

In Search of the Keys to a Biographical analysis of Bodil Koch, the Controversial Danish Minister during the Cold War 1950 – 1968
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American Minister of Foreign Affairs, John Foster Dulles, and the Danish Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, Bodil Koch, NATO conference, Copenhagen May 1958:

World famous is this photo from the NATO conference in Copenhagen 1958, showing the Danish Minister Bodil Koch sharply criticizing US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles both for the aggressive US foreign politics in Asia, and for Dulles' personal McCarthyist pursuit of political enemies in USA. Not being a communist herself (Koch was a Lutheran Protestant and a liberal Social Democrat), Koch as a Minister felt an obligation to criticise her colleague though she represented one of the smallest nations of the NATO-alliance, being a hostess, too. Wearing an evening gown, string of pearls, brandishing cigar, finger raised, she remonstrated vehemently. His reaction and expression was one of surprise and consternation, apparently asking: Was she a man or a woman, a friend or a foe of NATO? He was disconcerted, flabbergasted and astounded. The photo was circulated throughout the world's media. Precisely and characteristically, it introduces the portrait of the controversial Bodil Koch.

Female Political Success and Impact

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The Danish intellectual Bodil Koch (1903-1972), university educated with a degree as one of the first female theologians in DK, was a mother of 5 children.

* In 1941, she lost the one-year-old daughter who died from a rare blood disease. She and her husband decided to repress their loss and grief, and never talk about the little girl or her death. As a consequence, BK gave up the role of housewife starting to engage in public debate and the struggle against Nazi Germany's occupation of DK. The well-versed in German academic BK appeared as a courageous and never-ending challenger towards the suppressors.

* During the war 'Mrs Professor Hal Koch' turned herself into a high-profile public political intellectual mobilizing that nation-wide feminist Resistance Movement thus becoming a publicly known personality. After the war she became a Social Democrat and a critic of

* The Western NATO as well as of the Communist East – and of her own party members. Nevertheless, in 1950 she was appointed as the first female Minister of Ecclesiastical and Cultural Affairs in the world and the third female Minister in Denmark. She was a Minis-

ter from 1950-68, the last two years as the Minister of Culture. Thus, she was a member of the Danish Government during 18 years of an important period of the cold war.

* She was known to be far more than a Minister because she acted as a committed humanist, feminist and a political provocateur on the national and international scene. Making a solitary approach to politics, she wanted to thaw the cold war out instead of freezing and making it ice-bound; she wanted to pave the way for a dialogue between people and nations on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

It was part of her plan to act like a public intellectual, especially within foreign affairs wanting to be nationally and internationally heard and listened to. She succeeded.

* But she was never appointed as a Minister of Foreign Affairs. In her days, she pleased her constituents, but provoked her fellow socialist Ministers. Her social liberal visions and thinking were later suppressed and marginalized in Danish national history. Why was it so?

As a feminist, * Bodil Koch had organized a new women's movement during the period of German occupation of 1940-45. The aim was to create a new political interest for women of all ideologies and classes, increasing female parliamentary representation. As a Minister, * she modernized the Danish state church, legalized access for women to public positions, insisted on humanist tolerance within the framework of ministry and service, and supported modern art and advanced culture. As a politician she was engaged with foreign * affairs, she paved the way for an internationally susceptible, frank and courageous dialogue which was controversial in the light of Denmark's position as a NATO-member, geographically close to USSR. Furthermore, she played the role as a public intellectual insisting on public debates on modernism, technology and controversial foreign affairs against the wish of her own Social Democratic Party. Bodil Koch was an enquiring spirit, determined in her constant questioning; as an honest intellectual she raised issues of humanistic * tolerance re-ordering the socialist welfare discursive thinking. This made her a popular political personality, but her insisting engagement was a thorn in the flesh of her male political colleagues.

Two Clashing views on Bodil Koch

Being a public intellectual provocateur synchronously as being a responsible Minister, she was an enigma. For this reason, she has been awkwardly placed in the official history.

* The biography, *To The Point. An Incisive Portrait of Bodil Koch* (Possing 2007) seeks answers to the conundrum she left behind her: Was she an intuitive, impulsive political clown that was not a real politician as some claimed? Or was she one of the most intelligent and influential Danish politicians of the 20th century as others have maintained?

* And was she the only female of the Parliament? The new research shows that she was

both, deliberately developing social liberal visions, and at the same time offering an alternative intellectual role of a modern politician in the post-war democracy of Denmark.

Sources

Her unpublished manuscripts combined with electronic sources from the Danish Broadcasting and TV showing her talent as a rhetorician, interviews with her contemporary fellows and enemies, newspapers, letters, paintings and photos document this paradoxical conclusion. Most of the private correspondence from and for her was burned by her or her family, thus missing.

How to understand her?

Now, I will argue how theoretical inspirations from P Bourdieu (1986), J Scott (1992) and E Said (1992) paved the way for the understanding of Bodil Koch's dual role as a public visionary intellectual, *and* a focused, responsible political figure:

In May 1958, * the painter Kirsten Kjær made this portrait of Bodil Koch claiming that she painted 'the character of her soul': For me, the portrait with the focused look, the explosion of colours – but also with the holes in the body and the missing hands, gives a key to the understanding of the dual position of a strongly engaged woman on the one hand, and on the other hand a doubting, questioning, provoking spirit lacking the means to act.

In an odd way, this portrait became an icon of the interpretation and the construction of the biographical portrait of BK: It should not be organised as a chronological biography from cradle to grave. The obvious reasons for this were four: *firstly* the recognition that BK's life had taken more than one direction, as a housewife, as a politician & minister, as a public intellectual, as a feminist, as an advanced art interpreter, and as an enquiring believer and spirit. *Secondly*, BK's childhood or the milieu in which she grew up were not the places where I would find the explanations for her public success or impact. *Thirdly*, sources for a reconstruction of her private life were nearly non-existing. *Fourthly*, I wanted to understand and explain her dual public position, not to make a pure or a panegyric life depiction. The explanations of her public political performance had to be sought out in a combination of her particular talents and a series of events in her adult life, events instigated by others or fate, and over which she had no control. Thus, I abandoned a hermeneutic reading my way 'into' BK, and I left the idea of a chronological biography.

A polyphonic portrait

Instead, I took inspiration from Bourdieu's now classic article on the biographical illusion, * *L'Illusion Biographique* (1986), questioning the concept of coherence in the life of the protagonist. This supported my theory about the ambiguous and paradoxical aspect in an un-

derstanding of BK. The reconstruction and understanding of her life was not to be structured in a logical-chronological order. Further inspired by narrative theorist's insight into the way in which narratives are read prospectively but are understood retrospectively, I abandoned the idea that the direction in her life was controlled by the end of life, by death. This conventional biographical understanding would not open for an explanation of the paradoxes of BK's life and political oeuvre. It became clear to me that the fact that BK's life took a number of directions, overlapping and contradicting each other, was the plot and the polyphonic 'logic' of her life. The biography on her would have to be written accordingly, not in form of a complete cradle-to-grave biography but as a focused, polyphonic portrait. Four main narratives: The internationalist, the feminist, the advanced cultural intellectual, the responsible Minister of Eccl. & Cult. Affairs.

Naïvity as a guiding principle for experience

BK's many unpublished lectures and manuscripts, her publications, and the media reactions to her political discourse indicated that there were a number of lines in her thinking. These spanned and combined 20th century extreme ideologies in the Howsbawnian sense: Elements of liberalism, socialism, Protestantism, feminism, humanism and some conservatism were to be found in her remaining texts. It did not prove possible to find a meaningful interpretative framework for the BK rendering of these ideologies, not even by viewing her as someone who reconciled dichotomies.

* Until, inspired by the American social constructivist Joan Scott and a Finnish historian Marianne Liljeström, I asked the simple question: "What did BK's subjective visions, and ambitions express?" Scott identified "experience as the process by which subjectivity is constructed" (Scott 1992). Now, it was possible to see how, through her political activities,

* BK had taken an extremely purposive stand to maintain 'naïvity' as a guiding principle in the democratic process: She wanted to make herself useful to her community and in the modern democracy by repeatedly turning things upside down, by posing intellectual, banal and thereby naïve questions. Her political incentive was *not* the desire for power. It was the desire to affect public discourse. Thus, she held Hannah Arendtian view of democracy in modernity which emphasises democracy in constant motion and changing as ideal.

At this point I understood why BK was able to remain a position as minister for 18 years in succession and under 4 prime ministers, irregardless of ministerial responsibility and harsh criticism of her own government members. Her performative endeavour was to make herself the intellectual minister who re-created democracy every day. Thus, she embodied a different kind of politics.

The public intellectual

This, however, entailed another analytical enigma to be pursued: Namely how come she was able to place herself in this dual position and maintain it? The conventional understanding of the intellectual critic's role in the state is that he/she is and should be independent of power. Without independence, no exposures of challenge to that power.

* E Said (*The Public Intellectual*, 2003) made a clear distinction between the intellectual critic and the responsible power brokers/the Establishment as irreconcilable positions. Having united these positions in her 18 year service as government minister during the Cold War, BK should *not* be seen as someone who surmounted or re-interpreted 20th century extreme ideologies and developed a systematic new political thinking. How could she function as an agent provocateur in relation to the power to which she herself was responsible?

BK was neither to be seen as a new-thinking theorist nor a pragmatic politician. She should rather be understood as the one-off who insisted on using her intellectual position in tandem with keeping her ministerial responsibility by playing on and playing with fragments of the existing ideologies interpreting them in new ways. Being aware of the consequences – that her superiors had to set limits to her power and influence – she assumed the dual position: intellectual critic of and responsible minister for the same government.

* Already during her first days as a minister, she presented herself from the podium of the parliament as a “thinking person with the duty to stay anti-authoritarian”. The reason why she stayed in that dual role as an intellectual provocateur and a responsible minister was that she quickly became the biggest vote-catcher of the Social Democratic Party. The party could not afford to sack her from her post or expel her from the party, as others demanded on more than one occasion. On the other hand, nor could any of her 4 Prime Ministers afford to give her one of the most powerful posts – that of Minister for Foreign Affairs – as she permanently insisted on her intellectual independence. She wanted the politician to be a pioneer, not a weathercock. She lived her political life on a diet of opposites. When she left the post of minister in 1968, she told a TV interviewer that from the very beginning of her political career she had had one wish: “And that is to retain my naïveté in the original sense of the word, to be myself – from the inside”.

Conclusions

In the making of this dual role as an intellectual critic of authorities *and* a responsible Minister, she claimed politics in a democracy to be far more than a paralysing pragmatism.

* A parliament politician should not lose sight of new visions in the constantly changing modern society but keep alive a naïve ambition of questioning and dreaming.