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Between Tradition and Modernity: Grundtvig and Cultural Nationalism

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INTRODUCTION

On the last day of 1848, Grundtvig sat down at his desk in his home at Knabrostræde in inner Copenhagen to pen a sermon for New Year's Day after one of the most dramatic years in Danish history. The year had begun with the death of Grundtvig's protector, Christian VIII. It was followed by the outbreak of civil war in the duchies and the abolition of absolutism on 21 March after mass demonstrations and pressure from a broad political alliance. In the autumn, a general election for a constitutional assembly was held. In spite of his reservations about elective democracy, Grundtvig was one of those elected.

Noting the secular character of New Year's Day, Grundtvig granted himself permission to speak on secular matters on the following morning. He described 1848 as "peculiar" and "unforgettable" for, in that year, "chains, which did not tie the wicked but the good," had been broken around Europe, and "human life guided by the hand Providence" had made "a giant's step forward towards victory, freedom and enlightenment." And as for the smaller part of the world, Denmark and the Nordic countries, there was more reason to be thankful to "God the Father" and, "in the name of Jesus[,] to concede" that in no other place in the world had the year been so joyful. And this in spite of the fact that no other country had lost "such a good and wise king" and been caught up "in so dangerous and harmful a war"; and only in Denmark was "worse conceit, more obvious willfulness and blinder selfishness" to be found. What Grundtvig found reason to celebrate was that, even though the end of absolute monarchy had meant the breaking of the external bonds

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between the "ruler and his subjects and between high and low," his way of handling the people's petition had made the public realize that there had been an "internal bond, a bond of love between king and people and among us all as co-citizens [*medborgere*] from time immemorial and as children of the same mother." The "dangerous and harmful" war in the duchies – in which the kingdom, fatherland, mother tongue, honour, freedom, and independence of the people were at stake – had contributed to tightening these bonds. Indeed, they had awakened and nourished "a deep feeling among the Nordic peoples and realms" that they must "stand together and help each other against external enemies in order to live in honour and to pursue their great destiny." Grundtvig (1924, 218–19) was convinced that, far from causing harm, the present "unavoidable ferment and confusion among us" was only "a transition to a new order of things, far freer, more in harmony with the people [*folkelig*] and more human than we have seen for a long time, so that we may expect as genuine and blissful a peace as can be found in the realms of this world."

Grundtvig's New Year sermon in 1849 offers insight into his complex thoughts on history, society, humanity, freedom, justice, and divine providence. But it also expresses his personal perplexity at this watershed in Danish history and his own life. He was fully aware that Europe and Denmark had been utterly changed by the political and spiritual earthquake of 1848 and that a new age was dawning over his fatherland and people. But he was unsure about the implications. Against this background, passages of his sermon may be read as his dim vision of a prospective Denmark – a Denmark in the making but not yet clearly envisioned. Hence the discursive complexity of his sermon, in which elements from his thoughts and writings over the past twenty years are intertwined.[1]

Over the past decades, Grundtvig had adopted ideas from British liberalism, German idealism, and state theory as well as French and Italian political philosophy (Birkelund 2008; Grell 1988, 1992; Kaae 1986; Wåhlin 1989–90). He didn't fully subscribe to any one system of thought, probably because his deepest held convictions about the nature of liberty and the course of history were derived from his readings of the classical philosophers and the Bible (Birkelund 2008; Vind 1999). The New Year sermon reflects this complexity in its welding together of ideas of history, freedom, peoplehood, language, universal order, humanity, and citizenship in a rather idiosyncratic manner that causes confusion to those unfamiliar with his mind and habits of reading and writing.

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Space does not allow me to unravel and expound on the various threads, which have been dealt with thoroughly by others. Instead, what I intend to do in this chapter is to offer a reading of another seminal text from this period, "The Transition Period in Denmark" (1849), an essay in which Grundtvig reflects on his vision of the "New Denmark" and his own contribution to nation building. My purpose is to characterize Grundtvig as a cultural nationalist. My argument is that Grundtvig was a typical cultural nationalist in so far as he mediated between the traditional and modernizing forces of his own time and saw himself as a spiritual nation builder. In order to demonstrate this, I draw on Calhoun, Hroch, and Greenfeld but especially Hutchinson. My argument, then, is as follows.

As a member of the new Danish Parliament, Grundtvig saw it as his principal task to promote what he called "the Danish cause." Central to this was to "enlighten" the common people – that is, to make them conscious of the values of their language and their cultural heritage so that they might take part in the rule of Denmark. Fully aware that he was not a politician and that politics was predicated on pre-political values, he did not have and did not subscribe to any political program. His sole objective was to help prepare Denmark for a glorious future in which the vernacular and the culture of the rural population would be respected. This meant the end of a period that had been dominated by modernizing urban elites, who had distanced themselves from the people and who had been steeped in Franco-German culture. Central to Grundtvig's cultural program – and this is where a postcolonial theoretical element enters my argument – was his conviction that the modernizing elites represented a foreign element in Danish society. Denmark, therefore, had to be restored.

The chapter consists of three sections. In the first section I briefly address theories relevant to understanding how modernization processes affected nineteenth-century nationalist discourse. In the second and major section I read Grundtvig's essay "The Period of Transition in Denmark" in light of Hutchinson's theory. In the last section I place Grundtvig in a wider historical and geopolitical context and conclude that he should be seen as a cultural nationalist in an age of transition.

THEORIES OF CULTURE AND NATIONALISM

As some scholars have pointed out (e.g., O'Day 1998), the factors that Anthony D. Smith (1991) lists as preconditions of national identity – the

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existence of a historic homeland; common myths and historic memories; a common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties for all members; and, finally, a common economy with territorial mobility for members of the nation – do not arise at the same time. Nor do they always take the same form: their development and articulation are conditioned by particular political and social circumstances. Hence, in many of the old kingdoms of Europe, nation-building efforts may be traced hundreds of years back and should be seen as part of state building. Such kingdoms, I suggest, should therefore be distinguished from states that resulted from the fragmentation of empires and in which nation building was the product of nationalist movements and socially modernizing factors.

The followers of Ernest Gellner see nationalism as a product of modernization. So-called ethnosymbolists – the followers of Smith – agree that nationalism as an ideology is a modern phenomenon but argue that ideas of nationhood go back to the old kingdoms of Europe. A more controversial view, espoused by Liah Greenfeld (1992, 2006), sees modernization as a product of the rise of national awareness. Modern political nationalism thus presupposes pre-existing cultural and social identities. Greenfeld argues that, historically, the idea of the nation was always an effect of socio-political anomie; it took root among social groups who experienced a condition of "status inconsistency" in relation to elites, whether they be the aristocracy or colonial rulers. A related argument is found in Miroslav Hroch's (1968) account of the stages of nationalism. On the basis of his studies of the rise of nationalism in the empires of Central Europe, he shows how, in its first stage, nationalism took a cultural form prior to the rise of political movements. But since cultural nationalists lacked a political program, their ideas of nationhood did not have relevance to the mass population. It was not until socio-economic modernization made them relevant that they began to appeal to groups that found their social mobility hampered by existing social and political structures. In this context, the idea of the cultural nation became an instrument of political empowerment for marginalized groups in European empires who adopted the conviction that they were the legitimate inheritors of the homeland and that their own language, social values, and way of life were those of the true nation.

Cultural nationalism is a rather complex phenomenon, however, because it is connected to the process of modernization and the transition between traditional society and the values of modernity. Cultural nationalists would often use an emotional discourse characterized by a

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nostalgic yearning for an older and more traditional order, which had been violated by social change. But this should not be misread as a wish for social and political regression. Craig Calhoun (1997), emphasizing the discursive nature of nationalism, demonstrates how traditionalism, an ingredient of cultural nationalism, has frequently been a cover for rational political radicalism: the appeal to the tradition, language, and culture of the common people – usually the peasants – suggests that modernization caused by capitalist change threatened old social bonds and contracts. But it should not be seen as a rejection of new values and modernity as such (Calhoun 1983).

The celebration of allegedly authentic national values and traditions often reflected a resistance to the current political leadership and the way in which it administered social change. The discourse of "romantic nationalists" may thus sound irrational and motivated by fear of modernity and change, but it may, in real terms, express the demand of the rising farming middle class for a say in the governance of the new political order of their country. If change was perceived as coming from outside – from a dominant external and foreign power – this would not only make them turn towards political radicalism but also nationalism. It is in this context that N.F.S. Grundtvig should be seen: as a mediator between the values of two ages and as an intellectual who saw himself as one of the "friends" of farmers, who argued their case for membership in and moral leadership of the prospective Danish nation.

GRUNDTVIG IN BETWEEN TWO AGES

Grundtvig was fully aware of what British dominance had meant to Ireland, and he appears to have feared that Denmark might end up in a similar relation to Prussia. Like Irish nationalists, who argued that Ireland was suffering from British cultural dominance, Grundtvig was convinced that Danish culture was close to being extinguished by Germany and the "modern" culture it was imposing upon Denmark. In this section, I demonstrate this with special reference to "Overgangs-Tiden i Danmark" (The Transition Period in Denmark), an essay that Grundtvig published in *The Dane* in 1849.

Grundtvig began issuing his weekly journal, *The Dane*, from the very first week after the appointment of the new government on 22 March 1848, and he continued doing so over the following three years. It was to comprise 3,136 pages, mostly from Grundtvig's own hand. Grundtvig himself saw its purpose as saving "Danishness." He drew on

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his experiences and ideas from the public lectures he had given between 1838 and 1844. But he also used the journal to clarify thoughts that so far had been rather dim (not only to himself but also to others) about the nature of peoplehood and nationality, and the significance of expressing oneself in the vernacular (Lundgreen-Nielsen 1992). It was as a promoter of the mother tongue that, six months after the first issue, Grundtvig announced his candidacy for Parliament at a by-election in Præstø. His political candidacy was thus closely linked to his claim to be an interpreter of the peasant voice.

When Grundtvig decided to run for the election in his native town in November 1848, he did not see a strictly political role for himself. And he knew that many voters would wonder about it. "What will N.F.S. Grundtvig do in Parliament?" and "why did he want to be elected in Præstø and not Copenhagen where he had his home?" were the questions he was asked before the election. He admitted that he was driven neither by desire nor by honour. What he wanted was to represent "a Danish word in Parliament." The new assembly needed someone like him – someone who could and would, as he claimed, "dare" speak the language of the ordinary people. The very use of the term "Constitution" for "basic law" (*grundlov*) was, to Grundtvig, a dire forewarning of how a new dominant and paternalist "estate," consisting of public officials and their servants, threatened, first, to take power from the king; second, to limit the "Nordic spirit" of freedom; and third, to continue, with their abstract concepts and formal language (which he regarded as foreign to the true Danish nation), the repression of the ancient oral tradition of the common people. No matter the number of rights encoded in this Constitution, it would invariably lead to spiritual and cultural bondage. However "sensible" they might be, the new democratic institutions – general suffrage, an elected legislature, and responsible government – were inadequate guardians of the "popular spirit." This is because democracy presupposed "a common, progressive enlightenment about the conditions of human life in general and about the conditions of Danish popular life and the fatherland in particular." This kind of enlightenment, however, could only succeed if both "mouth and pen" were given unrestrained freedom. The "freedom of the word" depended on people's ability to speak their minds in their own mother tongue (Grundtvig 1848, 298–9).

The vernacular was thus vital to Grundtvig's "Danish cause." It was the vehicle of "enlightenment" and the "freedom of the [people's] heart," which was to put an end to the hegemony and paternalism of the state

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and replace it with the "hegemony of the people's spirit" (Grundtvig 1849, 323–4).

Grundtvig begins his essay by arguing that the "liberty of the word" – that is, freedom of expression – had been "tolerated" since the king's granting of a free constitution in March 1849. However, it had not been fully "admitted" (Grundtvig 1849, 322). Undoubtedly, liberty was the bright side of what had otherwise been an "excited, confused and turbulent time." But there was also a dark side: the remaining distrust in the beneficial effect of "the real freedom of the word" in the new national government and assembly (322). If this suspicion remained, he predicted, Danes would remain in chains, even if they succeeded in the ongoing war with the Germans. Only by granting freedom to the power of the "mouth and pen to express itself in the vernacular" would the "bewitchment" of "all the Nordic tribes, and especially the Danes" be lifted (323). Only through the vernacular could they be sufficiently enlightened about human life and the inner core of their life as a people to be able to rule their state. Grundtvig hoped, however, that the Danish people's deeply felt conviction of the need for this freedom would bring them through the transitional period "from death to life, from darkness to light, from night to day, from idleness to industry, from servitude to liberty, from caste system to equality in all public matters, and from secrecy to openness in all that concerns the interests of the whole and the common good!" (323). In other words, Grundtvig was worried that neither universal suffrage, nor eligibility, nor an elected assembly, nor responsible government would be enough in themselves to prevent the new system of rule from becoming the mere rule of the "raw and ignorant" masses. Even a form of responsible government, which could not be held "freely and [be] publicly accountable," would end up being carried out by "unconstitutional civil servants and paternalists of the worst and most dangerous kind" (324). However, if freedom of expression was granted, and if the people were spoken to in their own language, Grundtvig trusted that they would understand their own good and make the best out of the new conditions both in their private lives and in their roles of citizens.

To Grundtvig, "transition" was a universal phenomenon in human history – or the history of "Christendom," as he called it. It meant that history was passing from an "age of estates" to an "age of peoples." He saw this as "progress." But for progress to be achieved, it took more than electing a parliament: it took creating a people. As little as Rome could be built in one day, "as little can a whole people, even if it were born in one day, reach maturity at once" (Grundtvig 1849, 327). It required

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restoring the sense of peoplehood, which had been lost in the Middle Ages due to the rise of the three great estates: the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners. Grundtvig saw this rise as evidence of a Danish inferiority complex, which caused the Danes to imitate "Germans and other noble peoples" instead of trusting their own institutions and traditions (328). In Denmark – as in other parts of Europe – the estate system had made people forget their fatherland, their vernacular, and their ancient lore, indeed the very factors that constituted them as "a community with particular traits" and enabled to make "a common effort and perform great things" (329). In Denmark, where the higher estates were mostly made up of foreigners, freeholders, who had played a powerful role in medieval society, had been reduced to peasants.

As a result of social development – or "modernization," as we would call it today – new "artificial" estates had arisen and replaced the old ones: public officers, military men, businessmen – and in England also the "factory estate" – that is, industrialists ("but so far, thanks God, not in Denmark" Grundtvig [1849, 330] noted). He predicted that the old estates would ultimately disappear with the dawn of a society dominated by these new ones (e.g., officers of the army and state officers would replace the clergy). The new estates, he believed, gave no nourishment to society but, rather, appeared to lay it waste (e.g., the factory estate was "eating the soul out of people's lives" [Grudtvig 1849, 330]). So much greater was the danger of German dominance if Prussia were to win the war over the future state of the duchies, for Prussia represented the forces behind this development – the forces of modernization.

Defending Denmark against Germany was thus another way of defending the Danish vernacular and the values of the common people. Both threatened the dissolution of the kingdom and the end of the life of the people. When "the German will be our master," Danes will "in all likelihood only be allowed to speak Danish except in corners." Then they would have to accustom themselves to associating "popular" not with their own Danish "kind and inclination and sentiment" but, rather, with their "opposite" – namely, the "German," which was "foreign" and "inimical" (Grundtvig 1849, 331). If, on the other hand, Danes emerged victorious in the war for language and fatherland, the peoplehood of Danes would have "passed its test" and be able to sift the genuinely Danish from the foreign, including with regard to the "old estates." Furthermore, all the "un-Danish" aspects of the "new estates" – their "shopkeeper mentality" as well as their tyrannical and slavish elements – would be done away with without, however, forfeiting what might

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"serve to enlighten and straighten out Danish conditions, to protect and defend our Danish fatherland, or to promote and nourish any activity for the common good, which is beneficial in Denmark as well as in all other places" (321).

Grundtvig realized that this would require a new perception of the "people." Whereas the Danish word "people" used to be understood to refer, in a limited sense, to "the common people," it was wrong to speak of the new Parliament as though it were the embodiment of the people to whom all rights belonged. And even if the Danish people were defined as "all the estates and groups who feel and confess their commonality in birth and blood, mother tongue and fatherland, that is[,] all genuine Danes," it would be to no avail since no one would be able to tell "who they are and where they are." It would not say anything about their identity as a people. The only way they would grow into a people would be by drawing on – "pointing to" – the values and culture of the rural population. For, as Grundtvig (1849, 333) writes: "Our farmers descend from the people of old and know no other language than the mother language of the Danes." Since the farmers are "the only recognizable part of the population" that has preserved these qualities, "all the true friends of Denmark and Danishness, of fatherland and mother tongue are or ought to become decisive friends of the peasants."

The only problem was that, "although obviously the bottom layer of the Danish people and strength of the kingdom" and the potential "core around which all that pertains to peoplehood [should gather]," the farming estate had been neglected and abused for centuries by the dominating estates. For this reason, it approached the new system of government with a degree of ignorance that made it vulnerable to all kinds of new abuses. Besides, the peasants' grudge against the former estates might "tempt them to all kind of violence and justice." It was therefore important that they find "good friends among the more informed and educated compatriots" and that they have both "the humility and nobility of mind" to follow the "wise and well-intentioned advice" of such friends (Grundtvig 1849, 334). Of course, Grundtvig regarded himself as one of these friends.

As Grundtvig's essay demonstrates, in 1849 he was looking forward to the new age with both hope and trepidation. He was fully cognizant that Denmark – and the rest of Europe – stood on the verge of a new age, a modern age in which old social and economic structures would change and the former political regimes would be replaced by parliaments and constitutional governments responsible to the people, indeed, ruled by

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the people. The questions for him were, therefore: Who are the people? How can we avoid having the "new estates" take over the social and political power of the old estates and the monarch and thus bypass the people? What does it take to create a modern Denmark that reflects the identity and values of true Danish peoplehood?

Grundtvig's basic answer to these questions was that the social and political modernization of Denmark could only succeed if the social and cultural values of the Danish people – originating in a distant past characterized by freedom and social equality – were revived and made the basis of a new enlightened peoplehood in which individual liberty would serve the common good. For this to happen, the artificial, foreign culture that had been imposed on traditional society – with the effect of splitting people, marginalizing the farmers, and denigrating the vernacular – would have to be removed. What worried Grundtvig was that modernizing social forces might hinder Denmark's transition into the new "peoples' age." He identified these forces in the growing split between town and country, the increasing power of the centralized state bureaucracy, the formation of political parties based on social self-interests – and, not least, in the rationalism, materialism, and selfishness that he had castigated since his younger days. All these forces and social vices he regarded as foreign: as products of either French or German cultural dominance.

However, Grundtvig did not reject modernity as such; instead, he insisted upon the need to modernize Denmark on Danish terms. He saw it as his task to expound those terms. It was his task as a nation builder to make Danes masters in their own house by reminding them of their historical values and of the family-like character of their national community from time immemorial. This national community was not based on race; rather, it was a community bonded by loving devotion to fatherland and language, as he expressed it in his famous poem "*Folkeligt skal alt nu være*" (Everything will now have to be based on the people). Grundtvig was a traditionalist. But his traditionalism never took the anti-liberal character of much German nationalist thinking in this period. This may be explained not only as a result of his rejection of Fichte's ideas of German cultural and linguistic superiority but also as a result of his readings of Locke and his travels in England, which had convinced him of the virtues of Whiggish liberalism. And, not least, his Christian beliefs and his biblical view of the history of humankind prevented his philosophy of peoplehood from developing into an ethnocentric and quasi-religious nationalism.[2]

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CONCLUSION

I conclude that Grundtvig should be seen as a mediator between the patriotism of the eighteenth century and the nationalism of the nineteenth century (Böss 2013). He surely regarded himself as living in an age of transition – between old and new, tradition and modernity. In this role, he contributed to the forging of an alliance between the mostly politically conservative but economically liberal class of middle farmers and the liberal urban middle class. Indeed, he saw himself as one of the so-called friends of the people (who included the more informed and educated of his compatriots from whom he urged the farmers to take advice. And because they actually did, the popular movements led by these farmers – most importantly in the form of cooperatives and the Folk High School movement inspired by Grundtvig and his followers – became highly significant in the modernization of Danish society.

Grundtvig should thus be seen as a typical cultural nationalist, as defined by John Hutchinson, mediating between the traditional social order – dominated by the estates and politically ruled by the monarch – and a new, market-oriented and increasingly more democratic order. Aware of the dangers of this social and political transition, Grundtvig warned against the social malaise and splits that modernization involved. He was also concerned that Denmark's new Constitution might lead either to mass rule or to the rule of the new privileged classes for their own gain. His solution was to recreate a lost sense of peoplehood and to replace the existing society of estates with a people's society characterized by freedom, equality, and the sense of a common good.

In *Zones of Conflict*, Hutchinson (2005) points out that nineteenth-century cultural nationalists were not always successful in reconciling the opposing interests of their own society. In many cases cultural nationalism not only led to social integration but also created "zones of conflict" and open division, especially in ethnically diverse and politically composite states. This was also what happened in the Kingdom of Denmark, and Grundtvig's campaign for Danishness – regardless of its alleged gentle and peaceful character – certainly added fire to the plan of the National Liberals to force the Germans living in the duchies into a Danish nation-state. Hence, his reconstructed concept of peoplehood should be understood within a larger geopolitical context. It demonstrates how new ideas and changing power relations in Europe not only made empires crumble but also sent intellectuals to the barricades to

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defend pre-political and premodern identities, which they saw as the moral core of the prospective nation-state.

NOTES

1 I concur with Tine Damsholt's and Vagn Wåhlin's interpretations (drawing on Lorenz Rerup) of Grundtvig's political development since the early 1830s. See, for example, Damsholt (1995); Rerup (1992); Wåhlin (1994).
2 Helge Grell, among many others, explains Grundtvig's rejection of nationalism as a product of his Christian faith and historical view.

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