82.
- 21 Korsgaard, *The Struggle*, 56.
- 22 Konservativ.dk. *Udlændinge og Integration*, accessed March 2, 2018, <https://konservativ.dk/politik/alle-emner/udlaendinge-og-integrationspolitik/>.
- 23 Thomas Dickson, *Dansk Design* (London: Murdoch Books, 2008), 31.
- 24 Žižek, *Tarrying*, 203.
- 25 Socialdemokratiet, 29.
- 26 Ibid., 29.

- 27 Ibid., 29.
- 28 Socialdemokratiet, 30.
- 29 Regeringen, "Forslag til lov om ændring af straffeloven (Tildækningsforbud)," *Justitsministeriet* (February 6, 2018), 3, accessed July 31, 2018, www.justitsministeriet.dk/sites/default/files/media/Pressemeddelelser/pdf/2018/lovforslag_tildaekningsforbud.pdf.
- 30 Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 25.
- 31 Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, the Reality of an Illusion," *Lacan.com* (2009), accessed July 31, 2018, www.lacan.com/essays/?page_id=454.
- 32 Jan E. Jørgensen, "Venstre vil både åbne og lukke landet," *Berlingske Tidende* (August 16, 2014), accessed July 31, 2018, www.b.dk/kronikker/venstre-vil-baade-aabne-og-lukke-landet.
- 33 Balibar, *Race, Nation*, 22.
- 34 Ibid., 22.
- 35 Balibar, *Race, Nation*, 22–23.
- 36 Žižek, *Tarrying*, 226.
- 37 Žižek, *Tarrying*, 204.
- 38 Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 7.
- 39 Adam Cottrel, "Fantasy," in *The Žižek Dictionary*, ed. Rex Butler (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 90.
- 40 Jason Glynos, "Transgressive Enjoyment as a Freedom Fetter," *Political Studies* 56 (2008): 679–704.
- 41 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2001), 90.
- 42 Henrik Day Poulsen, "Er projektet Danmark en fejl?" *Berlingske Tidende* (March 25, 2014), accessed July 31, 2018, www.b.dk/kommentarer/er-projektet-danmark-en-fejl. Morten Østergaard, mentioned in this quotation, is a politician from a center-left party who is known for the most tolerant politics towards immigrants. Moreover, what is referred to as "children's checks" here are modes of government subsidy to families with children in Denmark.
- 43 Žižek, *Tarrying*, 206.
- 44 Ibid., 206.
- 45 Wallerstein, *Race, Nation*, 84.
- 46 Jørgensen, *Venstre vil bade*, www.b.dk/kronikker/venstre-vil-baade-aabne-og-lukke-landet.
- 47 Lars Bo Kaspersen, *Danmark i verden* (Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels forlag, 2008), 168–169.
- 48 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Road Map to History's Most Important Political Document* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 81.
- 49 Cited in Brian Merchant, "Life and death in Apple's forbidden city," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2017.
- 50 Freja Thorbech, "Modebrand skifter ejer," *Detailfolk.dk* (March 14, 2014), accessed March 2, 2018, http://detailfolk.dk/detailnyheder/modebrand_skifter_ejer.html; See also Clean clothes campaign, "Rana Plaza: a man-made disaster that shook the world," (2013), accessed March 2, 2018, <https://cleanclothes.org/ua/2013/rana-plaza>.
- 51 Louise Voller, "Arbejdere hos Bestseller-leverandører i Bangladesh risikerer dødsstraf," *Danwatch* (February 16, 2017), accessed March 2, 2018, <https://old.danwatch.dk/nyhed/arbejdere-paa-bestseller-fabrikker-i-bangladesh-risikerer-doedsstraf/>; Louise Voller and Nikolaj Houmann Mortensen, "Mass faintings afflict the women who sew our clothes," *Danwatch* (2017), accessed March 2, 2018, <https://danwatch.dk/en/undersogelse/mass-faintings-afflict-the-women-who-sew-our-clothes>. See also *The True Cost*, directed Andrew Morgan (2015; Los Angeles: Untold Creative, 2015), Documentary film.

- 52 Lemberg-Pedersen, “Om flygtningeudspillet fra S.”
- 53 Ulrik Dahlin, “Politiets magtanvendelse skal undersøges i sag om dødsfald under tvangsudsendelse,” *Information*, November 25, 2017.
- 54 Cecilie Lund Kristiansen, Anders Bæksgaard og Carl Emil Arnfred, “Ministerium mangler livstegn fra tre syge personer,” *Politiken*, February 20, 2018.
- 55 Ritzau, “Lars Løkke: Et nyt europæisk asylsystem er på vej,” *Jyllands-Posten*, June 5, 2018.
- 56 Ritzau, “Løkke om S-udspil: Teltlejre i Nordafrika er postgang for sent,” *Fyens Stiftstidende*, February 7, 2018.
- 57 Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 415.
- 58 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (London: Verso, 2010), 32.
- 59 Cynthia D. Coe, *Levinas and the Trauma of Responsibility: The Ethical Significance of Time* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 225.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 129–130.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 137–139.
- 63 *Ibid.*, xiii.
- 64 Jairus Grove, *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 65 Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.

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