

In Denmark we eat pork and shake hands! Islam and the anti-Islamic emblems of cultural difference in Danish neo-nationalism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Martin Lindhardt** 

University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

Abstract

This article argues that constructions of Danishness and Danish culture in neo-nationalist right-wing discourse have increasingly become structured around a marked opposition to Islam and Muslim immigrants. My analysis draws on Frederik Barth's understanding of ethnic identity as constituted through processes of demarcation of boundaries vis-à-vis other groups. In such processes, certain cultural phenomena, both material and immaterial, can be elevated to emblems of cultural difference or symbolic markers of an in-group's shared identity. The article explores how different phenomena such as freedom of speech, pork, winter swimming/mixed-gender swimming and handshakes have become salient topics of political and public debates about integration and Islam in Denmark. I argue that these phenomena have all become emblematic of an allegedly distinctive Danish culture because they serve the purpose of demarcating symbolic boundaries vis-à-vis Islam.

Keywords

Denmark, ethnicity, Islam, neo-nationalism, political semiotics, symbolic boundaries

This article makes the argument that constructions of Danishness and Danish culture in neo-nationalist right-wing discourse have increasingly become structured around a marked opposition to Islam. What I suggest is, in short, that perceptions of Muslim

Corresponding author:

Martin Lindhardt, Cultural Sociology, University of Southern Denmark, Degnevej 5, 6700 Esbjerg, Denmark.

Email: lind@sam.sdu.dk

immigrants as a particularly problematic group have evoked certain types of cultural defence and a new rhetoric of exclusion (Stolcke, 1995), mostly on the political right, resulting in a new kind of awareness of what it means to be Danish.

In the last approximately three to four decades, the presence of Islam in Denmark has become a dominant theme of political and public domestic debates, with many voices arguing that Muslim immigrants, because their religion is fundamentally incompatible with Danish values, pose an imminent danger to Danish society. The presence of Muslim immigrants in Denmark goes back more than three decades and so do the critical opinions many Danes hold on immigration. However, the public and political concern with the Islamic religion of immigrants as a potential threat to Danish values and culture has grown significantly in the last 30–35 years or so. Ferruh Yilmaz (2015) has noted how, starting in the 1980s, there has been a growing tendency in parts of the media and among politicians, especially from the populist Danish People's Party, to label immigrants by religious rather than ethno-national designations and to attribute their code of conduct to their Muslim culture (p. 43; see also Yilmaz, 2016).¹ The political concern with Islam as the main source of problems related to immigration and integration was manifest during the 2019 parliamentary elections when two new populist parties with explicit anti-Islamic agendas were on the ballot. One, The New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*), got enough votes to enter parliament, while the other, Hard Line (*Stram Kurs*), came very close. Until then, the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) had been the main advocate of anti-Muslim policies and views, although such views have increasingly found their way into other major parties, such as the Liberal Party (whose Danish name is *Venstre*), the Conservative Party (*Det Konservative Folkeparti*) and the Social Democratic Party (*Socialdemokratiet*).

There is a good deal of research on media, political and popular representations of Islam and Muslims in Denmark and other European countries. Much of this research has shed light on orientalist and essentialist representations of Islam and Muslims and further demonstrated how culture and religion have become pivotal categories for explaining any real or perceived challenge related to immigration (see Boreus, 2020; Hervik, 2011, 2019; Kublitz, 2010; Moors, 2009; Yilmaz, 2015, 2016). What I suggest in this article is that the growing concern with Islam in some portions of the population and the media and among right-wing politicians is not only manifested in essentialist representations of Islam but has also led to new understandings and constructions of Danishness and Danish culture. In Danish neo-nationalist representations, there is a tendency to define Danishness vis-à-vis Islam and to attribute emblematic status to cultural phenomena that serve the purpose of demarcating symbolic boundaries between the two. Later, I examine such representations, both in statements from politicians from the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, the Danish People's Party and the New Right (all right wing), and in reporting and editorials of major independent newspapers with right-wing sympathies such as *Berlingske Tidende* and *Jyllandsposten*. But first a few clarifying comments on the concept of neo-nationalism, followed by a further presentation of the article's theoretical framework, are in order.

Neo-nationalism

Neo-nationalism refers to an ideology that uses nationalism, sometimes in combination with a clash of civilisations narrative, against minorities within a country. A salient feature

of neo-nationalism is the idea of a culturally homogeneous nation that is being threatened by the internal presence of culturally different others (Gingrich, 2006: 199). The Danish anthropologist, Peter Hervik (2019), traces the emergence of Danish neo-nationalism back to the late 1990s (p. 533), a time when the public and political concern with the integration of immigrants was not only on the rise but was also increasingly being framed as a concern with Islam. Neo-nationalism is closely related to what scholars refer to as neo-racism, an ideology that conceives of differences between people in terms of incompatible cultures rather than biology or skin colour (Balibar, 1991; Hervik, 2011). It follows that the definition and demarcation of sharp cultural boundaries, and the representation of the cultural *other* who is separated from the national *we* by those boundaries, are important parts of neo-nationalist and neo-racist discourse.

Boundaries and othering

A recurrent theme in both theories and empirical studies of social, cultural and political identities is the importance of an *other*, someone external to a group or an imagined community that shares an identity. Thus, the literature frequently tells us that dichotomies between *us* and *them* or between in-groups and outsiders are significant in terms of shaping a given group's understanding of what defines them. The *other* in such dichotomies is not just culturally different but is often imagined as directly antithetical to the *us*, as a negative mirror image of a group or imagined community that enables members to understand who they are through a marked contrast with what they are not. As scholars have repeatedly stressed, the ways members of a given group or community represent their antithetical *other* are generally essentialist, unnuanced if not outright inaccurate and, at the end of the day, tell us a lot more about the self-image of the group or community doing the representation than about those who are being represented. For instance, in his pathbreaking work on Orientalism, Edward Said makes the argument that Western representations of the Orient in different literary genres are not very helpful in terms of understanding what the Orient is really about. Such representations are better seen as discursive processes through which the West forms its own self-image (Said, 1979). In a similar vein, David Norman Smith (1996) argues that while antisemitic representations of Jews can tell us a lot about the anti-Semite and his or her projections, they are often completely dissociated from, and uninformed by, actual encounters and conflicts with Jews; thus, he notes that antisemitism also thrives in parts of the world where there are virtually no Jews. Scholars have also noted how the image of the unwanted and incompatible cultural other has been intrinsically linked to the constitution of national subjects and communities. Thus, Etienne Balibar (2012: 215) argues that the idea of the national subject (*homo nationalis*) who is identified by his or her belonging to a particular people goes hand-in-hand with the emergence of the internal ethnic stranger or the intruder. This point is echoed by Hervik, who notes how in-groups tend to produce their own out-group out of a projection of themselves. The other, Hervik (2019) continues, 'is a product of the nationalist Self – an image of Others with their fixed identities, which is rendered between fact and fantasy' (p. 530).

The importance of us-them dichotomies is also highlighted in studies of ethnic identity. An acknowledged classic in ethnicity studies is the Norwegian anthropologist

Frederik Barth's (1969) introduction to the book, *Ethnic Group and Boundaries*, in which he in many ways set the stage for much subsequent scholarship by emphasising the demarcation of boundaries as constitutive of ethnicity. Barth made what was at the time an innovative argument about the relation between ethnicity and culture. In his view, an ethnic group is not an ethnic group because it shares a culture. There may be great cultural diversity within ethnic groups and different groups may share many cultural features. But in situations of contact between groups, attention tends to become focused on the demarcation and maintenance of boundaries between them and this is where culture becomes important.

Although Barth, as we will see, is certainly attentive to the symbolic dimension of the demarcation of boundaries, a distinction between social and symbolic boundaries is, at best, implicit in his text. So before proceeding with unpacking Barth's argument, it might be helpful to briefly introduce Michelle Lamont and Virac Molnar's (2002) explicit distinction between these two kinds of boundaries (p. 168). They define social boundaries as 'objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities' (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 168). Social boundaries are further manifested in stable behavioural patterns of association. Symbolic boundaries take the form of conceptual distinctions that social actors make to categorise people, practices, objects, time and space. Such boundaries serve to separate people into different groups and to create feelings of group membership and similarity (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 168). When they are widely agreed upon, symbolic boundaries can take on a constraining character, pattern social interaction and ultimately become social boundaries, for instance by translating into identifiable patterns of social exclusion and congregation (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 168–169). Arguing along similar lines, Barth notes that an important way of defining and maintaining boundaries between groups is to emphasise cultural elements that are perceived to be specific to one's own group and hence serve to distinguish it from others. While such cultural elements are important for a group's self-identification, Barth (1969) stresses that it is 'the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses' (p. 15).

Barth (1969) uses the terms 'signals and emblems of difference' to refer to features or elements of a culture that are used to indicate difference (p. 14). Such emblems, which Barth (1969) also refers to as 'cultural contents of ethnic difference' (p. 14), include overt signs, such as dress, language, general style of life (and, I would add, food) as well as immaterial phenomena such as value orientations and standards of morality. It is by no means all aspects of a culture that serve as emblems of difference. Insofar as a group wishes to distinguish itself from another group, it will most likely choose cultural features that serve that purpose and ignore others that are shared across boundaries (Eller, 1999: 9). Furthermore, those elements of a culture that serve as emblems of difference may not always have done so. In situations of contact between groups, for instance because of migration, practices and values that used to be parts of a taken-for-granted cultural repertoire can be elevated and given the status of symbolic markers of a group's distinctive and exclusive identity.

Barth's legacy has been significant, and subsequent scholars of ethnicity have repeatedly paid attention to consciousness of difference, boundary making and symbolism.

Thus, George De Vos (1975) defines ethnicity as ‘the subjective symbolic and emblematic use of any aspect of culture [by a group], in order to differentiate themselves from other groups’ (p. 6), whereas Margaret Burgess (1978) sees ethnicity as ‘the character, quality, or condition of ethnic group membership, based on an identity with and/or a consciousness of a group’s belonging that is differentiated from others by symbolic markers’ (p. 278). According to such understandings of ethnicity, groups and communities do not simply construct antithetical images of others that basically reflect, confirm and strengthen the image they already had of themselves. Rather, through the encounter with others and subsequent processes of boundary making, groups develop a new kind of cultural awareness of themselves and not least of specific cultural features that define them.²

Drawing on the perspectives introduced above, this article explores how, in the case of Denmark, national identities and definitions of Danish culture are increasingly being constructed in a process that is centred around a demarcation of boundaries in relation to Islam and Muslim immigrants. I argue that especially on the political right, Islam and Muslims have come to assume the role of a threatening *other* that is antithetical to a Danish national *we*. When a threat is imminent, or perceived to be imminent, those feeling threatened can react by demarcating boundaries. Social boundaries between Danes and immigrants have taken the form of legislation, for instance strict requirements for family unification and for obtaining permanent residence and tougher requirements, for some foreigners, to qualify for welfare benefits. While Danish legislation does not explicitly discriminate on religious grounds, some laws, for instance on family unification, have clearly been passed with the purpose of limiting immigration from Muslim countries.

At the same time, I argue, a perceived need to thwart the threat of Islam has also resulted in a new political semiotics, or new kinds of symbolic boundary work where certain cultural elements are elevated to the status of emblems of difference or symbolic markers of Danish identity. In other words, processes similar to those described by Barth and other scholars of ethnicity appear to be unfolding as the internal presence of an Islamic other has fostered a new kind of consciousness of Danish culture and values and not least of certain cultural features that are held to be distinctively Danish. In Danish neo-nationalism, Danishness is increasingly being defined vis-à-vis Islam, meaning that specific cultural phenomena that serve to distinguish (a specific construction of) Danish culture from Islam are given an emblematic status. Although anti-immigrant sentiments can be observed across the political spectrum and may to some extent be said to have become mainstream in contemporary Denmark, the kind of neo-nationalist cultural defence that consists in demarcating symbolic boundaries by attributing emblematic status to particular cultural phenomena is most prevalent among right-wing politicians and in right-wing media.

In the following pages, I first provide a brief account of how the presence of Islam and Muslims in Denmark has been debated in recent decades. I then discuss four emblems of difference, namely (1) freedom of speech, (2) pork, (3) winter swimming and mixed-gender swimming in general, and finally (4) handshakes. These four phenomena are, of course, of a very different nature as they range from principles or values to food items and tangible practices. But as Barth and other scholars of ethnicity argue, the cultural stuff that serves to differentiate a group from others can indeed be very different and may very well include both material and immaterial phenomena. What I argue below is that

these four phenomena, their obvious differences notwithstanding, share something important in common. Since 2005 they have all, at one point or more, become salient topics of political and public debates about integration and Islam. Furthermore, in neo-nationalist discourses, mainly articulated by right-wing participants in the debate, these four phenomena have all become emblematic of Danish culture as they are evoked to demarcate boundaries vis-à-vis Islam. My discussion of these emblems of difference is partly based on the work of other scholars (Hervik, 2011, 2012, 2019; Lenneis and Agergaard, 2018; Rostbøll, 2010; Vandsø, 2017) and partly on my own readings of Danish media coverage of recent events and of debates on the presence of Islam in Denmark as they have unfolded in the media, among politicians and on the social media.

Islam and Muslims in Denmark

In January 2020, an estimated 256,000 Muslims lived in Denmark, corresponding to 4.4 percent of the entire population.³ The first major wave of Muslim migrants occurred in the 1960s and 1970s when so-called guest labourers, mostly from Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco and former Yugoslavia, arrived to work in Danish industries. Most of these migrants were men, who were only expected to stay and work in Danish industries for a limited period, and there was little political and public focus on their everyday life (Rytter and Pedersen, 2014: 2311). However, in the late 1970s and 1980s, many of them began to settle permanently and since then Muslim migrants in Denmark have mainly been the families of original labour migrants and refugees from countries such as Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria. The more permanent settlement of migrants posed new challenges to politicians and the welfare state, and during the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of integration became increasingly dominant in political discourse (Rytter and Pedersen, 2014: 2311). Nevertheless, Hervik (2011) notes that labour migrants and their families were fairly positively portrayed in the media up until the late 1980s (p. 22).

In the 1980s and early 1990s, there were voices, for instance of the right-wing pastor Søren Krarup (who years later became an MP for the People's Party) and Mogens Glistrup, founder of the Progress Party (*Fremskridtspartiet*), that pointed to incompatibilities between the Islamic religion of immigrants and Danish culture. In a brilliant analysis, Ferruh Yilmaz (2016) has demonstrated how especially Krarup was instrumental in the recasting of immigrants from being immigrant workers to Muslim immigrants. Other important occurrences that contributed to an emerging cultural anxiety of immigrants in general and Islam in particular included the Salman Rushdie affair in 1989 and, on a national level, an aggressive campaign, run by Danish tabloid newspaper, *Ekstra Bladet* in 1997, with the purpose of creating a debate about the prospect of Denmark turning into a multi-ethnic society (Hervik, 2011: 55–56). Two years earlier, the Danish People's Party had been founded by dissidents from the Progress Party. *Ekstra Bladet* provided an important platform for the new party (Hervik, 2011: 62–63) which, running on an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agenda, received 7.4 percent of the votes in the 1998 parliamentary elections.

Understandings of a sharp opposition between Danish or Western culture and Islam preceded but were also intensified after the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001. Such understandings have been manifested in an increased use of essentialist rhetoric in public and political debates (Rytter and Pedersen, 2014: 2310). As noted by Mikkel Rytter and

Marianne Holm Pedersen (2014: 2306), after 2001, the discourse on integration both inside and outside Denmark began to merge with concerns of national security and a threat from Muslims. Only 2 months after the terrorist attacks, the parliamentary elections in Denmark resulted in a new government, which was formed by the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party with the support of the Danish People's Party, which increased its share of votes from 7.4 to 12.0 percent. The government formed a new Ministry of Integration and implemented a range of policies and initiatives to enhance integration and prevent terror. For instance, the legislation of family unification was tightened and the criteria for obtaining permanent residency as a refugee were altered. Denmark also began to select its refugees based on their 'integration potential' which in practice meant that Christian refugees were granted residency more easily than Muslims. Anti-terror measures also included surveillance, control and regulation of Muslim immigrants living in Denmark (Rytter and Pedersen, 2014: 2307, 2317).

In addition to such policies, the government also launched a new culture war of values in 2002 (Rytter and Pedersen, 2014: 2312). A key element in this war was the announcement of a new national Cultural Canon (*Kulturkanonen*) by then-minister of culture, Brian Mikkelsen from the Conservative Party, in late 2004. Mikkelsen had previously explained that Danes should by no means accept that 'in the midst of [their] country a parallel society is developing in which minorities are practicing their medieval norms and undemocratic mindsets' (Kublitz, 2010: 112). Committees were set up to produce a list of indispensable works that shape Danish cultural heritage in the areas of art, music, film, design, architecture, crafts and dramatic arts. The Cultural Canon project can very well be seen as an attempt to demarcate symbolic boundaries. Mikkelsen repeatedly linked the Canon to the war on values and, in a speech in September 2005, he explicitly argued that both projects were part of a struggle against Muslim fundamentalists. One of the other reasons he provided for launching the Canon was a wish to 'give us reference points and awareness of what is special about Danes and Denmark in an ever more globalized world' (quoted from Hervik, 2011: 172). As noted by Rytter and Pedersen (2014: 2313), the project of presenting and discussing that which is particularly Danish simultaneously served the purpose of delimiting that which is not Danish.

The 1990s and the first decade of the millennium were a time, not only of a growing public and political concern with immigrants and their culture but also where perceived problems with immigrants were increasingly being related to their Islamic religion. The cartoon crisis that broke out in 2005 took place in a political climate where neo-nationalism, the understanding of a culturally homogeneous Danish nation that is under threat from a foreign Islamic culture and must be therefore defended, had already made its impact on Danish politics and portions of the media (Hervik, 2011, 2012).

The cartoon crisis: freedom of speech as an emblem of difference

On 30 September 2005, the newspaper *Jyllandsposten* printed 12 satirical cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. Many Muslims consider pictorial depictions of the founder of their religion to be blasphemous, so the decision to print the cartoons was in itself seen as a provocation of Islam, but further fuel was added to the fire by the fact that one of the

cartoons depicted Muhammad wearing a bomb with the Islamic credo written on it, in his turban. The background for the decision to publish the cartoons was a public debate on self-censorship following a story published by the news service Ritzau about a Danish author who had difficulties finding an illustrator for a children's book he was writing on the life of Muhammad. The editor of *Jyllandsposten*, Flemming Rose, decided to test the extent to which self-censorship was practised by inviting professional illustrators to produce drawings of Muhammad for the paper. The 12 cartoons that went into print were accompanied by an editorial, written by Rose himself, in which he argued that several recent cases of self-censorship testified to how the fear of confronting Islam posed a threat to the freedom of speech.

Soon after the publication of the cartoons, a group of Muslim leaders in Denmark was formed with the purpose of influencing public opinion on the cartoons, for instance by writing letters to media outlets in Denmark and abroad and reaching out to diplomats. On 12 October, 11 ambassadors from Muslim majority countries who had received petitions from Danish Imams sent a letter to the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, officially soliciting a meeting to discuss an 'on-going smearing campaign in Danish public circles and media against Islam and Muslims' (Hervik, 2012: 59). As examples of this campaign, the letter mentioned the cartoons, statements by minister of Culture, Brian Mikkelsen, on a war against Islam, statements by a Danish radio station (Radio Holger) and by Louise Frevert from the Danish People's Party who had compared Islam in Denmark to a cancer tumour. The Prime Minister wrote a reply in which he ignored the request for a meeting but explained that freedom of expression is a foundation of Danish democracy and that the government has no means of influencing the press (Hervik, 2012: 60).

In December 2005, two groups of Danish Imams who had failed to make any progress with the Danish government travelled to different Middle Eastern countries to seek support by meeting directly with political and religious leaders. These trips are largely regarded as triggers of worldwide discontent which, in early 2006, was manifest in demonstrations around the world, attacks on Western embassies, death threats against the cartoonists and *Jyllandsposten*, and a consumer boycott of Danish products in several Middle Eastern countries. Danish government officials made frequent references to a clash of civilisations narrative when addressing the crisis (Hervik, 2011: 240) and the fact that Muslim activists travelled from Denmark to the Middle East to seek support contributed to a redefinition of Muslims in Denmark from being a minority to becoming local representatives of a global Islamic community (Rytter and Pedersen, 2014: 2310).

In the views of many politicians and commentators, what separated Danes and Muslims was first and foremost freedom of speech. The very purpose of printing the cartoons had been to test the freedom of speech in the wake of reported self-censorship, and Rasmussen's reply to the ambassadors' letter indirectly said that there was no purpose in meeting as freedom of expression was a fundamental principle that was not up for any kind of debate, a point he made in more explicit terms in his communication with the press (Rostbøll, 2010: 406).

Hervik (2011) has shown how the Danish government and part of the Danish media consistently framed the cartoon crisis as a simple question of being for or against freedom of speech. This was evident in Rasmussen's reply to the ambassadors where he apparently (mis)interpreted their request for a meeting about a smear campaign against

Islam as a request for a discussion of potential restrictions of the freedom of speech. The freedom-of-speech framing of the crisis often had an orientalist touch as it tended to divide the world into free (Western) and non-free (Islamic) countries. In an interview with *Jyllandsposten* on 30 October 2005, Rasmussen explained that

What is fundamental in this case is that enlightened and free societies are more successful than un-enlightened non-free societies, exactly because some dare to provoke and criticize authorities, whether they are political or religious authorities. (Quoted from Hervik, 2011: 191)

The message that the crisis was primarily about freedom of speech was repeated over and over, with freedom of speech often being presented as an absolute value that could under no circumstances be curtailed. Pia Kjærsgaard, the leader of the Danish People's Party at the time, wrote a piece for the party's website in October 2005 where she claimed that Muslims protesting against the cartoons in Copenhagen were basically protesting against the freedom of speech.⁴ In an intriguing analysis of the media debate that followed the publication of the cartoons, Christian Rostbøll (2010: 404–405) notes how defenders of the cartoons presented freedom of speech both as a non-negotiable universalistic value that is necessary for progress and democracy in general, and simultaneously as an expression of a Danish culture that supports and sustains such values and which stands in contrast to Islam. For instance, Rostbøll notes how defenders of the cartoon saw insight into universalistic values as a particular Danish accomplishment that relies on a specific national culture and history which include the Enlightenment with its critical stance towards religion and a Lutheran Christian tradition that is conducive to the privatisation of religion and its separation from politics (Rostbøll, 2010: 405–406).

Freedom of speech was not a new value in Denmark, and nor was it an entirely new theme in public and political debates on integration and Muslims. But the cartoon controversy moved this theme to the forefront of such debates, in large part because of how the government and the media framed it. Beginning with the cartoon controversy, freedom of speech has become elevated to the status of an emblem of difference, a distinctive marker of a specific Danish culture and a Western liberal culture (which Danish culture is part of and sustains), both of which are increasingly being defined through a marked contrast to global Islam.

Meatball-gate

On 25 May 2020, former MP for the Danish People's Party, Martin Henriksen, posted three pictures on Facebook, two of a big plate of roast pork, a very popular traditional dish in Denmark, and one of himself eating a piece of it. The photos were accompanied by a text, saying:

After having spent the day in Østre Landsret [a high court] defending my right and duty to oppose Sharia and Islam, it is quite appropriate to come home to my beloved wife who has cooked and made roast pork with everything.

Henriksen lost his seat in the Danish Parliament after the 2019 elections, where other parties presented competition to the Danish People's Party by prioritising a neo-nationalist

agenda. Nevertheless, Henriksen, who used to be the party's spokes person on integration, continues to be a high-profile member of the party, who makes frequent media appearances and is known for his uncompromising statements about the incommensurability of Islam and Danish culture.

At first glance, Henriksen's Facebook post could appear to be nothing more than a man expressing gratitude to his wife for having prepared a delicious meal for him after a long day of work. And yet, we can only wonder if Henriksen would have made such an update if his wife had prepared a meal for him that did not include pork or if the fact that he had pork for dinner would have been relevant for him to share on Facebook if he had spent the day debating taxation or environmental policies. There was little subtlety about the way Henriksen linked his demonstrative pleasure in consuming pork with his 'duty' to defend Denmark against Islam.

This was not the first time the consumption of pork was evoked as a cultural emblem that serves the purpose of demarcating symbolic boundaries between Danish culture and Islam. In January 2016, the Danish city of Randers suddenly became placed at the centre of both national and international media coverage, when city officials narrowly approved a proposal from the Danish People's Party to require that all public institutions ensure that pork was part of their menu. The 'meatball war' (*frikadellekrigen*) or 'meatball-gate' (*frikadellegate*), as the media termed it, after a traditional Danish dish, meatballs (*frikadeller*) made of minced pork, had previously raged in Denmark in summer 2013 in the form of a political/media debate on whether public day-care institutions should refrain from serving pork in deference to Muslim children. The 'war' was revived in 2015 when then-Integration Minister, Inger Støjberg from the Liberal Party, shared an anecdote about a family in the city of Aalborg that pulled out their child from a day-care institution after it had banned pork (Vandsø, 2017: 79). Although the story was later debunked, the debate was nevertheless reignited and in autumn 2015 *Jyllandsposten* published an article revealing that a specific day-care institution in Randers did not serve pork for lunch because a majority of the children did not eat it. Before this revelation was made, the Danish People's Party and the Liberal Party, who together held a narrow majority in the municipality of Randers, had revised the municipal constitution and added a sentence saying that Danish food culture should be a central part of food schemes in municipal institutions. The proposal that was passed in January 2016 included a further addition to the constitution, a sentence saying that as a matter of course, pork should be served in public institutions, regardless of their religious composition (Vandsø, 2017: 78).

Danish politicians and the Danish population in general were divided on the mandate to serve pork in day-care institutions. Some welcomed this mandate as a necessary defence of Danish culture, with Martin Henriksen explicitly suggesting that other Danish municipalities follow suit.⁵ Politicians from centre-left parties argued that this mandate was a pathetic example of policies enacted solely for symbolic reasons (Vandsø, 2017: 79). An anonymous artist had a more humorous approach to the meat ball gate as she or he put up a big sculpture of a meatball near a roundabout in Randers. As with other works of art, this one was open to multiple interpretations. It indicated that meatballs had now made Randers famous. The sculpture might also be seen as an ironic commentary on the seemingly sacred status attributed to meatballs, and pork in general, in Randers.

In an interview with *Jyllandsposten* in autumn 2015, Bente Gråkjær, the general day-care manager in the municipality of Randers explained that day-care institutions served Danish vegetables, Danish fruits and Danish bread, and that adding pork to the menu was hardly necessary in order to make it sufficiently Danish. As she put it, 'It does not have to be pork to be Danish'.⁶ The fact that the proposal was later approved clearly shows that not everyone shared this view. The rationale behind the proposal seemed to be that Danish culture was under attack and that the promotion of traditional dishes constituted a much-needed bulwark, a line of reasoning that Michaela DeSoucey (2010) has referred to as gastrationalism. If the menu served in day-care institutions was to truly represent, and defend, Danish culinary culture, it *had* to include pork. Apparently, no other ingredient was sufficiently Danish to do the job. The specific value attributed to pork, rather than, for instance, rye bread, fish fillet or herring, as *the* essential marker of Danishness clearly exemplifies how the elements of a (culinary) culture that are elevated to an emblematic status are those that serve to demarcate symbolic boundaries between an in-group and outsiders. Because Muslims do not eat it, pork became a powerful means of drawing symbolic boundaries between Danish culture and the threatening Islamic other.

Winter swimming and mixed-gender swimming as emblems of difference

In 2016, a story about women-only swim classes in public swimming pools in Tingbjerg, a suburb of Copenhagen with a high percentage of immigrants, caused no little outrage in the media and among politicians. The story was first published on 26 April in the national newspaper, *Berlingske Tidende*, with the headline 'New-Danish girls take over the swimming pool – if it is emptied of boys'.⁷ The article explained that gender segregated swimming in public swimming pools was part of a project that aimed at getting girls with ethnic minority backgrounds, who are often absent from swim classes due to religious beliefs, to learn to swim and, more generally, to join leisure activities. The article in *Berlingske* included comments from Lars Sørensen, the director of Copenhagen's leisure activities, who stressed that the project offered girls the opportunity of getting out (of their homes) and meeting role models.

Hervik (2019) offers a comprehensive account of the story and the reactions that followed. As he points out, the wording of the headline of the article 'New-Danish girls take over' feeds into the idea of a nation in danger (Hervik, 2019: 538). He further notes how many national-level politicians made 'moral-panic statements' about segregated swimming, and ministers of the then right-wing/liberal government denounced the initiative for being anti-integration and incompatible with Danish society and values (Hervik, 2019: 538). While some newspaper comments and social media exchanges adopted a pragmatic approach, focusing on the practical challenge of offering minority girls swimming lessons, another group of comments tended to see gender-segregated swimming in public swimming pools as a potential preliminary step towards a widespread Islamisation of Danish society. In other words, what was at stake here was something much more important than the organisation of a specific leisure activity. Similar to how people are sometimes willing to go to considerable lengths to defend their national flag, because a

flag can be perceived as much more than a mere piece of cloth (Kertzer, 1988: 7), mixed-gender swimming became conflated with something else, namely a general defence of Denmark and Danish culture. Hervik (2019) provides some telling examples of statements made in the debate on segregated swimming:

‘Are we living in Denmark or in an Islamic caliphate?’; ‘Segregated swimming is not Danish’; ‘Soon, pig breeding will be prohibited, since certain citizens with a specific religion cannot breathe the same air as pigs’; ‘Those who cannot behave according to Danish norms must be expelled’; and ‘Every time we give them an inch they will take a mile’. ‘This is not Denmark’; ‘This is not Saudi Arabia’. (pp. 538–539)

A nation under attack must be defended. One line of defence consisted in insisting that gender-segregated swimming be banned from public swimming pools. In the municipality of Aarhus, the second largest city of Denmark, the Liberal party proposed banning gender-segregated swimming in May 2016 and, after months of debating and reviewing the proposal, the ban was passed with an overwhelming majority of votes in February 2017. In the debates that preceded the ban, arguments against segregated swimming were that it would strengthen the formation of parallel societies in Denmark, that women participating in such swimming were victims of social control of their husbands and that segregated swimming is incompatible with fundamental Danish norms and values, such as gender equality, a tolerant mind-set (*frisind*) and sexual liberation (Lenneis and Agergaard, 2018: 53–54).

Another line of defence was of a more symbolic nature. On 28 October 2016, the website of the News Channel TV2 News published a story with the headline ‘Muslims make Pernille Vermund go winter swimming’.⁸ Pernille Vermund is the leader of the anti-Islamic party, the New Right, which was founded in 2015 and was elected into parliament in 2019. The story was based on a Facebook update by Vermund and a subsequent interview with her. Vermund explained that she used to go winter swimming but had decided to skip it this season because she did not have time. However, the debate on segregated swimming made her reconsider. Her Facebook post reads as follows:

I had actually considered stopping going winter swimming this year. But with the increased pressure that is placed on our freedom and tolerant spirit by unintegrated Muslims, which was last expressed by the need for gender segregated swimming, I will do another season in Oresund [a Danish ocean]. Here we swim as we are. Men and women, young and old people together. Naked and without fear. There is no better defense of free and natural relations between the genders!

Winter swimming, which basically consists of taking a quick dip in the ice-cold ocean during winter, is quite popular in Denmark. There are more than 25,000 organised winter swimmers who are members of clubs that provide facilities such as saunas and changing rooms. To this number must be added the unknown but undoubtedly high number of unorganised winter swimmers. Many winter swimmers prefer to take the dip in the nude, even in mixed-gender situations and some winter swimming clubs do not allow swimming suits. Most winter swimmers will argue until their throats are hoarse that there is

nothing sexual about the nudity in such contexts. But Pernille Vermund does have a point when she suggests that the tradition of winter swimming as it is practised in Denmark reflects a relatively liberal and relaxed attitude towards mixed-gender socialising.

In the interview with a TV2 reporter, Vermund elaborated on her views. She argued that public funds should not be spent on initiatives that undermine the precious freedom and gender equality of Danish society. The reporter asked explicitly if winter swimming was a political statement for Vermund, to which she replied:

It [winter swimming] has not been that [a political statement] for me until now. But if we adapt to some people who do not share the sexually liberal mind-set we have in Denmark, including a relation to the female gender that is very different from what we are used to, we will be moving on a slippery slope.

Vermund's comment about winter swimming *having become* a political statement in the face of an Islamic threat illustrates how a certain cultural practice can, under specific circumstances and as part of a neo-nationalist political agenda, be elevated, or can be attempted to be elevated, to the status of a cultural emblem of difference or a symbolic marker of a nation's distinctive cultural identity. Whether Vermund was ultimately successful in reshaping the public Danish perception of winter swimming is doubtful. I know of no investigations addressing this question, but my guess would be that most Danish winter swimmers do not see the practice as an emblem of a distinctive Danish identity or as a cultural defence of the nation against an Islamic invasion but merely as something enjoyable and healthy. However, the fact that Vermund attempted to turn winter swimming into an anti-Islamic political statement and the fact that political and social media debates about gender-segregated swimming were full of arguments about the fundamentally un-Danish nature of such an arrangement all point to the ways in which meanings and symbolism attached to specific practices are subject to ongoing negotiation and contestation.

The handshake as an 'incredibly important Danish value'

In December 2018, Denmark, once again, attracted the attention of international media because of political approaches to the integration of Muslims. This time what was at stake was handshakes! Some Muslim groups forbid or discourage their faithful from having physical contact, including handshakes, with members of the opposite sex outside of their close family. Prior to 2018, there had been occasional media stories about Muslims working in the public sector who refused to shake hands with citizens or colleagues of the opposite sex. Although such stories were relatively few and far between, they have created a public awareness of the handshake between members of the opposite sex as a practice that distinguishes ethnic Danes from Muslims.

In December 2018 a law was passed that requires anyone who is granted a Danish citizenship to participate in a municipal naturalisation ceremony and shake hands with the mayor, or another official, regardless of their gender. The handshake requirement included a provision that the wearing of gloves is unacceptable. The proposal for the new law came from the Danish People's Party and was supported by the minority government

consisting of the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party and Liberal Alliance. The new law prompted some strong reactions from mayors in different parts of the country who conduct the citizenship ceremonies, with many proclaiming that they would adopt a pragmatic approach to the ceremonies, for instance by having officials of both genders take part. On 17 January 2019, the daily newspaper *Berlingske* ran an article with comments from several mayors from the Liberal party who described the law as purely symbolic and illiberal and as an inappropriate attempt of national-level politicians to determine how local-level politicians should interact with citizens.⁹ It was, perhaps, unsurprising that those defending the new law adopted a more 'principled' line of argument, evoking Danish culture and describing handshakes as something quintessentially Danish. In a defence of the new law, then-minister of integration, Inger Støjberg, argued that the handshake is a fundamental Danish norm and that by performing it, new Danish citizens will symbolically signal that they have adapted to Danish society and values.¹⁰ Another passionate advocate of the handshake was Martin Henriksen. In a hearing on the new law in the Danish parliament on 20 December 2018 (just before MPs voted on the law), he explained that:

If you want to become a Danish citizen, you need to acquire Danish values and Danish culture. And it is a very, very common display of decency to show another person respect and if someone extends the hand, then, of course, you receive it.¹¹

Danish culture (insofar as such a thing exists?) is arguably less of a handshake culture than what one encounters elsewhere in the world where shaking hands is a standard and routine form of greeting friends, co-workers and other people. Hugging, or merely saying 'hej' (hi), are just as common ways of greeting one another in Denmark. There is hardly anything uniquely and distinctively Danish about shaking hands, but the practice of shaking hands with someone of the opposite sex can be evoked as an emblem that distinguishes a Danish national *we* from a particular group of *others*, namely Muslims (even if only some of them refuse to shake hands with members of the opposite sex) whose culture allegedly represents a threat to Danish society. The comments by Henriksen and especially Støjberg were quite explicit about the tremendous national-symbolic value attached to the handshake (between members of opposite sexes). In their ways of putting things, a handshake is infinitely more than just a physical gesture that communicates mutual respect between people; it is an emblem of Danish values and of everything Danish society stands for.

The importance of the handshake was confirmed in March 2020 when, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the government took several measures to ensure social distancing. In these circumstances, a ceremony that includes a handshake without gloves was not an option. Consequently, the new one-party government of the Social Democratic Party strongly encouraged municipalities to postpone citizenship ceremonies until it was again safe to shake hands. Mads Fuglede, MP and spokesperson on integration and foreigners for the Liberal Party (now the major opposition party), strongly applauded the idea of postponing the ceremonies and in an interview with *Berlingske* on 6 March, he expressed the opinion that no Danish citizenships should be granted before hands could again be shaken. In his own words,

We have implemented the handshake requirement to send a very important signal about the fundamental value that men and women in this country are equal. And you cannot just annul that rule. For some it may be silly, but for us it is an incredibly important Danish value. So, we would rather wait until the health authorities say that we can touch each other again.¹²

In mid-April 2020, the government eventually announced that the handshake requirement would be suspended temporarily as it was clear that the COVID-19 pandemic would not go away any time soon. However, the government also made it clear that the handshake should be reincluded into the citizenship ceremonies once social distancing was no longer required.

Conclusion

In Denmark and in Europe, ideological, neo-nationalist reactions to demographic developments have led to new kinds of border work that aim at separating the wanted from the unwanted (van Houtum, 2010: 958). Borders can be both external, preventing outsiders from entering a political territory, and internal, in the sense that they establish social and legal as well as symbolic divisions within a territory. As Henk van Houtum notes, processes of bordering are closely related to processes of ordering, a making and remaking of a socio-spatial order, for instance through the use of military force or through a selective invention and narration of community and tradition, and, not least, to processes of othering. The latter processes involve the production of categorical differences between insiders and outsiders (van Houtum, 2010: 959–960). Bordering, in other words, involves a specific construction of the *other* that is separated by the border from a national *we*. But bordering may, as Barth has shown, also lead to a new cultural self-awareness.

It has become something of a commonplace to assert that social and political struggles are inseparable from struggles over meaning and symbolism. In this article, I have attempted to show how in Danish neo-nationalism, borders are being drawn and definitions of Danish culture are continuously being negotiated in processes that involve attributing new meanings to existing values and practices, thus turning them into symbolic markers of Danishness. As different as phenomena like freedom of speech, pork, handshakes and winter swimming/mixed-gender swimming may be, they also share something in common. They have in recent years been prominent themes of public and political debates on integration and they have been elevated to emblems of Danishness because they serve the political purpose of establishing and highlighting contrasts between Danish culture and the Islamic *other*.

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ORCID iD

Martin Lindhardt  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4507-8368>

Notes

1. The Dutch anthropologist, Annelies Moors, refers to this tendency, which she also observes in the Netherlands, as an ‘Islamisation of Muslims’ (Moors, 2009: 395).
2. An important addition to early theories of ethnicity is found in the work of Richard Jenkins who brings more attention to power than Barth, de Vos and Burgess. Jenkins (1997: 53) argues that the effects of the way certain groups ethnically categorise themselves and others are highly dependent upon power relationships.
3. This estimate was made by Danish sociologist of religion, Brian Arly Jacobsen; see <https://www.tjekdet.dk/indsigt/hvor-mange-muslimer-er-der-i-danmark>.
4. <https://danskfolkeparti.dk/ytringsfrihed/>.
5. <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/politik/2016-01-19-df-efter-frikadelle-sag-goer-svinekoed-obligatorisk-flere-steder>.
6. <https://amtsavisen.dk/artikel/s%C3%A5dan-startede-frikadelle-sagen>.
7. <https://www.berlingske.dk/samfund/nydanske-piger-indtager-svoemmehallen-hvis-den-er-fri-for-drenge>.
8. <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/politik/2016-10-28-muslimer-faar-pernille-vermund-til-at-vinterbade>.
9. <https://www.berlingske.dk/danmark/forstaa-debatten-om-stoejbergs-haandtryk>.
10. <https://cphpost.dk/?p=107464>.
11. <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20181/lovforslag/L80/BEH3-40/forhandling.htm>.
12. <https://www.berlingske.dk/politik/coronavirus-udskyder-statsborgerskabsceremonier-uaenstaendigt-og-absurd>.

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Biographical note

Martin Lindhardt is an associate professor of Cultural Sociology at the University of Southern Denmark. His research has mostly focused on Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America. He is the author of "Power in Powerlessness. A study of Pentecostal Life-worlds in urban Chile (Brill 2012).