

# The upper hand

## The eviction at the Youth House in Copenhagen

**Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen**

**A**round seven o'clock in the morning on 1 March, Danish police stormed the Youth House at Jagtvej 69 in Copenhagen. Helicopters dropped police onto the roof of the building while others were lifted in small containers to the top windows, gaining access by breaking a hole in the front wall at the fourth floor. Before entering the house, the police filled it with tear gas. The thirty-six people sleeping in the house were arrested. The action caught the activists by surprise and the spectacular entrance quickly escalated into confrontations with police in the streets around the house.

Within a few hours, young people started building barricades by pushing dumpsters into the street. The police who tried to remove them were met with stones. At around five o'clock that afternoon thousands went into the streets and fighting broke out with the police as protesters set cars on fire and tried to take over the streets of Nørrebro, the surrounding neighbourhood. More and more young people joined the demonstrations, which spread to Christianshavn, where the free city Christiania is located. Cars were burned and barricades were set up faster than the police could remove them. For three days the streets of Copenhagen were filled with angry young people protesting the eviction of the Youth House. Nonviolent demonstrations, as well as violent clashes with the police and the trashing of a high school, disturbed the peace of Denmark's wealthy capital. Police from all over the country were sent to Copenhagen and help was even requested from Sweden. Although there have been more violent clashes between police and activists in Copenhagen, in the 1980s and 1990s, the current situation is more dramatic since it involves such a large section of Danish youth, frustrated with the direction in which Danish society has been heading for the last decade or more. The police have not hesitated in their response and almost 700 people were arrested in the first three days of the disturbances.

### **Danish national democracy**

Neither the anger nor the repression came out of the blue. Since the elections in November 2001, the Danish political system has developed a particular combination of democracy, racism and chauvinism that we might term national-democratic authenticity – totalitarianism. This ideology of Danish nationalism, comprising a cultivation of authenticity and hatred of foreigners, has been promoted with great force by the right-wing government of Anders Fogh Rasmussen. After assuming power, Fogh Rasmussen launched the so-called 'battle of culture' that targeted both left-wing culture and Muslims as destructive forces in Danish society. This campaign against foreigners may seem strange, as Denmark is the least mixed country in the Western world, with very limited immigration and severe immigration laws – even before they were strengthened in 2001. But because politics in Denmark has been reduced to a question of authenticity, the very idea of a multicultural society has become a threat. The challenge of

globalization has been met with entrenchment. The Muhammad cartoons epitomized what has become a cultural crusade against Muslim migrants. The cartoons were not at all about free speech; they were yet another attempt by the right-wing newspaper *Jyllands Posten* to demonize Muslims. (See Heiko Henkel, 'The Journalists of the *Jyllands Posten* are a Bunch of Reactionary Provocateurs', *RP* 137.) The handling, or rather mishandling, of the affair by the Danish prime minister was symbolic of an attitude towards foreigners that perceives them as unwilling to 'integrate' into Danish society.

Cultural heterogeneity and cosmopolitan sensibility are not options for a minority government that depends on the support of the explicitly racist Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party). In 1998 the Dansk Folkeparti gained thirteen seats in parliament after a campaign based exclusively on hatred of foreigners. This situation forced not only the other right-wing parties but also the then Social Democratic government to react. The Social Democrats chose to enter the fight for racist votes and tightened immigration rules several times after June 1998. Several Danish newspapers, among them *Ekstra Bladet* and *BT*, helped pave the way for this development by publishing 'exposures' of migrants' 'misuse' of the Danish social security system.

With the 'state of war' proclaimed by the US president after 9/11 whereby the question of global inequality between rich and poor countries was transformed into a war against 'terror', racism was finally legitimized in Denmark. Fogh Rasmussen's right-wing party won the 2001 election and became the party of government, supported by Dansk Folkeparti, which received 12 per cent of the votes. Unlike in France where it was possible to isolate Le Pen's Front National, Dansk Folkeparti participated in the new right-wing government's programme. Of crucial importance in this programme were new restrictions on immigration, making it extremely difficult to acquire asylum in Denmark. But the defence of the West against Muslim immigration was just one component of the new government's politics. Another consisted in siding with George W. Bush and his war on terror. The Danish government has been there right next to Bush and Blair all the way, invading Afghanistan and then Iraq. Danish troops have taken part in operations in both countries.

The xenophobic campaign against Muslims was accompanied by an attack on everything seemingly left-wing in Danish political culture. According to the government, the country is in need of a cleansing of old left-wing and '68ers' ideas that threaten to destroy the Danish community in favour of a multicultural society. To an unprecedented



extent, the government has tried to put pressure on a number of public institutions, such as state television and the universities, demanding that they distance themselves from dangerous '68ist currents. Former employees from state television have reported a drastic increase in attempts to shape or influence programmes, and the university system is currently going through a transformation in which corporate ideas are replacing the notions of *Bildung* and autonomy. Funding for schools and hospitals is also being reduced. In this situation, where the government is making a thoroughgoing attempt to make a particular Danish neo-conservatism hegemonic, the Youth House and Christiania have been a thorn in its side. Each in their own way, the two places have somehow been able to create alternative communities with different values.

### **From Zetkin, Luxemburg and Lenin to Einstürzende Neubauten**

The Youth House represents a lifestyle in complete opposition to the one the government is promoting. The House dates back to 1897, when it was called the People's House, and it has played an important role in the history of the working class, not only in Denmark but internationally. It was here that the German Social Democrat Clara Zetkin declared 8 March an International Women's Day of Struggle. Zetkin's ally in the German Social Democratic party, Rosa Luxemburg, gave a speech in the house, as did Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin. In 1918 the house was the centre of a large demonstration against unemployment when Danish anarchists stormed the Stock Exchange. After the Second World War it was mainly unions and working-class organizations that used the house. It was abandoned in the 1960s and bought by a supermarket chain that wanted to demolish the building, but because of its historical significance the council did not allow this. A folk music ensemble used the building for a few years. Finally, in 1980, the municipality of Copenhagen acquired the house, but it remained empty.

In 1981 a group of autonomists squatted the building demanding a youth house.

The house was raided a couple of times but on each occasion the activists reoccupied the building. In the end, the Social Democratic mayor, Egon Weidekamp, decided to hand over the house to a group of squatters. Since then there have been conflicts with the authorities and several politicians have voiced regrets about giving the house to 'youngsters'.

In the 1980s and 1990s the Youth House was the scene of the Danish underground. Punk rock and anarchism flourished there and musicians like Björk and Einstürzende Neubauten played before they were famous. A variety of cultural activities took place and the building also housed a popular kitchen. Young people who did not fit in could hang out and live life beyond the demands of their parents and Danish society, experimenting with music and politics outside the confines of the music industry and the party structure. The Youth House's importance also stemmed from the

fact that the cost of living in Copenhagen has risen sky-high in the last two decades, making it difficult for young people to live in the city. There are very few cultural opportunities for young people in Copenhagen apart from very pricey bars, cafés and clubs. In short, the Youth House represented an alternative.



In 1999 the municipality of Copenhagen decided to sell the House. As one member of Dansk Folkeparti put it: 'I am sick and tired of hearing about this Youth House, so let's settle the matter right now, let's tear it down and erase it completely.' Very few buyers showed any interest. One of the few who did was a right-wing Christian sect called Faderhuset (the Father House). It was initially turned down by the municipality as 'insincere'. But through a bizarre turn of events, Faderhuset managed to buy the



house after all, using a middleman, in 2000. Since then the sect has insisted on getting the young people out. According to Faderhuset, it is involved in a battle against ungodly elements – Muslims and homosexuals – and the acquisition of the Youth House is an attempt to drive away sinners. The council supported the sect and criminalized the most vibrant cultural scene in the city. Although the users had been given the house, back in 1982, there was nothing they could do – the politicians handed the matter over to the police. Court cases and various protests did not settle the matter and the scene was set for the events that took place at the beginning of March.

### **The beginning or the end?**

On 5 March bulldozers and a huge hydraulic excavator moved in to tear down the Youth House at Jagtvej 69. Under heavy police protection, masked workers set about removing every visible sign of the house, even painting over the graffiti on adjoining houses.

Since the demolition of the house, the site has been renamed 'Ground 69' and has been the location for a number of actions. On Saturday 17 March, protesters managed to drop more than 10 tonnes of earth on the site, creating a garden with flowers and trees. All over the city people have tried to win back public space. Several thousand streets have been 'renamed' Jagtvej, not only in Copenhagen but throughout Denmark. Students from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art tried to transform their building into the Royal Danish Youth House, placing a huge banner on the front of the building. In each case, the police have tried to silence protesters by making wholesale arrests. The young woman who produced fake street signs with the name 'Jagtvej' has been arrested and charged with public disturbance under the Terror Act. There have been several instances of police brutality, random arrests and illegal searches. It seems the authorities are hell-bent on destroying the last enclaves of free space in Copenhagen. But the protesters are part of Danish society and remain so even if they are jailed.

The acts of violent protest are not the biggest stupidity. The government and local authorities have refused to enter into a dialogue with the protesters. They are denying the existence of the problem, and trying to eject the protesters from the national political community. According to politicians of both Left and Right, we are confronted with the unreasonable acts of thirteen-year-olds who have not received a proper upbringing from their parents. There is no political problem: the kids are badly brought up, that's it. Moreover, it is supposedly not a Danish problem, since, according to the politicians, the most violent protesters are all foreigners from either Sweden or Germany.

It is difficult to say whether the young protesters will be able to keep voicing their resistance. But as the municipal council of Copenhagen is pushing to 'normalize' Christiania, we have not seen the last confrontation. A broad spectrum of young people refuses the aggressive policies of cultural uniformity sweeping across Denmark and the world. Danish involvement in the war in Iraq has certainly destabilized the political system, even if it is not possible to point to a viable protest movement, able to undertake a thoroughgoing critique of the ruling powers. Right now, reaction has the upper hand.

# radical philosophy conference **materials+materialisms**

Saturday 12 May 2007

Clore Centre, Birkbeck College, London WC1

9.30–10.00	Registration	
10.00–10.15	Introduction	
10.15–11.30	Plenary 1	<b>Divorcing Materiality From Physicality</b> Isabelle Stengers (Free University of Brussels)
11.45–1.00	Panel sessions	
	Panel 1	<b>Materials of Science and Nanotechnology</b> ROOM B01 'The Inorganic Open: Nanotechnology and Physical Being', Nathan Brown (University of California, Los Angeles) 'Nano-technoscience and the Promise of Matter', Ben Anderson (University of Durham)
	Panel 2	<b>Materialities of Sex</b> ROOM G01 'The Incomplete Materialism of French Materialist Feminism', Alison Stone (University of Lancaster) 'Sexual Materialism: Firestone Revisited', Stella Sandford (Middlesex University)
	Panel 3	<b>After Cultural Materialism</b> ROOM G02 'A Cultural Critique of Cultural Studies', Freee (Dave Beech, Mel Jordan, Andy Hewitt) 'The Pig in the Bath: New Materialisms and Cultural Studies', Michelle Henning (University of the West of England)
1.00–2.15	Lunch	
2.15–3.30	Panel sessions	
	Panel 4	<b>Art and Immaterial Labour</b> ROOM B01 'Art in the Age of Biopolitical Production', Stewart Martin (Middlesex University) 'From Sochaux to Belmar: Grey Labour', Liam Gillick (artist, London and New York)
	Panel 5	<b>Materialism in French Philosophy</b> ROOM G01 'The Production of Subjectivity: Towards a Political Anthropology of the Present', Jason Read (University of Southern Maine) 'French Marxism and the Problem of Agency', Nina Power (Roehampton University)
	Panel 6	<b>Building Materials</b> ROOM G02 'Clouds of Architecture', Mark Dorrian (University of Edinburgh) 'Writing Materials: Matter, Form and the Architectural Specification', Katie Lloyd Thomas (Middlesex University)
3.45–5.00	Plenary 2	<b>The Matter of Knowledge</b> Iain Boal (Retort, California)

£15/students £8

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