Malte Tellerup

The Heathland Society

Hedeselskabet

Presented by: Troels Thorborg Andersen

***Hedeselskabet* is a political novel about community and the conflicts between nature and culture. Three friends, presumably in their late 20s or early 30s, move from Copenhagen to the heathland of Western Jutland in Denmark. Their ambition is to start a community in a wrecked farmhouse, far away from the big-city life of Copenhagen. In the heathland, they dream of living more sustainably, in closeness with nature and the local population. They commence their new life with a great curiosity toward the locals and their different outlook on life. However, the dream gradually turns into a nightmare since the truth about the heathland is hidden just a few inches under the surface: Long ago, a great part of the heathland was transformed into a heavy agricultural industry. The idyllic green fields are poisoned by pesticides. The locals, who seem friendly in the beginning, start revealing their less tolerant and tolerable sides.**

The title *Hedeselskabet* (*The Heathland* Society) refers to a private investment fund carrying the same name. It was established in 1866 with the purpose of transforming the vast heathland of Western Jutland into agricultural land. The fund is still operating, and despite its current aim of promoting biodiversity and sustainability, it remains one of the main reasons why there is hardly any wild nature left in Jutland today.

Tobias and Viktoria are a couple, but they have an open relationship, which allows Tobias to also pursue his desire for men. They are self-acclaimed writers (although they never write anything throughout the story). Andreas is their friend, and he is an art painter. The three of them move together from Copenhagen to a remote and wrecked farmhouse in Western Jutland. They rent it from the farmer Mads, a friendly and easy-going person whose main interest is to take care of his family and his farmland. He rents the house to the three Copenhageners and seems to appreciate that somebody will finally take good care of the old building. In the beginning Tobias, Viktoria and Andreas are excited to clean up and renovate the house. Tobias, especially, is euphoric, while Andreas soon starts a new painting project, albeit without great success.

The heathland is described as an almost autonomous zone where there is “a short distance to the sky, far away from the law” (23). This area of Denmark must be considered one of the wildest natural areas the country has to offer. The waves from *Vesterhavet* (the Nordic Sea) erode the western coast of Jutland; winds blow across the lowlands and ensure that only bushy vegetation like heather, herbs and pines can grow in the sandy soil. However, already in the mid-19th century, the regional administration in Jutland wanted to drain the heathland to make it fertile for agricultural production. Until the late-20th century, the land was cultivated by small-scale farmers, but with the economic boom of Danish agricultural industry, vast parts of the heathland (along with other areas of Denmark) are now owned by multi-millionaire agricultural industries, which exploit and exhaust the land and pollute the fresh water supplies because of the excessive use of pesticides.

Nonetheless, Tobias is excited. He dreams of combining a sustainable co-living with nature and friendly people with the pleasurable fetishes of the big-city life. After spending a day renovating the house and taking care of the

garden, Tobias, Viktoria and Andreas watch the newest fashion show of Prada on YouTube, where they can observe and analyse how *haute couture* merges with outdoor lifestyle. This scene pretty much encapsulates friends' utopia: To bring raw nature and high culture together; to not have to choose between a life in the city and a life in the country. Their dream is to break the often-discussed cultural and political boundaries between the province and the capital by insisting on the possibility of combining the best of both worlds.

Gradually, small signs appear that this dream might not last. Two other friends, Esben and Lukas, turn up. They are described as uncompromising anarchists with strict ethical viewpoints. Not impressed by the local surroundings of the heathland, they immediately see through the facade of raw nature and point out the obvious agricultural industrialisation and environmental destruction that is happening just around the house. Esben and Lukas soon leave again, but their visit has caused some second thoughts in Viktoria and Andreas.

The peak of the novel is a party that the three friends have organised for the neighbouring community. Life artists from Copenhagen come all the long way to the party; the trendy band First Flush will play a concert; and the friends have organised a big communal dinner that is supposed to unite locals and Copenhageners. Everything seems to play out excellently and Tobias is ecstatic, but only a few days after the party, Viktoria and Andreas announce that they intend to leave for a while. Andreas has found a new girlfriend in Copenhagen and Viktoria has been offered to take care of a house in Sicily for some time. This sets off a long, depressing downfall for Tobias' dream.

Shortly after Viktoria and Andreas have left, the landlord Mads is forced to declare bankruptcy. He can no longer compete with the economic tendency towards large-scale farming run by multimillionaires. Tobias is also desperately looking for a way to earn money, but neither the local farmers nor the local kiosk is interested in hiring a desperate writer from Copenhagen who does not have any practical skills.

Tobias also begins a sexual affair with one of the local bullies whom he meets on Grindr, but this only leads to further disappointment for Tobias because of the outspoken homophobia that does not allow his affair to show any emotional connection.

The novel is not resolved in the end, and it leaves room for reflection upon the political accomplishment of the friends' experiment. On one hand, they surely manage to build a connection with the locals and thus to create a sort of cross-cultural unity between the young life artists from Copenhagen and the down-to-earth mentality of the Jutlanders. But the novel also depicts the contradiction inherent in this image: The locals – and specifically the big industrial farms in the area – are actually much more obsessed with money and exploitation of nature than the idealistic Copenhageners. The sustainable life they came to find did not comply with reality but remained a utopian image of a past long gone.

In the end, the strongest point of the novel is the urge to build new forms of community, which breaks the typical division between the city and the countryside. It is here the novel shows its strength, and it is in this respect that the reader can feel the author's sympathy with both the local Jutlanders and Tobias – the idealistic believer in the good of humankind, despite humankind's obvious enslaving and destruction of the rest of nature.

LANGUAGE: Danish/Dansk

CENSORSHIP STATUS: