The Vanishing Villages of Denmark

by ROBERT T. ANDERSON

RÉSUMÉ

Dix ans après avoir étudié un village danois, l'auteur y est retourné et il nous livre ses observations sur les changements socio-culturels survenus durant cette période.

INTRODUCTION

To return to the community one has studied after the passage of a decade is both a moving personal experience and a stimulating intellectual exercise[1]. It has been that long since Mrs. Anderson and I, with our family, went to live in the Danish community of Dragor for a year of fieldwork. Last summer I had an opportunity to revisit Denmark and this community for a few days. On such a short visit one cannot speak of scholarly enquiry, and the personal experience of chatting with family and friends provides a very uneven basis for gauging the impact of ten years of history. Yet there is enough in a decade of time and a brief encounter to permit at least an informal, impressionistic perspective. Let me share this perspective by reviewing briefly something of what we discovered in our investigation of 1956-1957.

AMAGER ISLAND A DECADE AGO

At that time we found a community which had only recently lost the greater part of its cultural uniqueness (Anderson and

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Anderson 1964). In the 18th and 19th centuries, the island of Amager, on which Dragor is located, had a local folk culture. Denmark as a whole, in those days, consisted of numerous such regions, each with its own version of Danish culture. That of Amager was characterized by a blending of old, local Danish traits with Dutch practices brought to the island in the 16th century by immigrants from the Netherlands. Through the early decades of the twentieth century, in spite of closer contact with the capital city on the neighboring island of Sealand, to which it was connected by two bridges, Amager Island continued to preserve much that was unique. Dragor, at the southern end of the island and most distant of all of its villages from Copenhagen, particularly maintained the characteristics of an essentially self-contained community with its own folk culture. Amager as a whole depended upon farming for its living. Dragor, though sharing Amager culture, differed in being marine-oriented. Only three farms were located in this village, and the majority of the families lived from fishing, merchant sailing, or the piloting of ships through the Sound to and from Copenhagen.

Amager underwent massive change at the end of World War II. These changes may be characterized as a process of rapid urbanization. The source was not far to seek. Copenhagen had doubled its size between 1901 and 1951. Much of this growth took place during and immediately after the war. The housing situation in the capital was very tight. Construction had been extremely limited for a number of years. The potentialities of postwar transportation made it possible, when housing construction was resumed, to reach out into the countryside. The villages of Amager began to develop as suburbs. Even from Dragor the bicycle trip to Copenhagen took only an hour, and was not considered too long for daily commuting. In addition, bus and streetcar service provided regular, dependable, and inexpensive transportation. The postwar years also witnessed a large increase in the use of motor bikes, motor scooters, and motorcycles, especially after 1950. Automobiles, however, remained a luxury enjoyed by few and were of significance for daily commuting primarily for the professional classes.

Amager became a dormitory for the people of Copenhagen and Copenhagen provided employment for the people of Amager.

This was particularly fortunate for Dragor, since maritime occupations fell off precipitously about this time. Merchant sailing as a local enterprise died out as both inter-island and over-seas merchant trade shifted home ports to other harbors better able to accomodate it. The pilot station, which had been headquarters for 17 official pilots and an unknown number of unofficial and illegal pilots at the turn of the century, declined to a staff of 6 state pilots and no illegal ones when traffic shifted from sailing vessels to to motor and steam ships requiring a smaller staff. The number of fishermen fell from around a hundred to approximately forty. For the vast majority of the population, which had increased from 1850 inhabitants in 1900 to 3500 in 1955, urban employment was the norm. Dragor had become a suburb rather than a village. Except for a small number of old residents, its inhabitants were largely indistinguishable from Copenhageners. In dress, in speech, in occupation, in family and community custom, the residents of Dragor exchanged local tradition for urban conformity. What persisted of the old folk culture did so as museum display.

AMAGER TODAY

Ten years later one finds, on a causal visit at least, no surprises. The urban trend has merely continued as one might have anticipated. The population is up now to around 5000. Around the edges of the community the construction of apartment houses and detached dwellings reflects this growth in population. The old village at the center is still much as it was. The houses are picturesque. They are protected from basic change or destruction by laws for the conservation of old buildings, the aim being to prevent all but minimal change in basic structure. On closer examination one notes that they have increasingly come into the hands of more or less affluent city people who have modernized them without changing their basic appearance. They are very comfortable now, and exceedingly attractive. But this was going on ten years ago as well. The most noticeable change is in the presence of automobiles. The narrow streets and lanes are now crowded with numerous small cars for which no proper room exists.

The shopping center has also modernized within the confines of the building code. Businesses remain as they were a decade ago, although the interiors of many have been renovated and modernized. The single major change is connected with one of the three farms, the one located in the shopping area. It is now the site of a new construction which even as I write will become a modern shopping complex featuring a large, contemporary supermarket. Ten years ago, the Irma chain of supermarkets had a branch in Dragor, but it was quite small and differed only slightly from the more traditional grocery store. Irma will now be quite up-to-date.

Nearby at the harbor only a couple of fishing boats are to be seen in that part reserved to their use. A decade ago this area was full of fishing boats. But even then it was clear that the future of fishing, though very good, was located in other parts of Denmark as modern transportation took away the advantage Dragor once had of being close to the city market. Yet the harbor is bustling. Sport sailing, significant in the fifties, is thriving in the sixties. The empty waters of the fishermen's part of the harbor contrasts with the forest of masts in the pleasure-sailing area. And the pilots' station has revived. The number of official pilots has grown with the growth of trade through the port of Copenhagen. At the far edge of town, a new ferry connection to Sweden now has its dock. But ferry traffic goes around the community and affects only the view.

On the whole, the nature of the urbanization of Dragor has not changed, it has merely continued. Dragor is still separated from its nearest neighbor by open fields. The road to its neighbors and to Copenhagen has been rebuilt and is now much faster. Amager between Dragor and Copenhagen has grown in population density just as Dragor itself has done. Someday Dragor may be little more than a memory in a massive megalopolis. But today it is still closer to the suburb of 1956 than it is to that.

DENMARK TODAY

The highlight of my return to Denmark was a visit to Amager. But Denmark is a small country, and in the course of a week it

was possible to drive over major parts of Jutland and the larger islands. Impressions gained in this way were later enlarged and improved through the study of recent publications.[2] What came out of this assumed the dimensions of a rather startling disclosure. The urban assimilation of regional folk culture, which we had investigated ten years ago as illustrative of what could happen in the countryside near a major city, has become a phenomenon that now characterizes Denmark in its entirety. A mere decade has seen the social and cultural revolution of limited areas such as Amager spread to the nation as a whole.

AGRICULTURE AND INDUSTRY

In Dragor, old industry declined as new industry developed. Urbanization of the village was associated with a shift in employment from traditional forms to modern ones. Such a shift is now taking place all over the nation.

Denmark is generally thought of as an agricultural nation. Agriculture certainly is important, and will continue to be so. On the world market, Denmark ranks first in the export of meat and meat products, second in butter and eggs, and third in cheese. Denmark, however, has not been without industry. The industrial revolution spread into Denmark in the latter decades of the 19th century. But Denmark had none of the natural resources that would allow it to become an important industrial power in those days. It had no coal, no oil, no waterpower, no iron. In fact, the only major raw material that it had was cement. Currently Denmark is undergoing what may be termed a second industrial revolution, though the change would not be obvious to the casual traveler. No part of Denmark is emerging as another Ruhr. It is still a land of gently rolling fields. Yet industry is growing, an industry of small enterprises. More than any other part of Western Europe except Switzerland, Denmark has nurtured small industry built upon specialized products requiring a highly trained labour force. The change takes the form of village cabinet-makers

[2] See especially Bidstrup and Kaufmann 1966; Fonsmark and Lassen 1966; Nordic Council 1945, 1949, 1956, 1957, 1966; Nordisk Statistisk Arsbok 1965.

turning their shops into small furniture factories; of blacksmiths growing into manufactories for agricutural machinery; of home industry in toys, woodcraft, and fine weaving becoming firms producing for world markets. This type of industry is not new. But only since 1961 has industry clearly surpassed agriculture in production, employment, and export.

At the same time, farming has industrialized to a degree. The trend has been to fewer farm workers and more machines. Horses are being replaced by tractors. The horse population has fallen from 600,000 before the Second World War to 50,000 today. The 161,734 tractors of 1965, on the contrary, stand in contrast to 68,496 in 1956 and a mere 4,346 in 1944. The farmer is keeping pace in the use of machines for plowing, sowing, harvesting, threshing, and the like. In 1952, only 707 harvester-threshers existed in the whole country. Now there are over 30,000. In the last few years many farms have remodelled barns and stalls so that work can be done by machinery directed from an instrument board. As part of the rationalization of agriculture, farms are getting bigger, although many small, inefficient enterprises still survive, in spite of the difficulty of finding people to man them as old farmers retire. Ten or fifteen years ago abandoned farms were merely a memory from the Middle Ages. Now one finds them in significant numbers in places such as the island of Mols, the West Jutland Health, or the Hanherred area. According to a recent newspaper, in one of these areas (around Limfjorden). 10 of 450 farms are now abandoned. No one will buy them. Even if a young man is interested, he cannot find a wife who will join him there. In all, several thousand independent farms disappear each year in various parts of the country. Some get incorporated into cities. Others are being used for local industry. Many are combined to form larger farms, though in this the law presents a problem, since it restricts the combining of farms. But unofficially and indirectly, combining has been practiced and condoned. Often it takes the form of small farms being leased by older proprietors as a kind of self-pensioning. This movement is now so strong and necessary that legislators are talking of making it legal. The trend is still in its early stages, however, and Denmark continues to be a land of small and middle sized farms, there being a total of 180,000 in the country as a whole.

In the subsidiary industries of agriculture, this trend to mechanization and modernization is also visible. In 1950 Denmark had 1500-1600 milk processing plants. By 1965 only 1,106 remained, and 500 more will disappear in the near future. Those remaining will collect milk from larger areas and process it in plants using a greater division of labor and departmentalization of production. Cooperative stalling of cows and pigs is beginning to appear and is expected to increase in importance for the production of two major resources, milk and pork. Developments such as these typify the trend in subsidiary industries.

On the farm itself, many farmers now work in other occupations, continuing to farm only as a sideline. They turn daily chores over to their wives and crowd their own farm work into evenings, weekends, and holidays. Others have taken up part-time urban employment to profit from hours freed by the use of modern equipment. It is estimated that the mechanization of agriculture has released 10,000 year-round workers for work in non-farm occupations. Many of these have moved to urban areas to be close to their work. It is certainly clear that purely agricultural districts are losing population. In this respect, the movement of young people is especially significant. Of the 14-year-olds who begin in agricultural work, half have left it before they are 20 years old. And of those remaining, half again leave the farm before they are 25. In 1961 alone, 21,000 young people moved from the countryside to the city.

THE AUTOMOBILE AGE

The creation of public and private means of commuting between rural communities and the capital was a necessary part of the suburbanization of Amager. Subsequent developments in transportation are making most parts of Denmark subject to comparable change. This is seen above all in the use of motor vehicles. Roads and bridges have expanded greatly. Most of the territory of Denmark is made up of the peninsula of Jutland plus several large islands, although in all there are 483 islands. In the 1930s the Danes began to construct bridges to unite their island world. In the last 20 years 14 large bridges have been constructed and others

are planned. The nation already possesses an excellent road system. Yet use is increasing at such a pace that analysts anticipate the need to spend three billion dollars an road and bridge construction in the next twenty years in order to meet basic needs.

Denmark is still a nation of bicycles. In 1956 she produced 156,100 bicycle frames. In 1964 the number was about the same, 159,600. However some of this production is now diverted to export sales. The net export for 1965 was 21,476 bicycles. In 1956 it was minus thirty-six. Of those used within the country, a large proportion are intended for child use. Seventy-six thousand children are born each year. They all eventually need bicycles since for them it is still a major means of transportation. For the rest of the population, however, production figures do not reveal the really significant change that is taking place. The way bicycles are used has shifted. One gets the impression that adult bicycles tend to collect dust as they never did before. The bicycle is ceasing to be the dominant vehicle of mass transportation, having to a degree been replaced by public transportation. Again we must depend upon impressions. In the fifties, many of the inhabitants of Dragor commuted to work on bicycles. Buses were available, but the cost was a significant part of total income, and one saved money by biking. Denmark in the meantime has prospered. Personal income has risen 4-5% each year. For many, the cost of faster, more comfortable rides to town and to work is apparently no longer something one tries to save. In the fifties, this ability to enjoy better transportation was already sufficiently present to permit the purchase by many of motorcycles, motorbikes, and motor-scooters. At the end of the war, only 204 such vehicles were registered in the whole of Denmark. For several years after the war, their numbers increased only slowly as production struggled to re-establish itself; 29, 952 such vehicles had been registered before the war. By 1956 this number had risen to 125,652. But since then the trend has been reversed. Only 95,233 were registred in 1964. Between 1961 and 1965 alone the registration of *new* motorbikes, motorcycles, and scooters declined from 7,455 to 3,338. The impression one gets in travelling around Denmark today is that automobiles are the new element in the transportation mix. At the end of the war, the whole nation numbered only 40,078 registered automobiles for personal and family use. By the

end of 1948 the number was 101,612, still short of the pre-war figure of 108,757. By 1956 this had increased to 238,037, mainly, it appears, to the advantage of the relatively well-to-do, who traditionally had been the automobile owners and users. Only they could afford an automobile, the cost of which was doubled or tripled by extraordinary taxes designed to keep automobile imports at a minimum. Now, however, quite ordinary working people possess cars or look forward to their acquisition. A recent survey found that the acquisition of a car is the most desired investment goal of a majority of Danes, surpassing investment in a better home as a stated preference. This is reflected in number of automobiles currently found in the country: 675,167. The number of new cars per year has grown from 32,548 in 1956 to 143,548 in 1964. Ten years ago, driving a car during the rush hours in a Danish city was a terrifying experience because of the meandering myriads of bicycles. Bicycles are much less of an obstacle now. In their place, one encounters traffic jams of automobiles and monumental parking problems. The automobile age has begun and its earliest evidence is seen in the trend to live in the countryside while working in the city.

COMPREHENSIVE URBANIZATION

The population of towns has been increasing. A hundred years ago, three-fourths of the population of Denmark lived in the country. Now three-fourths live in towns, and the total population has trebled, which means that the population of towns has increased nine times over. In the last few years especially this urban shift has attained revolutionary proportions. Of communities over 5000 in population, the growth betweeen 1950 and 1960 was over 30% in two urban areas, between 14% and 30% in 23. The capital and its surrounding countryside illustrate the trend. In this area as a whole, a population growth of 7% to 12% is recorded in the last five years alone. Until 1951 statisticians reckoned 14 communities as belonging to the greater Copenhagen area. Thirty-five communities are now so reckoned, including five substantial towns (Køge, Roskilde, Frederikssund, Hillerød, and Helsingør) formerly regarded as separate

cities since they are located as much as 35 miles from Copenhagen's center.

The last few years have seen two wholly new features in this urban growth. First, movement to cities continues, but no longer primarily to the major centers. Part of the urbanization of Denmark concerns movements of residence. Danes can no longer be described as born, bred, and dead in their home villages. It is estimated that 10% of the total population moves residence each year. This does not mean that in ten years the whole population has moved. Some move more than once and others never budge. But it does mean that a good deal of shifting of residence takes place. Until a few years ago, the pattern was to move to one of the major cities. As recently as the period 1955-1960 this pattern was still dominant. Beginning in 1961, however, and becoming clearer since, is the tendency for movement to be to the smaller cities and towns.

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF URBAN POPULATION IN DENMARK

	Percent 1955-1960	*Percent* 1963-1964
Big cities: Copenhagen Aarhus, Odense, Aalborg	69	48
All other cities and towns	31	52
	100	100

The figures in Table 1 supporting this observation interpret urban residence in a broad sort of way. An urban settlement is taken to include city or town proper, its suburbs, and surrounding countryside in which the population growth is greater than that for the counry as a whole. This broad definition of urban settlement is necessitated by the second innovation in urban movement, the tendency to settle outside of old city and suburban settlements (Table 2). And here too we are speaking of a shift of the last couple of years, a pattern of the sixties not present in the fifties.

As in Amager in earlier decades, this settlement of country areas just beyond cities begins with the construction of summer

TABLE 2. DIFFERENTIATION OF URBAN SETTLEMENT IN DENMARK

	Percent 1955-1960	*Percent* 1963-1964
Towns and cities	9	7
Suburbs	79	67
Surrounding countryside	12	40
	100	100

houses and proceeds as these are supplemented by or converted into year-round residences. Thus, the area around Køge Bay to the west of Copenhagen was purely a summer residence area 10 or 15 years ago. Today it is a year-round community of 100,000 people in which old barns and hothouses are converted to garages or small warehouses. The trend has reached the north coast of Sealand. Twenty years ago this so-called Danish Riviera was an area of farm communities with summer houses along the coast. Ten years ago one found fields given over to summer cottages, old farm buildings standing out like mountains in seas of tiny, often do-it-yourself cabins. Today one finds permanent residences located in these and other fields while city dwellers in the liberal professions have taken over the straw-roofed farm houses as luxury accomodations. There are villages in Sealand now in which nearly the whole original population is gone or is submerged in the society of newcomers, much as has happened on Amager Island. Store Magleby, the village next to Dragor, is an extreme example of this development. The farmers of Store Magleby have lost most of their fields to the international airport at Kastrup. Rather than a ghost town, however, one finds a modern community in which the old buildings in the center, generally renovated and modernized, have been surrounded by new construction, the whole now connected to Copenhagen by a freeway. The population of Store Magleby is up 110% over that of a decade ago. In Denmark as a whole, 1352 farms were sold to non-farmers in 1959 alone. In the area of Copenhagen in that year 60% to 70% of land sales were to non-farmers. In Sealand and the island of Funen it was 30%, and in Jutland, 10% to 20%.

THE END OF FOLK CULTURE

As on Amager a decade ago, then, the greater part of Denmark now has a population employed in industry and oriented to the city, yet often resident in the nearby countryside. In the countryside the population engaged in traditional pursuits is in decline, if not in absolute terms, certainly in relative ones. The result has been the rapid urbanization not only of the great majority of people who have made this shift, but also of those who remain on the farm.

The farmer, exposed to urbanized neighbors, is himself close to the city as it has spread out, and as he has gotten an automobile. The city and the countryside are no longer isolated from each other. The modern farmer, however much he may like his work, especially as it has become mechanized, wants the things that other Danes want. He and his family want to be near other people, shops, mechanics, machine stations, central schools, communal offices, libraries, movie houses, sport arenas, beaches, restaurants and cafes. Many adults today remember from their youth the farmer family that sat around a long wooden table to eat their dinner of porridge with wooden spoons from a common bowl. Such farmers no longer exist. In the lifetime of people still living they have disappeared. Farming has changed from a way of life to an occupation like any other occupation. It has its advantages, which are appreciated. But its disadvantages — isolation, hard work, long hours, drudgery and monotony — are unacceptable. The farmer demands and gets a style of life like that of his urban fellow-citizens. There is little apparent difference between the modern farmer and the city man who resides in the countryside. Neither has a folk culture any longer.

The study of peasant culture is a museum enterprise in contemporary Denmark. Working in archives or with old informants, the ethnologist strives to reclaim for posterity the memory of traditions now dead. His problem is in the field of historical anthropology. This includes determination of the meaning of the past for the present. But the present is that of a mass society and a mass culture. To deal with both sides of the equation of social

change, he needs to be a student of urban-industrial life as well, that field which lately has been distinguished as urban anthropology. In Dragor we found that in a generation a village could undergo massive change with very little cultural or social conflict. Denmark as a whole now seems to be following the same road of pervasive and rapid revolution, and equally with little cultural or social conflict. How this can be, fairly cries for further study.

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