Introduction

This paper presents preliminary findings of our joint research project on different formulations of nation and family at the end of the 20th century as seen from vantage points of history and art. Our main research questions are, ‘What is a family?’ and ‘What is a nation?’ We do not begin with any specific concept of the family or the nation. In posing our questions in this way, our intention is to try to understand the significance of ‘nation’ and ‘family’ and specifically, their possible interrelation. Although family and nation are usually studied separately, as if there were no connection between them, we argue that family and nation constitute each other, and that a gender perspective helps to elucidate their mutual relationship.

As our work is at the level of representation, we’re concerned with how nations have been imagined, and not the political concepts of ‘state’ or ‘nation-state’. The historical reality of Denmark in the late 20th century, 1973–2000, in which this imagining takes place, is characterized by a political transformation of the Danish nation-state into a region of the European Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and by the women’s liberation movement. How does the imagination of the nation and the family operate in this historical reality?

The perspective of this inquiry will thus be to offer reflections on the construction and deconstruction of nation and family at the end of the 20th century. We assume that a gender perspective can dissolve either/or-notions by pointing out the simultaneousness of construction and deconstruction: that is, in the process of deconstruction, something new is constructed. Working from this assumption, we expect to be able to replace the notion of the passing from tradition to modernity with a model in which tradition and modernity recursively reconstitute each other.

Although our approach is somewhat eclectic in both theory and empirical sources we are in debt to Homi Bhabha and Benedict Anderson for their ideas on how nations are constituted. However, we find their lack of a gender perspective to be problematic. In the following analysis we would like to demonstrate why.

A Gendered Culture of Politics

The title ‘A Gendered Culture of Politics’ borrows some from Partha Chatterjee’s short essay ‘Whose Imagined Community?’ in which she argues that when Bengali family constructions collide with Western politics, the latter reveals itself not as purely rational and universal beyond history and context but as culturally embedded. Inspired by Chatterjee’s insight into the cultural character of Western politics, we add gender to our reading of three political programs, using as our examples
the ideology of the Danish Social Democratic Party and a selection of works of art from the post-war period.

In their political program from 1961, the Danish Social Democrats feel obliged to pursue the ‘liberation of man’. A further reading of the program shows that this human being was suppressed in the public sphere in politics as well as at work. In this context, gender was no issue except for the fact that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. In order to support mothers and housewives, the Social Democratic program argues that society should take responsibility for childcare. The program focuses on mothers’ need for public childcare, leaving out parents or fathers as possible child caretakers. Altogether, the program sketches a future society of liberated human beings, where housewives dwell mostly at home and the public sphere is populated by workers. Cultural politics is seen as one means to create democracy and liberation.

This condensed summary of social democratic ideology is sufficient to pose the question, ‘What is a nation?’ However, there is no reply in 1961, as the Social Democratic Party neither asked nor answered such questions back then. ‘Nation’ seemed irrelevant, as the topics at stake in the program are ‘society’ and the ‘human being’. The great idea is that the community will make a new and better society. There seems to exist no consciousness of the programmatic declaration that this society will be a community of men, as men are the norm in the public sphere, women being an exception.

When we turn to the question, ‘What is a family?’ we observe that the social democratic program silently passes over fathers and parents. The family seems to be constructed with the mother or housewife at the centre. Even though women could appear in the public sphere, for instance in the issue of equal pay for both men and women, women are generally conceived as mothers, and there seems to be no intentions or desire to change that fact. The program thus depicts a society of male workers, a society made possible because the family is constructed around women. From this we can conclude that ideologically, the Social Democratic Party was ruled by almost invisible assumptions about gender that when highlighted expose an obvious connection between family and society in the 1961 program; but not, of course, an obvious connection between family and nation.

In its 1977 program, the Danish Social Democratic Party shows new ideas inspired by feminists. The ambition is still the ‘liberation of man’, but in the 1977 program it is explicitly stated that everybody, women included, should be liberated. According to the program, women are now actively taking part in society, and it is now necessary that society take responsibility for the family duties which women used to fulfill. Along these lines, society must support families, and it is clearly expressed that men should become active in the families as fathers. It is significant that the term ‘mother’ has disappeared from the program, to be replaced by parents or fathers. Thus, cultural politics remains a means of creating a future society of ‘liberated human beings’.

To ask, ‘what is a nation?’ still turns out to be an irrelevant question as the program provides no answer. As in 1961, the community in question is the society. However, compared to the 1961 program, the reader is given a new picture of society. The Social Democrats are now aware of societally constructed differences between men and women and declare that these differences must be eliminated. Society’s task is to generate that equality through the liberation of all ‘human beings’.

When we turn to the question of what is a family, new answers appear. Men are now explicitly part of the family as fathers, and women have disappeared along with the mother. This means that women are now the invisible part of the parents. It is tempting to conclude that the program makes an equation between mothers and parents, as fathers are explicitly mentioned whenever they are
interesting. That is, the term ‘parent’ means ‘mother’.

In 1977, the relation between society and family has become blurred compared to the 1961 program. Instead of a strict division between society and family, defined by codes of gender in 1961, the 1977 program defines family as a microscopic version of society: the family is now a part of society, as men and women should be equal both within the family and in society.

The 1992 program reveals fundamental changes from the earlier programs. The main goal of the Social Democratic Party is no longer a society of ‘liberated human beings’. Instead, a modern welfare society is formulated. The welfare society is characterised by equity and equality between men and women. Furthermore, the perspective has changed, so that children are now at the centre of the family. The program declares that society must ensure the possibility for parents and children to be together. In this context, fathers are explicitly mentioned. The program clearly states that children have a right to both their biological parents and in so doing the program addresses the nuclear family. Cultural politics has lost its reformatory power. Instead of changing society into something new, the program now wants to preserve Danish identity and culture.

In 1992, it is finally possible to obtain an answer to the question, ‘What is a nation?’ The nation is Denmark, where Danish identity and culture thrive. This is a supplement to the 1977 program. However, there are similarities between 1977 and 1992, in that the new nation consists of equalised individuals.

What is a family? At first glance, gender seems irrelevant, as children have become the heart of the family. A closer look, however, reveals differences in gender, as in the 1977 program. The father remains the focal point of the parents and the mother is still the invisible part. As a consequence, we can conclude that in the modern welfare state, the family is constructed through the father and the children.

Is there a connection between nation and family? As differences between individuals have disappeared, a new foundation for a national identity can be identified. And just as in 1977, the man/father is the link between family and nation. From a gender perspective, this calls for further analysis of masculinity.

From these fragments, we can deduce that between the years 1977 and 1992, nation and national identity replace society as signifier and are assigned meaning in the programs of the Danish Social Democratic Party. As the Danish Social Democratic Party has had a national strategy for most of the 20th century, it may come as a surprise to Danish historians that it is not until the latter part of the century that it has become necessary to ideologise the nation. From a gender perspective, this development represents a shift from ‘human being’ to ‘citizen’ to ‘Dane’. The gender perspective demonstrates that the human being in 1961 is a man, that in 1977 citizens are men and women, and that in 1992 they become Danes, with a common national identity beyond gender. This newly found common identity can also be found in the latest programmatic declarations of the Liberal (1995) and the Conservative parties (2000) as well as in the program of the Danish People’s Party (2002).

Our analysis has further demonstrated that mothers and fathers/children exchanged places as the heart of the family over the four decades. The Social Democratic Party departs from the three non-socialist parties, who are in agreement that the family is the cornerstone of society. But they do not agree on the constellation of the family. The Conservatives explicitly refuse to define the family, and the two other parties implicitly define it as a nuclear family.
A Gendered Politics of Art

What is a nation? This seems an absurd question to ask about art in the 1970s. In the latest New Danish Art History, published in the 1990s, such outsider questions seem not to bother art, nor do they bother the writing of art history. Art is still concerned with the ‘big’, modernist questions. It is still concerned with the work of art, its material and conceptual being. Though the painting has left the picture-frame and the sculpture has left the plinth and they have worked their way into the environment, the work of art is still mostly interested in its own constitution as institution – according to the writing of Art History. What if we ask the question, ‘What is gender?’ The answer would be that this tradition is masculine: it is held by male artists, and it privileges a masculine subject, though it claims to be objective and neutral. It is therefore characteristic that female artists of the 1970s make a political point of their role as artists. The male artists don’t have to. They don’t see gender; they see only ‘art.’ The absence of gender is significant, but if we pose the question, ‘What is a family?’, it makes a difference.

In her self-portrait By glimpses I and II, from 1978, Kirsten Justesen is photographed in a typical situation as artist and mother and baby sitter. She describes the time when her children were small as a time when she had to divide herself between the kitchen, the nursery and the studio. In the picture she is caught in a glimpse between these situations. The point is that the kitchen/nursery is her studio, and that art is produced in that specific situation. It creates another sensibility, another kind of artwork. She produces art out of the situation. When I see the red banners flapping..., a collage from 1975-77, is an ironic, self-conscious, political statement. Justesen is quoted as saying, ‘When I see the red banners flapping, it is usually through my kitchen window.’ In the 1970s, female artists sought to insert a feminine experience into art, tactiley and ideologically. But their aspirations were excluded from the start as non-art, they were not understood as art or at least not as good art. It was seen as a minor genre. In the 1970s, Kirsten Justesen shows the artist as a feminine subject, but it isn’t until the 1990s that she is accepted as such.

Ursula Reuter Christensen is another female artist for whom the studio was in the kitchen and the nursery. Her art was also produced in the midst of the family. The two photos from 1975 are taken in front of her paintings of Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. Ursula Reuter left Germany and a promising career to marry a Danish artist, have children and settle down in the countryside. Her art springs from this source of feminine everyday life and dilemma. She had to be either a mother or an artist, which left her on the margins of the art world.

The two artists show how the mother is situated outside (art) society in the 1970s. As such, they seem to articulate a situation close to the 1961 Social Democratic program. When we re-visit the 1977 program from the Social Democrats, it becomes clear that it is all ideology, as these living female artists tell a different story of women and mothers in the decade. As mothers, women were not full citizens, but placed outside a society consisting of men.

In the 1990s we in fact obtain an answer to the question, ‘What is a nation?’ The concept of the nation in art during this decade relates to globalization, where nation signifies a cultural community, and not necessarily one connected with a nation-state. However, throughout the year 2001, Gallery Rhizom in Århus had a special feature on national identity. Under the label ‘Danish-ness’, the gallery invited artists of various ethnic origins, some living in Denmark some not, to make a statement. The different shows questioned, doubted and ironised the concept of the Danish nation. Colonel (Thierry Geoffroy), a French artist, in danishair.dk made an anthropological field study in which he asked Danes what they regarded as true Danish-ness. Quite often, the flag came up as a symbol of Denmark. And Eric R. Fajardo, in a comparative study, showed his photographs of houses from the Third World facing Danish allotments, which the Danes usually regard as signs of
unique, ‘true’ and traditional Danish culture. In different ways, these examples both construct and deconstruct the nation, leaving us with an idea of the nation similar to Bhabha’s as a de-centred community of cultural identification.

In this light, it seems understandable that the Social Democrats, in their 1992 program, view it as a necessity to preserve Danish identity; yet it seems odd that they think it possible. If we turn to our previous analysis of the Social Democratic programs, it appears that to address the question of the nation the way Gallery Rhizom does, is to make the same presuppositions about society as the Social Democrats did in 1977. To ask the question, ‘What is Danish-ness?’, is like asking, ‘What is a Dane?’ It presupposes that the Danish society consists of equal citizens, men and women, and as the 1992 program proclaims, that they are all Danes, with a common national identity beyond gender. This line of thinking suggests sameness. The gallery may have wanted to take ethnicity into account as difference, only to leave out other differences. We could rightly ask, ‘What about gender?’

What is a family? It is now possible to obtain an answer from the male artists. They hold a secure position within the institution, and with no risk, they can raise questions about family. They merely take new territory when they pose questions about masculinity and the father’s role in parenting. Claus Carstensen shows a modern father’s problems in his relations with his daughter. In CIZ (i.e. Claus vis-à-vis Zoe) from 2001, Carstensen is obviously under the gaze of the Other. The demands on his masculinity as a father are formulated through the cartoon picture over Zoe’s head, which functions as her speech bubble. It reads, ‘Dad?’ – ‘Yes, I recognize him.’ – ‘He’s always just a great, big, strong, clean-limbed American, who picks me up in his arms.’ She is teasingly laughing at him. She obviously holds the power over him. Now, even though this painting expresses doubts about the hegemonic status of the male subject, it is still an indication of the male artist having conquered new territory. The same pattern applies to Jakob Ørsted in his booklet (2003) More than pussy and football – 9 manuals to expand your masculinity, in which he suggests, with great humour, how to get further than the traditional masculine ideals. Those ideals are the action hero, the monk, the knight, the man of science, the businessman, the romantic, the dandy and the worker. The new man must take care of his relations with the family: his girlfriend/wife, their relationship, his children, his parents, his home. Where ‘pussy and football’ define traditional masculine control over and relations between gender and nation, ‘more than’ simply points to the newly found land: the family.

Because they are marginalized in the 1970s, women as mothers enable a society of men, though there is no speaking of nation. Women hold the family together and are thus invisible. In the 1990s, women continue to be invisible, and gender is not visible in art until the family is articulated through the father, that is, when men start questioning their masculinity. Thus, the nation is constructed in art as male artists question their masculinity. Men become the point from which it is possible to ask about both the nation and the family.

What is a nation?

In our investigation of the construction of nation and family, we attempt to avoid a futile declamation of the nation as either dead or dying or even stronger than ever. It now seems possible to restate Ernest Renan’s classical question ‘What is a nation?’; As we re-phrase Renan’s question in a gender perspective, it turns out that to argue whether the nation is dead or alive is to discuss the question in the wrong manner. We have shown here that the nation is changing and of varying importance. In art as in political ideology, the nation does not become important until the 1990s. But how does it change? Initially, it is constituted through mothers who represent the family and by
men who represent society. Later on, it is constituted by citizens in society and finally, it is
constituted by individuals who represent the nation. Art underlines the conclusions of the analysis,
however, it questions the chronology. This supports Chatterjee’s insight that politics are culturally
embedded and as shown in our analysis defined by gender, in that, different constructions of family
make different nations possible. Our gender perspective further underlines the fact that masculinity
lies at the very core of our thinking of nation, that this is explicit in art and, as we have seen,
implicit in the political programs.

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