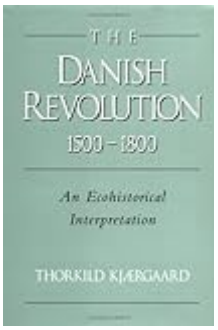
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Thorkild Kjaergaard. *The Danish Revolution, 1500-1800: An Ecohistorical Interpretation.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xii + 314 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-44267-1.

Reviewed by Deborah Fink (H-Rural)

Published on H-Rural (February, 1998)

A chapter on modern Danish history would typically begin in the second half of the eighteenth century, when Denmark was stagnating under the weight of an archaic feudal system. Most of the land was held by nobility, whose estates were worked by peasants. The majority of these peasants lived in small villages, from which they collectively farmed surrounding land. This land was also owned by the nobility, but it was assigned to peasants to work for their own subsistence. Under a law termed the stavnsbaand, working aged men were forbidden to leave the estates of their birth until completing military service, which for most meant that they were tied to their birthplaces for life. With no individual motivation, farming was sloppy: Yields were poor, pastures over-grazed, cattle diseased. The mood of the country matched the gray Danish sky.

But progressive currents emerged in the late 1700s, producing agrarian reforms that transformed the country. By the terms of these reforms, individuals were able to consolidate the strips of land, previously farmed collectively, into separate farms and to convert these farms to private ownership. The stavnsbaand was lifted, giving people the right of free movement. With this turn toward private ownership and individual initiative, peasants became family farmers, the backbone of the enlightened and affluent democracy that today is held in awe by shell-shocked American sojourners, as well as by many proud Danes and by rural developers from around the world.

An imposing community of Danish scholars has crafted this consensus through social, economic, and political studies produced with great care and reverence for the material. Now Thorkild Kjaergaard, an accomplished historian from within the fold, has collided with the consensus with his book, *The Danish Revolution, 1500-1800: An Ecohistorical Interpretation*, published in Danish in 1991.

As Kjaergaard constructs his argument, independent farmers were not the force behind the economic recovery; they were its beneficiaries. Far from being the solution to the problem, private farm ownership was a drag on the system. It required an expensive infrastructure, it promoted wasteful over-investment in individual farm operations, it furthered forest degradation, and it factored in inordinate considerations of capital and speculation. "Agrarian reforms have been a millstone round Danish society's neck for two hundred years," declares Kjaergaard (p. 251).

How does Kjaergaard know that? Through an ecological analysis indicating that the definitive economic turnaround occurred, or was well in progress, before the

agrarian reforms. Moreover, the critical timeframe was not from 1750 to 1850, the period usually thought to encompass the transition to a constitutional monarchy, but the period from 1500 to 1800, during which Denmark experienced and recovered from an ecological crisis triggered by population growth and excessive military expenditures by the state–not by the decentralized feudal political system.

According to Kjaergaard, the Danish crown implemented a profligate use of wood in building up its navy, thereby shrinking the forests which a growing population depended on for fuel and building materials. Forest depletion caused blowing sand and dust which reconfigured the landscape, exacerbating drainage problems on the soggy Danish land, causing soil to acidify. Fields were lost to production, bringing increasing pressures on remaining productive land, declining crop yields, and overgrazing of pastures. In the 1740s, weakened Danish cattle herds suffered a wave of cattle plague.

Responding to the crisis, and led by practices begun on estates, the peasantry undertook the intensely labor-craving work of forest conservation, building drainage systems, and marling soil. Imported iron and coal relieved the run on trees. The introduction of domesticated clover, which fixed nitrogen in the soil and improved the quality of pastures, was a cornerstone of agricultural recovery. Then, taking advantage of an expanding international grain market, peasant farmers allied with the crown to legislatively overturn the power of the local aristocracy and to reap their profits individually rather than collectively.

The nobility were clearly losers as the crown increased its power and the new Danish farmers looked to the king rather than local aristocracy. But the relatively large estates of the nobility have survived as an innovative segment of Danish agriculture. The more tragic losers were the many smallholders and cotters who forfeited customary grazing rights and other subsistence prerogatives held within the collective village farming pattern. In fact, these persons outnumbered the farmers who gained independent lands with the reforms, a detail previously noted by historian Fridlev Skrubbeltrang. Moreover, Danish laws protected and benefitted farmers to the detriment of smallholders and laborers. Nonlanded persons rendered a large part of the vastly expanded labor needs of the new agricultural system but reaped only a small share of its rewards. Political maneuvering, not justice, carried the day.

Kjaergaard's ecological methodology represents a clean break with the 1980s Foucauldian focus on texts. Where Foucault refused to differentiate between science and ideology, Kjaergaard comes down squarely in favor of science, asserting that existing Danish understandings are wrong, having been formed under the influence of the erroneous "farmer line" in Danish history. The landscape that most Danes believe to have been ancient, for example, is actually the product of a recent ecological shift. Further, this ecological shift is what shaped their history, whether Danes believe it or not.

Kjaergaard draws on the work of Danish economist Ester Boserup, whose widely referenced book, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*, lays out a theory of population growth underlying the process of agricultural intensification. Unfortunately, this is a weak and reductionist use of ecological method. Population growth does not in fact "force" the adoption of labor intensive methods of agriculture. Population pressure may be caused by a number of factors and may trigger a variety of responses. While agricultural intensification is a possible response to population pressure, a population might also resort to new patterns of birth control and growth stabilization; it might engage in outward expansion or warfare; it might persist with chronic over-population, disease and starvation. Ethnographic examples exist of each of these adaptations, and there may be yet other possibilities. However valuable an ecological framework may be for expanding the discipline of history, it is simplistic if it leaves no space for historical specificity.

Predictably, criticisms of *The Danish Revolution* have been extensive and pointed. These are based on matters of fact as well as interpretation. Notwithstanding the attacks, the book presents a challenge to historians by drawing forward a new complex of considerations. Academic divisions, which separate hard sciences (biology), soft sciences (sociology, demography), and unscientific humanities (history) do a disservice if they blind us to interconnections. Going outside the fold is stretching one's neck on the chopping block and asking for the ax to drop. This book is brave in a climate where caution reigns. Even with its wrinkles, the boundary-breaking scholarship opens intriguing questions for investigation and fine-tuning.

The Danish writer Peter Heeg has said that history is a set of facts that we connect with our fairy tales. We can and do argue over specific facts, but usually these arguments have endpoints. More significantly, we argue about how facts are connected. To some extent, we must accept that for historical events we cannot precisely de-

termine causes and motives; and few historians understand how scientific method can be used to further understanding, to temper ignorance. Beyond the use or rejection of scientific method, broader, political questions remain concerning the domain of facts that belong on the table. Creative work done with new domains of knowledge, on the boundaries of disciplines, teases and enrages scholars. Once in a while it opens new ground. *The Danish Revolution* has this potential.

In this spirit, I submit that facts about gender also belong on this table. *The Danish Revolution* is innocent of any but the most superficial engagement of gender scholarship, although virtually all of its variables have critical gender dimensions. Population increase is closely tied to some of what women do. I wanted to know about the way that women regulated fertility, the role of women as healers, how women exchanged information, and women's economic choices relating to marriage and family. The increase of the military has gender implications in that the military was a totally male domain that enhanced male power and claimed a disproportionate share of resources off the top. Population growth and military growth are not simply natural facts; they are historically specific conditions that are tied to nature but are also contingent on a range of cultural, economic and political threads. The impressive work of Danish gender historians might well be integrated into theories of Danish history.

The Danish Revolution is about today as much as about the 1500-1800 period, because history shapes the way we see ourselves and our possibilities. Like all history, this book is written in a distinct political and social climate that differs from that of the period under examination. Even in Denmark, alarms sound when anyone questions the sanctity of private property–and most of all the sanctity of the family farm. How do we rescue the debate from the ideological domain and subject it to empirical scrutiny?=20 With ecological analysis, Kjaergaard offers one way. =20

Citation: Deborah Fink. Review of Kjaergaard, Thorkild, *The Danish Revolution, 1500-1800: An Ecohistorical Interpretation*. H-Rural, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1736