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Jørgen Rasmussen (2015). *Fast grund under fødderne. Ø-filosofiske pejlemærker* (In Danish). [*Solid ground under one's feet: Island-philosophical indicators*]. København: Forlaget Politisk Revy. 184pp. ISBN: 978-87-7378-352-8. Price: DKK 248.

Denmark was once a country of and for seafarers. There was a cosmopolitan world, centred around seas, ships and ports. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Denmark turned inwards. The typical Dane shifted from being a widely travelled seafarer to a jovial farmer. Denmark became an island nation that lost sight of its islands, now firmly equipped with a continental self-image.

Denmark's 500 or so islands make up a third of its total land area. Around 70 of these are inhabited. While a handful of the largest ones (Sjælland, Fyn, Lolland, and Falster) are densely populated – a majority of the country's population live on them – the rest are rapidly declining. Since the 1930s, the 27 islands that make up the Association of Small Danish islands have lost half of their total population. Just since 2003, every seventh islander has moved away. In 2013, less than 5000 remained. Recently there have been suggestions to discontinue public services on these small islands, move their entire populations to the mainland and use the island buildings as holiday homes for tourists, students and artists. As expected, island spokespeople have protested and highlighted the islands' historic, social and cultural importance.

It is from the perspective of Danish small islands that Jørgen Rasmussen sets out to discuss a number of large 'island-philosophical' issues, such as the relationships between culture, space and place, islandness, remoteness, marginalisation, borders, boundedness, size, and scale, issues that the author sees as especially prominent on small islands. Rasmussen is himself a resident of the small island of Omø (146 inhabitants) in the Great Belt, the strait between the large islands of Sjælland and Fyn. So, one should not be surprised that, through this text, he steps up to serve as a spokesperson for Danish small islanders. In the first of the book's three chapters, the author asks what would happen if the normative continental narrative of the modern world were to be set aside and islands were to instead be approached not as exceptions but as the rule.

Through a mixture of existential ruminations; polemical standpoints; insights; and arguments from social psychology, sociology, geography, philosophy, and islands studies, the author proceeds to contemplate what it means to be a (Danish) small islander in an urban, continental world. The concluding chapter, 'Continents do not exist', arrives at the insight that every piece of land, whether small or large, from Omø to the planet itself, can be islanded, depending on one's perspective. It is from such a position that the author suggests the book to be read, as a collection of loosely organised arguments, considerations, and thoughts concerning the notion of 'the island', islandness, and the position and status of islands in global socio-cultural systems. This leads the author to a style and format in which academic prose is mixed with a more personal, essayistic strand, resulting in a sometimes rather puzzling text, which drifts freely between the general and the specific; the abstract and the concrete; the theoretical and the empirical; and between a limited number of Danish small islands, the islands of the world, and 'the island' as idea and metaphor.

Rasmussen's point of departure and main argument is that the possibilities of Denmark as an island nation have been neither fully understood nor developed in modern times. Islands, he proposes, possess a metaphysical power that generates new ideas and perspectives. At the same time, islands embrace, confine, and isolate their inhabitants. This ambivalence, the author concludes, leads to a sharpened experience of life and a heightened experience of the

lifeworld as a whole, which in turn leads to an enhanced feeling of authenticity, something he thinks is easily lost in modern urban life.

The discussion is wrapped around three dimensions or perspectives: small islands as nature, *logos*; as perceptions and ideas, *ethos*; and as particular forms of life, *bios*. Throughout, large modern and continental urban centres serve as the counterpoint against which small islands contemplations are mirrored.

Early on, the book discusses islands as nature/*logos*. Island geographies underline the isolated, remote and bounded, but such factors must be understood as relative. And islands are surrounded not only by seas but also by ideas, images, and narratives. Their logos is complex, ambivalent, even contradictory, which is part of their metaphysical power, since people are attracted to the richness inherent in such contradictions. Islands as ideas/*ethos* relates to the dynamics of an “insular gravity” consisting of three elements: surveyability, remoteness, and isolation, on a scale from low to high. Islands represent a third space – neither sea nor continent – and are thus often placed in a diminishing discourse and a deficit model, valued for what they lack and are not. Islandness is discussed as an interplay between demarcation and limitation, constituted by contrast to the surroundings. All sorts of spaces that contrast meaningfully to their surroundings can be islanded: in the end, an ‘island’ is a difference that makes a difference. Indeed, ‘the island’, Rasmussen emphasises, is an archetypical metaphor so embedded in ordinary people’s understandings, that it can be difficult to experience the island directly as anything but exotically different.

The forms of life/*bios* on Danish small islands are today threatened by a functional drain, which however forces islanders to develop new resources, insights and solutions on a daily basis. According to Rasmussen, this is precisely what makes these small islands important for Denmark (and the world as a whole), as sites of new insight and action, which may help produce “a culturally and socially more nuanced and unpredictable Denmark.” A hypothesis and perhaps a conclusion is that islands, by being bounded, encourage a quite specific interplay between space and place, which leads to a feeling of living in a centre.

In many places, Rasmussen produces illuminating and enlightening formulations, introducing interesting perspectives and providing food for thought. Apt empirical observations, mostly based on the author’s own experience of life on Omø, are however also mixed with sweeping generalizations in an often confusing manner and perhaps with too little attention to given to the diversity of experiences provided by small islands around the world.

But this does not detract from the book’s merits. What lingers after a careful reading of the book is a lament, a regret that the Danish islands, especially the smaller ones, have so entirely disappeared from the horizon of today’s Denmark. The book offers a persistent plea to reinvigorate island perspectives in the discussion of how to achieve a sustainable future for Denmark, and indeed for the rest of world.

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