

Grundtvig and 19th Century Nationalism

By Lorenz Rerup

Obviously Grundtvig sometimes behaved like an ugly nationalist, a nationalist of a kind we don't like although, I suppose, most of us would behave in precisely the same way as he did if the country we belong to is threatened by an enemy or some other kind of strong unusual influence from outside. Let me take some examples which may illustrate this aspect of Grundtvig.

In the last stages of the Napoleonic wars - in 1813 - Sweden under the leadership of Bernadotte fought against the French emperor and his allies. Among these allies - almost to the last day - was the Danish Monarchy. The anti-Napoleonic coalition had promised Bernadotte that the kingdom of Norway should be taken away from Denmark and given to Sweden when the war was over. This actually happened in the beginning of the following year. The situation was very serious for Denmark. In these dark days Grundtvig wrote a leaflet which he called *Til Fædrelandet om dets Tarv og Fare* (To the country of our ancestors about its need and danger).

His leaflet praises the marvelous triplet homeland all Nordic peoples have in common. Grundtvig, however, points out that the Lord has made distinctions between the peoples on earth. Among all peoples on earth there exist certain groups of peoples which are more closely related to each other than to other peoples. Groups of this kind are committed to mutual cooperation and love. Denmark and Sweden belong to such a group even if they, at that historical moment, are enemies. Now Grundtvig has to write because »in this case my country is for God and truth, Sweden a servant of lie and evil.« His attitude in this sentence is unmistakably a nationalistic one. We know that all too well.

In 1848 in the Danish Monarchy a civil war broke out. At times the Schleswig-Holsteiners were supported by Prussian and other German forces. The war lasted for 3 years. Naturally the fortune of war was unstable. Already in the very beginning of the hostilities Denmark experienced a grave and bloody setback

when the Danish army met regular Prussian troops instead of volunteers of the new Schleswig-Holstein army. This happened in the Battle of Schlesvig, fought in Easter 1848 (April 23/24th). The Battle is the background of the poem *Fædrelandet* (To my homeland) by Grundtvig. In this poem - in my opinion a very great piece of poetry - Grundtvig flatly equates Denmark's enemies with God's, the Lord's enemies:

»they are enemies of truth and right
they are enemies of God's children«

In 1850 the battle of Isted ended the war with a dearly bought Danish victory. Shortly after, in 1851, Grundtvig was ready to turn this bloodstained triumph into an argument for the Danish right to Schlesvig.

It is easy in these examples to recognize the shrill tune of nationalism when it is pushed to extremes. We know it far too well in our own time, in the former Yugoslavia, in the former Soviet Union and in many other places of our turbulent world. The nationalistic aspect of Grundtvig, of course, has an importance of its own. It may enable us to understand the development of his thinking and it is also an evidence of the development of nationalistic feelings in the history of the Danish people. It makes no sense to neglect this aspect of Grundtvig but a normal nationalist attitude does not make Grundtvig an interesting person in 19th century nationalism. Most of his contemporaries thought in the same way. On the other hand Grundtvig developed a very special configuration of national thinking, especially in connection with the Danish national movement in Schlesvig. These ideas he shared with the younger Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) who many years before him - in his writings about 1770 - was firmly convinced - the *public spirit* as Grundtvig called it when he met the English *Volksgeist* - that the *Volksgeist* in its most pure and vital form was represented by common people: peasants, artisans and so on, people who were not influenced by some kind of foreign education. Only these humble persons had preserved their genuine feelings, unspoilt by foreign or scholarly education. Herder - like Grundtvig later - opposed the Latin instruction of pupils, the poor »martyrs« and

he said: »If language is the organ of our soul-forces, the medium of our innermost education, then we cannot be educated otherwise than in the language of our people and our country; a so-called French education in Germany must by necessity deform and misguide German minds.« In Herder's opinion this statement was »as clear as the sun at noon.«¹

Herder of course had forerunners, but in the pre-revolutionary Europe which was divided in many quite artificial states nobody pointed out more clearly than Herder the real communities which were not subjected to the caprices of dynastic family ties and power politics. Each of these communities - communities of language and of culture - represented a special branch of humanity, and each of these communities was permeated by a unique spirit which tried to find expression in its arts and crafts, its philosophy, its legislation, its numerous ways of life and so on. Besides he interpreted history as a process of unfolding the original gift of God towards a more rich humanity. As he declared in 1769 he wished to write a history from the point of view of the development of mankind.

Each of Herder's communities had its own spirit - as mentioned before he called it *Volksggeist* or *Volkssseele* - and each spirit was created by God and had the same right to exist, no one was better than others or superior to them. Together they fulfilled the history of mankind. Each people is justified in its own way, is incomparable to any other. And Herder says very wisely: »the happiness of one people cannot be forced upon any other. The roses for the wreath of each nation's liberty must be picked with its own hands, and must grow happily out of its own wants, joys, and love.« Or in his own language: »Die Glückseligkeit eines Volkes läßt sich dem andern und jedem andern nicht aufdringen, aufschwätzen, aufbürden. Die Rosen zum Kranze der Freiheit müssen von eigenen Händen gepflückt werden, und aus eigenen Bedürfnissen, aus eigener Lust und Liebe froh erwachsen.«²

Herder was a person engaged in cultural matters but he introduced an extremely vital paradigm that was very soon transferred to the political level when the Great French Revolution had shaken the foundations of the old regimes in Europe. For instance the many non-German nationalities in the Habsburg Empire were highly inspired by Herder's ideas. Just at that time

they experienced Joseph II's enlightened centralizing and modernizing policy. The well known Hans Kohn, who himself grew up in Prague, confirms, that it was largely as a result of Herder's teaching of the rights of language »that these dormant peoples [we are talking about the Bohemians, Rumanians, Croatians a.o.] began to change their own attitudes towards their nationality and towards their national language. From him they learned that »a people, and especially a noncivilized one, has nothing dearer than the language of its fathers. Its whole spiritual wealth of tradition, history, religion, and all the fullness of life, all its heart and soul, lives in it. To deprive such a people of its language or to minimize it, means to deprive it of its only immortal possession, transmitted from parents to children.«³

It is an important feature in the history of European nationalism that in the following decades the ideas of Herder were profoundly changed. Maybe they could work in what above was called »uncivilized peoples«, i.e. peoples without the framework of a fully developed high culture, and in those cases lead to a further organization of a language community. The immense variety of German speaking people, however, made it impossible to realize a national project from the bottom. Already the older Herder changed his mind and underlined the role educated people had to play.

The idealistic German philosophers, especially Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) made Herder's ideas more rigorous. When Napoleon had defeated Prussia as well as the other bigger or smaller German states, Fichte delivered his famous 14 lectures in the occupied Berlin in 1807/08. In 1808 they were published as *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (Speeches to the German nation). It was the teaching of these lessons that it was the vocation of man to form, to mould himself or herself in a process of cultivation and of ego taming. As Fichte had declared already in 1801: »if you look at history in the right way you will doubtless find that from the beginning of history and until our time the few clear points of culture have widened from their center, have caught one individual after the other, one people after the other. This continuing extension of cultivating (Bildung) can now be seen before our own eyes.«⁴ Clearly in this relay race of cultivation, the elite, the educated group inside a people, played

a crucial role. They and only they could grasp the real *Volksgeist*; they could incorporate it in them and then rouse the dormant people to national action.

Fichte's ideas were fruitful; most of the 19th century nationalism was influenced by his flaming eloquence. But of course somebody had to spread them. Seldom if ever did dormant masses awaken without the help of an educated elite. As a rule such elites discussed national matters inside literary circles for years without thinking about propagating them. Then - under certain conditions: the beginning of a modernization process, a prosperous economic development which met a hindrance or maybe a challenge from outside - they would start on propagating their ideas to the masses. Finally they would become the leaders of an organized national movement. The Danish and German *national liberals* were elites of this kind.

The Czech historian, Miroslav Hroch, calls these fundamental stages phase A: the period of scholarly interest, phase B: the period of patriotic agitation and phase C: the rise of a national mass movement. He has made use of these phases in order to compare the social preconditions of national revival in Europe.⁵ Especially he tries to analyze the social composition of patriotic groups of smaller European nations (1985). These smaller nations are not necessarily small in size but nations which might be ruled by an alien nationality or had never been an independent political unit or lacked a continuous tradition of cultural production in a literary language of their own. Maybe they had never possessed such a language or it was forgotten or had degenerated. In other words the smaller nations are to a certain extent like the peoples Herder called »uncivilized«.

In Europe we also find »great« nations. These nations are the complete nations (France, England, Spain, Germany, Denmark, Sweden). They did not lack essential national attributes or, anyhow, not so many of them. As a rule they were governed by a feudal system which governed from a safe distance of the population. Then the »third estate« set itself up against the old ruling feudal class and proclaimed itself as identical with the nation. In this liberal model of nation-building the nationalists did not have to fight for the right of the vernacular or for political independence but there might be other problems. The

Germans, for instance, had the problem of creating a German political unity; the Danes the problem of dissolving the Danish Monarchy. The complete nations had the necessary institutions. They had schools of their own, universities, their own administration of justice and so on. They also had fully developed traditions such as a written language, an institutionalized history and a printed literature. And because they were *complete* their nationalist elites could concentrate upon liberalizing and modernizing the existing state. Alas, they could also make a practice of oppressing ethnic groups inside their boundaries. Germanizing, Danezising and the equivalent policy of other nations followed the new nations now that they had overthrown the former supra-national feudal rulers and were governed by the representatives of the people. Modern societies require a much closer relation between the government and the governed than the older state formation which in fact interfered little with the general public.

Of course there also existed mixed formations. In our context it is important to remember that the kingdom of Denmark belongs to the complete or great nations whereas the Danes in the Duchy of Schleswig are to be included under the small, incomplete ones. The history of Schleswig may illustrate what happened in many European border regions in spite of the fact that in our time we found way to a peaceful and fruitful co-existence between Germans and Danes whereas national unrest has continued in other European border areas.

In the old days it was important to have an efficient border defense. Therefore the Duchy of Sønderjylland (Southern Jutland) or Schleswig acquired a special position within the Danish Realm as early as the 11th century. In the 12th century it acquired the status of a Duchy. Throughout the period between the 13th and the 19th centuries its history was closely linked with that of Holstein. This particular connection between German Holstein and the Danish Kingdom (which is defined as only consisting of Denmark) resulted in a gradual penetration of Low German language into Schleswig which went far beyond the limit of an early German (Saxon) immigration. German also established itself as the principal language of the well-to-do urban population of Schleswig. The expansion of German language into Southern Jutland was connected with trade. After the Reforma-

tion the church also became important when church language shifted from Latin to German vernacular in the Southern part of the Duchy. National tensions did not emerge until the early 19th century. They were not overtly expressed until around 1840. At this time both duchies were part of the multi-ethnic Danish »Helstat« or Danish Monarchy which included the kingdom and the duchies and colonial possessions overseas. The King of Denmark was the Duke of Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg.

Around 1830 the Duchy of Southern Jutland was inhabited by three main ethnic groups which could be distinguished by language: Firstly the German speaking, who originally lived in the South of the Duchy; secondly the Frisian speaking on the North Sea Islands and along the west coast; and finally the Danish speaking in the Northern half of the Duchy. These three main groups spoke Low German vernacular and Southern Jutland dialects in addition to different Northern Frisian vernacular languages. In 1830 the population was around 330,000 people, of which roughly 23,000 spoke Frisian languages, about 122.000 spoke German and 185,000 Danish.

The institutional use of Danish and German did not correspond with the geographical distribution of these languages. The juridical language of the Duchy was German and so was the language of the administration. Not until 1840 was German replaced by Danish in those regions where Danish was used in churches and schools. That had always been the case in the countryside of North Schleswig up to a line corresponding roughly to the border as it exists today between Germany and Denmark. However, exceptions did exist: German was used in all grammarschools and teacher training colleges of the Duchy. German was also the predominant language of urban churches and urban schools. The educated part of the population spoke another language than the vast majority of the people did. In this respect the peasantry of North Schleswig was an incomplete nation.

In the late 1830's opposing national ideologies gained ground in the loosely integrated societies that composed the Helstat. Support for these ideologies was boosted by the French July Revolution of 1830 which resulted in unrest over most of Western Europe. The revolution did not lead to unrest in the Da-

nish Monarchy but the Danish king was prompted to set up Consultive Estates Assemblies, thereby allowing a fairly free political expression.

Between 1815 and 1836 nationalist ideologies were only of interest to small groups with little external contact. We can illustrate Hroch's phase A by an example: Christian Paulsen's fundamental booklet which initiated a Danish national movement.⁶ This booklet was written in German, and originally he sent it exclusively to high civil servants in order to draw their attention to the abnormal language situation in Schleswig. After 1836 national ideology was disseminated by small but highly active groups to a much wider audience. An essential part of this presentation was the combination of the new political philosophy with contemporary political and economic problems. This can be illustrated by the language question. As mentioned above the administration and juridical language in Northern Schleswig was German whereas the peasants spoke Danish. This inconsistency prompted a North Schleswigian peasant spokesman to declare in the Assembly of Schleswig that »my compatriots will be more at ease when the news arrives that from now on our mother tongue is also the language of civil servants.«⁷ The national leaders of Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark demonstrated great ingenuity in their attempts to mobilize the population of the duchies in support of their causes. In addition to discussion of topical issues, their arsenal included petitions to the Estates, the founding of newspapers, the formation of associations and the organization of mass meetings, song festivals, libraries and folk high-schools.

At least two sorts of nationalism were discernible in the period prior to the Schleswigian wars. German nationalism in Schleswig-Holstein tended to be elitist and conservative, firstly because it included most of the prominent urban population and secondly because it was dependent on support from the powerful landed aristocracy. Support for Schleswig-Holstein nationalism was also provided by the very anti-liberal Duke of Augustenburg.

Danish nationalism took a more popular form partly due to the influence of Grundtvig and partly because it was firmly supported by the large homogeneous peasantry, originally a ra-

ther conservative class. The Danish nationalist movement in Southern Jutland was in the beginning anti-liberal but soon it found it necessary to cooperate with the National Liberal opposition within the Kingdom. This opposition in turn needed the support of the peasantry within the Kingdom in their struggle for a more liberal constitution. Therefore the Danish nationalist movement tended to adopt more popular and egalitarian policies.

Obviously the Danish movement in the Duchy had a mixed ideologic composition. Elitist elements were blended with emancipating elements brought in by an early disciple of Grundtvig, Christian Flor (1792-1875). He extracted from Grundtvig a teaching which corresponded to the doctrine of the young Herder that the old *folkeånd* (spirit of the people) existed most clearly and most purely in those persons who had not been subjected to an alien education. That meant: not the German speaking public servants, not the well-to-do and educated townsmen were the real representatives of the people but the common people, the peasants. And now this teaching was well received. Especially in North Slesvig which was a region with very few estates and noblemen and with a flourishing agriculture, this ideology was accepted by the peasants satisfying their need for an ideology which justified their growing self-respect and reflected their importance in a modern society.

Two decades later a corresponding nationalistic movement was spread in the kingdom of Denmark, in sharp competition with the older national ideology developed by the National Liberals. Again mostly the peasantry accepted the *emancipating* kind of nationalism. In the development of this ideology the ideas of Grundtvig, especially the folk high schools, played a significant role, but of course it was very important, that the National Liberals were broken politically by the war of 1864, that the overwhelming majority of the Danish population was rural and that the astonishing development of Danish agriculture in the second half of the 19th century gave the peasants a strong self respect.

Certainly I do not postulate that the emancipating nationalism influenced by Grundtvig, represents a better or finer or more human kind of nationalism than the normal European elitist nationalism. Neither can it solve long traditions of hatred and violence. Danish nationalism in the latter half of the 19th

century was also influenced by other traditions than the Grundtvigian. But at least I will claim that in its pure form the 'folk-like' kind of nationalism can not be used to oppress other people. Indeed, the national policy of the Danish 'Venstre' - the liberal left wing party supported by the majority of the Danish peasants - when in government before the First World War showed, in matters concerning the Faroe Islands and Iceland, a remarkable generosity measured by the standard of the time. Maybe we should cultivate this kind of nationalism hoping in this way to avoid a surprise attack of more inconvenient forms of nationalism which seem to be latent in modern societies.

And, ladies and gentlemen, allow me at last to remind you about the fact that *the cultural framework* of modern societies - in the broadest meaning of the term 'cultural', including political and social culture - are inseparable from national ideology. What happens if we dissolve those ideologies? Why not try to modernize them? I think we shall do much better in cultivating our nationalism in a folk-like way than in abandoning it.

We all have experienced too many examples of evil spirits which were exorcised and after a while returned much worse than they were before.

Notes

- 1 Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism. A Study in Its Origins and Background*, 1944, citation after Macmillan Paperbacks Edition 1961, p. 433. Herder wrote the sentence in *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*.
- 2 Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 431.
- 3 Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 432.
- 4 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, Berlin 1800, p. 234.
- 5 Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

- 6 The Danish Flensburgian C.P., 1798-1854, was educated at German boarding schools and universities. In Germany he experienced the national and liberal excitement of German students after the wars of Liberation. In this environment he developed a Danish nationalism which he kept in his diaries for many years. In 1832 he published the booklet *Ueber die Volksthümlichkeit und das Staatsrecht des Herzogthums Schleswig* in order to confute the claim to unite the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein to one state as one part of a union state consisting of Denmark and the united duchies.
- 7 Cf. the case studies of Erich Hoffmann and Lorenz Rerup in A. Kappeler, F. Adanir & A. O Day [eds.], *The Formation of National Elites* (=Comparative studies on governments and non-dominant ethnic groups in Europe, 1850-1940, v. 6, published for the European Science Foundation), 1992.