

# Racism and Racialization in Danish Welfare Work

Marta Padovan-Özdemir and Trine Øland:

## **Racism in Danish Welfare Work with Refugees – Troubled by Difference, Docility and Dignity**

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Denmark's national self-image of being a benevolent welfare state taking care of its citizens in terms of benefits, social security, health care and education is being challenged and analyzed in the book, *Racism in Danish Welfare Work with Refugees - Troubled by Difference, Docility and Dignity*, by Marta Padovan-Özdemir and Trine Øland. The authors focus their attention on the welfare work regarding the reception and inclusion of newly arrived refugees. This seems specifically relevant when analyzing race, racism and racialization in Denmark, as the refugee "constitutes a contested figure at the mercy of state humanism, universalism and integrationism" (p. 51).

Padovan-Özdemir and Øland are combining two fields of research. On the one hand the research on welfare and integration, and on the other hand research focusing on racism and racialization. Consequently, their understanding of racialization lies at the intersections of race and welfare work, which points towards one of the major findings in their book, namely of how Danish

welfare work with refugees is fundamentally complicit in reproducing racial structures of super- and subordination. It is the authors' goal to unravel this complicity and destabilize the silencing of and ignorance on race and racialization in welfare work, by developing a "historical-sociological language for speaking about race, racism and racialisation in a Danish welfare work" (p. 3).

### Innovative methodologies

Padovan-Özdemir and Øland take on a critical sociological historical analysis of the reception of refugees in Denmark, but they are not applying a traditional historical lens to this work. Their aim is to break with traditional linear understandings of history as chronologically and progressively developing. Drawing on postcolonial theoretical perspectives from, amongst others, Ann Stoler (2016) and Avery Gordon (2008), on how the past and present are enfolded in each other and how

the past is haunting the present, the book engages in creative methodologies by working with stock stories and hauntology. Combining a critical race theoretical focus on majoritarian discourses and narratives with a critical postcolonial focus on race, power and privilege, the stock stories function as analytical anchors in the book.

A stock story is defined as, “descriptions of events as told by members of dominant/majority groups, accompanied by values and beliefs that justify the actions taken by dominants to insure their dominant so it becomes position” (Love 2004, 228-229 cited in Padovan-Özdemir & Øland 2022, 70). The stock stories analyzed in the book are based on readings of an extensive historical archive comprised of four welfare professional periodicals based on the four largest groups of organized welfare professions engaged in the reception of newly arrived refugees in Denmark: social workers, educators, teachers and nurses. The archival time-period stretches over almost 40 years (1978-2016) and covers empirical material regarding different groups of refugees arriving in Denmark, such as people from Vietnam, Iran, Iraq, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Syria.

The empirical material is formed and presented as historical stock story montages – a crisscrossing of different archival material from different time periods, refugees and welfare work. This is presented as a dynamic and innovative methodology, which serves to highlight the dominant theme of the stock story which transverses time, body and space. As a reader it can, however, sometimes be difficult to get a sense of which groups of refugees and which historic time-periods and professions the analysis draws upon. On the one hand, the aim of critically working with history in a non-conforming and non-chronological way enables a dynamic grasp of historically sedimented discourses and narratives on newly arrived refugees, but on the other hand, it can also be argued that different groups of refugees, different times, contexts and welfare professions influence how processes of racialization take form and are manifested. One cannot help wondering whether the same kind of racialization and stock story would play out in the same manner

regardless of whether it is a Tamil refugee arriving in the 1980s or a Syrian refugee arriving in 2015? The diverse but specific conditions at play - historically, socially and the categories the refugees are read through - are thus sometimes relegated to the background of the analysis. What stands in the foreground, though, are the larger analytical strokes on how welfare work with refugees comes into being through the different dominant racializing stock stories.

## Racializing stock stories and ghosts

The analysis of the three stock stories of color-blindness, potentializing and compassion are multilayered and nuanced and each stock story is related to the other but with independent affects and ghosts haunting the welfare work and its racializing effects.

The stock story of color-blindness is analyzed as a central part of welfare work's investments in evading issues of race and difference via discourses of egalitarianism, exceptionalism and universalism. Difference – especially when it is cast as cultural differences, are seen as threats and challenges that need to be managed, controlled and in some cases tolerated, positioning the welfare worker as the benevolent neutral and rational helper.

In the stock story of potentializing, the refugee is cast as a non-agentic object of integration and it is the welfare worker's task to bring as much as possible out of the refugee in terms of work and education. This is a form of “potentializing racialization (..) in terms of who is privileged with subjective agency and will, and who is not” (p. 119).

Potentializing is very much upheld through liberalist market forces and discourses of integration whereas the stock story of compassion is fueled by humanitarian and democratic values and ideals of justice and human rights. This casts the welfare worker on a morally higher ground working for the greater good. At the same time the refugee is formed as in need of help and change.

The analysis of the stock stories appears to follow a highly systematic and ordered format

(there are three stock stories, each story has three variations) and you can be left with the sense of it being almost too ordered. Where are the cracks, the resistances and the disorderly stories that challenge the hegemonic discourses and their rigidity in the empirical material? By the end of the book, another layer, however, is added to the analysis, which in some ways serves to deconstruct this order as the ghosts haunting and troubling the stock stories are analyzed. Each stock story has its own ghosts. Color-blindness is haunted by difference, potentializing by docility and compassion by dignity.

The ghosts refer to features of relational welfare work that welfare workers thought they had buried or worked on in order to make them disappear; they are social figures that come and go; they never quite settle and they never attain an approved position in welfare work with refugees.

The ghosts compel the social workers to work on silencing, shutting down and controlling race and difference - what Padovan-Özdemir and Øland term, "burying the ghosts alive" (p. 159). This points to the very subtle codes guiding the racializing processes of Danish welfare work with refugees, and this is without doubt one of the strengths of the book; it delves into the subtle, often silenced layers of racialized complicity in the ways of working with, helping, educating and integrating newly arrived refugees. It is possible, though, to discuss whether the methodology of hauntology is serving its full purpose in the book. The concept of ghosts and hauntings is developed to capture the often ephemeral, present but not present sensations, affects and figures surrounding race - that which seems there but not there (Gordon 2008; Hvenegaard-Lassen & Staunæs 2021). This level of analysis could have been unfolded more in regard to other ways in which race is present but actively silenced in the welfare work with refugees.

## New majoritarian stories?

The book draws on material from different welfare professional periodicals. Hence, we hear and learn

about the refugees through the welfare workers' perspectives. One could ask, if this approach reproduces existing majoritarian stories by applying the lens of the superordinate and not the Othered and subaltern? The aim is clearly the opposite, to make visible the dominant stock stories and deconstruct these. Nevertheless, it is worth considering the power dynamic of this approach and the immanent risk of further objectifying the refugee as a monolithic figure seen through a majoritarian optics of the welfare worker. Padovan-Özdemir and Øland also point to this inherent problem of knowledge production and power:

*Thus, it is clear that the story is told by the ones who operate the tools of reality production, in this case welfare workers, and it is clear that the story told claims a factual and neutral viewpoint because it is the viewpoint of welfare workers. (p. 117)*

How is it possible to trouble these tools of reality production, to dismantle and trouble the dominant optics? One way would be to include the subaltern perspectives - the ones who are being managed, controlled, and molded into the Danish welfare system - the refugees. This, however, does not come without its own troubles. Giving voice to subaltern groups and individuals might as well be tied to the benevolent and misunderstood ideal of liberation (Spivak 1988; Lather 2000), and to the practice of exhibiting the pain, suffering and subordination of the othered through a superordinated position of the researcher (Weheliye 2014). It is this very same practice of the humanitarian, benevolent social worker, that is being critically analyzed in the book. So, it seems there is no easy way to solve the question of knowledge production in relation to racialized and Othered minorities, but it needs to be reflected on more actively, also in relation to the question of researcher positionality and power.

## A brave book

*Racism in Danish Welfare Work with Refugees* is an insightful, analytically rich and brave book. The

book is an important contribution to the existing somewhat sparse research on race, racism and racialization in welfare work, and one can argue that even though the focus is on welfare work

and newly arrived refugees, the logics, stories and ghosts are recognizable in other spheres and contexts in society, making the book relevant beyond the field of welfare work.

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