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Fritzbøger, Bo

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4 “Revolt from the center”

Socio-environmental protest from idea to praxis in Denmark, 1978–1993

Bo Fritzboeger

On 7 February 1978, the 500th-year birthday of Thomas Moore, the author of *Utopia*, a book was published in Copenhagen that for a time had a significant impact on the Danish public debate on environment and society.¹ This book was written by a triumvirate of influential public figures who had met regularly since 1969 in the framework of the Society for Social Debate²: social liberal politician and former minister Kristen Helveg Petersen (1909–1997), novelist-philosopher Villy Sørensen (1929–2001), and professor in semiconductor physics Niels I. Meyer (b. 1930). The social-political debate of the 1970s was characterised by, on the one hand, left-wing skirmishes concerning the proper interpretation of Marx and, on the other hand, a strong conservative reaction to the breakdown of conventional virtues and the growth of the welfare state and its public sector. However, since the beginning of the decade, environmental concerns had gained significant traction in public debates. Furthermore, the economic crisis brought about by the oil embargo in 1973 in general appeared to widen the scope of political discussions. Hence, the time was ripe for highly imaginative ideas about the future, launched from a new perspective. Consequently, Petersen, Sørensen, and Meyer titled their book *Revolt From the Center* (RFC).³ The title proved apt insofar that the ideas presented in the book were quite revolting to many readers, while they inspired others to action.

RFC immediately gained enormous public attention. The sole television channel of the monopolistic Danish Broadcasting Corporation spent about three whole hours introducing it to the public.⁴ By the end of the year, the managing director of the publisher Gyldendal noted in his diary that the book was “an unparalleled success. Until now sold more than 100,000 copies (and we even got funding for the first edition)”.⁵ The aim of this chapter is to scrutinise the principal ideas of this book, their origins, and further circulation, as well as the subsequent (failed) attempt to translate them into social movements and actions.

The book is both highly complex, as it not only produces a coherent model for a possible future society and presents potential means to that end but also outlines fairly comprehensive assumptions regarding human nature and society. *Revolt From the Center* proceeds from a number of almost Hegelian “fatal contradictions” supposedly characterising modernity⁶: economic growth induces

shortages; global development results in an increase in levels of conflict and interdependence, while military spending goes up; rich nations have a moral responsibility to promote change, but there appears to be an inverted correlation between impending disasters and the incentive to act; being aware of problems does not automatically lead to action; all major problems in the world can only be solved at an international level, but there are no effective international institutions capable of addressing these problems; and the more urgent problems become, the more dictatorial solutions appear to be.

The description of these contradictions is followed by a detailed model of an ideal “humane, ecologically sustainable society”. It includes elements such as basic income; small-scale cooperative enterprises; reduced right of inheritance; an equal hourly wage for all functions; use of solar energy; strengthened local governments; termination of strong boundaries between work, education, and leisure; upbringing of children in extended families; local administration of justice; and the introduction of a second parliamentary chamber of experts meant to guide politicians. Finally, the book suggests reforms necessary for building the ideal society, based on the assumption that “people can often accept changes when they are introduced sufficiently slowly. Most people, on the other hand, will oppose a rapid encroachment on their well-earned rights” (p. 153).

Ideas about the past, present, and future

The key concept “idea” is defined by Arthur Lovejoy as “implicit or incompletely explicit assumptions, or more or less unconscious mental habits, operating in the thoughts of an individual or a generation”.⁷ In some respects, “knowledge” may be considered a specific sub-category of ideas; however, the social sciences operate with conspicuously vague definitions in this respect. For instance, Eyerman and Jamison define knowledge as “the broader cognitive praxis that informs all social activity. It is thus both formal and informal, objective and subjective, moral and immoral, and, most importantly, professional and popular”, and they even juxtapose it with “thought and ideas”.⁸

The evident confluence of knowledge with other kinds of ideas was aptly articulated by Villy Sørensen, one of the authors, when he wrote: “At one time people were prepared to believe in something they did not know for a fact. Nowadays it appears that we are not prepared to believe in what we know all too well.”⁹ Accordingly, there is a good reason why proponents of history of knowledge have been reluctant to clearly define knowledge.¹⁰ In the following sections, knowledge is defined in accordance with the so-called Strong Programme originating in the sociology of knowledge¹¹: knowledge is simply whatever someone in words or deeds *claims* to be knowledge. So, the very claim is the focal point of the analysis.

Central to the ideational foundation of RFC is a dialectical understanding of the relationship nature/environment vs. culture/society serving to discern the “natural” from the anthropogenic (p. 80).¹² Accordingly, the problems of modernity allegedly arise from an “artificial encroachment” of nature’s ecological

system, and “going back to nature” refers to “stone-age tribal society” (p. 29, 112). Nature – in the sense of a landscape – is allegedly something modern humans yearn for, while they experience a negative effect on their quality of life caused by industrial humdrum in an artificial urban environment (p. 30), a place where “practical considerations eventually set aside human regards”.¹³

Furthermore, the targeted political efforts of the postwar period to create sustained economic growth are contrasted with a future “society in balance with its natural environment”, which, accordingly, constitutes the basic principle that a new societal order must absorb (p. 28).¹⁴ In several places, the text is heavily informed by these types of romanticising ideas regarding the historicity of “the natural” (i.e., nature as a category basically belonging to the past).¹⁵ This idea is especially prominent when the authors (without further argument) describe how “agriculture is Denmark’s natural business”.¹⁶

Similar ideas underlie another prominent dialectic, namely the one between “the external nature” and “inner human nature”. In a chapter arguing for profound societal change, the authors claim the following:

In the last decade the ecology shock has shown us that people cannot exploit the physical resources of nature for any purpose they choose without paying the penalty. We must also recognize that people cannot be exploited and conditioned for any purpose at all without injury to both body and soul.

(p. 75f.)

“Only when human nature is accorded its proper significance can a society in balance with external nature be created” (p. 115). Consequently, the model of a possible future society described in detail in the following chapters is presented as an answer to this double “ecology shock”. The key theme here is a critique of consumption and growth in urban/industrial production, which is said to result in “danger of destroying the natural world and creating imminent shortages of essential resources” (p. 14).

RFC first presents a collection of claimed knowledge concerning the present environmental and the mental predicaments of modern society. The key argument here concerns the alleged absolute limit to societal activity encompassed in the Second Law of Thermodynamics,¹⁷ the understanding that all potential energy will eventually be turned into heat. Second, the book produces a multi-faceted imaginary of a possible future in which these problems will be solved. This narrative is constructed through a range of social and rhetorical means, drawn from the vastly different parts of public life represented by the three authors.¹⁸

Being raised politically within the tradition of the Danish folk high schools, the former minister of education and MP Kristen Helveg Petersen represented a long tradition of deliberative democracy based on general education and civic participation. Villy Sørensen was an intellectual writer attempting to gain a foothold between modernism and tradition.¹⁹ A professor in semiconductor

physics at the age of 31, Niels I. Meyer had become an accomplished scientist. Hence, the book clearly embraced both of the otherwise divided “cultures” described by C.P. Snow in 1959.²⁰ In the words of Ludwik Fleck, the book thus represented a certain convergence of different knowledge communities.²¹

Rhetorically, the book employed a number of dualistic metaphors in its descriptive and prescriptive passages. Harmony vs. discord, boom society vs. bankrupt society, confidence vs. scepticism, control vs. freedom, equality vs. growth, self-interest vs. authoritarianism, etc. Balance and equilibrium, however, appear to be the primary nodal points of the text, as these concepts connote the ultimate good.

In short, RFC links a quite rudimentary description of global environmental challenges to economical and socio-psychological problems in both developed and developing countries. Moreover, it prescribes a small-scale and closely knit Tönniesian rural “Gemeinschaft” as the obvious solution for the future. In the following pages, I trace the upstream (the sources drawn upon by RFC) and downstream circulation (the transforming reception of the book’s ideas) of these three intertwined strands of thought: (1) the physical limits of growth, (2) the inhumanity of industrial, urban society, and (3) the natural democratic equilibrium of the village community.

“Upstream” circulation and the sources of ideas

Obviously, the opinions presented in RFC originate from the immediate social context of the three authors. Nevertheless, they also have a great number of coalescing textual sources. This is what I choose to refer to as the “upstream” circulation of ideas: the interdiscursive and intertextual networks reflected in the text. While the bibliography records the more manifest of these, other and more implicit references appear on or “between” the lines. For example, the book relies on an imaginary of rural beatitudes, which have a long and vivid history drawing on strong ancient traditions.²² The qualities of the city vs. the countryside simply represent one of the most seminal dualities of Western societal thought.²³

The book bases its diagnosis of the present on the notable knowledge claim that “[e]xpert opinion is unanimous that any form of growth dependent of ever-increasing consumption of energy and raw materials and on progressive pollution of the physical environment cannot continue” (p. 28). This is clearly a hidden reference to the first report by the Club of Rome from 1972, *Limits to Growth*. Based upon systems-theoretical modelling performed by Jay Forrester’s group of young analysts at MIT, this report linked RFC to the growing hegemony of systems thinking characterising the scientific and political discourses of the 1970s²⁴ and which enabled an approach to the world as “a knowable entity – a single interconnected whole”.²⁵ Here, the ethos of “unanimous expert opinion” rhetorically strengthens the knowledge claim. Against this background, it is strange that, for instance, neither *Limits to Growth* nor E.J. Mishan’s *The Cost of Economic Growth* appears in the bibliography.²⁶

The lack of direct references, however, may result from the fact that the contact was social rather than textual. Meyer had met Forrester in 1969 when the latter gave a guest lecture in Denmark.²⁷ Three years later, Meyer was further acquainted with Donatella and Dennis Meadows from Forrester's group, and in January 1973, Meadows gave a lecture in Copenhagen, after which a private *Nachspiel* took place in the home of Helveg Petersen.²⁸ Meanwhile, Meyer was included in the Club of Rome at the recommendation of Thorkil Kristensen, the former director of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).²⁹ So, through social and academic relations, RFC was firmly established in the international environmental and developmental community. This establishment was reflected in the book's presentations of knowledge and imaginaries.

RFC makes a reference to the special issue, "Blueprint for Survival", of the new scientific journal *The Ecologist* published in January 1972 in relation to the upcoming UN summit in Stockholm.³⁰ Similar to the "Blueprint for Survival", RFC spoke of the relationship between environmental degradation and social disruption caused by modern society. "Pathological manifestations as crime, delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, mental diseases, suicide" indicated an escalating social disintegration and resulted from industrial production and urbanisation.³¹ So, "Blueprint for Survival" clearly contributed to the claim that "[d]espite all differences of scientific opinion and conflicts of ideology, we do have enough knowledge to establish that there is a disparity between the needs of human beings and the needs of industrial society" (p. 114).

Other sources of inspiration in RFC came from, for example, the ecosophical philosophy of Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss; German-American philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist Herbert Marcuse's diagnosis of the estranged individuality of modernity; American economist J.K. Galbraith's focus on the consequences of affluence; Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie's reform criminology; and Danish economist Jørgen Dich's critique of the growth of the welfare state. Based on behavioural scientists such as Konrad Lorenz and Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, RFC presents an indisputable biological and essentialist view on human nature. It promotes the development of "natural selves" (p. 79) and results in "a civilization in which there is a harmonious balance between biological needs and social requirements" (p. 109). As such, the basic anthropological suppositions informing the revolutionary ideas of RFC are rooted in a strongly conservative tradition.³²

A kind of "negative circulation" applies to positions from which RFC dissociates itself. Examples of such intellectual punching balls are the structural Marxist and behaviouristic ideas stating that humans are socially mouldable. Here, the book makes references to Ernest Mandel, a Trotskyist and leading member of the Fourth International, and B.F. Skinner, a Harvard professor in behavioural psychology.

The critique of modern, industrialised Western society is partly based on the 1973 book *Det herrelösa industrisamhället*, written by Swedish economist Karl-Henrik Pettersson.³³ It puts forward that material affluence should not be

equated with human and social well-being, that systems analysis confuses model and reality, and that technological developments must be controlled socially. Moreover, similar to RFC, *Det herrelösa industrisamhället* addresses the need to substitute “exponential growth” with “balance”, and it concludes that

the human demand for a radically de-centralised society freed from long distances to decision-making, freed from complex expert solutions, de-personalisation, and formalism is in opposition to the ever-stronger demands by modern technology for . . . large units, specialist power, common planning, and sophisticated and inhuman management systems.³⁴

Apart from international authors such as Galbraith and Marcuse, Pettersson largely based his analyses on a number of early Swedish commentators on environment and society: politician Rolf Edberg (*On the Shred of a Cloud*, 1966), plant physiologist Georg Borgström (*Limits to Our Existence*, 1964), and physicist Hannes Alfvén (*Atom, Man, and the Universe*, 1969).³⁵

An official report from the Danish Ministry of Culture produced in 1969 when Helveg Petersen served as minister had already addressed some of the main issues in RFC.³⁶ Meyer then participated in the report-writing group of external experts, and it was his suggestion to subsequently initiate the drawn-out writing process that resulted in RFC.³⁷ However, this report was not only informed by experts. A commune of young people established in a large villa in northern Copenhagen (later named Mao’s Delight) had, without an invitation, presented a written contribution that was included as a supplement to the official report. Its proposals were all rather vague, but they were clearly based on a belief in the self-determination of small-scale communities.³⁸

This belief informed the so-called *Langeland Manifesto*, written by some of the same collectivists three years later. It was based on seven basic demands, one of which was “close, human communities”. Such communities or settlements should be characterised by a unity of home and workplace, be sufficiently large in order to perform all necessary public functions, produce for self-sufficiency, and not be larger than “actual, personal contact can be established between all members”.³⁹ This account is consistent with the one describing the fictive twenty-first-century municipality X-ville in RFC, but the *Langeland Manifesto* does not appear in the bibliography (p. 122ff.).

This preference for small-scale solutions was explicitly inspired by German statistician and economist E.F. Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful* (1973). In respect to the specific challenges facing the third-world rural countryside, Schumacher argues that rural small-scale production is a prerequisite for development and adds that if “the disintegration of rural life continues, there is no way out – no matter how much money is being spent”.⁴⁰ Schumacher’s analysis applies to non-industrial, developing countries. What if, however, this line of reasoning was conveyed to a first-world country like Denmark?

During the 1960s and 1970s, Poul Bjerre (Danish architect and former participant in the resistance movement during the German occupation in 1940–1945)

developed his own social philosophy based on the idea that modern industrial and capitalist society has damaged people's inherent sociality.⁴¹ He aspired to direct the contemporary demands for re-establishing the "good community" by advising a growing number of communes, house shares, and other alternative forms of living. In 1973, he conceptualised a plan for turning the Jutland village of Krejbjerg into a co-operative association quite similar to aforementioned X-ville.⁴² Since the 1960s, Bjerre had discussed social matters intensely with Villy Sørensen and he rightly spotted his own "fingerprints" in the book.⁴³ After its publication, he joined the social movement arising from RFC.

"Downstream" circulation and social praxis

Environmental deterioration had been discussed publicly since the 1960s, and the early 1970s was full of imaginative demands for future improvements of society. However, the public debate concerning RFC reached an unprecedented magnitude and intensity. Within a year, more than 2,500 newspaper or magazine articles had referred to or commented on the book.⁴⁴ And, within three years, it had been the subject of 54 newspaper editorials.⁴⁵ The majority of commentators were extremely critical of the book, but their criticism took several different forms and subjects. Many found the book's unreserved assimilation of the dystopian tenets from the Club of Rome to be problematic.⁴⁶ The authors' fundamental assumptions regarding human nature were also strongly questioned.⁴⁷ Hence, the publisher was right in his prediction that RFC "is going to please neither revolutionary nor reactionary temperaments".⁴⁸ Still, when a volume of critical responses to RFC was published later in 1978, its small private publisher only sold a few copies and suffered a heavy financial loss.⁴⁹

The intense debate materialised into a great number of public meetings. Some of the numerous readers of the book met in the more than 100 study circles created within a year after the publication.⁵⁰ In response, Gyldendal issued a study guide that went through the book's main lines of reasoning using a Socratic method, outlining its background, reasons for change, foundations, goal, and means.⁵¹ These study circles, as well as the authors and publisher, created a wish for some kind of larger-scale organisation – a nation-wide social movement – which gradually took form.

In November 1978, a group including the authors of RFC published the first issue of the periodical *På vej* ("On the road"). In its first year, the journal had more than 5,000 subscribers.⁵² In 1980, the number had dropped to about 2,000, but the journal existed for 15 years and published 6 issues annually during most of this period. Presumably, this was the most important outreach activity among the diverse gathering of different interest groups and individuals sharing a common cause with the book. During 1981–82, *På vej* was supplemented by an internal newsletter called *MIS-nyt*.⁵³ Of the 177 individual contributors to the first eight volumes of *På vej*, only 13 wrote in more than two issues (including the 3 originators).⁵⁴ So, the debate was really quite decentralised.

Even though it implied no card-carrying membership, the movement – called the Center-Revolt (CR) – was not a grassroots movement in the proper sense of a “local, political organisation with the goal of influencing conditions outside participants’ working situation and the most important asset of which is the participants’ activity”.⁵⁵ It was not restricted to a local community, and its objective was never “simple and case-oriented”.⁵⁶ Rather, its objective was all-encompassing and highly complex, and it functioned as a meeting place for many different causes.

As a social movement, it combined a certain organisational structure with specific ideas, bringing the “members” together. Both meaning and structure are important for understanding the internal dynamics of movements, their external contexts, and the interaction between the two.⁵⁷ What constitutes a social movement is the cognitive praxis and the use of knowledge and imaginaries.⁵⁸ Accordingly, one could say that CR established a new knowledge community, with RFC serving as its ideational foundation.

From the very beginning, a so-called “support group” of approximately ten people was elected to be responsible for day-to-day operations. Niels I. Meyer was an ex officio member of the group until 1987, and he also wrote the editorials of *På vej*. During the first ten years, 15 women and 18 men were members of the group.⁵⁹

Naturally, the bulk of the movement’s activities consisted of social interaction. From 1979, annual joint meetings gathered activists from all over the country, and several folk high schools offered summer courses on the themes covered by the book.⁶⁰ Hence, a great deal of internal communication was oral; however, in some cases, external communications to the press also occurred. During a number of summer campaigns in the middle of the 1980s, a small group of activists travelled around Denmark on bicycle or by bus to speak about their ideas. As this means of transportation contributed to attracting considerable attention, it became a vehicle of knowledge circulation.

A joint meeting with about 120 participants in the summer of 1980 agreed upon some fundamental values of the movement.⁶¹ These included active brotherliness, tolerance, respect for nature, and consideration for future generations. Further, the basic outlines of a “humane, ecologically sustainable society” were reiterated: co-responsibility through one’s own actions; right to individual self-determination and co-determination in housing, workplace, and society at large; distribution of duties in solidarity; decentralisation; global and local economic equality; economising with natural resources turned into common property; and an active global effort to achieve détente and disarmament. Furthermore, the 1986 meeting addressed the necessary correlation between self-insight and extrovert reform activities.⁶² The folk high school course of 1987 was about self-development and social development. Hence, the book’s original dialectical relationship between outer environmental and inner mental problems was clearly valued more in the meandering route of activism. From 1985, other grassroots movements were invited to some parts of the annual joint meeting.⁶³

In the early days following the publication of RFC, parts of Helveg Petersen's party, Det Radikale Venstre, considered adopting ideas from RFC as a new policy agenda.⁶⁴ However, the up-and-coming power in the parliamentary group, Niels Helveg Petersen, Kristen's son, obstructed this scheme. Later, the political affiliations with centre-left groupings became even more evident. For instance, in an editorial in June 1986, Meyer wrote that

the humane, ecologically sustainable society will not emerge by itself. In particular, it won't come if the silent majority perseveres in indifference and lack of engagement. That will only please the opposing forces. Local experiments with alternative lifestyles are essential and inspiring, but the political dimensions must not be neglected in an active democracy. It does make a difference whether Schlüter and the right wing or Anker Jørgensen and the left wing wins the next parliamentary election.⁶⁵

As a reflection of the wide range of topics addressed by the book and the movement, the interactions with other social movements were extensive. It was to be expected that activists from CR contributed to a general *Handbook for Activists*, published in 1982.⁶⁶ In 1988, CR took the initiative to a meeting between representatives from a large number of movements in order to establish various forms of cooperation. Increasingly, CR and its journal had come to function as a platform for such synergies.⁶⁷ The following year, cooperation with a state-sponsored secretariat to provide inspiration for local initiatives relating to the UN report *Our Common Future* was initiated.⁶⁸

During the 1980s, the level of activity declined. One activist complained that "it is generally acknowledged that it has become harder to engage people in grass-roots work. On the one side, people commit themselves to therapy and health, and on the other, they lock themselves into privatisation and individualism."⁶⁹ So, whereas the domestic political establishment remained largely unaffected by RFC, the evolving UN agenda for environment and development in broad terms coincided with its goals. Niels I. Meyer continued as a member of the Club of Rome and in 1982 joined in the foundation of the Balaton Group, created by Donna and Dennis Meadows.⁷⁰

The Center-Revolt practised many different forms of activism. These included writing and publishing, which resulted in a "downstream" circulation of ideas originating from the ongoing, collective processing of RFC. Social movements are also knowledge producers.⁷¹ So, new knowledge and new imaginaries were produced and disseminated in various texts, covering a wide range of different genres.

"Genres" were originally defined as "relatively stable types of . . . utterances . . . in which language is used". However, this definition has later been both narrowed down and broadened to all kinds of "typified rhetorical action".⁷² Hence, genre connotes a stock of words and other discursive forms used for thinking and expressing thoughts within a defined social and thematic field (but in connection with other fields).⁷³ The field is defined by the knowledge constituted

by the mediating interplay of reality, text, recipient, and the writing self, or, in other words, by the knowledge community.⁷⁴

One genre crucial for the dissemination and discussion of RFC was periodicals such as *På vej*, which represented a sustained interrelationship between members of the movement. Another genre was the same kind of debate book as RFC. In 1980, a so-called Information Center was established in Copenhagen, which eventually turned into a publisher that, among other things, published a series of small anthologies called *Udveje* (Ways out) on subjects such as health, distribution of work, cooperative production, corporate democracy, basic income, and self-development.⁷⁵

Further, the astonishing initial book sales had generated such an unforeseen level of royalties to the authors that they chose to establish a trust aiming to support social experiments.⁷⁶ Unsurprisingly, the publisher Gyldendal also had an economic interest in “scaffolding” the movement’s continued activities. This interest was pivotal for the dissemination of ideas through the publication of a number of debate books related to RFC. Only a few months after the release of RFC, Gyldendal thus published an elaborate introduction to the debate on the issues raised by the book.⁷⁷ In 1979, a book targeted at schoolchildren was also published.⁷⁸

In 1979–1984, Gyldendal published a series of thematic volumes named “Crises and Utopia”, edited by Niels I. Meyer, lyricist Inger Christensen, and philosopher Ole Thyssen. These included *Labour/Unemployment* (1979), *Growth* (1979), *Democracy* (1980), *Energy* (1980), *War or Peace?* (1981), and *Green Economy* (1984). By inviting writers to the series, the editors succeeded in involving trade union leaders and politicians from the left and centre as contributors. Subsequently, the books achieved a true broadening of the potential audience beyond the activist movement. Moreover, in 1982, the three authors recapitulated the main issues of the debate during the previous years in the book *Røret om oprøret* [Commotion About the Revolt], drawing on a total of 1,266 texts in one way or another discussing ideas presented in RFC.⁷⁹

Naturally, downstream circulation frequently took place in other debate books. Associations with the basic ideas were found in, for instance, Philip Arctander’s 1985 book *Oprør fra flertallet* [Revolt From the Majority], whereas the Venstre politician and later prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen sharply dissociated himself from the “doomsday prophecy” as an “efficient tool in the hands of totalitarians” in his 1993 book *Fra socialstat til minimalstat* [From Welfare State to Minimal State].⁸⁰ However, the main ideas in RFC were so prevalent at the time that what at first appeared to be an imitation might simply have used other sources. For instance, Norwegian environmentalist Olav Benestad’s *Overvekst eller likevekt?* (Over-growth or Balance?), from 1979, closely overlapped RFC in terms of themes and arguments, but there appears to have been no personal nor intertextual links between the two.⁸¹

The articles and book reviews in the journal most clearly reflect the varying ideational developments taking place in and around CR. Books and reports on all kinds of subjects associated with a sustainable future were mentioned and

commented: international principal works such as American author and film critic Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), Australian historian Hugh Stretton's *Capitalism, Socialism and Environment* (1976), and British independent writer James Robertson's *The Sane Alternative* (1983). The same held true for a vast amount of domestic literature on natural gas, labour, socialism, activism, governability, technology, pesticides, and even vegetarian recipes. But whereas textual links clearly reflect interaction, they are not necessarily signs of a frictionless reception of ideas. What downstream intertextuality reveals is either association or dissociation. When, for example, Poul Bjerre in *På vej* wrote about the socialist school conglomerate Tvind as the "walled-in revolt", he was clearly dissociating CR from the Leninist orthodoxy of Tvind.⁸²

In the strong current of downstream circulation, the issues of "double natural limits" and the alleged naturalness of rural life only played a minor role. Or, rather, it is difficult to establish any direct link between suggestions in the book and actual praxis. As a matter of fact, however, the alternative movements during the period were clearly attracted to values such as authenticity, stolidity, and localism. Besides an increasing number of rural communes, the 1980s was the founding period for Denmark's highly reputable organic agricultural sector.⁸³

In the continued production and re-production of ideas, new upstream circulation coalesced with downstream circulation. When, for example, the authors of RFC in 1982 recapitulated and commented on four years of debate, they adopted new international inputs such as *The Global 2000 Report to the President* and reinvigorated and sharpened their own positions in relation to readers and movement.⁸⁴ And when the UN Commission on Environment and Development issued the report *Our Common Future* in 1987, it was obviously absorbed by the Center-Revolt.⁸⁵ Already one year ahead of its publication, *På vej* printed an article by the chair of the commission, Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland.⁸⁶

The textual downstream circulation was not limited to Denmark. In Norway, the 1972 book *The Future in Our Hands*, authored by Norwegian author and environmentalist Erik Dammann, instigated a very similar movement. Its goal was somewhat different from that of RFC, as it focused more on the personal, moral implications of international inequality. However, the Danish authors had been unaware of its existence.⁸⁷ Only two months after the publication, however, they were invited to present their book at a public meeting with around 100 participants in Oslo. They experienced that the reception of RFC was far more welcoming than in Denmark, and Meyer surmised that it was precisely because *The Future in Our Hands* (FOH) had paved the way for ideas such as theirs.⁸⁸ In the following autumn, a national branch of FOH established itself in Denmark, and the two movements together hosted a press meeting where Dammann presented the Danish translation of his book. Later, Dammann and Danish representatives of FOH naturally contributed to *På vej*.

A broader collaboration with movements from the Nordic countries was formed in 1984, when the umbrella organisation Nordic Alternative Campaign was founded.⁸⁹ From 1990, the so-called Nordisk Folkeriksdag (Nordic People's

Parliament) brought together many different types of alternative movements (environment, solidarity, gender, peace).⁹⁰ The latter was strongly encouraged by growing resistance towards stronger political and economic integration in the EEC (from 1993 the European Union).⁹¹

In many respects, the movement appears to have moved towards a gradually more distinct political profile. Numerous contributions in *På vej* renounced the conservative-liberal government of 1982–1993. Through book reviews, the journal endorsed New Left theorists such as André Gorz.⁹² Meanwhile, *På vej* was turning even more into a mouthpiece for the resistance against the European Union.⁹³

The last issue of *På vej* appeared in 1993. However, a replacement was in place the following summer: the journal *Projekt Den åbne fremtid* [Project Open Future]. The journal was published by CR but presented itself as a broad platform for all kinds of social debate. The topics addressed in the first and only annual volume of the journal were identical to the ones debated in CR (i.e., sustainable development, unemployment, democracy, etc.). At the same time, participants in CR started attending a number of more traditionally organised new movements.

In 1992, Niels I. Meyer became a leading member of the June Movement, a newly founded Danish Eurosceptic political organisation fighting against European centralism. Other members of CR had already joined an attempt to form a green party (launched in 1983).⁹⁴ This party was never represented in the national parliament, but it did achieve some local representation in municipal elections during 1985–1993.⁹⁵ In contrast to the neighbouring countries Sweden and Germany, Denmark did not have a parliamentary green party until 2014. Presumably, this was mainly due to the swift adoption of the green agenda by centre-left parties, such as the Socialist People’s Party (SF).⁹⁶ Moreover, it should be noted that SF appears to have overlapped somewhat with CR in terms of voters (and even members). So, it was not by chance that Niels I. Meyer in 2004 called the story of his own public life *From the Right Towards the Left*.⁹⁷ The centre appeared to have dissolved.

Let-down

In relation to the celebration of the tenth-year anniversary of the publication of RFC in 1988, the three authors of the book concluded that “for ten years, the movement has contributed to preparing the ground for the reversal that is crucial if Denmark is to solve its problem and become, once again, a good society to live in.”⁹⁸ Poul Bjerre, who had been an inspiration for the book through his village experiments, considered that

the humane ecological movement sprouts all over the world. RFC is but an early Danish variant of a world movement that is still very young and undecided, but it grows vigorously and when it comes to theoretical clarifications, Danes are not in a bad position, thanks to RFC.⁹⁹

Only six years later, he resigned that “now . . . I can see its weaknesses”.¹⁰⁰

At the anniversary celebration, the head of physical planning in the city of Copenhagen, Kai Lemberg, gave a critical speech, in which he tried to explain “why it couldn’t as a movement keep the power of penetration that the book had had”.¹⁰¹ He answered by pointing out four decisive factors: (1) RFC was intellectual in origin and lacked a broader foundation in basic social interests; (2) as a grassroots movement, RFC lacked a firm organisation; (3) the descriptions of ways and means in RFC did not include persuasion; and (4) the predominant recession since 1973 in public finances and society at large made people value security over freedom. To this analysis, one could add the simple general lesson that “the longer a social movement continues to exist, as it were, ‘outside’ of the established political culture, the less influence it is likely to have on the development of knowledge.”¹⁰²

The Center-Revolt, however, was one of the first Danish social movements to clearly break with the traditional left-right spectrum of political positioning. An attempt to supplement this spectrum with a transverse gradient ranging from “economic growth” to “ecological balance” places CR in the centre of left-right, albeit manifestly closer to “balance” than “growth”.¹⁰³

In order for a knowledge community such as CR to turn specific ideas into action, it needs to consider the ideas at hand “usable” in the sense of Haas and Stevens: credible, legitimate, and salient.¹⁰⁴ First, the group must accede to the knowledge claim. Second, this accession must be shared with other knowledge communities through a transforming circulation of ideas in order to achieve legitimacy.¹⁰⁵ Third, the knowledge must be organised on a meaningful scale. One could also argue that the ideational construct of RFC was so complex and far-reaching that it was, in fact, difficult to translate into practical politics.

As a social movement, the Center-Revolt never became the radical societal transformer it initially set out to be. The number of followers steadily decreased. At the first joint meeting in Bønnerup Strand in 1979, there were 140 participants.¹⁰⁶ Two years later, only 40 met in Helsingør, and attendance never again exceeded 60. And whereas the public debate on RFC was extensive and protracted, the publication of its follow-up in 1982 occurred in near silence.¹⁰⁷

Compared to more topic-specific grassroots movements, CR was based on a broad range of assumptions regarding the present and imaginaries of the future, and its ideational foundation was far from plain. The systemic, all-embracing approach to the combined environmental and societal problems of modern society tended to dissolve the aspirations for joint action into a multitude of different special (albeit interconnected) interests. Undoubtedly, this weakened the movement’s potential for greater political impact. Due to this diversity, it appears to have attracted many different kinds of opposition groups with correspondingly different political goals and ideas regarding the suitable means for achieving these. Consequently, the long-term tangible impact of RFC was limited, although the new political party formed in 2014, *Alternativet*, heavily taps into the imaginaries first presented in 1978.¹⁰⁸

It was the near all-encompassing approach to the multifarious predicaments of modern life that gave RFC its analytical and inspirational thrust and paved the way to its massive dissemination. And it was exactly the same ideational scope that prevented CR from becoming a powerful and persistent social movement comparable to the Norwegian Future in our Hands or the Swedish Green Party.

Notes

- 1 Niels I. Meyer, Kristen Helveg Petersen, and Villy Sørensen, *Oprør fra midten* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1978); Flemming Behrendt, *Debatten om Oprøret fra Midten* (Copenhagen: Berlingske Forlag, 1978), 9.
- 2 Niels I. Meyer, *Fra højre mod venstre: Samtidshistoriske erindringer* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2004), 166.
- 3 Whereas the original edition in Danish has been the object of analysis, all references (in brackets) originate from the English edition, 1981.
- 4 Behrendt, *Debatten*, 10.
- 5 Ole Wivel, *Kontrapunkt* (Copenhagen: Lindhardt og Ringhof, 1989), 14. In 1978, the adult population of Denmark was 3.8 million.
- 6 One should note that in 1962, Sørensen edited and commented the first Danish edition of Karl Marx’s juvenile works: Karl Marx, *Økonomi og filosofi: Ungdomsskrifter*, Udvalg og indledning ved Villy Sørensen (Copenhagen: Gyldendals Uglebøger, 1962).
- 7 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1936 (1960)), 7.
- 8 Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach* (State College: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 3, 49.
- 9 Niels I. Meyer, Kristen Helveg Petersen, and Villy Sørensen, *Revolt From the Center* (London: Marion Boyars, 1981), 15; *På vej*, 12 January 1990.
- 10 For instance, Christian Jacob, “Lieux de Savoir: Places and Spaces in the History of Knowledge”, *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 1, no. 1 (2017): 85–102.
- 11 David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 5.
- 12 However, it should be noted that “environment” is sometimes used in the sense that dominated until the 1970s (i.e., as “social environments”); for instance, Meyer, Petersen, and Sørensen, *Revolt*, 79, 115.
- 13 Sørensen in Marx, *Økonomi og filosofi*, 18.
- 14 Mathias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 15 Criticised by Poul A. Jørgensen, ed., *Opsang til midten* (Haarby: Forlaget i Haarby, 1978), 25.
- 16 Meyer, Petersen, and Sørensen, *Oprør*, 92; the English translation, p. 93, instead says “Agriculture is a highly important industry in many western countries.”
- 17 Bo Fritzboeger, “Global varmemeforening: Historien om en glemmt miljøsikro, ca. 1960–1985”, *Historisk Tidsskrift* 119, no. 1 (2019): 129–154.
- 18 This distinction between a social and a textual level is based on Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).
- 19 Kasper Støvring, *Villy Sørensen og kulturkonservatismen* (Copenhagen: Informations Forlag, 2011).
- 20 Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).
- 21 Ludwik Fleck, *Denkstille und Tatsachen: Gesammelte Schriften und Zeugnisse* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011).

- 22 Terrence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought From Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
- 23 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 24 Eyerman and Jamison, *Social Movements*, 74; Hunter Heyck, *Age of System: Understanding the Development of Modern Social Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).
- 25 Paul N. Edwards, *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 1.
- 26 *På vej*, 10 February 1988, 10.
- 27 Meyer, *Fra højre*, 141.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 142; Schmelzer, *The Hegemony*, 250.
- 30 Stephen Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 91.
- 31 “Blueprint for Survival”, *The Ecologist* 2, no. 1 (1972): 31.
- 32 Støvring, *Villy Sørensen*.
- 33 English translation, *Reap the Whirlwind*, 1975.
- 34 Karl-Henrik Pettersson, *Det herreløse industrisamfund* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1973), 120, translated from the Danish edition.
- 35 On Edberg, see David Larsson Heidenblad, “Ett ekologiskt genombrott? Rolf Edbergs bok och det globala krismedvetandet i Skandinavien 1966”, *Historisk Tidsskrift* 95, no. 2 (2016).
- 36 *En kulturpolitisk redegørelse afgivet af Ministeriet for kulturelle anliggender*, Betænkning nr. 517 (Copenhagen, 1969).
- 37 Behrendt, *Debatten*, 9.
- 38 “Svanemollekollektivets projekt”, in *En kulturpolitisk redegørelse afgivet af Ministeriet for kulturelle anliggender*, Betænkning nr. 517 (Copenhagen, 1969), 279.
- 39 Henning Kløvedal Prins and Ebbe Kløvedal Reich, *Langelandsmanifestet*, 2nd ed. (Prydsgården, 1977), 9.
- 40 E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 150.
- 41 Birthe Bech-Jørgensen, *Mod en Humanistisk Politik: Poul Bjerre – Filosof og Arkitekt* (Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2004).
- 42 Poul Bjerre, “Landsbypolitik – samfundspolitik”, *Dansk Byplanlaboratoriums Skriftserie* 8 (1974); Poul Bjerre, *Ud af industrikulturen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1994), 30.
- 43 Bjerre, *Ud af industrikulturen*, 58.
- 44 Accessed October 2018, <http://labs.statsbiblioteket.dk/smurf>.
- 45 Niels I. Meyer, Kristen Helveg Petersen, and Villy Sørensen, *Røret om oprøret* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1982), 187.
- 46 Behrendt, *Debatten*, 26.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 48 Wivel, *Kontrapunkt*, 9.
- 49 Jørgensen, *Opsang*; Niels Martinov, *Henrik Stangerup – en biografi* (Copenhagen: Cicero, 2003), 254.
- 50 Behrendt, *Debatten*, 32.
- 51 Kristen Helveg Petersen and Lone Heyde, *Studievejledning til Oprør fra midten* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1978).
- 52 Niels I. Meyer, “Ti år med Midteroprøret”, *På vej*, 10 January 1988, 3–15.
- 53 *Ibid.*
- 54 *På vej*, 8 August 1986.
- 55 Peter Gundelach, *Græsrodder er seje: En bog om græsrodsorganisationsformer i Danmark – deltagere, organisationsformer og modstandere* (Copenhagen: Politica, 1980), 25.

- 56 Poul Erik Mouritzen, *Borgerdeltagelse og græsrodsbevægelser: Nogle nyere tendenser i dansk politik* (Copenhagen: Politica, 1978), 116.
- 57 Nancy Whittier, “Meaning and Structure in Social Movements”, in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*, eds. David Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 289–307.
- 58 Eyermann and Jamison, *Social Movements*, 43.
- 59 Meyer, “Ti år”.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 *På vej*, 2 April 1980.
- 62 *På vej*, 8 March 1986.
- 63 *På vej*, 7 March 1985.
- 64 Niels I. Meyer, “Fra Selskabet for Samfundsdebat til ‘Oprør fra Midten’”, in *Med Villy i midten: 28 vidnesbyrd om Villy Sørensen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2004), 83–97. The party name translates into Radical Left. In fact, however, it is social liberal and traditionally placed at the very centre of the Danish parliamentary spectrum.
- 65 *På vej*, 8 April 1986.
- 66 Carsten Frederiksen et al., eds., *Håndbog for aktivister* (Copenhagen: Politisk Revy, 1982).
- 67 *På vej*, 10 June 1988.
- 68 *På vej*, 11 May 1989; Jesper Holm, Lars Kjerulf Petersen, Jeppe Læssøe, Arne Remmen, and Carsten Jahn Hansen, eds., *Økologisk modernisering på dansk: Brud og bevægelser i miljøindsatsen* (Copenhagen: Frydenlund, 2007), 132.
- 69 *På vej*, 8 May 1986.
- 70 Niels I. Meyer and Alan Atkisson, “From Sustainability Science to Real-World Action: A Short History of the Balaton Group”, *Solutions* 3, no. 5 (2012): 75–81.
- 71 Eyermann and Jamison, *Social Movements*, 48.
- 72 Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres”, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 60–102; Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151–167.
- 73 Sune Auken, “Understanding Genre”, *Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University* 2 (2018): 14–27.
- 74 Charles Bazerman, “What Written Knowledge Does: Three Examples of Academic Discourse”, in *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) 3–50; Fleck, *Denkstille und Tatsachen*.
- 75 Universal basic income in 1983, solidary divisions of labour in 1985, and health, society, and self-development in 1987.
- 76 Wivel, *Kontrapunkt*, 14; Meyer, *Fra Selskabet*, 87.
- 77 Jørgen Knudsen and Ole Thyssen, *Oprør på vej? Et diskussionsoplæg til ‘Oprør fra midten’* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1978).
- 78 Birgit Bjørnvig, *Opbrud, oprør og hvad så?* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1979).
- 79 Meyer, Petersen, and Sørensen, *Røret om oprøret*, 187.
- 80 Philip Arctander, *Oprør fra flertallet: En bog om socialisme på dansk* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1985); Anders Fogh Rasmussen, *Fra socialstat til minimalstat* (Copenhagen: Samleren, 1993).
- 81 Olav Benestad, *Overvekt eller likevekt? Industrivekstsamfunnets sammenbrudd – skisse av et nytt likevektsamfunn* (Oslo: miljøØko, 1979).
- 82 *På vej*, 1 January 1978; for Tvind, see Jes Fabricius Møller, *På sejrens vej: Historien om Skolesamvirket Tvind og dets skaber Mogens Amdi Petersen* (Copenhagen: Dike, 1999).
- 83 Søren Kai Christensen and Tage Søndergaard Kristensen, *Kollektiver i Danmark* (Copenhagen: Borgen/Basis, 1972); Nina Kirstine Brandt Jacobsen, *Gulerodshipper & gummistøvlesocialister: Historien om den økologiske bevægelse i Danmark 1970 til 2001* (Odense: Landbohistorisk Selskab, 2008).

- 84 Meyer, Petersen, and Sørensen, *Røret om oprøret*, 15.
- 85 For instance, Meyer, “Ti år”.
- 86 *På vej*, 8 January 1986.
- 87 Meyer, *Fra højre*, 181.
- 88 *På vej*, 1 January 1978.
- 89 *På vej*, 6 January 1984; Andrew Jamison et al., *The Making of the New Environmental Consciousness: A Comparative Study of the Environmental Movements in Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 115.
- 90 Accessed November 2018, <http://fritnorden.dk/NF/NFR%20info.html>.
- 91 *På vej*, 12 April 1990.
- 92 *På vej*, 6 January 1984.
- 93 Bjerre, *Ud af industrikulturen*, 60.
- 94 Jamison et al., *The Making*, 115.
- 95 Lars Bille, “De Grønne”, in *Den Store Danske* (Gyldendal), accessed December 2018, <http://denstoredanske.dk/index.php?sideId=86657>.
- 96 For instance, the policy agenda of 1980, accessed December 2018, www.arbejdermu.seet.dk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SF1980.pdf.
- 97 Meyer, *Fra højre*.
- 98 Meyer, “Ti år”.
- 99 *Ibid.*
- 100 Bjerre, *Ud af industrikulturen*, 60.
- 101 *På vej*, 10 February 1988.
- 102 Eyerman and Jamison, *Social Movements*, 4.
- 103 Kaj Lemberg and Jan Magnussen, “Økologi, miljø og lokalstyre som en ny dimension i dansk politik”, *Politica* 12, no. 3 (1980): 75–95.
- 104 Peter M. Haas and Casey Stevens, “Organized Science, Usable Knowledge, and Multilateral Environmental Governance”, in *Governing the Air: The Dynamics of Science, Policy, and Citizen Interaction*, eds. R. Lidskog and G. Sundqvist (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 130.
- 105 Fleck, *Denkstille und Tatsachen*, 267.
- 106 According to summaries in *På vej*.
- 107 Støvring, *Villy Sørensen*, 23.
- 108 Editorial, *Politiken*, 15 May 2014, accessed November 2018, <https://politiken.dk/debat/ledere/art5516687/Vi-byder-velkommen-til-et-nyt-opr%C3%B8r-fra-midten>.