Everything Changes

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Greenland

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Das ALPS Alpines Museum der Schweiz in Bern existiert seit 1905. Seit 1934 ist es eine nationale Institution. Bund, Kanton Bern und der Schweizer Alpen-Club tragen bis heute die Basisfinanzierung. Seit 2012 positioniert sich das ALPS als zeitgenössisches Ausstellungshaus, seit 2019 zusätzlich als Netzwerk für das alpine Kulturerbe. Seine Themen sind Fragen der Gegenwart wie Identität, Mobilität, Raumentwicklung, Innovation und Wandel. Im Kern geht es um das gelebte Verhältnis der Menschen zu den Bergen – in der Schweiz und im Rest der Welt. Das Alpine Museum arbeitet projektbezogen. Es recherchiert, sammelt, dokumentiert und inszeniert. Es zeigt Ausstellungen, macht Veranstaltungen, bereitet Wissen für Schulen und Erwachsene auf und kooperiert themenbezogen mit Partnern in der Schweiz und im Ausland.

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Greenland, Denmark and the Colonial Legacy
The Belief in Exceptionalism Has No Future
Ebbe Volquardsen

At the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024, the Danish pavilion had a premiere: for the first time, works by a Greenlandic artist were shown, pictures by photographer Inuuteq Storch. At the same time, the Danish National Bank asked the public to vote on the motifs for a new series of banknotes. Among the options was a portrait of Arnarulunnguaq, a member of the indigenous Inughuit people of northern Greenland. Arnarulunnguaq had participated in the Fifth Thule Expedition, which traveled from Greenland to Alaska via northern Canada between 1921 and 1924 and documented for the first time the kinship and historical migration routes of all Inuit in the region around the North Pole. However, a male-centered historiography had relegated Arnarulunnguaq to the role of a shy assistant to Danish polar explorer Knud Rasmussen.

Both recent events are expressions of the same trend: Greenlanders are increasingly representing Danish institutions, be it symbolically or quite concretely. Gradually and without much fanfare, official Denmark is thus positioning itself as the post-colonial federal state that it has de facto been since 1979, the year in which Greenland, a Danish colony from 1721 to 1953 and then a county, received home rule.

It is fitting that Greenlandic has recently become a working language in the Copenhagen parliament. To make her Danish colleagues aware of the linguistic challenges that are part of everyday life for many Greenlanders, 90 percent of whom identify as indigenous Inuit, Aki-Matilda Høegh-Dam, one of the two Greenlandic members of parliament, gave a speech in her mother tongue. This was initially criticized as a provocation, but Høegh-Dam was able to convince the speaker's office to allow Greenlandic contributions in the future and to provide members of parliament with funds for translation. In the end, Høegh-Dam even won an award – for the best Danish (!) speech of the year.

Everyone Should Become Danish

The last time Denmark saw itself as a multi-ethnic and multilingual state was at least 150 years ago: until the mid-19th century, the Scandinavian monarchy was a medium-sized empire with colonies in the North Atlantic, South Asia, West Africa and the Caribbean. Norway, the present-day German state of Schleswig-Holstein, and Iceland were also part of the so-called unitary state. With the gradual loss of these territories, Denmark changed its self-image and increasingly saw itself as an ethnically homogeneous nation-state, a development that now fills many feet of shelf space with historical research.

Greenland, the last remaining colony, was incorporated into the state as a formally equal county in 1953. Paradoxically, however, many Greenlanders experienced the following development as the real beginning of colonial rule: Danish Greenland policy in the post-war decades aimed to assimilate the indigenous population into a European way of life and, as it was sometimes said, to make them "North Danes". This was done not only to give the United Nations, which demanded decolonization and self-determination, the impression that Danes and Greenlanders were one and the same people because of centuries of cultural contact. The measures also corresponded to the enforced Danish self-image of an ethnically homogeneous and socially progressive cultural nation. Ethnic conflicts and violent independence struggles, it was thought, could

be fought elsewhere. Greenlanders would soon realize what a privilege it was to be Danish, to be a citizen of one of the richest countries in the world, with a welfare system that was the envy of many.

This assumption has been proven wrong. In recent years, the systematic nature of the state interference to which Greenlanders have been subjected during the decades of assimilation policies has become more and more apparent. Similarities with the treatment of the Aborigines in Australia, the Māori in New Zealand or the First Nations in Canada cannot be overlooked.

When Greenlandic art is shown in Danish exhibitions, Greenlandic people are depicted on Danish banknotes, and Greenlandic speeches are made in the Danish parliament, the Danish state is making an unprecedented commitment to the multi-ethnic character of the post-colonial union that Denmark proper forms together with Greenland and the Faroe Islands. At the same time, it is distancing itself from the misguided assimilation policies of the post-war decades, which aimed to hide or eradicate cultural and linguistic diversity. But the enforced revival of a unitary identity also evokes memories of imperialist times, when the monarchy saw itself as a multiethnic state whose subjects lived on four continents and spoke a variety of languages.

The Union is up for Debate

The reactions in Greenland to the efforts of Danish institutions to strengthen the union with Greenland through a more respectful image are correspondingly ambivalent. While the public has largely responded positively to symbolic events such as the awarding of prizes to Greenlandic artists, sportsmen and politicians and, most recently, the visit of the new Danish royal couple, a majority in Greenland wants far more than a contemporary facelift: a new form of cooperation should replace the union with Denmark, allowing Greenland to become a sovereign state without completely severing its ties with Copenhagen.

In 2023, a government commission in Nuuk presented a draft constitution for sovereign Greenland. In the spring of 2024, the parliament also decided by a large majority to examine the conditions for activating Article 21 of the Self-Government Act, a step that would lead to the start of concrete negotiations on Greenland's formal separation from the Danish state. One of the options under discussion is a free association agreement based on the model of some post-colonial island states in the Pacific. Just a few years ago, such ideas were dismissed as pipe dreams.

The future of the Union is being debated on both sides of the North Atlantic, with clear differences in objectives. In Copenhagen, there now seems to be an understanding that a prosperous relationship with the former colony requires a more respectful coexistence and a more inclusive state identity. In this sense, efforts are being made to improve relations with Greenland. But this commitment comes rather late, as not a few in Nuuk believe that the time has come to take a further step towards state autonomy and to dissolve the union with Denmark in its current form. To understand the complex dynamics on both sides, it is helpful to look at some of the political developments in recent years. What they all have in common is that they represent a gradual departure from the idea of colonial exceptionalism.

The term stands for a political ideology that portrayed Danish colonialism - compared to the behavior of other European empires in their colonies - as

a more benevolent, humane, if not harmless endeavor. Like the other Scandinavian countries, Denmark saw itself as an exception in the modern world: an exceptionally peaceful, charitable society, an unparalleled embodiment of solidary, egalitarian, and progressive politics. The North was considered the "good West," and for countries like Denmark this ideal became a national self-image, even though Scandinavians were also involved in colonial exploitation, the transatlantic enslavement trade, and the oppression of ethnic minorities.

Should Greenland Be Grateful?

In fact, it often seems that a self-image shaped by this exceptionalist thinking stands in the way of a reorientation of Danish-Greenlandic relations. It is also difficult to overcome because all colonial projects, not just the Danish one, were legitimized by a belief in moral and cultural superiority: the colonizers saw themselves as on a civilizing mission. In the Danish case, exceptionalist thinking also served to maintain the idea of a welfare state based on equality and human rights, even if one's own colonial history contradicted these values.

Consequently, to point out the ideological nature of exceptionalism is to touch the core of Danish national identity. For this reason, the mere mention of colonialism and racism is sometimes enough to provoke an indignant defensive reflex in the majority society. Even if certain policies later turned out to be wrong, they were undertaken with the best of intentions, is the recurring argument. It places the intentions of the executants above the experiences of those affected, making it difficult for Greenlanders to participate equally in the critical reappraisal of their own history.

In particular, Denmark's annual half-billion-dollar subsidy to Greenland's budget, which keeps the country dependent, has often been seen as an altruistic donation. In this way, Greenland's growing demands for autonomy and reparations for injustices during and after the colonial period have been interpreted in Denmark as a lack of gratitude, and many unpleasant discussions have thus been nipped in the bud.

None other than then US President Donald Trump took the wind out of the sails of such arguments. In 2019, he offered Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen to buy Greenland. Although the offer disregarded the Greenlanders' right to self-determination and was immediately rejected, it made clear what American interests in Greenland were and are. It is the Northwest Passage through the Arctic, which is opening because of global warming, shortening the sea route between Europe and Asia by five thousand kilometers. In addition, Greenland has the rare earths that are so important to the electronics industry and the energy transition, and that are likely to become scarce in the US because of the trade war with China. Finally, the strategic location of the US air base at Pituffik (known as Thule Air Base until 2023) in northern Greenland is becoming increasingly important, especially as Russia and China step up their activities in the Arctic.

Decolonizing a Legend

As a result, Trump's move forced Denmark to recognize that its annual payments to Nuuk should not be viewed as a well-intentioned donation, but as the market value of what nations are willing to pay for a military and commercial presence in Greenland. It turns out that Denmark pays comparatively little to secure its geopolitical position: a realization that challenges the old narratives of good-natured Danes and ungrateful Greenlanders and allows Greenlanders

to enter future negotiations on further steps toward autonomy with greater confidence.

June 21, 2020, will also be unforgotten. On the eve of Greenland's national holiday, unknown activists poured red paint over the statue of missionary Hans Egede, which stands over the historic port of Nuuk, and drew the call to “Decolonize” and patterns of traditional Inuit tattoos, once banned by the church but recently revived, on the base of the monument. It was Egede who initiated the colonization of Greenland in 1721. He turned to the Inuit only because he could not find any descendants of medieval Scandinavian settlers whom he wanted to convert from Catholicism to Protestantism, is the story, both comical and easily disproved, that popular historiography reproduces to this day. It gives the colonization an unplanned, innocent character: another variant of colonial exceptionalism.

The events at the Egede statue could easily have been ignored, had they not coincided with global movements such as “Rhodes Must Fall” and “Black Lives Matter”. They thus sparked a debate that continues to this day on the mental aspects of decolonization. In Greenland, where the indigenous population has achieved a comparatively high degree of political self-determination, decolonization has long been equated with the formal process towards self-government and further political autonomy. Conversely, discussions of the more subtle mechanisms that perpetuate colonial structures have remained taboo, as have calls to overcome internalized colonial mindsets and intergenerational traumas. These debates now seem to have reached critical mass, not least due to the pressure of a globally networked youth.

It is therefore perhaps more than a coincidence that in 2021 the psychologist Naja Lyberth for the first time publicly expressed the suspicion that what had happened to her as a young girl in Greenland might have been systematic. Lyberth had been fitted with a contraceptive IUD without her or her parents' consent. Investigations by the Danish Broadcasting Company revealed that between 1960 and 1991, when Denmark was responsible for the health system, at least 4,500 young Greenlanders - half of all women of child-bearing age - were affected by such measures. What thousands of women had carried around with them for decades as a personal traumatic burden, unaware of the true extent of the scandal, now turned out to be a state-mandated program.

The goal was to reduce population growth in Greenland, and the procedures were already a violation of women's human rights in the 1960s, resulting not only in a lost generation of Greenlanders, but also in a widespread and potentially fatal skepticism toward the health system. Since 2023, a commission of experts appointed by the governments of Greenland and Denmark has been working to clear up the scandal. But many of the women, some of whom are now elderly, do not want to wait for the report's outcome. They have sued the Danish state for damages.

This is the path that many victims of the assimilation policy have recently taken, including the “legally fatherless” and Greenlanders affected by questionable adoption practices. Children born out of wedlock, whose fathers often came from Denmark, were not allowed to identify and inherit from their biological father until the 1970s. During this period hundreds of children were also adopted to Denmark without their biological Greenlandic parents being informed of the implications of this step. In Greenlandic society, the term “adoption” had a different meaning; families with many children often placed their

offspring in the temporary care of relatives or childless acquaintances, without ruling out the possibility of reuniting the family later.

The Paradox of Integration

After the Danish government saw no reason to participate in a reconciliation commission initiated by Greenland in 2013, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen traveled to Nuuk in 2022 to officially apologize to the survivors of the 1951 "experiment." This is the internationally best-known case of assimilation policy: a group of children were forcibly sent to Denmark and permanently separated from their families to make them future achievers through a Danish education. In 2022, in line with the narrative of colonial exceptionalism, this was still largely portrayed as an unfortunate exception to an otherwise successful modernization policy.

But only two years later, not least in the wake of the revelations about the IUD and adoption scandals, it appears as just one of many examples of a socio-political system in which most Greenlanders who grew up in the post-war period experienced disenfranchisement, involuntary resettlement and abuse at the hands of the authorities. The fact that this has now become clear to the government in Copenhagen is demonstrated by its participation in a major research commission that is to deal with all the measures of Danish Greenland policy that still have an effect today. The aim of the historical review, according to the government paper, is "reconciliation", although it remains somewhat unclear what this means.

It has long been known in Greenland that the disenfranchisement and interference of the past continues to have an impact today, even if the subject was somewhat taboo until recently. Meanwhile, the gradual disillusionment with the exceptionalist narrative seems to be leading some Danes into a "postcolonial melancholia". Sociologist Paul Gilroy used this term to describe the nostalgic longing for times of less conflict and the sense of sadness at the loss of status and power in post-imperial societies. Danish-Greenlandic relations have never been as bad as they are today, one can sometimes read in the Danish press. But insights from integration research show that there is also something positive in this finding. In a widely acclaimed study, the German sociologist Aladin El-Mafaalani describes the paradoxical situation in which progress in the integration of minorities in a society initially leads to more conflict and tension. This can be explained as follows: improved participation and social mobility raise the expectations of the groups concerned and make them more visible in society.

Turning Away from Exceptionalism

Within the Danish state, Greenlanders have recently become more visible and vocal, whether in the cultural scene, in the successful demand to rename a Danish popsicle with the word "Eskimo" in its name, which is perceived as racist, or in the legal struggle against assaults and injustices that many have experienced firsthand. If Denmark is serious about reinventing the Union as an equal post-colonial federation, conflicts and tensions will continue to grow for the foreseeable future. This is because only a decisive departure from colonial exceptionalism - the cherished narrative of Denmark as a selfless, if not always infallible, companion on Greenland's path to modernity - holds the promise of a sustainable relationship with the former colony.

The government offices in Copenhagen are also aware that this aligns with the country's economic and geopolitical interests. However, the shift towards more uncomfortable and contradictory historical narratives will continue to meet with resistance. For Greenlanders, on the other hand, such a paradigm shift means that they would finally receive testimonial justice as contemporary witnesses. Their long-standing perception of many political decisions as wrong, unjust and violent would finally be recognized. This could give them the opportunity to make peace with their history and take control of shaping their own future.

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