

[0:00:00]

Micheal Skovmand: Hello?

Kieran Connell: Hello, is that Micheal?

Micheal Skovmand: It is Micheal.

Kieran Connell: Hi, it's Kieran here from the University of Birmingham.

Micheal Skovmand: Pardon?

Kieran Connell: It's Kieran here, from Birmingham ...

Micheal Skovmand: Right, yes.

Kieran Connell: How are you?

Micheal Skovmand: How are you?

Kieran Connell: Good thanks. Good. Nice to talk to you.

Micheal Skovmand: Yes. Likewise. I've been reviewing a little bit, those six months in '79 and it's been so long and I've done other things.

Kieran Connell: Of course.

Micheal Skovmand: But it's quite interesting because I review older stuff again. Because it was an interesting period, it was the last term for Stewart Hall as well.

Kieran Connell: Oh, was it? Okay.

Micheal Skovmand: Yes. He moved on to the Open University.

Kieran Connell: So what year was then then? '79?

Micheal Skovmand: That was the spring of 1979. And it was interesting, it was that winter of discontent and Margaret Thatcher was elected in May. And there was a lot of strikes, the trades unions problems, etc. So it was really interesting politically as well.

Kieran Connell: Yes, I can imagine. What was it that brought you to the Centre in the first place?

Micheal Skovmand: Pardon?

Kieran Connell: How did you arrive at the Centre?

Micheal Skovmand: Well I had six months leave from my job at University (inaudible 00:03:27) so I worked there as a business lecturer. And I read some of their stuff, the Ministry of (inaudible 00:03:47) stuff and had already been interested in Reverend Williams and (inaudible 00:03:54) and that cultural studies type of project. So that's where we spent seven months with my family, my two children and my wife and we lived in the (inaudible 00:04:33) area.

Kieran Connell: Right. Okay. And at the time then, did cultural studies and Birmingham in particular have quite a big reputation in Denmark? Or not really?

Micheal Skovmand: Not really. No yet. That happened later but it was growing at the time. And I spent six months living in (inaudible 00:05:25). There's a lot of interest of the kind of stuff they were doing. And theoretically, the way they moved into cultural studies, the (inaudible 00:06:08) that what they doing was probably what really took off in Denmark, but other stuff as well. The whole thing, the whole move into reception theory, readerships, that kind of thing was really very interesting and some of them more so visited (inaudible 00:07:15). And Angela Roggie(? 00:07:18) for instance, she came and spent, I think, six months of the year there (inaudible 00:07:29).

Kieran Connell: So as I understand it from the archives, Birmingham had a quite well established relationship with Aarhus as well as Roskilde as well, is that right?

Micheal Skovmand: Roskilde as well, yes. And in a sense, I was, I think (inaudible 00:08:25) that knew anything about Birmingham. But there were people in the media department, media studies and Roskilde at that time was seen as a very progressive place, very interesting and new, particularly in things like theories and teaching. And so there were people also from (inaudible 00:09:11) who moved on to Austria and there was Kim Schroder.

Kieran Connell: Okay.

Micheal Skovmand: Kim Schroder, he and I we did a media studies book together called (inaudible 00:09:43), called Media Conscience, which was really very much in front by (inaudible 00:09:56) of what was going on in Birmingham. And particularly, the readerly aspects of social theory and move into popular culture. And so the unabashed move into popular culture distanced itself from the old Frankfurter school of disapproval, popular culture as being the cop out(? 00:11:22) and being the industry's way of creating other people(?00:11:32). We are moving from that.

Kieran Connell: Of course

Micheal Skovmand: And doing stuff, and Kim Schroder for instance, we did stuff on (inaudible 00:11:52) on Dallas and Dynasty. And that was something maybe you know also, you've heard about Yu Nang(? 00:12:13) ?

Kieran Connell: No.

Micheal Skovmand: Well Yu Nang(? 00:12:16), that was in the early '80s when she did a big study which was really reception theory, readers reception of her (inaudible 00:12:41). It's called Watching Damus(? 00:12:46).

Kieran Connell: Watching Damus(? 00:12:47).

Micheal Skovmand: Yes.

Kieran Connell: So that process of moving away from the (inaudible 00:12:57) school, was that already underway in Denmark in the '70s? Or was it something that took place a bit later on, in the 1980s?

Micheal Skovmand: No, it didn't happen until sort of mid- to late-80s really.

Kieran Connell: Right.

Micheal Skovmand: Because it took a while for the writings of the (inaudible 00:13:47) to percolate through the system. And I was involved with that and we had (inaudible 00:14:13), we had Reverend Williams visiting, as a visiting lecturer. And yes, (inaudible 00:14:35), you've heard about (inaudible 00:14:38)?

Kieran Connell: No.

Micheal Skovmand: No, all right. She was very much into romance reading ... -

Kieran Connell: Janet ...?

Micheal Skovmand

Micheal Skovmand: Janice Vatway(? 00:15:01).

[00:14:59]

Kieran Connell: Janice Vatway. No, I don't know the name.

Micheal Skovmand: She was American.

Kieran Connell: Okay.

Micheal Skovmand: And doing, again, this kind of culture studies approach to, not just analysing trash fiction, the Barbara Cartland stuff, but actually working with how it was received. Not just the books themselves but the reception of these books and how study groups would be talking about this popular fiction, with (inaudible 00:16:17), the association with sentimental fiction. And how they were relating to their own lives rather than having any kind of notions about culture, quality and things like that, so that was interesting.

Kieran Connell: So how important do you think Birmingham was, how important was that school of work in Denmark?

Micheal Skovmand: I think it was extremely important. What was happening in Birmingham was a lot of things really. I think the most important thing was really breaking away from (inaudible 00:18:06), in '78, '79. (inaudible 00:18:19) theory. And he came and visited Birmingham and there was a huge crowd and Stewart Hall(? 00:18:39) and all the others, Michael Green was there and there was a great big discussion. But interestingly ... have you read (inaudible 00:18:59)?

Kieran Connell: I wouldn't say I've read the whole thing but I have read parts of it.

Micheal Skovmand: Right, anyway. It's really a huge demolition job on (inaudible 00:19:23) and that whole structured notion of culture and society in particular. So ...

Kieran Connell: So how did that –

Micheal Skovmand: (inaudible 00:19:44).

Kieran Connell: When Thomson came then, how was the atmosphere then? Because obviously Stewart was ... -

Micheal Skovmand: I think it was interesting because on the one hand when I came there, I would say that it was still quite popular. But what they were reading was just really this ideology and ideological state (inaudible 00:20:32). That was really all they were reading. And they were picking up on this concept about interpolation. And that was a big buzzword then, interpolation. And on the one hand, (inaudible 00:20:59) subject. But also the concept of hegemony, which obviously they got from Gramsci. So Gramsci and it really, it was interesting that I found it, and how could Gramsci and (inaudible 00:21:38) co-exist because they really are different paradigms, in a sense. But somehow, I think there was a kind of transitional stage between the structuralism of (inaudible 00:22:16), etc. and so the more culturalism of people like Gramsci, (inaudible 00:22:38) was coming into focus also and all this stuff hadn't been translated then. So it was an interesting opening up really. And yes, it was, theoretically I think they were juggling lots and lots of stuff then which has become (inaudible 00:23:46) which they were the first to do. There was an interest in Boudier(? 00:23:57) and his stuff had already been translated and from the fiction. And a chapter from Distinction was translated. And Le Claud(? 00:24:33), Le Claud, the Argentine political (inaudible 00:24:48). He was interesting because he was so interested in population.

Kieran Connell: Right.

Micheal Skovmand: And because of the population, and that was really dictated a lot in the first part of '79 simply because they were watching, well Thatcher was doing populace(? 00:25:25).

Kieran Connell: Yes, of course.

Micheal Skovmand

Micheal Skovmand: And they were really very concerned, the vast majority of people there were politically on the left, even on the left hand side of the Labour party. But they were very much concerned also theoretically with the right hand population.

[00:26:27)

Kieran Connell: Yes.

Micheal Skovmand: And what did you do with it. Because the way in which Thatcherism related to ordinary common folk, housewives, etc., etc., there was a kind of political appeal which the Labour party had lost really.

Kieran Connell: How do you describe the atmosphere of the Centre when you were there, compared to what you were used to back in Denmark?

Micheal Skovmand: Well I mean it was obvious, the Centre was post-graduate, which means they didn't have any undergraduate teaching and that meant of course a much more egalitarian kind of environment. There was no major distinction between students and staff. Students, they were mature students many of them, so you didn't sense there was any kind of gap between the students and staff, it was very egalitarian. And the students would lecture, you know, I would lecture. I wasn't really a student of course but I did a lecture on the (inaudible 00:29:08) storyteller, he (inaudible 00:29:28) like a storyteller which was (inaudible 00:29:34). And later on we also worked on a book project, Culture, Media, Language with Hutchinson, which was really a sort of a ragbag of everything that was happening in the Centre. And I was working with Michael Green and others on the section on reading.

Kieran Connell: Okay. Right.

Micheal Skovmand: Yes. And readerships and so on. (Inaudible 00:30:39) Benjamin was the (inaudible 00:30:46).

Kieran Connell: Is group work, because you mentioned the collaborative approach of the Centre, so I was wondering whether or not that was something that, this group collaborative approach is something that was equally common in postgraduate work in Denmark?

Micheal Skovmand: Yes. But we didn't have centres as such, they were individuals. There wasn't a whole lot of postgraduate work going on then really. So practically everybody, including very bright students, they did not go on to do research and there wasn't an established PhD programme at the time. So we didn't have kind of postgraduate or graduate environment at university. It would be individual projects.

Kieran Connell: Right. Yes.

Micheal Skovmand: And so that was really very interesting and eye opening to me to come to that kind of ... I mean when I first came and there was a lecture the first week I was there, a big lecture, and I went there and (inaudible 00:33:28). Anybody from saying anything but gradually I could sense that they wanted to say something but I didn't know Stewart Hall was black. I didn't register, I had no idea that he was actually black and so that was interesting. And he was an extremely open minded type of person and a great listener, who would never just be throwing himself into debates just for debates sake or anything like that. He was very ... he would always ponder, you know, (inaudible 00:35:19) position. He was a very interesting man.

Kieran Connell: What were your reflections on the impact of feminism?

Micheal Skovmand: Well I think it was interesting because feminism came very much into the ... well most people there had a background in English studies so what I was involved with as well was the kind of re-reading of more popular types of literature such as, a big one was Daphne Du Maurier, from the

feminist point of view and melodrama, it was a big concept there. It was interesting because the feminist (inaudible 00:37:13) in particular, with Dorothy Hudson(? 00:37:27).

Kieran Connell: Yes.
[00:37:27]

Micheal Skovmand: She did the work on Crossroads and (inaudible 00:37:36) female readership and has done. And so it was the kind of work, the kind of bridged literary studies, media studies and cultural studies mainly. I found that very interesting because those were my fields, English literature and media studies at the time.

Kieran Connell: Did feminism have an impact on the personal relations at the Centre?

Micheal Skovmand: Personal relations?

Kieran Connell: Yes. Like did it affect the day to day working practices of life in a Centre? Did people find it difficult to deal with feminism? Did men find it difficult to deal with feminism? Or, not really?

Micheal Skovmand: Not really, I don't think so. I mean obviously Michael Green, Richard Johnson and Stewart Hall were all men and so they were the guys in charge mainly. But no, I don't think so. I think it was a very open minded and liberal situation in that sense. Obviously there was a little bit of guilt stuff going round about men and women and (inaudible 00:40:30) and all that sort of stuff. I still feel that the women themselves, that the men were on their side, basically. That they had bigger battles to fight than (inaudible 00:41:18).

Kieran Connell: Yes. And did you have any inkling about the Centre's relationship to the wider university?

Micheal Skovmand: Yes. My feeling was that the popularity was obviously an acceptable thing. But politically there was always a very sort of sensitive kind of relationship to the rest of the university. And funding was the biggest problem. Also, there was a kind of a slow forwards because I think Sociology and English in particular, extreme Sociology and English, it really wasn't what were they doing in the department, in the Centre. And there were more established types, Sociology, History and Eng.Lit. going on in the department. So those sort of traditional departments came to be seen as less sexy, in the modern (inaudible 00:44:10) at the Centre.

Kieran Connell: Yes.

Micheal Skovmand: Which of course they were. They weren't that sexy. And so there was that and (inaudible 00:44:29) in that sense. Media attention for instance, all the media attention went to the Centre.

Kieran Connell: Right. Do you, because obviously Stewart left the Open University then as you were there, as the news spread across the Centre that Stewart was leaving did that have an impact in peoples ... how did people react to that?

Micheal Skovmand: Sorry? I didn't catch that.

Kieran Connell: How did people, when Stewart told the rest of the Centre that he was leaving to go and join the Open University, how did people respond?

Micheal Skovmand: I'm not so sure about that. I haven't had that much contact. I've had contact with Michael Green of course, who left a couple of years ago. But I think, in (inaudible 00:46:17) I think 11 years or so and I'm told that people (inaudible 00:46:32) move on to the Open University. It wasn't sort of a cop out in that sense, he was doing a worthwhile job as Professor of Sociology at the university. And in many ways it was a (inaudible 00:47:12). So I don't think there were any ill feelings in that sense. I may be wrong but that's not how I saw it.

Kieran Connell: Okay. And just finally, I was going to ask you Micheal, how big is the Birmingham School in Denmark today, would you say?

Micheal Skovmand: Today?

Kieran Connell: Yes.

[00:47:51]

Micheal Skovmand: Well it's become mainstream in that sense. I mean all the work on ... or at least it's defined really cultural studies and particularly so in the theoretical area of cultural studies. It's been defined by the Birmingham School. So for the last, certainly for the last 25 years or so, since the early '80s, it's been the defining fora in terms of, for instance masculinity studies, romance studies, popular fiction studies. I mean there's also political discourse that's been formed by the Birmingham School because in the sense, that was the input in the early '80s and obviously people move on to different types of theory. But it's been a huge informative influence on (inaudible 00:51:09) in Denmark. I mean with people who don't know very much about the Birmingham School itself, it's been very influential in that sense.

Kieran Connell: Great. That's really fascinating.

[End of Transcript]