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Brandt, Jesper

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The Development of Ecological Awareness - some Danish Experiences

Jesper BRANDT

Abstract

From the very beginning the Danish environmental movement was under influence of economic and political interests, that was taken into account by the strategy for the development of the environmental consciousness in Denmark. Four stages, the last two being connected to ecological awareness has been distinguished. The empirical development of the environmental consciousness since 1980 is analyzed. A jump in the middle of the 1980s is related to shifts in the political composition and to a maturing process in the development of ecological awareness in Denmark.

Key words: environment, awareness, environmental consciousness, Denmark

1. The foundation of the Danish Environmental Movement

To be a student at the end of the 1960s was a luck. It was an exciting period, where question marks were put to all ideas and values, and a radicalisation of especially students took place all over the world. As a geography student there was a lot of problems to be involved in, e.g.: Why couldn't the dominant development theories of that time explain the growing differences between developed and undeveloped countries and regions of the world? Why couldn't the localisation theories explain the growing polarisation of regional development in Denmark - and why didn't the economic and social geographers care about these practical problems? And why did geography split up into physical and economic geography in a time, where growing problems with pollution more than ever actualised a closer co-operation between these two sides of geography?

Some of us were especially attracted to the last problems. Through our student organisation for biologists, geologist and geographers we organised public meetings, and through that we founded an environmental movement, NOAH, that within very few years developed to a powerful organisation with local groups in many cities and regions in Denmark. NOAH was a typical grass root organisation of that time, based on small autonomous specialist or local groups, without any centralised leadership, and for that reason mostly also denying to go into formalised negotiations with the political or central administrative levels.

2. Some early experiences on the forces influencing ecological awareness

The very start of the NOAH showed up to be a hard lesson on the complicated forces behind the development of an ecological awareness in Denmark:

In the spring 1969 our little student organisation NOA (Naturhistoriske Onsdags Aftener - Nature scientific Wednesday Evenings) arranged some public meetings on pollution problems. To our surprise, we got a lot of publicity, especially from one of the biggest liberal newspapers in Denmark, *Politiken*. The newspaper drew a parallel from NOA to the old man NOAH that saved the world from the Flood, and the environmental organisation that was founded in prolongation of these meetings took up this idea calling itself NOAH.

Politiken had planned a campaign on pollution problems for the summer, and invited us for a co-operation, where we delivered active students as members of a journalist team travelling around in Denmark, and every week producing a page for the newspaper on local pollution problems, called *the garbage collector*. In turn, they paid our rent and telephone, and set at our disposal a journalist, that was daily on our secretariat, collecting information from the newspaper readers and others, that everyday could phone up the garbage collector, complaining over local pollution problems. And most important, it gave us as students a lot of experiences with the public, and mobilised a broader audience for the pollution problems, working the movement loose from the narrow and isolated university-status.

The journalist that was delivered to us was a brilliant organiser, hard working, engaged, with a seldom ability to find the right cases, to display the central conflicts, and to go into clinch with the right people. In a short time he even educated himself into a very competent environmental journalist.

Many of the cases that was enfold in our organisation and by *the garbage collector* certainly ended as economic and political conflicts with industrial enterprises and the Danish industry in general, unwilling to make investments in environmental improvements. Consequently, we were certainly in opposition to what we considered an not responsible capitalist exploitation and pollution of our environment. We realised that the biggest polluters were often the biggest industries, in practice resisting any changes with all measures, although they should have the profit to do it. And we used more and more time trying to find out, what was going on in the top of the industry.

It came almost as a chock to me when I after some years realised what actually had happened in this early stage of our environmental movement:

The anti-pollution campaign of *Politician* was initiated by the management direction. The chairman of the board of directors was at the same time a leading director of one of the biggest and also most polluting industries in Denmark, F. L. Schmidt Ltd. But this enterprise was at the same time very busy in building up an anti pollution industry, producing pollution monitoring instruments, filters, purification installations and setting up big departments for environmental consulting and planning. The inspiration came from Sweden where the environmental discussion already had been active for some years. So in fact, the success of the early Danish environmental movement was at least partly manipulated by simple profit interests. But only partly. There was other manipulators, too: Years later, I recognised the background of the journalist, that more than any other in practice had brought the movement to the broad public in the early phase: His father was one of the most well-known organisers within the Danish resistant movement under the Second World War and member of the Danish Communist Party. So the son was born into the political left, used to organise and mobilise. His main political goal was to get the workers and their trade unions engaged in the environmental problems, in a way that did not get too much in contradiction with their basic interests as wage earners.

As students in the 1960s, a period of economic boom, we had only a theoretical knowledge of problems of unemployment and unsure conditions at the labour market, so in that part of the struggle for environmental awareness we were rather innocent. I never really found out, what was the relation between the management direction and our journalist: Was it a strategic deal to the benefit of the environment, or was it an accident, rather reflecting a modernisation of the class-struggle under new capitalist conditions?

Probably both.

3. Stages of ecological awareness

Through these early experiences, we learned that environmental problems were not a new special problem of society, but an integrated part of it, and also an integrated part of the economic and political conflicts in society.

This helped us to bring out some ideas on how the movement could expect the environmental consciousness and ecological awareness to develop in the future. In our internal discussions we operated with 4 stages in the development of environmental consciousness (Agger, 1972)

1. The garbage stage
2. The filter stage
3. The ecological stage
4. The eco-political stage

The first stages were somehow based on empirical evidence: In the 1950's, a broad movement against litter from what was called 'forest swines' - people dumping waste in nature - had a certain success in Denmark. Still in the 1960's most pollution problems was handled by building higher chimneys and more remote discharge outfalls hoping for a rarefaction or dilution of the pollution: "The solution of pollution is dilution" was a popular standpoint at that time.

But from the end of the 60's the filtering on all sorts of droppings of society became slowly the way of handling the pollution problems.

For the newly established environmental movement primarily consisting of students, ecology became an important general frame of reference for the future strategy: Inspired by Rachael Carson, Berry Commener and others, the short-sighted aspects of the filtering philosophy was attached from a scientific point of view through global ecological thinking based on the necessary recycling of all matter on spaceship earth and the protection of the function of the ecosystems. Fundamental aspects of the metabolism of society had to be changed, too. We could also call this stage *the first stage of ecological awareness*.

However, the ecologization was not just to be seen from a nature scientific point of view: The necessary change of the metabolism of society should also be seen as a fundamental demand for basic changes in the heart of society: namely the production processes and the economic, social and political forces controlling these processes.

The battle at this level was called the eco-political stage of the development of environmental consciousness. We could also call it *the second stage of ecological awareness*.

In fact such 4 point stages later was set up in different variants for the description of similar or related aspects of the development of environmental consciousness. So, within the conservation movement 4 similar stages of the development of conservation awareness has been formulated:

1. The conservation of the vicars pear tree
2. The species-oriented conservation
3. The area-oriented conservation
4. The production-oriented conservation

From being most interested in the peculiarities of nature - here of course exaggerated in the care for the priests' pear tree, the conservation has for a long period been mainly oriented towards the conservation of species.

The last 10-20 years has shown a growing recognition of the fact, that the single species cannot be separated from their environmental conditions and the ecological systems that constitute their habitats. This has gradually moved the emphasis towards an area-oriented conservation keeping the care of the species together with the care of their habitats.

The last stage broaden this perspective: Since the main threat against both the species and their habitats can be seen as side-effects of man-induced circulation of matter and energy, say the metabolism of society, changes in the production processes that lower the impact on our ecosystems will be the most efficient way for the conservation movement to fulfil their goal of a better protection of nature and wildlife. And so, the two models of development of awareness are in fact rather similar, starting with a rather narrow formulation of the problem, and through different stages end up by acknowledge the necessity of fundamental changes in the production processes, based on a growing ecological awareness.

These stages are first of all to be seen as strategic political stages in a mobilisation process. But do they also reflect the character of the real social processes that further or restrain the development of ecological awareness? Intuitively I doubt. When you go just a little closer to the historical development of the environmental movements, you will easily recognise that although you always can find example to support such linear models of straight development, more often waves including period of stagnation and even decline are just as obvious, and has to be explained, if we want to get a better understanding of the conditions for a successful development of an ecological awareness. On the other hand, experiences also show, that what seems to be periods of stagnation can actually be a maturing before a sudden step towards a new stage.

4. The development of environmental consciousness in Denmark

For the members of NOAH the conclusion of these considerations was rather clear. Many went into different political parties, mainly at the left wing.

And that was a problem. Despite continuous discussions in the media on environmental problems, the environmental movement was for many years looked upon with sympathy, but also with a little scepticism, as idealist left wings, without knowledge of the real world.

This attitude was confirmed by an opinion poll 1980: They presented a representative sample of Danish voters for a list of 10 actual problems in society, and asked them, which 3 of these problems they considered as the most important for the country in the nearest future. As seen from Table 1 only 21 % of the population considered environmental problems as being among the 3 most important problems in 1980. In 1982 it had raised to 25%, but was still at the same low level on the list. And splitting the material up on the general political opinion - which was possible in the 1982-investigation - showed a marked difference: 49% of the voters on the left wing considered the environmental problems to be among the 3 most important, but only 20% of the right wing voters, with the social democrats (the biggest party in Denmark) on the average of 25 %.

Table 1: The three most important of 10 given problems in Denmark in 1980. AIM research A/S.

	1980		1982	
	(%)	Rank	(%)	Rank
Unemployment	70	1	82	1
Deficit in foreign exchange	52	2	61	2
Violence	47	3	34	3
Increasing prices	26	4	19	6
Environmental degradation	21	5	25	5
robbery	20	6	13	8
narcotics	20	6	30	4
alcoholism	16	8	14	7
salary	13	9	11	9
defence	7	10	2	10

For these reasons NOAH was always against attempts to put the movement directly into the traditional political scene. We considered a green party an impossible construction, because we found it important to engage all political parties in environmental problems. Only through such a broad process the environmental consciousness could develop the necessary width to be a powerful tool. This strategy was in the sense, that no strong green parties ever developed in Denmark. Instead many other environmental organisations developed beside NOAH, e.g. the organisation against atomic power and later the organisation for renewable energy, that in fact succeeded in a ban on nuclear power plants in Denmark. These organisation were more centralised, and for that reason also more efficient on specific goals than NOAH. The Danish society for Nature Conservation, an old private organisation, has developed to a very powerful environmental movement with almost 300 000 members with strong influence at all political levels. Greenpeace has got a certain status in Denmark, too. Also the public environmental organisations in the state, county and municipal administrations as well as research and sector oriented organisations was growing rapidly these years (Jamison et al., 1990).

But although these organisations made an efficient work, still in 1982 environmental problems was only no. 5 on the list of most important problems for the nearest future in Denmark.

But then something happened:

From 1982 to 1987 the environmental consciousness increased dramatically (see Fig. 1): From being among the 3 most important problems for 25 % of the population, environmental problems increased to number one on the list, even surpassing unemployment, that certainly was and still is a big problem in Denmark.

Since 1987 the figure has lowered somehow, stabilising around 60 %.

There might be several single factors that has influenced the development:

An extensive fish death in the summertime was observed during the first half of the 1980s in the seas around Denmark. Such scandals were however seen many times before. But this time it had a tremendous influence on the public opinion and at the political level, that within a very short period set

up rather radical and very ambitious and expensive plans for a reduction in the discharge of nitrogen and phosphor, especially from the agricultural sector.

I believe, that one of the reasons behind this has to be found at the political level. Now also the right wing was mobilised, probably as a consequence of their political mobilisation through the many broad environmental organisations. Although left wing voters were the most conscious concerning environmental problems in the beginning of the 1980s - and probably also the most active - the left wing only formed a minority of the voters, so that among the 25 % of the voters in 1982, seeing the environmental problems as one of the 3 most important, approximately 1/3 belonged to each of the three main political groups. But this changed drastically during the next years (table 2):

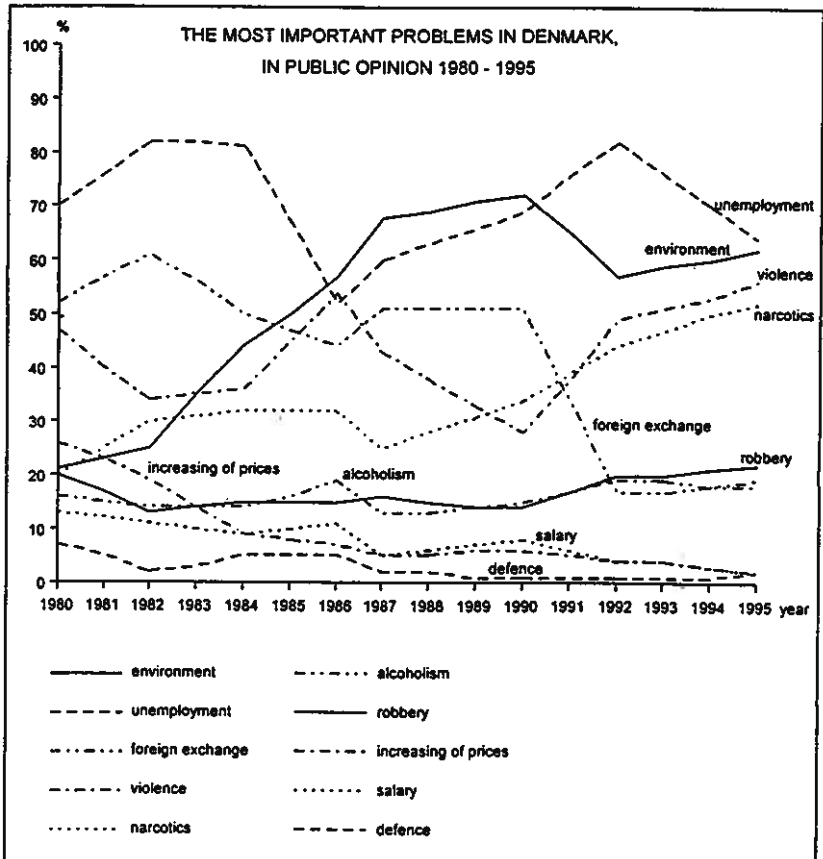


Fig. 1: The development of the opinion on the most important problems in Denmark 1980 - 95. AIM research Ltd. and Energispareudvalget

Table 2: The number among 100 voters, that consider environmental problems to be among the 3 most important problems. (AIM Research, LTD)

	1982	1984	1986
Right wing	11	22	29
Social democracy	8	13	18
Left wing	8	10	10
Sum	25	45	57

So, even if the left wing voters also in 1986 showed to be most concerned about environmental problems (that was in fact the opinion of 74 % of the left wing voters at that time), they were a still smaller minority compared to the growing mass of central and right wing voters now being mobilised. And this of course changed the general conditions for environmental policy in Denmark.

If this interpretation is right it shows how important it has been to ensure a broad consensus among the different political groups, rather than to collect the environmental conscious voters into a green party. This is of course to be discussed: the story of e.g. the German environmental movement would probably come to another conclusion.

The rapid change in consciousness during the 1980s also can be interpreted in another way: Maybe the environmental consciousness among the population suddenly flowered under influence of a growing ecological awareness. For a decade the environmental movement had tried to mobilise for more ecologically sound solutions on environmental problem and had written school books on ecology that was added to the instruction plans both in biology and geography. However, the upcoming ecological awareness was often considered too general to be implemented on the practical daily life problems. But the extensive fish dead became a symbol for the awareness of the fact, that the buffer capacity and self purification ability of the seas was indeed limited, and that all the planning based on the principle of dilution in practice had failed. It might have been the same type of ecological awareness that started a very efficient boycott of the oil company Shell in Denmark and some other countries, when they tried to dump the Brent Spar oil platform in the North Sea. I am convinced, that from a technical point of view, good reasons - also environmentally - can be found for the dumping. But people reacted with their new-born general ecological awareness, that all matter has to be recirculated and that 'away' does not exist anymore. Everybody has to respect that ecological rule, also Shell.

5. Conclusion

So, to conclude, there is a close relationship between environmental consciousness and ecological awareness in the way, that ecological awareness follows as another step in the development of environmental consciousness furthered not just by practice, but by theoretically based educational means. But the development of ecological awareness also seems to have important catalytic qualities for the mobilisation of an environmental consciousness, by setting up basic principles for a future ecologization of society, that in certain situations can speed up to transformation process. It must be a basic task for this chair to find out priorities and presentation forms for ecological principles with such catalytic qualities.

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