

Exploration

Something *Anarchical* in Denmark

by Benjamin Best

On his recent tours through Europe, Benjamin Best smelled something peculiar in Denmark. Perhaps it was freedom. You be the judge.

Christiania is a functioning anarchist community covering 85 acres, surrounded by Copenhagen. About a thousand utopian socialists and anarchists, hippies, drug-freaks, bikers and down-and-outs call it home. The laws of Denmark and Copenhagen are not applied to Christiania, and the police rarely enter the area.

Most "CA-nits" (as the inhabitants are called) do as they please without concern for government regulations. Christiania has its own flag (three yellow circles in tandem on a red background) and its own radio station, along with many shops, cafés, businesses and co-operatives.

For hundreds of years, the site of Christiania was a military compound consisting of the large barracks and parade area adjoining a series of bastions that jut into Stadsgraven, a body of water that acts as a moat. The Danish military abandoned the compound in 1971, with no immediate plans for it. Some hippy squatters moved in, publicizing their find with a photo-tour that appeared in an underground newspaper. Would-be settlers came in droves, and declared their new land the "Free State of Christiania." No government official was prepared to evict the squatters forcibly. In 1973 the government officially acknowledged the existence of Christiania, declaring it a "social experiment" which would be allowed to

continue for another three years.

By 1976, government opinion had soured, and the supreme court declared that the inhabitants of Christiania should leave "without unnecessary delays." The inhabitants did not budge, and government authorities were still unwilling to take the steps a forcible eviction would require. Christiania continued to exist in this legal limbo for eleven more years.

The "Free State" is divided into nine physical areas, and is organized by co-operatives, which regularly meet to discuss common problems. No taxes are paid to Denmark, though residents do pay "rent" to their local co-op. The payment of "rent" is enforced only by social pressure, and many residents do not pay. Revenues from "rent" are divided into three funds: water/electricity, area fund and common fund. CA-nits send a yearly check to the Ministry of Defense, which holds legal title to the land, for water and electricity. The Ministry deems the amount inadequate,

but so far has not cut off utilities.

A monthly meeting of representatives from the co-ops and the nine areas distributes the common fund to a health house, "garbage gang," radio station, kindergarten, community newspaper, post office, etc. General meetings of CA-nits represent the highest authority in the community.

Christiania does have rules. Cars and weapons are not permitted. Hard drugs are prohibited. Christiania residents addicted to hard drugs are moved outside the community for rehabilitation. Hashish is sold openly, but is mainly restricted to a single street, rechristened "Pusher Street" by residents. It is the main thoroughfare.

Many "visitors" to Christiania arrive at the front gate in a taxi-cab, make a beeline to Pusher Street, and then return to their cab with their merchandise. When I visited in 1987, I was taken aback by all the signs that say "no cameras," but when I visited

last summer, I learned that this only applies to Pusher Street. A hash dealer who is being photographed may well destroy your camera.

As Karl Popper has observed, the "paradox of tolerance" is that tolerance often allows free rein to some very intolerant people. A motorcycle gang known as the "Bull Shit" claimed Christiania as part of its turf, and became engaged in a gang war with the

Christiania seemed like a microcosm of anarchy in a world of statism. I could see drugs being sold openly, and there were public baths where naked men, women and children bathed together without inhibition. Big dogs were common, and it seemed to me they played the role of the Colt 45 in the Old West—personal self-defense.

Danish chapter of the Hell's Angels. In 1987, the body of a murder victim of their turf war was discovered entombed in concrete.

Most of the residents of Christiania co-operated completely with Copenhagen police in the removal of the corpse and the removal of the "Bull Shit" from Christiania. Undoubtedly this incident, along with repeated complaints from the governments of Norway and Sweden that Christiania is a major conduit for drugs arriving in Scandinavia, led to a new decision by the Danish parliament. A "control group" was established (by parliamentary majority), with a mandate to adapt Christiania to its surrounding society without destroying its special characteristics.

So when I visited Christiania last summer, things had changed since my visit three years earlier. The motorcycle gangs were gone. But drugs were still sold openly, and there were public baths where naked men, women and children bathed together without inhibition. Big dogs were common; it

seemed to me they played the role of the Colt 45 in the Old West: personal self-defense. I walked through Christiania several times, observing the people, the dogs, the stores, the bars, the restaurants and the buildings (some of which were graced with fabulously beautiful psychedelic artwork). I felt the fear and fascination of being in the midst of what was either anarchy or a pirate community—particularly at night, when the dogs became abundant and savage dog-fights were frequent.

I didn't see much evidence of the parliament's "control group." As far as I could determine, the only actions the "control group" had taken were to require the licensing of bars and cafés serving liquor and to prohibit the on-premise selling and consumption of drugs at those establishments. Some bars have complied with the anti-dope requirement. But others have not, and in many such cases the police have conducted raids, confiscating everything that wasn't nailed down. I visited a couple of these cafés; they contained little else than dilapidated wooden furniture and a bunch of people sitting around with drinks and dope. Dope is also smoked fairly openly on the streets of Christiania.

Vast sections of "rural" Christiania lie along the Stadsgraven. Here there are many farm animals, tents and odd-looking structures that were never built to conform to any building code. I also saw an enormous greenhouse—and can only speculate on what is grown inside.

In the beginning, a large number of CA-nits lived on government welfare. Others commuted by bicycle to jobs or schools in Copenhagen. But as in North America, the hippies of the '60s and '70s became the entrepreneurs of the '80s and '90s. The community has grocery stores, repair shops, a bakery, an art gallery, a print shop . . . all of which operate without government taxation or regulation. The *Spiseloppen* restaurant, near Christiania's front gate, has a reputation of being one of the best eating establishments in Copenhagen. I was escorted past barking dogs and clutter into a new plant shop where I bought a cactus. At Green Hall, a large warehouse, I

watched a forklift truck unloading a pallet of building supplies off a flat-bed truck. I was amazed to see that the front of the bicycle factory was made of large glass panels. Obviously, the owner has no fear of break-ins or thieves.

I spoke to a man who had been living in Christiania since the beginning, one of the principal operators of the well-known "Faggot House" theatre-café. He described Christiania as "80% Klondike, 20% Utopia." He resented the fact that the capitalistic drug merchants on Pusher Street earn a large amount of money that does not benefit the Christiania community as a whole. He was, nonetheless, proud that Christiania had never become a haven for prostitution or gambling.

I attempted to explore some of the barracks residences, but found that a door on each floor locked out strangers such as myself. Although all property in Christiania was originally up for grabs, most CA-nits now have a clear idea of where the boundary lines are drawn between what belongs to them and what does not. The squat-

Christiania is moderately independent of its surroundings. Hash is sold openly and no one pays taxes. Most inhabitants do as they please without concern for government regulations. Christiania has its own flag and its own radio station, along with many shops, cafés, businesses and co-operatives.

ters have become *de-facto* owners of their rooms and rural lands.

To me, Christiania seemed like a microcosm of anarchy in a world of statism. How long it will retain its character, I am not certain. In 1991, after 20 years of occupation, the squatters will become legal property owners under Danish law. Will legitimization of ownership become a pretext for taxation and government regulation of CA-nits? □