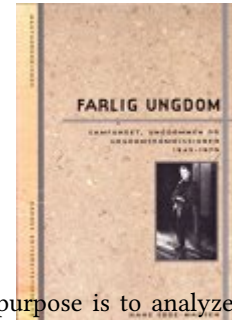


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alf Hans Sode-Madsen. *Farlig Ungdom. Samfundet, Ungdommen og Ungdomskommissionen 1945-1970*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2003. 242 pp. ISBN 978-87-7934-041-1.

Reviewed by Sissel Bjerrum (University of Southern Denmark)
Published on H-Skand (September, 2003)



What was the point in making a youth commission in the year of 1945? Was it a reward to the heroic youth of the resistance movement? Or was it a way to pacify the dangerous youth with machineguns in their hands?

During the German occupation Denmark, primarily young people were engaged in sabotage and the distribution of illegal papers. These young people were later celebrated, during the national frenzy of the days of liberation. But they were also feared, because they were thought to have enjoyed the dangerous and wild life of the underground. Armed young men simply did not fit into the picture of a normal life, and a peaceful Denmark.

The youth of May 1945 dreamed of a “new heaven and a new sky,” and the lowering of the electoral age to at least 21. In the immediate period after the liberation, however, no such political change was happening. Instead, a commission was set up to look into the special social problems of youth.

Hans Sode-Madsen wishes to look into an interesting development after 1945, in which youth become a new and special category in Danish society. Here he identifies a vacuum in Danish historical research in this area. During the postwar period, youth became something special, and therefore were warranted special attention by the rest of society: hence, the establishment of the Youth Commission. The author has set out to explain how the commission came into being, what tasks it accomplished, and the results of its work. He also aims to describe the political support base of the Commission, and larger society’s role in its development.

There are two main objectives of this book: the study of youth itself, and of the Youth Commission. *Farlig ungdom* is part of a research project on Democracy and

Power in Denmark, whose main purpose is to analyze Danish democracy. Perhaps due to this, Sode-Madsen has a tendency to forget, or hide, his first theme of “youth,” behind an analysis of the administrative history of the Youth Commission, throughout the book. I will return to this point later in the review.

The first part of *Farlig ungdom* describes events surrounding the creation of the Youth Commission. Throughout the political landscape of Denmark, there was a consensus that something needed be done for youth, and in particular Danish Social-Democratic Youth, who’d left their mark on political developments. The main areas of interest for the Commission were: education, jobs, leisure, housing, the right to vote, and an overall concern with teaching democratic values.

The second part of the book is about the early years of the commission. This section shows how the commission struggled to assert itself, but their efforts were often in vain due to unrealistic proposals, political reluctance and power struggles between its members, and other parts of the administration. Nonetheless, the Commission managed to document important social problems, especially the hopeless situation of housing, and the general fear of “peace depression.”

The problems the Youth Commission confronted are further examined in the third and last parts of the book. Hans Sode-Madsen also uses these sections to show that, even though the proposals of the Commission were not immediately followed, many of their projects were implemented later, when the government had acquired more wealth. Of particular interest in these sections, is the chapter about the great youth poll, which was completed in 1952. The poll asked, ‘what did young people do in their spare time?’ Results revealed that movies, music

and dance were the favorite activities of the young. The Commission did not think that youth deserved its bad reputation. In the first years following the occupation, the spare time of young people had been a great theme. Young people were “hanging around,” reading cheap literature, and watching trashy movies. This early debate was quite moralizing and condemnatory. But by 1952 the picture has changed. Young people were still watching movies and reading cheap novels— but now their behavior was being explained in psychological and pedagogical terms. If young people had the choice, they would choose the valuable books and movies. And if young people had social problems, these should be seen as a reflection of the limited possibilities society offered.

Overall, *Farlig ungdom* is written well, and in a straightforward language. However, Hans Sode-Madsen has a tendency to comment on the historical events and positions from a contemporary perspective. In one instance he uses Anette Warring’s book on *German-girls during Occupation and Post War Purge* (1998), to criticize Grete Hartman’s *The Girls They Left Behind*, which was published in 1946 (p. 195). In another context, such a criticism might have been o.k., but here it doesn’t bring us any closer to an understanding of how authorities looked

upon the girls, and what they therefore chose to do about them. Instead, the criticism is just annoying.

Unfortunately, Sode-Madsen’s book is not as “dangerous” as its cover suggests. A great deal of attention is given to power struggles between the Commission and other parts of the administration. The focus on administrative power struggles is not a new or unexpected approach, but one which draws from the project on Democracy and Power in Denmark. The concluding chapter does not give us any further insight regarding how and why “youth” became a new social category. The book’s strength lies in its analysis of how the Youth Commission came into being, and how it worked. These sections are very detailed. The more interesting but less developed subject Sode-Madsen places on the table should be researched further by other scholars. This, of course, is the subject of “Farlig ungdom”—dangerous youth.

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-skand>

Citation: Sissel Bjerrum. Review of Sode-Madsen, Alf Hans, *Farlig Ungdom. Samfundet, Ungdommen og Ungdomskommissionen 1945-1970*. H-Skand, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8091>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.