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'Det Ny fra Thy': Historical Innovation in a Peripheral Place

by Poul Houe

I

When we say in English that a certain innovation "takes place"—or in Danish: finder sted, which means literally, "finds place"—both linguistic idioms, "takes" or "finds" place, suggest that the role of place is not accidental. This is obviously pivotal in geography, but also in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and a host of cultural studies, sometimes in the form of "mental geography." Recent Danish book titles suggest as much: Dan Ringgaard's Stedssans (Sense of Place), Anne-Marie Mai's Hvor litteraturen finder sted (Where literature Takes Place) in 3 volumes, and Ringgaard & Mai's anthology Sted (Place).

In what is to follow, I venture to be both more and less ambitious than these book-length trendsetters. While I limit my scope to a small place in the northwest Jutland landscape of Thy, where I grew up, I submit that three consecutive stories of innovation, issuing from this puny location, offer a window on major shifts within nineteenth-century Danish culture as a whole. It may seem a tall order to suggest that pivotal traits of Danish democracy were existed in embryo in the periphery of the country decades before they manifested themselves in Copenhagen, yet the evidence, at which I can only hint here, is considerable.

II

Malthe Conrad Bruun was born 1775 in Thisted (the town where I attended middle and high school), from which his father, a district revenue officer of the absolute kingdom, in 1783 moved his family to Ulstrup, a manor five miles southwest of Thisted that he had recently purchased, and where Malthe was raised until the age of fifteen, when he left for studies in Copenhagen. (My paternal grandfather bought Ulstrup in 1912, when my own father was twelve.) After a brief stint in law school, Malthe skipped university to become a journalist, poet, and literary critic. During the first half of the 1790s he published extensively on aesthetic and political matters in Copenhagen papers
and journals and became increasingly enmeshed in the public debates and controversies over the French revolution that reverberated even in placid Denmark's capital.

His youthful revolutionary fervor conflicted with the views of his royalist civil-servant father, who was lord of Ulstrup manor and its many copyholds, but soon his loudmouthed output elicited more serious opposition. Especially the calls made by Malthe and others for unrestricted freedom of the press did not sit well with the powers that be, and as the government increasingly targeted such outspoken critics with lawsuits and censorship, young Malthe Bruun had to take refuge twice in southern Sweden before being exiled from Denmark for good.

Thus ended the first part of his life, and a voice of displeasure with Danish absolutism that might have facilitated more substantive calls for democracy in the new century went silent. Like other early critics of the ruling system, Bruun's democratic leanings were temperamental and tempestuous, more in the abstract mode of the late Enlightenment than in the rhetorical style of popular awakenings. Yet his early experiences as berated gadfly and self-taught public intellectual stood him in good stead as he embarked on a new career abroad.

Malthe Bruun went to Paris and changed his name to Malte-Brun. Although merely a stateless resident, just being in the land of Robespierre fueled his revolutionary spirit, if only until Napoleon took the revolution hostage and set out to conquer Europe. At this point the Danish expatriate and once-disorderly hothead, whose writings now filled Parisian outlets, turned imperial, and after Waterloo even became a royalist with a vengeance. While this seems more the trajectory of a sellout than a democratic reformer, post-revolutionary Malte-Brun made innovations that prove otherwise. He founded the scientific discipline of geography in France, previously a domain so neglected in the nation's intellectual life that while Napoleon was conquering a plethora of foreign lands, the people of France had little idea of where to find their nation's new possessions on a map.

As a college dropout, Malte-Brun was an unlikely founder of an academic discipline, yet there was consensus, both among his peers in France and among European geographers more generally, that he was more than a first among equals. Impressively erudite, he also was a gifted gatherer of eyewitness accounts from travelers as well as other
forms of plausible information about the most obscure parts of the world. In part, this was the work of a born journalist, but also that of an intellectually curious thinker with an insatiable appetite for new insights, discriminating judgment, and organizational talents to boot. His Tableau de Pologne, ancienne et moderne (Scenes of Poland, Old and New, 1807) was a singular tour de force, while the work of his life, Précis de la Géographie universelle (Outline of a Universal Geography), was more than an individual achievement. Its first volume was published in 1810, and by the time of Bruun’s death in 1826, five additional volumes, all penned by him, had appeared, while two additional tomes, chiefly on Europe and authored by others, followed in 1828 and 1829.

Malte-Brun simultaneously contributed tirelessly to leading French journals and newspapers with journalism, art reviews, political commentary, and yes, geography, not to mention co-founding and managing the French Société de Géographie (Geographic Society). In personal and artistic respects, he could be a lightweight wildcat, but his capacity for innovation still commands respect. The reasons are several, as not least Per Stig Møller has shown. But the one I wish to highlight takes us back to Malte-Brun’s early democratic bent. By most accounts, his geographical writings were considered scientifically sound, if not superior, according to the academic standards of the time. But their pedagogical and reader-friendly compositions and style, so obviously crafted by a self-taught scholar and journalist, make them stand out to this day.¹ A holistic mix of Romantic and Rationalist, he wanted “to show the world” (cf. Bredal’s title)—who he, Malte-Brun, was, but also to “show the world” to its people,² a timely endeavor that foreshadowed future democratic discourse.³

In 1826, Malte-Brun was eventually given permission to return to Denmark, but he never managed to see his native land again, as he died before year’s end. Yet his nostalgia for his homeland was undiminished—for Jutland and its dialect, indeed for Thy and Ulstrup, whose “every house, every cow-house, every barn, every hill and pond and creek” he remembered after decades in Paris.⁴ A cosmopolitan, yet in exile, a citizen of nowhere, yet mentally rooted somewhere, his very identity was an innovation that was later to become commonplace.
Some three miles from Ulstrup lies Snedsted, where I was born and first went to school. From 1812 to 1848 its parsonage was the site of one of Denmark's first training colleges. The very first was in Copenhagen, but as the rural majority did not appreciate the haughty manners of urban graduates who came to teach in their communities, a desire to train new teachers in rural settings was on the rise.

The pioneering parsonage college in Snedsted opened not long before 1814, the year when "numerous agrarian economic reforms were ... crowned by two Education Acts," which "introduced better municipal primary schools and independent schools for children in rural areas all over Denmark," i.e., compulsory education for every Dane. From the get-go, this college was part of a sweeping reform movement, outside of Danish urban culture and contributing to "the gradual emergence in the nineteenth century of a free, independent and enlightened peasantry."^5

Snedsted's first principal, pastor N.C.L. Bentzon, who presided from 1812-30, was a typical eighteenth-century theological rationalist, whose efforts at innovation were far removed from both pulpit and lectern. Instead, he—and later some of his students—served as catalyst for new agricultural practices, notably spearheading the planting of hedgerows to shelter farmland from the onslaught of the area's devastating sandstorms. Bentzon's gospel seems to have been that "man cannot live on words alone, he needs bread," and so the material well-being of the community topped his agenda, be it as vicar or college principal.^6

His successor from 1830 to 1842 was of a very different stamp. P.G. Brammer was a respected pedagogue and widely published theologian, who went on to become a bishop in the state church. In contrast to Bentzon, he was quite a child of the nineteenth century and in tune with its movers and shakers, notably N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), whose followers were beginning to cause a stir throughout the Danish countryside. Grundtvig's emphasis on the living word, as opposed to stale bookish learning, and on being "human first, Christian second," called upon educators and ministers alike to take notice of the natural state of the common people and their children and not to rely upon received knowledge and doctrines.
Brammer's training college was Christian in its ideology, but Socratic in its emphasis on orality; without shunning pedagogical clarity and planning, its teaching mode was improvisational, tending to both the needs of heart and brain of the future teachers. Such didactic schemes owed as much to the Swiss pedagogue Pestalozzi as they did to Grundtvig. Brammer’s attempt to balance his audience’s spiritual awakening and rebirth with an orderly preliminary in the requisite subjects of history and psychology set him apart not only from Grundtvig himself, but from the “godly assemblies” that were spreading like a wildfire of populist revivalism in Grundtvig’s name.

Brammer was fully aware of this, but remained an academic church authority, who refused to yield his intellectual integrity to grass-roots fervor. This makes him transitional, caught between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, somewhat like Malthe Bruun before him, though more in the sense of a Christian educator trying to translate marked cultural changes in the nation into new pedagogical practices, all the while refusing to surrender institutional paradigms lock, stock, and barrel to the sectarian whims and excesses of a popular upheaval.

Such reservations did not burden his, and indeed Snedsted Training College’s, most famous pupil, Christen Kold, who was born to a shoemaker in Thisted, a stone’s throw from where Malthe Bruun had been born. Much like Bruun, Kold was one of a kind, but unlike Bruun, he came from modest circumstances and was anything but a sellout, indeed he remained committed throughout his life to the same pedagogical mission that began with his training at Snedsted 1834-36. Some tensions between him and Brammer, his principal, developed over precisely the Grundtvigian godly assemblies, whose practice and growing influence Kold embraced and whole-heartedly supported, eventually with Grundtvig’s forceful approval. This stance limited Kold’s career opportunities in the Danish public schools and drove him to start his own free and folk schools, where Grundtvig’s idea of turning Denmark’s rural majority of common people into able and conscious agents of a fledgling grass-roots type democracy was put to the test, which in many ways it passed with flying colors. Kold, who passed away at 54, is not only the practical founder of the Danish folk school, but a pivotal figure in the history of nineteenth-century Danish democracy.

After Brammer’s departure from Snedsted in 1843, the position as vicar and training college principal went to L.C. Müller, who served
there until 1848, when the college was relocated to Ranum (still with Müller at the helm). For all his intellectual acumen, this former teacher and tutor of Hans Christian Andersen, Søren Kierkegaard, and Grundtvig's sons, was a rather forgettable principal. Intellectually on Brammer's wavelength, but without his pedagogical interest and administrative skills, Müller mostly pursued his own agenda as a learned philologist and historian. A committed Danish national, he was widely respected, and blessed by Grundtvig himself, for his contributions to the rise of cultural literacy in the general population—but his stewardship of the training of teachers in Snedsted was less remarkable.

IV

Another stone's throw from the birthplaces of Malthe Bruun and Christen Kold sits a statue of yet a third icon of Thisted, H.C. Sonne (1817-80), rural dean of Thisted Church and a pillar of support for its poorest population. His way of combining these two roles was his claim to fame. He, too, understood that man does not live by words alone and saw it as his spiritual calling to improve the material life of the needy by organizing them around a co-op, an aid-to-self-aid organization, the success of which, beginning in 1866, would in turn enhance its members' civil, moral, and religious self-respect.

Inspired not least by a British model, Denmark's first brugsforening, called Thisted Arbejderforening, marked the start of an enduring Danish movement, andelsbevægelsen—with co-ops specialized in dairy processing, slaughtering, egg production, banking, etc.—which spread rapidly for half a century, somewhat in tandem with the folk school movement. The latter had a spiritual and the former a material emphasis, but ideologically they were joined at the hip in advancing local self-government and Danish democracy in the nineteenth century. While co-op members benefited in proportion to their investments, they all had equal voting power, and well into the twentieth century some 40-45 percent of all Danes participated in one type of co-op or another.

Finally, one last stone's throw from Malthe Bruun's birthplace on Storegade stands the house where J.P. Jacobsen (1847-85), the most famous person from Thisted, was born. One of his country's greatest writers, he was also central to the modern breakthrough in
Scandinavian literature, ushered in around 1870 by the critic Georg Brandes. Jacobsen not only stood out as its foremost artist; in many ways his modernism exceeded the movement's realistic scope and inspired and impacted leading European artists in the twentieth century, such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Stefan George, Herman Hesse, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gottfried Benn, and Arnold Schönberg. 9

Meanwhile, the religious dimension that was integral to the other Thisted innovators mentioned above had vanished. Jacobsen's principal novel, *Niels Lyhne*, ends with its eponymous character dying in defiance of God. Its artistic naturalism was grounded in science, which is perhaps unsurprising since Jacobsen was Darwin's translator into Danish. Moreover, his formative years, marked with impressions of nature, botany in particular, can be traced to Thy, a landscape to which he maintained deep emotional bonds, as Malthe Bruun did to parts of the same area. Afflicted with tuberculosis, Jacobsen spent much of his adult life as an invalid in his hometown and here expressed "an interest in the fate of his fellow-townsmen." 10 Through the legacy of Jacobsen's artistic originality, some of Bruun's innovations around 1800 continued to reverberate in Danish society and culture more than one hundred years later.

**V**

Why did all this "Ny" (newness) originate in Thy? I have no simple answer. But a look at the map shows a landscape situated between the North Sea and Limfjorden, with barren sand dunes along the west coast and fertile farmland to the east. Pastor Bentzon's hedgerows were to protect the latter against the sandstorms of the former. Demographically, these landscape features pitted poorer population segments in the west against wealthier yeoman farmers in the east—with Thisted as a middle ground. Similarly, while Thy did sustain manor houses, like Malthe Bruun's Ulstrup, they were both smaller, fewer, and farther between than the manors of most other places.

These proportions may have been conducive to the innovations that took place in Thy. It was not a place for a young revolutionary Malthe, but if the aristocratic leanings of his father were a repellent, Ulstrup manor was no less a magnet for the nostalgia of the royalist turncoat in his Parisian exile. Snedsted, the adjacent site on this
Danish periphery, met with the rural need for teachers trained far away from bourgeois Copenhagen; and as a place where, to use Grundtvig’s famous phrase, “few had too much and fewer too little,” Thy provided an ideal recruitment basis, both for the school itself and for the Grundtvigian godly movements more broadly that swept the area and attracted students like Kold. As for Pastor Sonne’s co-op in Thisted, its members were obviously not well-to-do, but without a segment of farmers in surrounding areas that were, its economic situation would have been unsustainable.

Is a spillover effect from these innovations noticeable in today’s socio-economic environment? Time and again, entrepreneurs complain that Denmark is not the place to start an innovative business, and a team of politicians and business people recently expressed fear that “we might be heading for a Denmark that doesn’t have a significant production and manufacturing industry.” These may seem concerns about innovation of a different sort than I have traced to nineteenth-century Thy. But even there and then, before globalization became the new normal, global circumstances could be decisive. They drove Malthe Bruun abroad and attracted from abroad the inducement for Pastor Sonne, though in both cases against the backdrop of a specific Danish place and its socio-cultural makeup. It’s worth noting, therefore, that Marianne Jelved, Denmark’s current Minister for Culture, just returned from spending a week at a folk school in the tradition of Christen Kold, praising this venue for once having “raised the educational level for very many young people and created a gigantic transformation, which lifted Denmark out of a crisis and gave it a shared identity.” Now, when Denmark’s first movers are no longer yeoman farmers, but have joined a greater international community, she declared, these “folk schools must be better at reinventing themselves for the global age.”

What the minister means to say here is not entirely clear, though. Is she calling for measures to preserve the integrity of valid innovations of the past in new globalized circumstances? To ensure that the umbilical cord between the present and “det Ny fra Thy” remains uncut? This would be consistent with how Richard Wolff, in a recent interview with Bill Moyers, challenged global capitalism’s “destructive power” with the same kind of co-op ideology that saw the light of day in Thy 150 years ago.
But one could also suspect a different intention behind Ms. Jelved's statement. The historian Henrik Jensen recently lamented how, after World War II, we in the West "senselessly got onboard the driverless train of globalization and invested civilization in technology." Is this more sinister cultural outcome what the folk schools, say, are heading for? To get onboard the train of globalization at all costs, including that of shedding innovations that are not strictly technological? Another historian, of Danish rural culture over the last 150 years, concludes an interview about his work on the subject by noting a disquieting quiet in rural areas today. These places have lost their soul—and inasmuch as the innovations they once embraced were integral to this soul, there is reason to fear that they, significantly, may have the future behind them.16

Notes

1 Bjørn Bredal, Manden der ville vise verden: Malthe Conrad Bruun & Malte-Brun (København: Gyldendal, 2011), 284; most of the biographical on Bruun included in my text has been culled from this volume.

2 Ibid., 350.

3 Ibid., 222.

4 Ibid., 371, 378.


7 Rochdale, the world’s first co-op (outside Manchester), 1844. "Brugsforening," Leksikon for det 21. århundrede (most recently updated 05/01/03), http://www.leksikon.org/art.php?n=4745.


10 Elsebeth Birkeland, En miskendt thybo: Malthe Conrad Bruun Liv og
Levned (Thisted: Sparekassen Thy, 1982), 73.


16 Jesper Vind, “Da landet havde en sjæl,” Weekendavisen (Berlingske), December 20, 2013. The article is an interview with Ove Korsgaard on the occasion of his publication of Solskin for det sorte muld—om slægt og folk (København: Gyldendal, 2013); for a review of this book, see Rune Engelbreth Larsen, “Personligt gravskrift over landbokulturen,” Politiken/Bøger, January 4, 2014. That said, permit me, for the sake of illustration, to end this essay on a more personal note. A resident of Thy throughout his long life, my recently deceased brother-in-law was a farmer turned paint shop owner (with his store next to J.P. Jacobsen’s birthplace in Thisted), and privately an amateur painter and sculptor and an inquisitive, self-taught jack of many hobbies, intrigued by mechanics and new techniques. He modestly prided himself on being the second resident of Thy to erect a modern windmill, which decades ago was more than a piece of new technology (that ever since has put its mark more visibly on the landscape of Thy than on any other region of Denmark); it was equally a source of political controversy, and even friends and family members considered the mill a sign of its owner flirting with the dubious greens and reds of the time. Altogether, this unusual common man epitomized “Det Ny fra Thy” in many ways, but not least the way in which its innovative spirit has historically interlaced practical and technical dexterity with grass-roots independence and informed self-reliance.