

BOOK REVIEW

Letfærdig og løsagtig – kvindeanstalten Sprogø 1923–1961 (Dissolute and loose – the institution for women at Sprogø 1923–1961)

BIRGIT KIRKEBÆK

Holte: Forlaget Socpol, 2004, ISBN 87-88868-65-6

“Who was the ‘Sprogø-girl’, if we are to believe the construction that was made of her at the time in the case records, correspondence cases, articles and theoretical considerations?” This is the question that Birgit Kirkebæk asks in the conclusion of her book about the so-called “feble-minded” girls who were placed on the Danish island of Sprogø. The question is ambiguous. It might indicate that Kirkebæk wants to know who these girls really were, whether they were really “feble-minded”, or whether they were really as dangerous as was thought. From time to time Kirkebæk seems to ask this type of question, but most of the time she does not. The quotation marks are crucial: Kirkebæk is not writing about the Sprogø-girl, but about the “Sprogø-girl”. This is what I like about her book; for a historian, documents about patients at a certain time in history in fact say very little about who or how the patients really were, but these writings say so much more about those who wrote them. This is Kirkebæk’s main research strategy – she turns the records around: they are not telling the truth about the patient, but the truth about their authors.

This is also why the book starts with the “stories of Sprogø” – stories that are told in newspapers, articles and official reports. We hear about how brave men struggled finally to establish Sprogø as a necessary and useful institution in 1923, how the inmates set the institution on fire in 1925 (and thus were dangerous) and how the girls had to be evacuated during the war (and thus received less adequate treatment). Kirkebæk’s analysis of these stories functions as a highly intelligent and sophisticated introduction to her project: it emphasizes how the concept of the girls was also constructed through memory material in which this institution was later incorporated. Here, as in most of the other chapters, Kirkebæk illustrates her point by telling case histories, a technique that is surprisingly illuminating. By reading the archives she is (almost) never trying to determine who the patients were or what really

happened to them, but how they were perceived, diagnosed, controlled, tested and supervised. Throughout the book she turns the examinations towards the examiners: their discourse reveals their way of thinking.

Different reasons were given for placing girls at Sprogø. On the one hand it was considered the best solution for the girls involved: here they would be protected from sexual exploitation, given a “home” and “reformed”. On the other hand they were sent there in order to protect society from them: they might transmit defective hereditary traits to their progenitor (and thereby contribute to the degeneration of the race), they might contaminate men with venereal diseases or they might be an economic burden on the poor relief system. An island such as Sprogø was a perfect solution to these problems: this was a place where the girls could be reformed intensively without locking them up, and at the same time society got rid of the girls and prevented escapes (the current around the island was so strong that it would be impossible to cross the strait). The girls who ended up here were often those who were considered too difficult to be “treated” in other institutions or who had broken the law and were sentenced to treatment at Sprogø instead of going to prison (or another kind of punishment). They were placed on the island for an indeterminate time (the average stay was around 7 years) and were thus dependent on the inspection board’s goodwill (normally a recommendation from the doctors was needed) in order to be “released”. Discipline was tough and extensive: the girls had to work, talk decently, behave well and do as they were told; those who did not were punished (by depriving them of money or food, strapping them to their beds, detention in their room, isolation in a cell, or sedation). In fact, the Sprogø institution was also considered to have a deterrent effect on other girls: those “feble-minded” girls who were placed in other institutions were told that they would be sent to Sprogø if they did not behave as they should.

According to Kirkebæk the girls at Sprogø were described in an astonishingly homogeneous and stereotypical way with emphasis on their sexual appetite (they were perceived as “frivolous” and “loose”). As such they could easily be connected to the criminological discourse in which, at least since the end of the 19th century, prostitutes were considered to be feble-minded and to inherit a predisposition to sexual dissoluteness. Very often the girls at Sprogø were also seen as lazy or unable to retain steady employment. Intelligence tests were used in order to establish that they were “feble-minded”; various diagnoses (such as “psychopath”) determined them as dangerous. For these reasons the Sprogø-girls were considered deviant, which of course implied that the doctors who treated them were considered not deviant: the girls were abnormal, the doctors normal. When Denmark passed a sterilization law in 1929 it was especially useful in relation to these “abnormal” girls: frivolous and loose they were, but sterilized they would at least not give birth to “feble-minded” children or children they could not take care of. As a result more girls were released from the island after having been sterilized.

The girls were, however, rarely out of the grip of the authorities. If they were not sent to another institution, they were normally supervised in their

“released” condition. For many, if not all, of the girls marriage was the key to freedom and an ordinary life. However, the inspection board and the doctors were very reluctant to allow marriage; not only because they considered the girls promiscuous, but because the husbands they wanted to marry (and who had given their consent) were not considered suitable for marriage (normally because they were out of work) and thus not good husbands. More often than not the authorities did not allow marriage.

For Kirkebæk the case records also seem to have their limits. The more cases she discusses, the more repetitive her study seems to become. When, for instance, she uses “Anna’s story” to illustrate the role of the director at Sprogø, she is after all not putting much flesh on the bone. She indicates how the director functioned both as a professional officer and as a model mother (and sometimes even as a mother substitute), but most of the case is (again) used to illustrate how the authorities in general considered the girl to be vagrant, untruthful, immoral, indecent, feeble-minded, alcoholic, nervous, weak-willed, loose, and so on. In a short chapter Kirkebæk also gives us the result of three interviews she carried out, one with the skipper of the Sprogø boat, another with the daughter of the lighthouse keeper at Sprogø, and a third with a woman who had been interned at Sprogø. These interviews break with Kirkebæk’s main research strategy: the two first informants are asked mainly about their opinion of the inmates (not the staff) and the last informant relates briefly some stories and makes some general remarks about what it was like to be interned there. It is not easy to understand why Kirkebæk has incorporated these interviews in her book. She does not use them analytically and they provide little information about the professional discourse; however, at least they are short.

All in all Kirkebæk has carried out an excellent study, which reveals the patterns in the practises and strategies used by the authorities to come to terms with a group of people who were perceived as “difficult”. The scientific (medical) expertise played a crucial role here. Like many others agents in this game, the doctors conceived these girls as different, but they perceived this difference in a different way. They gave the girls medical, “scientific” diagnosis, and by the same token they justified certain means and treatments. It is this medicalization of deviant behaviour that Kirkebæk analyses with her micro- and macroscopic lenses: tiny remarks in the records tell us much about general concepts of “deviant” people.

Espen Schaanning
Professor, History of Ideas, University of Oslo, Norway
E-mail: espen.schaanning@ifikk.uio.no