

Places and spaces between urbanity, network society and traditional rural areas

By Johs. Nørregaard Frandsen

First, I would like to thank you for offering me this opportunity of talking to you – my esteemed colleagues from all of northern Europe – about a research subject that is becoming increasingly more topical. There are many reasons why rural areas in Denmark are in particular focus at present, but my aim here is to identify more closely and understand the role of rural districts in a conflict of identity. This I intend to do via a number of scenarios that indicate partly worrying and partly encouraging prospects for rural districts.

Let me begin by quoting the Danish writer Jens Smærup Sørensen (born 1946), who in his novel *Mærkedage* (Red-Letter Days, from 2007) takes stock of the countryside he has within him:

Both town and country disappeared. All of it – as everyone before long would more than just suspect – was removed from the Earth's surface, every little piece of it that had existed until then. Everything crumbled, disintegrated, it vanished from time, became submerged in a frozen darkness, would never again show signs of life.

For 1960 was also the year that the village had to abandon its position as the most important rural community. When, for the first time in thousands of years, agriculture was not a larger industry than all the others put together. When Staun perished as a community and a world in itself, gradually becoming – like all other villages – a remote, shabby settlement in the global metropolis.

(Jens Smærup Sørensen: *Mærkedage*. 2007)

The old world ‘vanished from time’, disappeared at considerable speed. Some people call this innovation and renewal, while others refer to it as the greatest cultural loss to have taken place in modern Denmark. Until 1960, Danish agriculture was, economically speaking, larger than all other industries put together in Denmark. In addition, agriculture and a farming culture were the hub of a way of life that had deep, traditional roots back through history – one that was characterised by its particular anchorage in a localised community. Life in the country thus constituted its own narrative and a distinctive culture, the rhythms and values of which differed considerably from urban ways of life. In 1950, for example, at least 25% of the total Danish population lived on farms and in agricultural units out in the countryside, while a further 25% lived in villages and other small towns of less than 1000 inhabitants, functioning as service or other adjacent occupations to the agriculture that created the values. This means that about half the total Danish population lived in the country in a pattern of life that had villages, cooperative farming, agricultural institutions and communities as its central buttresses. In 2010, a maximum of only 2% gains a living from primary agriculture, and the age of the cooperatives is over. The majority of those who live in the rural districts have no occupational connection to the agricultural industry. They commute to and from larger towns and workplaces. Cultural urbanism, the forms of the town, its values and rhythms have spread out to the countryside. The old world ‘vanished from time’, the old order has collapsed. Where are we heading for now?

The Hispanic-American sociologist Manuel Castells, in his work *The Rise of Network Society* from 2000, has attempted to characterise modern network society. He argues that its dissemination entails two apparently opposite tendencies. Traditional towns are on the decline, while at the same time we are witnessing the greatest and strongest urbanisation ever. So it is not simply the rural areas that are under pressure at present;

the towns are losing their centres and spreading outwards in an ever more sprawling pattern of periphery on periphery. In Denmark, Copenhagen is quite possibly the largest city, but economically speaking, the long urban construction that stretches along the East Jutland motorway is gradually becoming the most important. It is not a town in a traditional sense, rather a mega urban region. Such areas are examples of the new urban network society, by which I mean a society where all vital sections of economy, politics and culture take place in so-called information-based networks. Buying and selling takes place, as does communicating, with information being transferred and entities coming into existence that the anthropologist Appadurai has given the names *finanscapes*, *mediascapes*, *ethnoscapes*, and *ideoscapes* – gigantic, constantly shifting ‘landscapes’ of rivers of information, power and values that go beyond boundaries and traditional forms, and that move without any specific centre for their activities.

It is movement and especially access to movement that in itself means power. Castells talks about *space of place*, which is increasingly being overlaid by *space of flows*, and he draws attention to the phenomenon that the ‘space of flows’ is the special ‘place’ of the new elite. The group that designs and creates the space of flows, by which I mean the major information highways, is in power, while those who loyally work in the flows are bound to places. There is a supermobile, highly educated upper class and there is a function-bound middle class. Finally, there is a growing group of people who are simply not part of this game. These are the place-bound, the uneducated, those who are socially immobile.

In California, in the heart of Silicon Valley, which is the most important place for information technology, there lies a town that most people know of: Palo Alto is the place where Stanford University and Industrial Park lie. This is one of the world’s most innovative, culturally imaginative and rich places. But just on the other side of the large motorway, only a few kilometres from the fluid alchemy of Palo Alto, lies

the incredibly poor black and Latin-American ghetto like some satanic sort of counter-image to the affluence of Palo Alto. Castells – and Richard Sennett too, by the way – stresses the brutal nature of the new network society, for while it gets rid of the functional divisions of the industrial town, it creates enormous social differences between the areas of high-speed development and profound social and intellectual impoverishment.

In Denmark – as presumably also in the other Nordic countries – these areas could be called *rural districts*. Their contours are clear: a low level of education, bad jobs, no industrial development, the exodus of the highly educated. Women are quicker than men in leaving the areas in favour of educational possibilities. Men often remain stuck there without an education, but with a ‘bloody-minded’ attitude. They have fists that they use, for they feel themselves to be victims of something over which they have no control. We have a Danish name for this ‘Dumme Bomben’ – a Danish coinage based on the American White Trash which I have had the opportunity of studying, for example, in Mexico, where Santa Fé has devoured all developmental potential and left the neighbouring city Las Vegas (not the gambling mecca but Las Vegas, N.M.) in abject poverty as well as the obesity of a burger and cola culture. Is that the direction the rural districts will move in. Or are there other paths?

Please allow me this quick glance down memory lane:

A small, unprepossessing road ran across the fields back home in the farming parish of western Jutland where I grew up in the 1950s. It was called The Milky Way and it provided a link between two municipal roads. As a child, I was in no doubt about the meaning of the name, for when we drove along it at night, the cones of light from the car or tractor headlights struck the gravel on the road in such a way that myriads of small pebbles would glitter as if they were the multitude of stars in the great Milky Way of the heavens. For us back home, the small road was a short cut, reducing the

distance to the village dairy, the Coop, the school, church, parish hall, feedstuff business – and thus to the World. But to me as a child the small road was also an earthly imprint of the great galactic Milky Way.

My belief that I cycled to the village along a divine pathway of stars was abruptly shattered. For my father told me one day that the small road had been established so that the milk cart could get to the dairy in a shorter space of time. Which explained the name The Milky Way! And then the road was transformed from magical star-dreams into an earth-bound utility project, the sole aim of which was to effectivise communication links in cooperative agriculture.

The road no longer exists in the landscape in question. The area has been designated an urban zone. The Milky Way of my childhood has had to give way to site development and building plots. This has happened in thousands of instances – where childhood's milky ways once lay there are now rows of newly built single-family houses, linked by asphalt roads and closes with such names as Barley Field, Oats Close, Lark Road. I wonder if those living there are aware of the fact that the cosmic fantasy of my childhood lies right under their lawns? Hardly! But the children who grow up there will surely create their own age's star-strewn moments and imaginative paths.

I hope you will forgive me for attempting to give you a glimpse of the past as an introduction to themes I now wish to pursue – partly that places and spaces change in our conceptual world, and partly that imagination is important for creating ways to the stars. And the so-called peripheral areas could well do with such creative imagination.

When the welfare state got underway in Denmark in the course of the 1950s and 1960s, and the new, wealthy middle class really came into its own, this was reflected, among other things, by a construction project that changed the Danish landscape.

About 800,000 new houses were built between 1950 and 1980. – And, don't forget, we are talking about a country with only 5 million inhabitants! Of these, 600,000 are detached, privately-owned single-family houses, which shot up like small planets in the huge lunar corona that came to encircle the towns and in many cases even villages close to towns. This is one of the biggest changes to the Danish landscape that has ever taken place. Suburbs of small private houses with lawns, light, fresh air and clean conditions for the little family in row upon row. It was the dream of light and fresh air that had seized the thousands of Danes who one to two generations earlier had moved from country to town. Now they wanted to move out again and settle close to towns in the greatest dream production Danish history has witnessed – the dream of a life close to the soil, the dream of light, fresh air and sunshine, combined with hot water in the taps, flush toilets, rooms for the children and space for personal development.

This dream must never be disparaged! When the middle class realises its dreams, the world changes! In this case, out to the close periphery. Can we learn from the forces and energy in this historic settlement pattern?

I would like to develop this point further by quoting one of the major profiles of Danish literature – Johannes V. Jensen, who died in 1950, and who wrote the following words – actually addressed to his deceased father – in 1928:

There are memories that do not seem to coincide with reality, even though one can date them to particular impressions, and that will not come to life even if one returns to places to which they are linked; they are of an own inner nature, more valuable than all others. A whole life can heap other impressions on top of them – that is what one calls life – but deep down they yet remain like a first experience, more important and more profound, although irrevocably lost, than everything one has experienced.

Strictly speaking, such memories cannot be mentioned or described at all, using linguistic means, but it is possible to write one's way forward towards them, list the pertaining circumstances – possibly there are those who will feel a chord struck in their inner world that they recognise and that leads into the same deeply preserved world.

As far as I am concerned, it begins with a small river, a perfectly ordinary river, such as watercourses are in Denmark – and, by the way, not in any other country with which I am familiar – the typical lowland river that moves, almost without falling, with many meanderings and patches of still-standing water known as 'høller', full of water weeds and fringed with reeds, through great expanses of meadowland until finally entering some low-lying arm of a fjord.

(Johannes V. Jensen: From: 'Ved Livets Bred' [On the Banks of Life], 1928)

In this beautiful, brief passage, Johannes V. Jensen shows that landscapes and landscape spaces are not such physical localities but places that contain memories and that appeal to emotions and values. As is well known, art and artists have dealt with this for a long time. There is, for example, a very large and impressive Nordic tradition in painting, music and literature for depicting experiences from the clash between the old, tradition-determined rustic life and the emerging, new, more rationally organised life of the farmer. Such depictions of upheavals in rural areas were even a main theme in Danish literature throughout the 20th century. For these authors, the home region out in the country, its nature, people and environment are partly a prerequisite for narrating, and partly material and motifs in what is narrated. In that way, writers and painters designated what were to become the places of the native region, and these 'places' are planted in the way we as modern individuals *have* and *perceive* our landscapes. The landscapes are not simply our physical surroundings. They are places for the mind and scenarios for our sensing consciousnesses.

Perhaps a rustic culture is no longer something that exists out in the rural districts. That is sometimes claimed, but my point is that it is mostly a phenomenon inside the heads, memories and bodies of large groups of the population who have left the agricultural landscape behind and who now find themselves in new urban environments and professions. An important aspect of the debate about modern agriculture, the one being conducted at present in Denmark at any rate, has perhaps not all that much to do with the environment, pollution, natural resources or agricultural modes of production. Perhaps what is being enacted is just as much a symbolic struggle for our surrounding landscapes, and has to do with the right to narrate and thereby define *the great outdoor narrative*. What I refer to here as the great outdoor narrative is the common memory which down through generations has been stamped on the identity, and that has become anchored in the cultural landscape that surrounds us.

So what I call the great outdoor narrative contains a key to important aspects of our common identity as Danes. Perhaps that is precisely what it is all about: the internal images, emotions, identity. A great many of those who go round with unaltering, traditional images of a rustic culture and the rustic cultural landscape do not live in the rural areas or the open landscape but in urban surroundings. They have ‘emigrated’ from farming landscapes, or are the children of such ‘emigrants’. Maybe all of these rural emigrants have physical and mental images of a landscape and an environment that contains powerful forces and images of what ‘down in the country’ is all about. And these images mean something in relation to the self-marketing of rural areas. We want, for example, to hear about free-range animals, clover-munching cows, blue skies, red berries and invigorating sunsets. We want to consume the image of the unspoilt, stereotypes of the cultural heritage, while eating our fill of mythologised agricultural products. Can we make better use of these inner pictures? Can we use them as images of a quality of life where in-depth awareness and quality characterise existence?

Emigrants often retain a romanticised image of rustic culture, and many of them would perhaps like to move back to the country and to one of the many farmsteads with a couple of farm animals, some vegetables and the dream of peaceful hours for their own reality and inner development. This group of the population already exists in the rural districts, and it would be able to mean even for life in the country if its infrastructure and institutions were improved.

Romantic conceptions are difficult to manage, but perhaps we could give the outer rural districts a new sense of pride by *branding* their assets as living space.

Many have moved to the country because they feel it's great out there. Dreams, memories of the great outdoor narrative and amenity values are what has underpinned their decision. It's great for the kids here, the horse can run free with white Dallas fencing round it, while the cat can arch its back if a mosquito doesn't disturb it, as Hans Christian Andersen says (and that rhymes in Danish! QUOTE). Some of them would like to own some acres of land and let beef cattle roam on them. It is this group of Danes with rustic roots and a willingness to take on 'the open landscape' who are capable of 'saving' the rural areas from the cruel fate of depopulation. Cultural farmers and lovers of the open air. And that's not mere chickenfeed! For it supplies the rural areas with life and finances. Both of which are sorely needed.

A diverse structure already exists in the country. There are far fewer but also larger actual farms, where operational requirements are a high degree of specialisation along with professional expertise as regards technology, organisation, production and business economics. These industrial farmers no longer perceive themselves as 'simple farmers' responsible for a rustic culture. They perceive themselves as managing directors in charge of a production unit with farm animals and crops as their particular base. Life in the country is thus not different in kind from an existence

in urban areas. Farmers' families lead a busy working life – just as most families do in our hectic welfare society. If one compares the family life of the modern pigmeat or milk producer with corresponding owners, supervisors or managers of industrial companies with the same turnover in the industrial area of the adjacent town, one will scarcely be able to note any difference. They are under pressure from the same harsh economic conditions. Squeezed by regulations and administrative problems, and sharing the same bad conscience about having too little time for the children. The modern farmer's family goes on holiday like everyone else. And one of the married couple – the wife, most often – also works as a rule within the service sector outside the farm. There is no difference.

There are many other groups, such as wealthy early-retirers in the prime of life who base their leisure years on the green rural districts. There are entrepreneurs, small companies and liberal professions. The vital common feature of these people in rural districts is that they do not live there because they live off the land, but because they feel good because of the recreative assets available, want space to live and breathe, amenity values and tall skies, fresh air and open areas.

The driving forces of a new landscape – apart from nature and quality of life – could be new forms of energy, IT networks and entrepreneurship. An obviously organising force for the design of a new, visionary landscape would be able to be linked to electronic 'highway systems' that out to spread out, in other words, a fully developed system of fibre cables for digital communication. Residential and productional clusters would be able to allocate themselves around this network, just as the railway network functioned in the latter half of the 19th century as an organiser of a developing cultural landscape.

The electronic system – in the form of high-speed cables – ought to be able to transport services and information and thereby organising paths of development. Around such hubs, new entrepreneurs would be able to settle: clusters of

entrepreneurs within biotechnology, human resources, hard and soft design, mentefactories, etc.

The landscape will soon be characterised by fractals and transitions rather than mosaics and boundaries. The familiar industrial and agricultural landscapes will be a thing of the past, and what will belong to knowledge- or network-based societies will be recreative areas that consist partly of experience areas with historical arenas, shopping facilities, fitness centres and holidayscapes, and partly nature, where original and unspoilt nature is the codeword.

The traditional boundaries between town and country have ceased to exist. Could the network society be constructed using as its point of departure the physical and cultural potential of the rural areas as a series of 'urban hubs' around cultural scenarios and energy spots, like the major health institutions will probably come to form hubs along with universities and other knowledge generators? At the end of the 19th century, when Denmark had been knocked backwards by the battle of Dybbøl, which led to a third of the total area of the country being lost to Prussia, imagination rose from its slumber and indicated a utopia: the cooperative movement. That was then. Does imagination still exist?

The rural areas are almost systematically downgraded in the public debate. It's referred to as 'out in the country'. Now that is far out! The towns have captured all *brands*! How can we recapture imagination and the striking images? How can the rural areas once more recover their pride and thereby become main characters in the great outdoor narrative?