

A FORAY INTO FOLK HIGH SCHOOL IDEOLOGY



10 Lessons from
The Folk High School

Ove Korsgaard

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Ove Korsgaard
Translated by John Mason

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Series editors: Sara Skovborg Mortensen, Michael Schelde,
Andreas Harbsmeier

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A Foray into Folk High School Ideology

If truth be told, it is extraordinary that the Danish *folk high school* should be celebrating its 175th anniversary. There is a world of difference between 1844 and 2019. The *folk high school* came into being in an epoch so far removed from ours, and for many years, its purpose within a social framework that was so different from that in which we now live. It might seem against all the odds, then, that the *folk high school* should have survived the massive upheavals Danish society has undergone – from being structured around the peasantry to becoming industrialised and later yet being transformed into a modern post-industrial society.

This might suggest that the *folk high school* manages both to adapt to changing times and to transcend the temporal. This may, in fact, be the secret of its success. In any case, it is certain that over the generations *folk high schools* have given many young people in Denmark an experience for life and fascinated many people right across the globe.

The history of the *folk high school* is inseparable from that of N.F.S. Grundtvig. He is regarded, rightly, as its father and in time has developed into a legend. There are countless examples of his name and his ideas continuing to resonate in high places all around the world, most recently when the prime ministers of the Nordic countries were invited to the White House for a state dinner in 2016. There, President Obama spoke of the significance of Grundtvig for the American civil rights movement, without which he would himself never have been able to rise to the position of president.

The civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s was heavily influenced by a *folk high school* in Tennessee by the name of the Highlander Folk School. It was established in 1932 by Myles Horton after his visit in 1930–31 to a series of *folk high schools* based on Grundtvig's ideas. The Highlander Folk School mentioned by Obama in his speech was hugely significant for the struggle of black Americans for equal rights. Among many others, Rosa Parks, Pete Seeger and Martin Luther King Jr. had attended Horton's school. Obama's reference to the link between Grundtvig and the Highlander Folk School indicates that Grundtvig continues to inspire people to fight

for “equal dignity in croft and castle”, to quote one of Grundtvig’s famous songs.

Key Concepts

In Denmark, the act which currently governs folk high schools dates from 2006, and it states that the schools offer teaching and togetherness through courses, “whose primary aim is individual enlightenment for life, enlightenment of the people and democratic edification”. *

The three core concepts – enlightenment for life, enlightenment of the people and democratic edification – can be regarded as overlapping circles, each of which emphasises something different. Enlightenment for life concerns the personal and existential questions that each of us is faced with. Enlightenment of the people relates to the historical and cultural traditions that make up the background of the Danes as a people. Democratic edification refers to the foundation of the political system that exists in Denmark today.

This model not only provides us with the primary aims of the *folk high school* in 2019, but can also be used to illustrate three principal currents in the ideological history of the *folk high school*. Throughout its 175-year history, there has never been consensus about a single ideology, though at times there have been ideas that have been on the verge of achieving hegemonic status. But only on the verge. For there have always been competing ideas in the

* Translator’s note on the three key concepts: “These concepts are central to the ideas informing folk high schools as Grundtvig conceived them, but they are untranslatable. ‘Enlightenment’ involves the bringing of light and understanding to mind and spirit. It is not only knowledge or learning, for it includes the whole being. The words ‘folk’ and ‘folkelig’ in Danish belong to a tradition for which the English language has no equivalence. The Danish ‘folk’ or ‘people’ is all-inclusive, while in English, ‘the people’ would be ‘them’ or even, maybe, the lower classes. The word ‘folkelig’ could be rendered as ‘popular’ but that again has divisive or discriminatory overtones. For Danes, ‘folkelig’ indicates something that applies to all members of the ‘folk’ and it conveys a warmth of shared belonging close to the now-famous ‘hygge’. Finally, ‘dannelse’, which is sometimes translated using the German ‘Bildung’ or even ‘education’, includes the whole person. It might best be compared to ‘edification’, with its etymology in ‘building’ and its sense of moral and intellectual improvement.”

offing. Some schools have placed their main emphasis on matters of personal and existential concern, others on national and cultural issues and others again on social and political ideas.

It is by no means the case that any individual *folk high school* continues to build upon a particular set of ideas throughout its history. Typically, a *folk high school* will change course, moving, for example, from a focus on national and cultural issues to adopting political and social ideas as its ideological base. Or vice versa. This can be due to a change in leadership, but as a rule such change mirrors major shifts in the social context in which *folk high schools* find themselves and to which they have to relate.

The importance of context for the ideological orientation of *folk high schools* has been highlighted by, for example, the theologian and philosopher K.E. Løgstrup, who in *Højskolen til debat (The Folk High School up for Debate)* (1961), wrote an article with the telling title “Højskolens nye fronter” (“New fronts for the *folk high school*”). In it, he points out that “these fronts are not the same as in the previous centuries”¹ – in other words, the 19th century. The *folk high school* was indeed facing quite different challenges in 1960 than it had a hundred years earlier. Løgstrup is taking up an important – if often overlooked – point here. The history of the *folk high school* has from time to time seen shifts in its battlefronts, which have had extensive significance for the ideology underpinning the *folk high school*.

The changes and shifts that have been influential here provide the background for the question that has been posed throughout the history of the *folk high school*: What is it that characterises the *true folk high school* or the *pure folk high school*? Is there an ideological core shared by all *folk high schools* regardless of their changing focus? This question forms a leitmotif throughout this volume and will from time to time come to the surface.

It is important to stress that this volume is *not* about the ideas and motives lying behind *students’* wish to apply for a particular *folk high school*, and nor is it about the degree to which they may have been influenced by its ideology. There are countless letters and travel journals,

in which students have written about their motivation for going to a *folk high school* and about what they have got out of it. Some of these letters have been published, but no history of the *folk high school* has yet been written based on experiences and evidence garnered from students over these 175 years. This volume does not fill that gap.

The reason for calling this article a ‘foray’ is that the limitations of this volume permit me to do no more than provide a short and simplified survey of the complex history of the *folk high school*. This complexity can be seen in the many different terms that have been used for what we today call the *folk high school*. These include ‘peasant schools’, ‘rationalist *folk high schools*’, ‘international *folk high schools*’, ‘workers’ *folk high schools*’, ‘gymnastic *folk high schools*’, ‘sports *folk high schools*’, ‘travelling *folk high schools*’, ‘art *folk high schools*’, ‘film *folk high schools*’, ‘music *folk high schools*’, ‘meditation *folk high schools*’ and so on.

I have reduced the ideological complexity that can be seen in these various denominations by focusing on those ideas and shifts that have had *particular* significance for the way in which *folk high schools* have seen themselves at various times. And these are without question ideas for which the thinking of N.F.S. Grundtvig and – to a lesser extent – Christen Kold have provided inspiration and legitimacy. Traditionally, Grundtvig is seen as the enlightenment man and Kold as a revivalist man. Nor is this wrong, but for both of these men enlightenment and revivalism are, in reality, inseparable notions in their understanding of the mission of the *folk high school*.

In today’s Denmark, the notion of revivalism is difficult to address. While it is far easier to draw upon economic, social and technological factors as an explanation for both individual and cultural changes, alterations in consciousness surely also have to be acknowledged as being significant for both individual and collective processes of change. The word ‘revivalism’ is used both about the individual, who is ‘awoken’, and about religious, social and political revivalist movements, in which awakening is a mass phenomenon. Was the *folk high school* movement a revivalist movement? Were popular reform movements

initiated by the ‘awakened’, who set themselves in motion as a movement? Was the labour movement also initiated in this way? And what of national socialism? Was this also a movement set in motion by the ‘awakened’? And if so, what are the similarities and differences between them?

In this article, I shall use 1864, 1940 and 1968 as signal dates, each of which heralds a new form of revival or awakening that *folk high schools* were influenced by and contributed towards. This is true of the national awakening of 1864, the democratic awakening of 1940 and the awakening manifested by the youth revolution of 1968.² The book concludes with the question as to whether there is a new awakening on the way, one whose significance will be just as profound as those that preceded it.