The Rotten Banana’ fires back:
The story of a Danish discourse of inclusive rurality in the making
(14-12-2011)

Abstract: The popularity of a particular term – the Rotten Banana – has paralleled the one-sided centralisation of public services since the Danish Municipal Reform of 2007. The Rotten Banana denotes peripheral Denmark, which takes a geographically curved form that resembles a banana, and it symbolises the belief that rural areas are backward and (too) costly. This article shows how the negative connotations of rural areas have come to outweigh the positive ones and to legitimise liberal visions of the ‘sustainable’ welfare state. Whereas previous studies on the perceptions of rural dwellers have focused on the discourses of rurality that produce rural outsiders (e.g. Pratt, 1996; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; Svendsen, 2004; Munkejord, 2006), this article builds on the work of Certeau (1984) and Laclau and Mouffe (2002). Based on both quantitative and qualitative data, the study shows how, in Denmark, negative connotations and centralisation have together spurred a new and political mobilisation in many parts of the ‘banana’. Through skilful ‘consumption’, rural dwellers have adapted the alienating liberalist ‘logic of equivalence’ to their own use and produced a ‘logic of difference’, thus challenging the predominant political discourse of rurality (Woods, 2008; Cruickshank et al, 2009). As a result, the Danish Liberal government was forced to introduce a new and more inclusive rural policy in September of 2010 and grant rural dwellers a political voice in parliament.

Keywords: Political discourses of rurality, social stereotyping, political mobilisation, logic of equivalence and difference, consumption

Words: 9.139
1. Introduction

This paper begins with a true story. Recently, a young woman participated in a job-search course in the town of Tønder, located on the west coast of Denmark near the German border, in one of the most peripheral and sparsely populated municipalities in the country. The woman lives in a remote village some 20 kilometres from Tønder, near the seaside. One day, after the course had ended, she was preparing to go. Just before leaving, she remarked: “Now I’m going home to The Rotten Banana”. This incident shows how the expression ‘The Rotten Banana’ has quickly become popular in Denmark, involving symbolic violence and real impact on ‘rural performances’ (Edensor, 2006).

But what is The Rotten Banana? It is a fuzzy metaphor, which in recent years has been used in Danish media for the peripheral part of Denmark, which, geographically, takes a curved form that resembles a banana. That this banana should be ‘rotten’ stems from an increasingly widespread belief that all rural areas are backward, depopulated, demolished, deprived of infrastructure, lack employment opportunities, have ageing and poorly educated populations. In sum, rural areas are the antithesis of the ‘sustainable welfare state’, that is, the aim of ‘creating a new Denmark’ through reforms of the public sector that centralise public services to reduce costs and increase expertise and quality to meet citizens’ demands.

The political project of the sustainable welfare state thus violates Danish traditions of generalised welfare rights, as accessibility to rural dwellers requires a certain level of decentralisation. However, an increase in the negative connotations associated with rural areas has paralleled these transformations of the welfare state. In fact, an analysis of Danish media sources shows how negative terms for rural areas, such as ‘The Rotten Banana’, have steadily overtaken neutral ones since 1996, with a significant increase in 2010 that seems to, to a certain extent at least, crowd out neutral terms, such as ‘the rural districts’.

Facing alienation and centralisation, rural dwellers have formulated an alternative political project. They accept the need to cut costs and increase expertise, but they provide alternative interpretations of ‘quality’, ‘cutting costs’ and ‘citizens’ needs’. These alternatives challenge the near-hegemonic project of the sustainable welfare state to such a degree that the national politics of rural development have been corrected, more funds have been allocated and a new parliamentary council on rural matters is in the making.

An analysis of the neo-liberal centralisation and marketisation of public services from a Foucaultian perspective most often emphasises how alienation legitimises centralisation through the marginalisation or correction of an unwanted other (see e.g. Dean, 1999; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; Rose, 1996, 1999)\(^1\). However, the Danish case calls for alternative interpretations. Therefore, in line with Cruickshank et al (2009), this article builds on the framework of Laclau and Mouffe. It focuses on the transformation of a marginalising discourse (i.e., the political project of a ‘logic of equivalence’) into a discourse that

\(^1\) Analyses like these resemble Foucault’s analysis of the asylum, which produces and marginalises mad people (1961), as well as his analysis of the prison, whose panoptic structure disciplines and corrects ‘false’ behaviour (1977).
recognises the legitimacy of certain rural concerns (i.e., the political project of a ‘logic of difference’). These transformations have been generated by a myriad of power relations, including a liberal majority in parliament that is losing local (rural) votes due to its centralisation programmes, organised local resistance to centralisation initiatives and upcoming national elections.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on the discourses of rurality, followed by a statistical analysis of the frequency of prevailing terms for rural areas in the Danish public media 1996-2010. Section 3 outlines a theoretical framework that builds on the work of Laclau, Mouffe and Michel de Certeau; it shows how near-hegemonic political projects can be challenged and expanded in such a manner that they, to a certain degree, come to include alternative visions (i.e., the production of a ‘logic of difference’). Section 4 tells the story of the political project of the ‘sustainable welfare state’ and how it first legitimised centralisation through the alienation of rural dwellers and then had to enlarge its political project to include rural concerns. Finally, section 5 concludes that the Danish case and the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe provide alternative interpretations of rural positions facing neo-liberal discourses. From this position, we have reason to feel optimistic on behalf of rural dwellers in the midst of one-sided centralisation.

2. Discourses of rurality

2.1. The rural-urban divide as reflected in words

Within social constructionist-inspired research, we find many examples of how words influence human practice. This includes rural studies, which are rich on examples of discursive, or theorisation effects, termed the effects of discourses of rurality (e.g., Pratt 1996), discourses on rurality (e.g., Munkejord, 2006), or rurality discourses (e.g., Zografos, 2007). In the specific context of the construction of rural policies, this paper will pay particular attention to political discourses of rurality, much in line with Michael Woods’ account of the construction of a political discourse of rurality under New Labour 1997-2007, significantly impacted by critical citizens and lobby groups belonging to rural Britain (Woods, 2008, 2010; see also Munkejord, 2006 and Cruickshank et al, 2009). At the supra-national research, we find Richardson’s (2000) study on the establishment of a EU discourse of rural spatiality that has dictated a “new European regional political economy” in which ‘rurality’ and ‘peripherality’ have become key concepts in a Europeanisation process that has cities and regions as the “principal units” (Richardson, 2000: 66).

Critiques of definitions that take rurality for granted have been prominent within rural geography since the mid-1980s (Urry, 1984; Bradley and Lowe, 1984; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Cloke, 2006; Edensor, 2006; Halfacree, 2006; Woods, 2006, 2010), not least spurred by Chris Philo’s (1992) now classical paper on “Neglected rural geographies”. In “Discourses of rurality”, Pratt (1996: 75) sums up the rural definition (stigmatization, neglect) problem by arguing that the word ‘rurality’ contains a multiplicity of meanings that constitute reality and warns against taking “essentialist notions of the rural” for granted. Thus, in line with Halfacree’s (2006) advice to study the dynamic relationship between rural localities, rural
livelyhoods and representations of the rural, increasing attention has been directed towards rural representations and realities across narrow sectors and scientific disciplines. A recent example is Woods’ book *Rural* (2010), the aim of which is to shed light on “representations of rurality and rural space within academic, policy, media and lay discourses [as well as] the material effects of these ideas in local localities, and in the ways in which these ideas are performed through the everyday practices of rural life” (Woods, 2010: 12).

[Figure 1 here]

In certain ways, the urban-rural relationship in Western countries mirrors the relationship between ‘the West and the Rest’. For example, in his work on the theoretical effects stemming from a particular development discourse, the anthropologist Johannes Fabian (1983) has discussed “allochronic discourses”, that is, Western scientific discourses that place non-Western peoples and cultures in other (preceding) times and, in this way, construe them as less developed than the peoples and cultures of the scientists themselves. In such influential and widespread macro-historical interpretations, the word ‘development’ implicitly communicates that the populations of the world can be divided into two halves: the successful and the less successful. It literally reveals them as being in various stages of the world development, in accord with the original evolutionist ladder metaphor invented in the 19th c. Expressions such as ‘The Rotten Banana’ seem to reflect a similar relationship between urban and rural in a country such as Denmark. Such terminology mirrors the widespread belief that there is a gap between a developed ‘inner’ population – the urban population – and an underdeveloped ‘outer’ population that is ‘lagging behind’ (i.e., the rural population living in what is now termed ‘Outskirt-Denmark’ or The Rotten Banana). As such, it exerts, to a certain degree, an impact on concrete rural politics and policies – and rural realities.

2.2. Discourses of rurality in Denmark

Similar to many other European countries, rural Denmark has experienced a demographic, economic and cultural decline since World War II. The Rotten Banana seems to reflect what may be the last stage in this decline. It is characterised by depopulation, loss of work places, as well as loss of cultural and symbolic capital.

We can trace this development to shifts in rural-urban terminology. Thus, in a 19th century dominated by rural civic movements – most prominently, agricultural cooperative movements – the rural population became increasingly more prosperous, more educated and more politically active. The culmination of the rise of the Danish rural population was the introduction of parliamentarianism and the subsequent take-over of power in 1901 by the farmers’ party, The Left Reform Party (*Venstrefremspartiet*), and then later by the

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2 In the book, Woods distinguishes between types of discourses of rurality: academic, political and policy, media, and lay. See also Munkejord (2006) for a similar typology and Cruickshank et al (2009: 73) for ‘non-discursive’ logics stemming from global trends “outside the analysed discourses” – a term that is borrowed from Fairclough (1995).

3 Thus, science has constructed the (non-Western) other by institutionalising and promoting “an allochronic discourse according to which the other never occupies the same historical time as the Western observer” (Fabian, 1983: 143.).
present liberal party, Left (Venstre). Thus, in a self-organising process during the second half of the 19th century, the rural population (largely consisting of farmers) became increasingly self-conscious, which was reflected in terms such as the ‘lifting up’ of the rural population, the ambition of establishing cooperatives, free schools and so-called folk high schools (general education for young farmers), as well as the growing ambition of achieving political influence. One of the pioneers within the cooperative dairy movement remembers: “It was a remarkable time in the late 1870s and 80s. At that time, something happened within Danish agriculture. A great movement broke through. If we ask the old folks now, they say that it came like a hurricane. [The] cooperative idea broke through – the people themselves wanted to have control over the production. The cooperative dairies turned up everywhere” (Therkelsen 1929: 1).4

However, the nature and status of the cooperative movements changed during the 1960s and was reflected in a significant shift in rural terminology. It was a time in which the national economic importance of agriculture was quickly receding and in which significant rural-urban migration had started.5 As in many other Western countries, a whole ‘family’ of words was imported from the USA. In Denmark, this new productionalist discourse of rurality was used by a group of modern farmers. The terminology was mainly based on key words that were taken from agricultural economics, such as ‘development’, ‘structural changes’, ‘vertical integration’, ‘rationalisation’ and ‘centralisation’ (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2004: 127-30). However, agriculture was no longer “the most important net foreign exchange earning occupation”, as farmers previously had proudly declared. Thus, during the 1960s, being ‘rural’ gradually changed its socio-economic meaning. A rapid and steady decline in economic, cultural and symbolic capital occurred. Urban thinking (cultural urbanisation) was adopted along with modern-urban business organisation, as revealed, for example, by large-scale centralisation within the cooperative movements.

Partly as a counter-reaction, a second discourse was established during the 1970s. It sought to reintroduce the idea of ‘the good, natural life in the countryside’ and thus regain the general recognition of rural lifestyles. This transition is similar to what occurred in many other Western countries, such as the UK, where an “agricultural community discourse” promoting narrow agricultural interests was gradually challenged by an “environmentalist discourse”, beginning in the mid-1970s (Woods, 1997). In Denmark, the new terminology – which can be summarised as the local community discourse – was primarily applied and promoted by new non-agricultural elites in the villages, who were often well-educated young people from the cities. Similar to the agriculturalist vocabulary, the non-agriculturalist vision of rurality was based on academic terms that were mainly taken from the social sciences, such as ‘local community’, ‘local democracy’, ‘active citizenship’, ‘culture’, ‘environment’ and ‘natural development’ (Svendsen, 2004).

However, the so-called local community movement quickly receded. During the first 10 years of the new millennium, the centralisation discourse of the 1960s has become near-

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4 For more details, see Svendsen & Svendsen 2000; Chloupkova et al. 2003; Svendsen & Svendsen 2004.
5 During the German occupation of 1940-45, there had been a significant urban-rural migration in Denmark. However, a couple of years after the war this trend quickly disappeared.
hegemonic. Recently, this discourse has been supplemented by the discourse of what centralisation in many ways seeks to abolish: the so-called ‘Outskirt-Denmark’ or *Udkantsdanmark*. In this manner, the Danish rural population (approximately 37 percent of the entire population) has become a kind of ‘inner’ third world population that is lagging behind the rest of the population.

This new trend can be seen in rural policies, where closing down rural schools, hospitals, libraries, etc. has prevailed since the municipal reforms of January 2007, as well as in an increase in negative terminology, such as the peripheral areas (*yderområde*), the outskirt areas (*udkantsområde*), ‘Outskirt-Denmark’ (*Udkantsdanmark*) and the name that contains the most negative connotations and has spurred most rural resentment: The Rotten Banana (*den rådne banan*). Today, no one praises ‘the small community’, at least not in public.

### 2.3. Rise of a new discourse of rurality: *Udkantsdanmark*

As mentioned, the term The Rotten Banana was seen for the first time in print in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in January 2006. According to the article entitled “Subdenmark: Denmark out of balance”, the Danish government’s latest white book had discussed “A Denmark in balance”, but “the reality is that Denmark is getting more and more out of balance, and the researchers talk about ‘The Rotten Banana’ [which is] the peripheral areas without medium or larger cities in the vicinity” (From & Pihl-Andersen, 2006).

To obtain a quantitative picture of this decline, we may look at the emergence of what may be seen as a new discourse of rurality in the Danish public media – a discourse containing strongly negative connotations, and which can be summarised as ‘Outskirt-Denmark’ – *Udkantsdanmark* – as this term clearly has been the dominant one since 2010. For these purposes, we have used the Infomedia electronic database, which contains most Danish public media sources, both printed and electronic.

Figure 3 shows the incidence of four negative terms for rural areas in the database. The sources that have been selected are the 7 nationwide newspapers, which have some of the largest circulations in Denmark, and which all appear in the database back to 1996 (except

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6 If villages under 5000 inhabitants are included, cf. Danish Ministry of the Interior (2009).

7 A Facebook group with the aim of closing down *Udkantsdanmark* as quickly as possible has even been established (“Så luk dog Udkantsdanmark”).

8 By ‘researchers’ is probably meant researchers from the Danish Centre of Rural Research and Development (CFUL). One of the authors was at that time employed at the former centre and is able to confirm that one of the researchers claimed that he actually coined the term. Moreover, it has come to the author’s knowledge that the term was inspired by two similar geographic terms from urban sociology, both without negative connotations. These are the ‘Golden Banana’, consisting of the conurbation lying between Valencia and Genoa on the Mediterranean coast, and the ‘Blue Banana’ (also termed the Hot Banana, or European Megalopolis), referring to the banana-shaped Western European backbone, which historically has been the economic locomotive of Western Europe and includes important cultural and economic metro poles from England to Northern Italy (e.g., London, Brussels, Frankfurt am Main, Milan and Genoa).
for one that appears from 1997). This sampling was done for methodological reasons in order to obtain a representative picture of the development.9

It is quite remarkable how these negative terms have become popular in the Danish printed press over the course of a single decade. They indicate the formation of a new discourse of rurality linked to the establishment of a liberal government in 2001 – that is, the discourse we summarise as *Udkantsdanmark*. Also note that the negative terminology has significantly increased in the year 2010, including *Udkantsdanmark*, which has become one of the most common ways to conceptualize sparsely populated rural areas. Negative terms should be compared with three other terms that we assessed as being ‘neutral’: rural areas (*landområder*), rural districts (*landdistrikter*) and in the countryside (*på landet*) – see Figure 4.10 As can be seen, there has been no increase in ‘neutral’ terminology; rather, there has been stagnation.

To illustrate the relationship between negative and neutral terminology in Danish newspapers more clearly, Figure 5 aggregates the data and shows the development, using an index value of 100 in 1996. Again, we see the dramatic increase in the use of negative terminology (in particular *Udkantsdanmark*) in 2010. In fact, the absolute numbers reveal that, in 1996, the four negative terms in total were only applied 74 times, which is 4.3% of all occurrences (all 7 terms); while in 2010 they were applied no less than 1663 times, which amounts to 45% of all occurrences (out of all 7 terms taken together).

It could be claimed that using only the 7 national newspapers as sources may lead to a skewed picture. As the large majority of sources in Infomedia only date back to 1/1 2006, we also searched all available sources 2006-2010.11 Again, the result is a clear indication of a shift in rural discourse in Denmark and, more specifically, a significant increase in negative terminology compared to neutral terminology. It seems as if neutral terminology in the public media has been somewhat displaced by negative terminology, although there also has been a slight increase in the usage of neutral terms. Thus the absolute numbers show that

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9 There are 7 more, nationwide newspapers in Denmark, however, these are issued in much smaller editions. Five of these are excluded because they cannot be traced back to 1996, namely Arbejderen (in Infomedia from 2007), Børsen (from 2006), Effektivt Landbrug (from 2007), Kristeligt Dagblad (from 2001) and Licitationen – Byggeriets dagblad (from 2007). The last two, namely Aktuelt (in 2001) and Dato (in 2007), have been closed.

10 Note that, except from the terms *på landet* (in the countryside), udkantsdanmark (Outskirts-Denmark) and *den rådne banan* (The Rotten Banana), we have for each term included both singular/plural and definite/indefinite forms, for example rural district: (1) *landdistrikt* (rural district) (2) *landdistrikt*er (rural districts) (3) *landdistriktener* (the rural districts).

11 including 14 national newspapers, 77 regional newspapers, 75 local newspapers, 190 magazines, 30 news agencies, 101 web sources, 8 radio/TV channels and 4 other sources.
negative terminology constituted 17.5% of all occurrences in 2006 (total number of all 7 terms), while it made up 48.7% in 2010 (Figure 6).

[Figure 6 here]

To summarise, in 2010, sparsely populated areas in Denmark appear bereft of any form of capital, be it human, cultural, economic or symbolic, or at least they are depicted like that in the public media where negative terms occur almost as often as neutral – something that was unthinkable 10-15 years ago. However, political mobilisation followed by an emergent discourse of rural resentment has taken shape over the last couple of years, reflected both in new ways of rural self-representation and in political action. This development leads us to the story of The Rotten Banana, which is a story of rural discontent and political mobilisation (cf. Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; Woods, 2006, 2008; Scott, 2008). What we observe is the construction of a new discourse of rurality that was invented by urbanites, largely journalists, and we see the victims of this discourse – the rural population – attempting to ‘fire back’ (contrefeux) to use Bourdieu’s (2003) expression. As will be explained in the following section, this process can be seen as an illustrative example of a political project (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) that contests one-sided centralisation and unquestioned urban power.

3. Political projects, hegemony and change

According to Laclau and Mouffe (2002: 13-14), politics is the primate of society. Politics does not determinate society, they argue, but political action institutes and changes the social order. Hence, investigations of political projects, that is, relations of political utterances, may deepen our understanding of how and why inventions like ‘The Rotten Banana’ and ‘Outskirt-Denmark’ came about in the first place and of its contemporary political and social consequences.

Political projects and antagonism

Political projects emerge out of a range of potential projects. That is, they are but one decision among others by virtue of being products of continuous negotiations – for example, when members of the Danish liberal party discuss whether centralisation or decentralisation of public services should be a part of their political program. Laclau and Mouffe term this condition ‘antagonism’, and it fosters two primary conditions: hegemony and radical subjectivity. Hegemony conceals the gaps (inconsistencies and contradictions) of a dominant political project and produces the illusion of totality, whereas radical subjectivity feeds on these gaps and formulates alternative political projects (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In the following section, we will take a closer look at this terminology to shed more light on what is presently going on in rural Denmark.

\[\text{Laclau and Mouffe thus place critique within the political project, which resembles the work of Marxists (Kerr, 1999; Sayer, 1991) and contradicts the work of poststructuralists like Foucault (1961, 1977). To him discourses are essential and unchangeable entities whereby critique must emanate from outside.}\]
Laclau (2005: 77) defines political projects as:
“[T]he unification of a plurality of demands in an equivalential chain; The constitution of an internal frontier dividing society into two camps; the consolidating of equivalential chain through the construction of a popular identity which is something qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential link”.

Hence, political projects are products of different meanings (democratic demands) combined into one unity (equivalential chain). Within this process, one meaning is turned into an empty signifier that is capable of representing the unity of all meanings (popular demand) (Op. cit.: 73-78). Liberalism is such a project. Here, the idea of ‘personal freedom’ (an empty signifier) is expanded to include heterogeneous elements, such as individual civic rights and the centralisation of public services (from rural to urban areas).

The two logics of governance

Because the construction of political projects involves antagonism – i.e., the selection and de-selection of meaning – the process divides society into insiders and outsiders. This division may take the form of either ‘a logic of equivalence’ or ‘a logic of difference’, which Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 130) distinguish as follows:
The logic of equivalence is the logic of simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasingly complexity.

Hence, a logic of equivalence marks the boundaries of a political project through negation or an emphasis on what the political project is not. Within such a logic, differences are perceived of as inconvertible with community and therefore subject to exclusion. Accordingly, a logic of equivalence tends to reduce the number of meanings that can positively be combined and signify the political project (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002: 74-85). In the terminology of Hall alternatives become the constitutive outside of the hegemonic project, since it is only through recognition of the Other, the relation to what it is not, that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term can be constructed (Hall, 1996, 4). One example is the construction of a neo-liberal project based on a logic of the Market, which alienates the alternatives of state regulation or state subsidies and thereby uses this constitutive Other to demarcate its own boundaries. A genuine social democratic project would thus become the negative reflection of a neo-liberal project.

Conversely, a logic of difference expands the number of meanings that signify the political project. It dissolves some of the subjective negations, which would mark the boundary of a ‘logic of equivalence’, and emphasises their objective differences. As these differences are positive, they may be included in the political project. Yet other antagonisms may still be perceived as negative and therefore displaced to the periphery of society, where they serve as the constitutive Other (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002: 74-85). For example, the Danish universal welfare state (as it has functioned until recently) can be said to unite different positions under the common umbrella of a political project based on citizens’ duties versus formal rights/welfare benefits on the one axis, and market versus state regulation on the other. It thus broadens the definition of community, but still legitimises its political project with references to alternative state systems, which rely more heavily on, e.g., market mechanisms.
Both logics thus produce frontiers demarcating their communities, but a logic of equivalence defines the legitimate community narrowly, where a logic of differences recognise a much broader community. Despite this difference, political projects within both regimes are subject to antagonistic forces that challenge their meanings and necessitate continuous formulations and reformulations of political projects to maintain their particular identity. Political projects are thus fluid, and their authority depends on the illusion of totality (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002: 89-91). Defining the Danish welfare state is a recurring example of these processes. It is characterised by liberals and social democrats challenging the balance between citizens’ obligations/duties and rights/welfare benefits to define their own specific political projects.

**Hegemony, totality and myths**

Political projects thus present their truths and falsehoods as given – that is, in a *naturalised* form as the ‘truth’ – and thereby establish what Laclau (2005) terms “a totalising horizon of any social orientation”, i.e., a hegemony (Op. cit.: 120-123). To glue heterogeneous meaning together and produce the illusion of totality, political projects may make use of myths.

Myths provide ‘a principal reading of a given situation’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990: 61). That is, they provide a framework for understanding a diversity of different circumstances in relation to each other without questioning the differences of these circumstances and without any contiguity between the myth and the given circumstance. One such myth could be that rural areas are backward, their populations ageing and, in sum, an economic burden on the rest of society. However, the environmental and socio-economic problems of metropoles may be equally expensive in the long run, but it takes dislocation to reveal such cracks and holes of the political project.

**Radical subjectivity, structural dislocation and reflexivity**

Radical subjectivity is the product of ‘structural dislocation’ and, as such, a producer of change. It arises when new events cannot be explained within the current frame of reference and subjects therefore come to realise the incomplete nature of the prevailing political project they hitherto have identified themselves with [??]]. They feel a gap and start searching for promising alternative solutions to their ‘identity crisis’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990). Such processes are identifiable when members of the liberal party realise that the liberal-conservative government implements reforms contradicting these members’ needs, and they react by establishing a new political party. Here, we may talk about centralisation reforms as a triggering event (see also Figure 8 for an overview of the historical development).

According to Laclau and Mouffe, *reflexivity* is a structural possibility due to the fluidity of political projects allowing subjects access to a field of discourse *in-between* political projects. However, they fail to explain from where these discursive elements emerge and how they motivate subjects (2002: 88-89). Alternatively, Butler (1993) places reflexivity in the realm of socialisation and therefore *inside* the subject. She argues that reflexive subjects arise out of prior socialisations that failed to produce totality and thereby allow subjects to recognise
alternatives. In her words, “[the] agent emerges both as the effect of prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency” (Butler, 1997: 14-15).

Members of the liberal party are hence not only socialised within the frame of liberalism; they are likewise the product of prior and parallel socialisation within, for example, regional and familial conditions. Furthermore, these conditions may motivate formulations of alternative political projects.

**Challenges, floating signifiers, legitimacy and ‘consumption’**

Yet another important question emerges if we are to reach a deeper understanding of the Danish case: how do subjects formulate alternatives that are legitimate within the frame of reference? If the alternative political project is to challenge existing political projects, it needs legitimacy within the opposition. This is, former members of the Danish liberal party in government must formulate an *alternative political project* that appeals to its existing members to challenge and change the position of the liberal party.

Certeau (1990) recognised the incompleteness of socialisations and argued that a polytheism of scattered practices survives beneath the disciplining practices of the dominant position. This *surplus of meaning* allows dominated subjects to ‘consume’ the dominant truth within their own framework (Op. cit.: 33). One example could be that the liberal government requires equal taxation of its citizens while it, at the same time, centralises public services with unequal accessibility as a result, which may lead rural dwellers to rally for decentralisation under the slogan ‘we also pay tax’. Hence, dominated subjects do not manifest themselves through their own products but rather adapt the products of the dominant position to use them for their own ‘strategic’ interest and rule (Certeau, 1984: xix). Thus, in the Danish context, former members of the liberal party may not formulate an entirely new political program but rather may feed on the program of the liberal party in a way that turns its meanings *against* itself, so to speak. These tactics include inducing new meaning into former concepts by arguing for another definition of, say, quality and equality.

This is the condition Laclau (2005) terms *floating signifiers*. Previous discussions have revealed how a political project consists of a cluster of signifiers. These signifiers, however, start floating when different subject positions start investing the same signifier with different meanings, each of which claims to be in possession of ‘the truth’. When the signifier is no longer attached to the signified – i.e., when words are no longer related to specific concepts – the political project loses meaning, and the need of a new political project becomes urgent (Op. cit.: 129-133).

Note that Laclau (2005) focused on the *constitution* of any new political project and that he took internal trustworthiness for granted while paying no attention to issues of external

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13 De Certeau refers to Foucault’s work on governmentality and recognises the totalising capability of discourses when he uses the concept of disciplining practices. From this, it follows that strategies are enacted through ‘tactics’, which are devious and dispersed practices that insinuate silent and almost invisible meaning everywhere (1984: xix). Because the present discussion builds on the work of Laclau and Mouffe, who recognize the ‘antagonistic’ condition of structures, these reactions are not perceived to be hidden.
legitimacy. However, external legitimacy is of great importance to the present study, which brings the political power of rural dwellers challenging hegemonic political projects to the fore. In this context, de Certeau offers a valuable addition to the work of Laclau by suggesting that the strategy of ‘consumption’ produces both internal and external legitimacy. For example, liberal politicians may find it difficult to argue against rural dwellers rallying against centralisation under the slogans ‘We also pay taxes’ and ‘Individual citizens’ rights also include decentralised public services’.

Responses to challenges: Two strategies
When facing such challenges, the dominant positions may choose one of two strategies:
(1) They may alienate alternative interpretations of the signifier. This process increases the boundaries dividing society into two camps and, in this way, attempts to preserve the original logic of equivalence. For example, this process may occur if liberal politicians dismiss the tax or decentralisation arguments of the rural dwellers on the grounds that, for example, the population density in rural areas is too low.
(2) They may include alternative interpretations in one of two ways: (i) They may expand the logic of equivalence possible under the banner of a new popular identity, thus admitting the legitimacy of certain concerns and needs of rural dwellers, or (ii) they may completely shift to a logic of difference, which recognises the equal importance of different political projects under a common denominator. An example of the former is the liberal-conservative policy program ‘Denmark balancing a global world’ (Danish Government, 2010), which is clearly an attempt to include the present concerns and needs of rural dwellers in government policies. An example of the latter could be a general (centralised) Danish health policy that allocates money for health services to the individual municipalities, thus allowing for a variety of local solutions that build on local values.

With this framework in mind, we will now turn to the on-going story of The Rotten Banana.

4. The story of The Rotten Banana

4.1. The ‘sustainable’ welfare state
The Rotten Banana reflects government policies designed to improve the sustainability of the welfare state. Since its inauguration in 2001, the liberal-conservative government has implemented four major reforms: the Structure Reform of 2007, the Quality Reform of 2007, the Police Reform of 2008 and the Court Reform of 2007. Together, these changes reform two of the three state powers and further transform the health system, with the overall aim of minimising public expenditure and creating a ‘sustainable’ welfare state. The Minister of Health and internal Affairs Lars Løkke Rasmussen subsequently declared that The Structural Reform was “the greatest, unified public sector reform of our generation” (Danish Ministry of the Interior and Health, 2005: 4).

The overall governmental tool for creating sustainability is centralisation. The Structure Reform (also termed The Municipal Reform) merged 270 municipalities into 98 and 13 counties into 5 regions (Danish Ministry of the Interior and Health, 2005). The Quality
Reform reduced 56 local acute hospitals to 22 (Danish Regions, 2007). Likewise, the Police Reform reduced 54 police districts to 12 (Rigspolitiets, 2010), and the Court Reform reduced 82 city jurisdictions to 24 (Domstolsstyrelsen, 2007). Each of these reforms has resulted in a centralisation of the public sector, with the goal of reducing costs and increasing expertise and quality. (Cf. Figure 8). Hence, the overall aim of the Structure Reform was to “create a new Denmark”, in which municipalities offer “greater quality” and “better services”, designed in accordance with “the needs of citizens” with less expenses, making municipalities “more sustainable” (Danish Ministry of the Interior and Health, 2005).

The Quality Reform introduced 8 goals for increasing quality in the public sector. These include “[...] greater user orientation, attractive public workplaces, better management, more innovation, strong local self-rule, less bureaucracy, more hands for presence and care and massive investment in the welfare of the future” (Danish Government, 2007: 14).

The liberal idea of the sustainable welfare state is thus a political project that fulfils the three defining characteristics suggested by Laclau (2005) – Du må gerne opliste disse 3 karakteristika, evt. i en parentes. ‘Sustainability’ is an empty signifier receiving its meaning from signifiers such as ‘greater quality’, ‘new Denmark’, ‘world class’, ‘reduced costs’, ‘better service’, ‘needs of citizens’, ‘user orientation’, ‘professional competences’ and ‘centralisation’. Furthermore, the continual use of adjectives such as ‘greater’, ‘new’, ‘better’ and ‘reduced’ marks a well-defined boundary between the sustainable welfare state and what is implicitly perceived to be the old, inferior and ever-expanding welfare state of previous governments.

The antithesis of ‘sustainability’
The Rotten Banana is the antithesis of the political project of the sustainable welfare state. It depicts what the sustainable welfare state is not and should never be. Why? Simply because the very remoteness of rural areas requires decentralisation. This is to say that the sheer existence of rural areas questions the core of the reform (centralisation). As such, The Rotten Banana signifies the constituting Other of the sustainable welfare state, and thereby both legitimises the marginalisation of rural areas and allows for new social, political and economic burdens on rural citizens.

These social burdens include the fear of losing loved ones, who due to closure of local hospitals must be treated at distant locations (Holmsgaard & Jørgensen, 2011; Krause, 2010); and the threat to everyday security when the sudden absence of local police inspires systematic traffic offences (Hofmeister, 2010). Political consequences include fewer local representatives in the new larger municipalities, where politicians – to a greater extent than before the Municipal Reform – give priority to overall goals rather concrete issues, which all together increases the distance between local politicians and local citizens (Dahlgaard et al., 2009)14. Finally, economic burdens include, e.g., commuting to distant public services and the increased costs of paying local lawyers for driving to the centralised city courts (Ritzau,

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14 Alternatively, more municipalities have established local committees representing rural dwellers in municipal politics. The institutional design seems promising but rural dwellers are ambivalent about their actual political influence. Where some praise the new platforms they are but hot political air to others (Agger et. al. 2010).
These burdens are recognised by the liberal-conservative government that implemented the four reforms and by the electoral body voting them into office for three periods, and it appears that their consequences are acceptable to the majority. As such, the political project of the sustainable welfare state reflects a ‘logic of equivalence’, which marks the boundaries of the political projects through the constitutive Other, which among others are the rural population (Laclau and Mouffe 2002: 74-85). Kan dette ikke slettes?

The broken Denmark

The liberal-conservative government has unfolded the political project of the sustainable welfare state from the mid 2000s and onwards. As we showed, exactly through this period negative terminology has become more frequent, culminating in the year 2010. This may not surprise while, from about 2005-2010, citizens came to realise the consequences of the reform leading to, among other things, a more intense debate on the sustainability of rural Denmark, which as often was termed Outskirt-Denmark or, simply, The Rotten Banana.

One of the most remarking utterances on the meaning of The Rotten Banana come from a two-week long theme on Danish national television called ‘The Broken Denmark’. Through documentaries, expert interviews and local tails [Forstår ikke] it creates a picture of deprived rural areas, exemplified by ramshackle houses (Møller, 2009), decreasing local volunteerism (Albæk, 2009). This is followed by socio-economic poverty, when the so-called ‘white trash’ move into neglected houses and these unemployed addicts and child abusers (or so the saying goes) discourage the other local dwellers (Møller, 2009). The TV program further shows, how young people leave after receiving their General Certificate of Secondary Education, as rural areas offer few employment possibilities, educational opportunities and cultural activities (DR, 2009b). Ultimately, these illegitimate local break-downs in rural Denmark are related to the legitimate concerns of sustainability. Danish National Television thus displays a ‘Banana Map’ on its homepage, which clearly indicates that most employment opportunities, the greatest home equity (Forstår ikke) and the most educated citizens are located outside The Rotten Banana and advises that ‘we’ (whoever we might be) live outside this much-criticised area in the future (DR, 2009a).

Together, these different perspectives on socio-economic and socio-cultural decline relate to the common framework that rural areas are places one should try to escape, or avoid. Laclau and Mouffe argue (1990: 61) that the strength of such a myth is its provision of ‘a principle reading of a given situation’ within which all other circumstances of rural areas are understood. Increased social, political and economic burdens following the four great reforms are thus legitimate, as rural dwellers are not one of ‘us’. They are different and therefore subject to different conditions. Thus, no one questions whether the so-called ‘white trash’ phenomenon is particular to rural societies, and the rural myth is left unquestioned within the authoritative framework. Hence, the only solution to the rural challenges, which national politicians came up with on the Tønder meeting, was that everybody should have access to broadband internet. [Det bør fjernes – der er i øvrigt heller ikke refereret til Tønder mødet i det foregående]
4.2. The Rotten Banana fires back

The four reforms both fostered the legitimacy of the ‘sustainable’ welfare state and the illegitimacy of The Rotten Banana and provoked the creation of the Common List in November 2008. This organisation is a political movement that was formed to resist the closure of a local hospital in the town of Holstebro in the Western part of Jutland (peninsular bordering Germany). With the support of the citizens from rural areas and provincial towns, this new political party is now fighting centralisation in its broadest sense.

Initially, the Regional Council of Middle Jutland closed the emergency unit in 2008; later that year, however, the Minister of Health announced the final closure of the hospital and the construction of a new ‘super-hospital’ in the middle of Jutland, some 20 kilometres away. This proposal was generally seen as the last straw by locals, as the centralisation of the Structure (Municipal) Reform, the Police Reform and the Court Reform had already caused great public discontent. As a result, rural dwellers founded the cross-party organisation, the Common List, and stood for election at the regional level with the sole aim of keeping their local hospital (Krause, 2010). To the great surprise of political commentators, the Common List entered the regional council with 2 out of 41 seats in the 2009 elections, and they are now preparing for the national election in 2011 (Krause, 2010). Again, they aim to run on a cross-party platform with a political program focusing on decentralisation of the health sector and establishment of rural workplaces and educational institutions. Aside from abandoning the plans for the new hospital structure, they stress the importance of motorways in rural areas, easier access to credit for rural home owners, the preservation of early retirement benefits and the return of 4-year unemployment benefits (Fælleslisten, 2010a). Dette kan måske undværes – eller laves om til en note. Altogether, these aims bear witness to a degree of consolidation that has been sufficient to provoke reaction from the liberal-conservative government.

The green cucumber

The Common List (Fælleslisten, 2010b) fights centralisation, inequality and lack of respect for the rural population. One of the regional politicians, Leif Hjortshøj, explained in a national radio program that “we are going to change what is called The Rotten Banana into The Green Cucumber” (Krause, 2010). Similarly, the other regional politician, Poul Christensen, argued on national radio that the centralisation taking place over the last 10 years has divided the country into two parts: the developed, urban part and the peripheral countryside, which is lagging seriously behind (Møller, 2010).

They both point the fact that, in the regional election of 2009, the Common List received 48 % of the votes cast in the liberal strongholds of the municipalities of Holstebro and Struer, as well as 37 % of the votes cast in the liberal municipality of Lemvig. These results, they claim, indicate that the Common List is based on the wishes of people actually living in rural areas 15

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15 As Leif Hjortshøj concludes, “It is not easy, not at all, but it is us living in peripheral Denmark, who needs to protest. This will go awfully wrong, if we fail to do so” (Krause, 2010).
rather than on politicians and experts, i.e. well-educated urbanites giving advice on rural issues and concerns from the outside (Krause, 2010; Møller, 2010).

The Common List politicians thus challenge the signifiers of the sustainable welfare state political project. They strike at the core of the political project (the alienation of rural areas, as symbolised by The Rotten Banana) when they suggest a new alternative, vitalised symbol in, for example, The Green Cucumber. Moreover, they confront the signifiers of a ‘new Denmark’ built on ‘quality’, ‘expertise’ and ‘innovation’ when they claim that the liberal-conservative government has divided the country, creating a backward countryside that contradicts their political vision of a Danish society ‘in balance’. In other words, the Common List maintains that The Rotten Banana is not intrinsic to Denmark. It is not a ‘natural’ entity. Rather, it is the consequence of liberal-conservative rule over the last 10 years.

Furthermore, Common List politicians challenge the basic signifiers of ‘centralisation’, ‘user orientation’ and ‘the needs of citizens’, when they draw on an overwhelming support for decentralisation among voters from liberal strongholds, thus undermining the electoral body central to the liberal-conservative objective.

‘Consuming’ political power
These acts can be characterised by what Certeau (1990, 1984) terms consumption. The Common List appropriates the truth of the sustainable welfare state for its own ‘strategic’ interest and rule. This process occurs when regional politicians seek to attach ‘the needs of citizens’ to the political project of decentralisation. They further differentiate it from the political project of the sustainable welfare state, when they emphasise how the ‘new Denmark’ marginalises, and creates problems for, rural areas.

However, the political program of the Common List accepts the need to cut costs and increase expertise, which bridges their relations to the liberal-conservative government. However, they frame the necessary development differently. Instead of building new hospitals and police stations, they suggest renovating old buildings and introducing electronic networks that enable long-distance professional medical consultation. This approach allows for greater quality, the preservation of local medical networks based on personal contact and a proximity between patients and hospitals, which are of greater importance to rural citizens than are super-hospitals located long distances from their homes (Fælleslisten, 2010a). Again we see that the Common List politicians appropriate the signifiers of the liberal-conservative government and invest them with new meaning. ‘Quality’ is no longer a function of new buildings and centralised units. It is about electronic solutions and existing buildings providing the patient with a greater feeling of security. Also, cutting costs is not about new investments but rather about the maintenance of existing structures.

Hence, these consumptions produce what we, following Laclau (2005), previously termed floating signifiers, as the meaning of ‘centralisation’, ‘citizen needs’, ‘new Denmark’, ‘cutting costs’ and ‘quality’ is no longer fixed. These terms are rather being invested with differentiating meanings and appear ambivalent to the electoral body. For obvious reasons,
this makes the hegemony of the political project of a sustainable welfare state vulnerable. In this way, the Common List produces what Laclau and Mouffe (2002) term a *logic of difference*. Hence, the regional politicians invest new meaning in the liberal project and thereby aim to expand the liberal interpretation of the truth by adding new meaning that includes the concerns of a (differentiated) rural Denmark.

When the Common List plays on the similarities of the two political projects, emphasising the various trade-offs between centralisation and decentralisation, they create a basis of legitimacy within the liberal-conservative camp. It would be impossible for the liberal politicians to reject this alternative position as pure nonsense, as it contains vital parts of liberal policy (confer the historical roots of the agricultural party *Venstre*, as we mentioned previously). In other words, the proponents of the political project of the sustainable welfare state seem to be forced into dialogue about possible changes that allow them to recapture the floating signifiers and preserve hegemony.

4.3. Government confessions
The government was quick to respond to the challenges raised by the Common List. First, the Prime Minister visited the municipality of Holstebro in June 2010. Later, in September 2010, 6 ministers visited the municipalities of Holstebro, Struer and Lemvig. These included the Minister of Taxation, the Minister of Employment, the Minister of Transportation, the Minister of Development, the Minister of Education and, once again, the Prime Minister. Although being the main architect behind the many centralisation endeavours, the latter suddenly wanted to somewhat dissociate himself from the original liberal political project, for example by remarking: “I hate the expression *Udkantsdanmark*. The ‘centre’ is where you are” (Lemvig Folkeblad, 2010).

Moreover, the Prime Minister met with rural dwellers for an open discussion and promised a new motorway priced at 2 billion DKK (268.5 million €) to support both business development and easier access to the new super-hospital in Middle Jutland. He further launched the development program *Denmark Balancing a Global World* (Danish Government, 2010), which recognises how globalisation, the financial crisis and the subsequent loss of 180,000 jobs has affected rural Denmark disproportionately. According to this development program, the government promises better conditions for local businesses, easier accessibility to educational institutions and local healthcare units and a rescue helicopter. In addition, it offers 150 million DKK (20.1 million €) to a rural Denmark growth fund.

As such we see that the liberal-conservative government is broadening the meaning and therefore the reach of the political project of the sustainable welfare state at two levels. First, when various ministers visit Western Jutland, they broaden the definition of ‘users’ and ‘citizens’ to include the needs and ideas of the citizens living outside the urban centres. Second, the Prime Minister acknowledged that ‘quality’ includes the feeling of personal security when he offered local healthcare units and a rescue helicopter. Similarly, ‘expertise’ is no longer exclusively linked to centralisation, as the growth fund aims to support business and social service development in rural areas. In this manner, the liberal-conservative government has pushed the limits of the sustainable welfare state to include – to some
degree at least - rural areas, something that is further evidenced in the Prime Minister’s repositioning of the ‘centre’.

In sum, it is interesting to observe how the liberal-conservative government is refining the signifiers of ‘user involvement’, ‘citizen needs’, ‘quality’ and ‘expertise’ in accordance with the new political agenda set by the rural population, and aiming for their re-attachment to the political project of the sustainable welfare state. In this readaptation process, the government will admit at least a certain level of decentralisation.

**Troublesome protests**

These promises, however, were soon to be named ‘gobstoppers’ by rural dwellers, as they were simply seen as tools for shutting the mouth of the ‘big angry liberal stronghold’ in Western Jutland (e.g., Lemvig Folkeblad, 2010). Still, public opinion has shown no signs of reconciliation. For example, an independent survey conducted during the weeks of the ministerial visits showed no signs of rural mitigation. Citizens in this area usually provide 40% or more of the votes cast for the liberal party in national elections, but the number has recently dropped to 9%. Instead, 8 out of 10 voters see the bail-out package as a tool for poaching voters in the 2011 national election (Ugebrevet A4, 2010).

These findings have made their way into the statements of Common List politicians. For example, the Common List politician, Poul Christensen referred to the insistence on building the new super-hospital in Middle Jutland when he commented: “It is not enough that the Prime Minister feels sorry. If the rest of us are mistaken, we have to make amends” (Møller, 2010). The other regional politician, Leif Hjortshøj, commented on the growth fund: “150 million DKK are but the price of a modern fishing vessel” (Ugebrevet A4, 2010). He further dismissed the expectations for the new motorway, claiming that it was “5 years and two elections away”, thus indicating that it may never materialise (Krause, 2010).

With national elections coming up in 2011, the protests of rural dwellers have become even more troublesome to the liberal party. The liberal-conservative government has won the last three elections in close contests between the conservative-liberal wing and the social democratic block. Dissatisfied rural dwellers and the alternative Common List may thus swing the balance.

Running on a cross-party platform, the Common List clearly frustrates liberal politicians. On national radio, Karsten Laursen, a member of the liberal party’s parliamentary group, admitted that “[there] is no doubt that what happens in North-Western Jutland may be a threat to the right-wing government, as they refuse to tell which prime minister they are supporting” (Møller, 2010). When commenting on these concerns, the regional politician Poul Christensen remarked that “[if] you [the government] could just behave properly in Danish society, you might gain our support” (Møller, 2010). As such, the Common List continues to mistrust the liberal-conservative government and emphasise that there is a gap between the latter and rural dwellers. Liberal politicians are thus becoming less capable of creating a total picture that grants their vision of the sustainable welfare state an authoritative and, hence, hegemonic position.
Figure 8 summarises the rather complicated story of how a ‘rotten banana’ came into being in Denmark, including crucial events, political arenas and political discourses of rurality, as well as what should be seen as the triggering factor: the top-down decision to establish the super-hospital far from the majority of rural inhabitants in this region of the country.

[Figure 8 here]

**End of story?**

Despite positive predictions the Common List did not make it to the 2011 national elections (Krause, 2010; Kristensen, 2010) [disse to referencer er fra 2010?! Kan evt. slettes]. However, the Common List and the general discontent of rural dwellers in Western Jutland did alter overall political attitudes toward the recognition and legitimacy of rural concerns. They did in fact exert a considerable impact on the new liberal-conservative policy addressing rural challenges. Even more importantly, they opened the door for the Joint Council of Rural Areas, which is the largest interest organisation for rural development on local, regional and national levels in Denmark (Board of Joint Council of Rural Areas, Interview, November 2011).

The Joint Council of Rural Areas has lobbied the supporting parties (ikke helt klart – du må gerne uddybe) of the minority liberal-conservative government and authoritative individuals [political key actors] in both government and opposition. These persons made a united parliament support The Day of Rural Districts 2011, which is a rural conference held in the parliament, as well as promise a Rural Council after the 2011 election. As a result, the new social-democratic government established the Council for Rural Areas and Islands in September 2011 and, besides, appointed a Minister of City, Housing and Rural Districts (Jensen, 2011).

Negative connotation and perceptions of rural communities might further be changing. Among other initiatives, a marginal national television program entitled ‘The Bumpkin’ (Bonderøven), which follows the life of a self-sufficient small farmer, has increased its audience rating to more than 700,000 and is now aired in prime time. The program has further won the European prize from the Eurovision Forum for ‘the best public service format’ in 2010, and mainstream weekly magazines currently report on the bumpkin’s whereabouts. Thus, struggles for a local hospital in Western Jutland may, in a sort of domino effect, have lead to a larger movement against negative stereotyping and political neglect of rural areas in Denmark.

5. Conclusion

Neo-liberalism has been accused of hollowing out local communities. Studies have focused on political neglect and negative stereotyping marginalising rural areas in democratic societies. Our Danish case shows that there are no doubts that rural areas are facing new challenges under market mechanisms legitimising centralisation and self-reliance [lidt uklart – du må gerne finde et andet ord]. However, the story of ‘The Rotten Banana’ also shows how negative terminology and political marginalisation of rurality in Denmark provided the
step stone for political mobilisation among the rural population and the subsequent re-recognition and re-legitimisation of rural concerns in national politics.

In 2007, the Danish liberal-conservative government centralized the public sector by implementing a municipal reform that reduced 270 municipalities to 98 – a reform that was followed up by similar reforms aiming to centralise public services. In a parallel development, negative terminology on rural areas increased dramatically, culminating in 2010 with a whole ‘family’ of negative terms, among which the word ‘Outskirt-Denmark’ has become the most popular. This new discourse also involves the myth of ‘The Rotten Banana’ – a very recent and rather polemic term that denotes peripheral Denmark, which takes a geographically curved form like a banana, and which symbolises a widespread belief that rural areas are backward and excessively costly. Using the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe (2002), we argued that this was not a random correlation. On the contrary, we suggested that rural areas came to serve as the constitutive Other of a particular political project, which could be summarized as ‘the sustainable welfare state’. We further argued that this project was based on a ‘logic of equivalence’, which defined the legitimate community narrowly and therefore contributed to marginalise rural concerns through negative stereotyping.

In recent years, however, rural dwellers have fought back for the first time since the last wave of centralisation during the 1960s. Rural dwellers established the political party, the Common List, which in the words of De Certeau (1984) ‘consumed’ arguments for centralisation and adapted them for their own use, including alternative definitions of ‘sustainability’. As such, the Common List challenged the near-hegemonic project of the liberal-conservative government and enforced a new ‘logic of difference’, which in its fledgling initiation recognises rural concerns to such a degree that the new social-democratic government has appointed a Minister for City, Housing and Rural Districts in September 2011.

This extremely dynamic and complex process of ‘political construction’ of rurality, which was greatly impacted by critical voices from the rural population, resembles in many ways the one that took place in England 1997-2007 under New Labour. To the great surprise of the British Government, it was already in 1997 met by demands from a ‘highly organised and motivated countryside lobby’ (Woods, 2008: 6). As such, we see that the Danish case resembles cases around the world (e.g. Woods, 1997; Svendsen, 2004; Munkejord, 2006; Scott, 2008; Cruickshank et al, 2009), where near-hegemonic discourses of rurality have stirred political discontent and rural counter-discourses, which ultimately – at least to some degree – have effected national, rural politics and policies.

We therefore suggest that studies on the consequences of various political discourses on rural development, including those of neo-liberalism, should pay more attention to tentative, merging reactions against marginalisation among rural dwellers, since they – in a domino effect – might lead to much more severe reactions and eventually generate decisive transformations. Hence, the Danish society after all has learned that ‘The Rotten Banana’ might backfire!
Bibliography


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**Observations**
Landdistrikternes Dag, 2011. A conference on rural districts in the parliament, arranged by The Joint Council of Rural Districts.
Figure 1: The two first pictures are taken from the homepage of the Danish national TV station’s DR: “Danmarks rådne banan” (Denmarks’ rotten banana) and “Det skæve Danmark” (The skewed Denmark). Source: http://www.ois.dk. The third picture is from the homepage of the Danish national TV station’s TV2: “Udkantsdanmark” (‘Outskirt-Denmark’). Source: http://nyhederne.tv2.dk/article.php?id=30264258:danmark-har-tre-r%C3%A5dne-bananer.html

Figure 2: ‘Outskirt-Denmark’ (Udkantsdanmark) leads the 2010 list of new words in national Danish newspapers. Diagram reproduced from Infomedia 2011: http://www.infomedia.dk/index.html (date of access: 15-06-2011).
Nye ord i medierne i 2010


- WikiLeaks: 1.178
- Udkantsdanmark: 1.083
- Askesky: 917
- iPad: 714
- Vuvuzela: 372
Figure 3: ‘Negative’ rural terminology in 7 Danish national newspapers during 1996-2010 (absolute numbers). Source: Infomedia.

Note: The data include the newspapers B.T., Berlingske Tidende, Ekstra Bladet, Jyllands-Posten, Politiken, Weekend Avisen for the period 1/1 1996 to 12/10 2010 and the newspaper Information from 1/9 1997 to 12/10 2010.
Figure 4: ‘Neutral’ rural terminology in 7 Danish national newspapers during 1996-2010 (absolute numbers. Source: Infomedia.

Note: The data include the newspapers B.T., Berlingske Tidende, Ekstra Bladet, Jyllands-Posten, Politiken, Weekend Avisen for the period 1/1 1996 to 12/10 2010 and the newspaper Information from 1/9 1997 to 12/10 2010.
Figure 5: ‘Negative’ and ‘neutral’ rural terminology in 7 Danish national newspapers during 1996-2010 (1996 = index 100). Source: Infomedia.

Note: The data include the newspapers B.T., Berlingske Tidende, Ekstra Bladet, Jyllands-Posten, Politiken, Weekend Avisen for the period 1/1 1996 to 12/10 2010 and the newspaper Information from 1/9 1997 to 12/10 2010.
Figure 6: ‘Negative’ and ‘neutral’ rural terminology all 499 available sources during 2006-2010 (2006 = index 100). Source: Infomedia.

Note: The data include Danish national newspapers, regional newspapers, professional journals and magazines, news agencies, web sources, Radio/TV and other sources from 1/1 2006 to 12/10 2010.
Figure 7: “The green cucumber” (Den grønne agurk). The rise of a discursive counter strike? An article in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, April 18, 2010.
Figure 8: Centralisation, discourses of rurality, political mobilisation and the creation of a new rural policy in Denmark, 2001-2010.