

# Something smells bad in Denmark

Via [Contrahegemonía](#)

A mythical aura emanates from the postcards that come into the world from Denmark: strong welfare state, free and competitive market, the happiest country in the world. These almost utopian images were immortalized by Netflix when it brought us Borgen. However, the anti-immigration consensus that encompasses the entire Danish political spectrum shows that the European conservative wave is also flooding the continent's more progressive shores. From Aarhus, a chronicle of life in postmodern "ghettos."

Denmark is often portrayed as a country in harmony, where ideologies are long dead. Seductive to global left and right, it always appears in the world's top 3 rankings for well-being, market freedom, happiness and social equality. "The Scandinavian is the future," an Argentine journalist who wrote a laudatory article about the Netflix Danish production Borgen in a national newspaper told Crisis. Borgen (pronounced "Bowen" and referring to the headquarters of government), which ended in 2013 and which Netflix distributed worldwide in 2020, is part of the postcards of that welfare state where even "politics" works well.

But the Nordic exception to the ups and downs of a continent in turmoil is only one of the myths associated with the northern country. The migration crisis that exploded in 2015 came to test this and many other legends, and today there are hardly any dissenting voices left for a categorically anti-immigration stance. In Borgen, the Prime Minister, Brigitte Nyborg, left her party in protest of this stance. The same is not true in a country where there is a government list of ghettos, but also a list of already approved projects with an

exact date for their suppression.

## **Living outside**

When I arrange a visit to see my apartment in the city of Aarhus, Denmark, I have no idea what I am getting myself into. My Danish friend Simon asks me how the search for my new home is going. I reply that the neighborhood is called Brabrand, that it is a good price for a room, and that I will be living with a 50-year-old Dane; finally, I show him the address on the map. "You're in Gellerup? That's a ghetto, Agustina!" he replies, and the expression alarms me.

Later I would learn that Brabrand is actually a neighborhood of large white houses and mansions, which have extended their domain into the ghetto by municipal order. The former area called Gellerup gradually erased its name: schools, kindergartens, and clubs once had that name changed in an attempt to remove itself from association with one of the "problem neighborhoods." However, due to Argentina's political stubbornness, I still call it Gellerup, since I live there.

In 2010 ghetto stopped being a pejorative term with historical significance to become a government classification. Today, for the government, a ghetto is a neighborhood where the proportion of immigrants and non-Western descendants exceeds 50%. These areas must also have high unemployment, a conviction rate three times higher than the national average, and low income levels or low levels of education. Currently, 15 neighborhoods across the country are considered ghettos.

The list is renewed each year in a media event that everyone watches and no one wants to be on. In 2019, the company that owns Bispeparken housing in Copenhagen sent its employees to knock on doors and ask migrant residents if they had any university degrees that had not been validated with the authorities. They needed 17 people with degrees to avoid being considered a "hard ghetto," that is, a neighborhood that

remains on the critical list for more than five consecutive years. They got 22 and escaped. There are other strategies: some rental agencies ask “college students or graduates” or even “high net worth individuals” to populate the ghetto apartments so that they are not one.

## **The move**

My first sensations when I enter the ghetto are to gratefully detach myself from the perfect bubble of the city. I like to say that Denmark is like a very big country. But this is different. Towards the horizon, I see how some giant cement blocks rise up and I think this is my destiny. I confirm this when I see something unusual in the local landscape: a tuk tuk (also called a mototaxi in some large Latin American capitals) driving along the bike path, which is completely out of place. I go inside. As far as the eye can see, there are apartment complexes. They were built in the 1970s by workers from Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco, and the former Yugoslavia. They were planned as an affordable, modern residential village: home to more than six thousand people, inspired by the precepts of Le Corbusier. Bright apartments at the cutting edge of the time, with solid, user-friendly materials, with large green spaces and a self-sustaining biomass heating system. But in the 1980s this housing complex suffered an unexpected rebound effect from the oil crisis: the balconies were filled with migrants and refugees from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia, for whom the government allocated cheap housing.

Sheets and bedspreads are spread out on the balconies and I can smell spices cooking at mid-day; also the smell of dirt and urine fumes, huddled in the corners of some spaces.

## **Ghetto Law**

When in February 2018 the then Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen presented the plan One Denmark Without Parallel

Societies, and declared, "The very essence of Denmark is under threat, and therefore it is necessary to put an end to the idea that everyone in Denmark should be treated equally." The plan, proposed by the previous center-right government but pushed forward by the current center-left coalition, includes an article stipulating that if certain crimes are committed in such "enhanced punishment zones," penalties can be doubled.

In addition, from their first birthday, "ghetto children" are required to attend a special kindergarten for 25 hours a week to be educated in "Danish values." Says the official website: "During the time in kindergarten, your child should have developed his or her ability to speak Danish and have learned Danish traditions and holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, Constitution Day and the Lent season, as well as the norms and values of Denmark."

But that's not all: the Ghetto Law also stipulates that there can be no more than 40 percent social housing by 2030. "A Ghetto-free Denmark by 2030" is another of the slogans with which this package of laws is promoted. This means that in Vollsrose, a ghetto in Copenhagen, 1,000 houses will have to be demolished. In Gellerup, in the city of Aarhus, where I live, about 400 fewer people are stipulated. In other vulnerable neighborhoods, they will be sold and turned into property for private investors. This will naturally lead to higher rents and the dismantling of these communities, which the government calls "parallel societies."

The plan has provoked criticism from United Nations human rights experts. And the residents of the ghettos have been organized and have sued the state. In Copenhagen's Nørrebro, among streets as full of security cameras as they are of cultural centers, residents pasted posters with their pictures all over the neighborhood with the slogan "No to the Ghetto Law: We are a mixed neighborhood. In Gellerup, a banner flies "No to demolition" in perfect Danish.

## **Parallel lives**

It is a holiday, but the bazaar in Gellerup does not close for that or anything else unless it is Monday. The large shed is a unique place to shop, and as close as you can get to a market in most of the country. The smells rise and stagnate in the humidity of the Danish climate: there are falafel, kebab, samosas, kepis, fire grills. There are piles of vegetables that you could not find in any supermarket: cassava, green bananas, passion fruit, apricots, figs, and every imaginable variety of date.

The men smoke and argue loudly. They make their deals, bargaining; a few matrons do their shopping wrapped in their big dark clothes, gloomily. The shadow of a blue burqa turns the corner and surprises me: it is forbidden in this country to cover your face with the veil. But this is a liberated space. There are drugs of poor quality, if you ask the right way. There are spices and food from all over the world, especially from the East. There is furniture, rugs, and housewares, things you would never see in the minimalism of a Danish home. And there is also fashion on display: shiny hair accessories, niqabs in various colors, and even Louis Vuitton imitations. Although I only see men in traditional attire on wedding days in the ghetto, women and girls wear their hijab naturally, every day, all the time. Some do, some don't, even if they walk together. I like to play at imagining the reasons why some wear robes and others just veils, why some wear purple and others black, why one is sleeping in her pink hijab while another plays with her free curls. It may depend on how religious their families are, whether they are Somali, Libyan, Syrian, Afghani, whether or not they feel freedom of choice out there. I wonder what will happen inside.

## **Westerners and Christians**

In 2019, immigrants and descendants of immigrants from non-Western countries accounted for 8.9% of the country's 5.8

million inhabitants. This term – “non-Western” – forms the raw material from which the ghetto classification is made, but for the government it is very heterogeneous. “In Denmark we have no problems with people from Latin America or the Far East. We have problems with people from the Middle East and North Africa,” said Integration and Immigration Minister Mattias Tesfaye, who wants to stop lumping all migrants into the same bag and be more precise in the pyramid of state discrimination.

“They are afraid of the Muslim identity,” says Salam (37) in crisis dialogue. She fled Syria in 2015 and knew nothing about Denmark. She wanted to get to Sweden because, from her life between bombs and prison, she imagined that there she would have the full guarantee of stability and freedom: the dream realm of well-being.

Mohammed, for his part, tells us that he arrived in Denmark in 2015 from Turkey, buying a stolen passport for \$10,000; he is convinced that this is the price he paid for freedom. But freedom has its nuances: he wants to change his name because he knows that if his identity stops sounding like a Muslim name, he will have a 50% better chance of being hired. He dreams of going back to work as a graphic designer, the profession he chose in Syria, a country that no longer exists for him.

According to Danish integration narratives, any immigrant in Denmark must face two sides of the same coin: a Danish future or a Muslim past. Salam points out, “I will never become part of life here, but I do what I have to do.” While some immigrants resist integration or accept it with resignation, others run after it.

## **The Uprising**

Today is Constitution Day, a public holiday. Red and white flags are flying in avenues all over the city, but not here.

In the rest of the country it is a day devoted entirely to politics: the Queen makes her speech, officials and party leaders debate the state of the government. But here in Gellerup, it's a normal afternoon. The summer sun forces people out onto the sidewalks, and women – only women – make the rounds of the beach chairs and chat while children run around. Their faces are distinguished by the fabrics: the older women wear chadors, the younger ones choose the niqab. They smoke shisha throughout the afternoon. Flowers grow in summer all over the ghetto park, up to a meter high, in all their colors. The architectural landscape has changed a lot since my arrival. The government's plan is implementing its improvements: they have installed courts and playgrounds; they have broken up and built new apartments, where real estate developers intend to invite more Danes to live, betting on gentrification; they have set up a gym station that lasted three weeks standing before it was vandalized; they have made winding concrete paths; some are so absurd that people cut paths and mark their own in the middle of the flowers; they have broken the darkness of the long nights in the neighborhood by installing vibrant colored lights over the streets and buildings. I guess the rich choose things for the poor that they themselves would never use.

Around 4 o'clock, the rumblings of the street force us to get up. Some residents of the neighborhood are expecting an unwanted visitor, with pyrotechnics and fire as weapons. We go out onto the balconies to see what is happening on the outskirts of the neighborhood. People huddle and run. A politician named Rasmus Paludan has chosen as his platform the most problematic corner of the city for him: the Gellerup Gate, the entrance to the ghetto. Paludan and the supporters of his party (called the Stram Kurs) know they are not welcome. The man, blond and plump, carries a reputation that requires him to wear a bulletproof vest and has permanent police protection. In the turmoil, a man of Lebanese origin, surrounded by television cameras, wields a knife and threatens

to kill him. The attacker is a Muslim and one of the thousands that the war has brought to the Viking lands. With the knife in his hand and his eyes fixed on Paludan, he can only shout "Allahu akbar," until a police bullet hits him in the leg.

Then the place has turned into a pitched battle. On one side are the flags, the TV cameras, the police and Paludan; in front of them are the vociferous ghetto groups, mostly young men, who barricade the street and throw stones and flying cannons at the police, a spectacle that makes us shout from our balconies for several hours.

This is not the first time this disaster has been orchestrated. A few months ago, Paludan passed through Nørrebro, the largest ghetto in Copenhagen. On a street corner, he burned a copy of the Koran and broadcast it on Facebook. The event sparked riots, because if one thing is clear, it is that migrant identities will not stand by and watch their fates on their cell phones. At that time, Paludan received a shower of stones and a young Syrian man ended up in jail.

Paludan wants to ban Islam, deport Muslims, and imprison foreigners in a detention center in Greenland. In 2019 these ideas made it onto the general election ballot, although the lawyer did not make it into Borgen: he got 1.8 percent of the vote, below the electoral threshold of 2 percent. But Paludan is only the most extravagant representative of these ideas; apart from this political figure – who far surpasses the bellicose Svend Åge Saltum, leader of the far right in Borgen – perhaps the most striking thing in everyday life is that the parties in power, regardless of ideological affiliation, invariably implement the spirit of these controversial and media-friendly proposals. And sometimes they even exceed it.

### **Series of Changes**

Borgen protagonist Birgitte Nyborg is said to have predicted



Mette Frederiksen, the first woman to be elected Danish Prime Minister, nine years in advance. But Nyborg and Frederiksen are not so similar. "We believe that we live in a multi-ethnic society, so it is a waste of time to discuss how to avoid it," says the fictional Nyborg. For Frederiksen, the real one, Europe is "too liberal" with its immigration policy, mass immigration "is a problem," and after taking office, she called for the closure of all Muslim schools in the country.

The center-left coalition that is now in the real Borgen has not even taken the cosmetic precaution that the same political force had in the 2011-2015 period, when it changed the name of the ghetto list to the more friendly "vulnerable areas list." The Social Democratic vote also supported laws that confiscate the property of incoming refugees and ban the Islamic veil. In September 2019, Frederiksen was given a new title of "Minister of Immigration." The goal was to improve diplomatic channels for asylum seekers to go to other countries. And he succeeded: in 2020 only 1,547 people applied for asylum in Denmark, the lowest number since 1998. But the figure is far from the goal of the prime minister, who said in January 2021 that she wants her country to receive "zero" refugees.

"In 2019, it was clear: whoever said the worst or the most restrictive thing about immigrants would win the election," recalls Ole Ellekrog, a journalist specializing in housing issues, in dialogue with Crisis. "It's a race to the bottom, a race to the right," he summarizes.

The political parties are the expression of an important part of Danish society, which does not escape the authoritarian tendencies embracing a growing territory of Europe, especially since the migration wave of 2015. Perhaps the deepest origin lies, as sociologist Jasna Balorda of the University of Liverpool points out, in the erosion of the myth that Danes are most proud of, whatever their political orientation: their welfare state. The myth persists, even though the economic crisis of 2008 was the perfect excuse to accelerate the

neoliberal reforms started in 2002 as a consequence of the country's entry into the European Union and the weakening of the trade unions: the length of time someone can enjoy unemployment insurance has been reduced from four to two years, the average retirement age has been raised, and access to various benefits has been restricted. At the same time, the rhetoric has changed: according to Balorda, it has shifted from a universal system of guaranteeing citizens' rights to a "coercive, authoritarian, neoliberal" system that "aims to discipline and punish if certain criteria are not met." According to political scientist Jørgen Goul Andersen, this has created a new social class: the indigent poor who do not "deserve" state assistance, an ethnic category for immigrants, but now encompassing more and more Danes.

### **Euroskeptic country**

"The state spends too much money protecting people like Paludan, the police should be there for more important things," complains Anne Marie, my Danish colleague in the ghetto. At 51, she is banking on the neighborhood's low rents and hopes that the rest of the Danes will discover the benefits of integration. Her expressions follow progressive public opinion: the point is not to control these speeches, the point is that they are expensive for the state and here "taxes are not paid to protect violent politicians."

The lights of the patrol cars are still reflected in the windows. What Constitution Day left behind is a permanent police guard, as the ghetto youth demonstrate by burning garbage cans and cars, in a caravan of eternal horns that plays at dodging the police all night long.

As in much of the world, it is the far-right parties that are best able to explain and exploit the feeling of lack of protection, with one difference in Denmark: here they maintain a favorable position towards state assistance, which allows them to present themselves as defenders of blue-collar

workers, the precarious and pensioners, while at the same time maintaining authoritarian positions towards immigrants, multiculturalism, and Islamism. Migrants are thus constructed as enemies of Danish values not only in terms of their religion and culture, but also as a threat to the welfare state, the most Danish of values. The criticism that "Muslim men don't let their wives work," so often heard in the country, is not only a demand of liberal feminism, but also a demand for productivity from a community that is seen as a parasite on a state that should in the first instance take care of its own state. "The prime minister and her elitist friends want to help the poor in Africa. But what about the poor in Denmark?" asks an opposition senator in an episode of Borgen. Disputed by Nyborg in the series, in real life these ideas were quickly absorbed by Prime Minister Fredericksen: "The price of deregulated globalization, mass immigration and free movement of labor is paid by the lower classes."

Something mythical emanates from the postcards arriving in the world from Denmark: a strong welfare state, a free and competitive market, the happiest country in the world. These almost utopian images were immortalized by Netflix when it brought us Borgen. In parallel, we inhabit a world that is increasingly frightening. A world that Eurosceptic Denmark sometimes seems to want no part of.