

Book review of Schmidt, G. 2021. *Den første ghetto* [The first ghetto]. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag. 100 pp



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BOOK REVIEW

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In her book, *Den første ghetto*, Professor Garbi Schmidt gives a concentrated historical view of how immigrants came to Denmark and how they settled in Danish cities. Moreover, it describes how the public viewed new groups of immigrants, their religious customs and behaviour, their tendency to settle down in certain parts of the cities, and what kinds of political actions were taken against them. The book also looks at how their food and other goods influenced Danish society, especially through new kinds of restaurants.

The stories of different historical groups of immigrants, such as Jews, Dutch peasants and craftsmen and Germans are told, including why they came to Denmark and how they were treated by the authorities. Furthermore, there is a short description of how public views and policies towards immigrants and their settlement have developed in Denmark during the last 50 years. The subject of the book is enriched with stories on specific events and newspaper stories that illuminate the messages put forward.

Some of the immigrants originally came because the king wanted them to make a special contribution to Danish society. This includes, among others, Dutch craftsmen, who were imported to the City of Elsinore to help with the king's building projects in the 14th and 15th centuries, and peasants who settled on the island Amager to produce vegetables for the king's kitchen (30). These groups of immigrants were given certain privileges at first, but were later met with some restrictions, especially concerning their religious practices. They were also allowed to settle in their own communities with some kind of self-governance.

The treatment of refugees has been quite different. The first wave of Jewish immigrants included quite wealthy Sephardic Jews, who were welcomed because they brought capital to the country (2–15). Later immigrants, who came around 1900, were refugees from Jewish pogroms in Eastern Europe. They were often seen as potential criminals with norms and values that threatened Danish society. It was also a concern whether they would become a financial burden for the public or a competitive threat

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to Danish businesses. Many of them settled in special parts of Copenhagen. In the debate about these neighbourhoods the word ghetto was used, even if they did not have the character of a real ghetto where Jews were forced to live. Proposals were made to establish a real ghetto, but they were not approved by the authorities.

In general the perception of foreigners in Danish society, at this point in time, was that they were exotic, but also suspicious and some of them inferior compared to Danes. Racist attitudes were quite common (26–28). This changed considerably after World War II (WWII) when the Holocaust showed the ultimate consequences of such attitudes. Racism expressed as generalised negative statements about specific ethnic groups was now mostly condemned. This has, however, changed much in the last 30 to 40 years (15–20).

Denmark had some refugees from communist countries in the 1950s, but more widespread immigration started in the 1960s where a need for labour led to an influx of workers, especially from Turkey, Pakistan and Yugoslavia. At that time a proposal was put forward to build a special low-quality housing area for immigrants and there was a discussion about if it was positive or negative for immigrants to be geographically concentrated (16).

In the following years immigration increased with refugees coming from, among other places, Vietnam and Sri Lanka. These immigrants settled in a limited number of municipalities and especially in slum areas in Copenhagen and some newer social housing estates. A negative focus on this began to arise around 1990, especially on certain neighbourhoods with social housing that had social problems (19). In official documents (19) it was stated that the problems could not be attributed exclusively to immigrants and that the concentration partly was a result of restricted options for immigrants on the housing market. A programme for special initiatives in deprived housing estates started in the 1990s, mainly focussed on measures to help immigrants be more integrated in society (19).

This view and practice has changed considerably after 2000, where a right-wing government has been dependent on support from an anti-immigration party. Deprived housing estates were now designated as ghettos and, later on, as ‘parallel societies.’ This is, in my opinion, in contradiction with the denotation of the term ghetto, meaning a place where only a single ethnic group is concentrated against their will or because they have no alternatives. Rather, a more correct designation is ‘multi-ethnic neighbourhoods,’ as the neighbourhoods are composed of many different ethnic groups.

The public perception regarding the cause of the problems shifted in the direction that some Danes and especially immigrants with ‘wrong values’ had settled in these neighbourhoods in order to isolate themselves from society (Regeringen 2018). This is in direct opposition with what we know from research about ethnic segregation, which shows that the concentration of social problems and ethnic minorities in such areas all over Europe is a consequence of stigmatisation of multi-ethnic neighbourhoods and what, in the research literature, has been called ‘white avoidance.’ It has thus been shown that the ethnic majority often avoids moving into neighbourhoods with many ethnic minorities (Skifter Andersen 2017; Skifter Andersen 2019). The policies towards deprived neighbourhoods, and especially those with many ethnic minorities, now focus on punishment and deportation. Special, restrictive laws have been introduced, which only are applicable in neighbourhoods distinguished by characteristics such as a high proportion of ethnic minorities and unemployment. In

some of the neighbourhoods it is required that up to 60% of the social dwellings shall be demolished or sold to private investors. In this way it has been made legal to evict residents. Moreover, it has been prohibited to lease out dwellings in these areas to ethnic minorities and unemployed. The housing options for ethnic minorities and for some of the most vulnerable groups have thus been considerably reduced.

This book provides an easy to read and entertaining introduction to the history of immigration in Denmark, based on a comprehensive number of historical sources. It illuminates how prejudices about immigrants, and the inclinations to restrict them, have taken place in Denmark in the past and are still found today. The somewhat disappointing result of the analysis is that the broader and more objective views on foreigners and immigration that arose after WWII have now been replaced by views that are in many ways similar to those found at the beginning of the 1900s.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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