

Property and Publics

Negotiating State – Citizen Relationships in Christiania

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CAS WORKING PAPER SERIES
Centre for the Study of Social Systems
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

May 2014
CAS/WP/14-8



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Abstract

In the summer of 1971, many Danish citizens, mostly the homeless and those living a hippie life, squatted on vast tracts of vacant and pristinely beautiful land belonging to the military in the Christianshavn area of Copenhagen. Over the years, this area became marked as Freetown Christiania, a social experiment that flourished despite numerous conflicts with the state. In 2011, the community entered into a historic agreement with the State to buy a majority area of the squatted land. Following this Christiania would be managed by a foundation, consisting of Christianites and some 'outsiders'. The agreement negotiates and articulates Christianites right to and control over the land and property where they have been living for the last forty years. People's relationships to property in Christiania is further complicated by the overwhelming presence of hash and the hash market. The paper thus deals with the community's engagement with two kinds of property relations – relations to, and mediated by, land and relations through hash.

The paper weaves a narrative of negotiating with the state while representing some of the anxieties and concerns of Christianites and seeks to understand some aspects of self-governance and consent democracy through this process of reaching an agreement with the state. I present Christiania's negotiation

with the state through four narratives: R, the upholder of the right to private property in Christiania; L, the archivist; S, a member of the contact group which was instrumental in the negotiations with the state and T, who lives in the 'Red Castle', one of the houses that Christiania has agreed to remove as part of this agreement with the state. Of course they all have many other identities but I have chosen to highlight the one most significant for the narratives of negotiating with the state and the paradoxes of life in Christiania.

Vignettes from Christiania

In 2007, while a court decision on the Danish state's normalisation plan of Christiania was still pending, the police entered Christiania and amidst protests, forcibly demolished the Cigar box, a small house located in the Midtydysen area in Christiania. From the state's point of view and its normalisation and legalisation plan, the Cigar box was an illegal structure with illegal residents. Following this act of demolition, activists from within and outside Christiania worked through the night and by the next morning had rebuilt the Cigar box, in defiance of and protest against the state's act of violence.

E, one of the long term members of Christiania in reflecting on how Christiania decides to allocate residence, narrated an incident from a while ago, when a widow was not allowed to continue living in her husband's home after his death. A neighbour had intervened and in an attempt to secure her right to continue living there if she chose to, took the established and accepted path of calling a local meeting to resolve the issue. Some days before the meeting some Christianites forcibly entered the premises and threw out all the belongings of the widow and reclaimed the home for a person of their choice.

In 1979, Christianites launched the junk blockade to evict all hard drug dealers and users. They were given the option of relinquishing hard drugs or their right to Christiania. If they chose the former, they would have to agree to rehabilitation. The blockade lasted for forty days. Another attempt to control the drug scene was made in the late eighties when the pushers were operating all over Christiania, especially in the segment recognised as the downtown area. An older woman recalled that women were a very critical part of this attempt to get the pushers confined to Pusher Street. She felt that when women came to the forefront to defend the values of Christiania, it was generally taken very seriously. As E said, 'the women planned it. We got up

at 5 in the morning and we built a wall near the post office. It was intended as a closing off of one of the entrances to Pusher street. I think when women make attempts to reclaim spaces, it is taken very seriously. Probably we take on a very moralistic, a soft, yet very insistent position. That is women power and it is difficult to resist.

P is a young woman who has been living in Christiania since her marriage to a man who lived here. She has spent five years here and lives in the serene village area of Christiania with her husband and little daughter. P works as a yoga instructor, generally outside Christiania. When we met she was about to start off her own yoga studio along with a friend. P was very happy about her life in Christiania and liked the fact that it offered her a life, different from one that she had lived in the city before being here. 'Its like living in a small village', she said. Its not very Danish at all. You can live in a building in Copenhagen and not know the name of your neighbour. In Christiania you cannot not know your neighbour. I think that gives it stability. You feel safe. Mentally you are in the country side and physically you are just ten minutes away from the centre. That is quite unique. I am not really engaged in the common meeting and in the decision making processes. Yet, I feel a kind of safety from the rule of consensus. 'While I probed on with the issue of safety and feeling safe she told me about the time police had entered her house'. My husband and daughter and I were getting ready to leave the house to go and pick up my mother from the metro station nearby. She was waiting there for us. There was a knock on the door and my husband opened it to a bunch of angry men in uniform. They began roughing him up and asking about some letter. They had an envelope in their hands. Now in Christiania there are no separate numbers for each house. I had marked my house number on my door to avoid confusion. But the same number would be allotted to other houses as well. So without looking at the name on the envelope they began accusing my husband of dealing in drugs and so on and messing up our home. My little daughter was petrified. I did not know what to do. To be with her or to intervene with the policemen. Then I don't know what came over me, I just screamed. I screamed and shouted out aloud. That sort of calmed them down. Then I asked to show the letter and saw that it did not have my husband's name on it. We showed them identification and they left apologising. There was a woman officer who said that I could press charges if I wanted to and I said no. We choose to be here because we don't want anything to do with the police. Pressing charges would mean engaging

with them and we don't want to do that. That was the only time I felt unsafe and unprotected.

The ethnographic vignettes presented here indicate some of the relationships around property in Christiania that this paper will deal with. These relationships around property, I argue, are fundamental both to the contradictions implicit in the organisation of life in Christiania, as well as to the multiple configurations of Christiania publics. Here, property is not essentially seen as a right to a thing, but rather as a bundle of rights between persons, which may vary according to the context and the object which is at stake. Thus, I articulate the relationships among people based on two different sets of objects – first, land and buildings and second, hash. To begin with, analytically and not necessarily empirically speaking, I locate these relationships in two separate, yet perhaps overlapping physical realms – Christiania and Pusher street or the hash market. The relationships within these two realms and between them embody, in my mind, one of the fundamental contradictions of Christiania life - the alternative aspirations of life and everyday governance that the community was premised on, produced conditions conducive to the emergence of the very materialism, hierarchisation and political subjection most abhorred in the Christiania way of life.

In the summer of 1971, many Danish citizens, mostly the homeless and those living a hippie life, squatted vast tracts of vacant and pristinely beautiful land belonging to the military in the Christianshavn area of Copenhagen. Over the years, this area became marked as Freetown Christiania, a social experiment that flourished despite numerous conflicts with the state. In 2011, the community entered into a historic agreement with the State to buy a majority area of the squatted land. Following this Christiania would be managed by a foundation, consisting of Christianites and some 'outsiders'. The agreement negotiates and articulates Christianites right to and control over the land and property where they have been living for the last forty years. I use a dialogue between some residents of Christiania in the process of this agreement with the State to bring to light these inherent contradictions, the Christiania paradox – that which makes the alternative possible and yet holds the potential for its implosion. The idea of paradoxes is premised on two related conceptual axes: first, the concept of governmentality (Foucault 2006); and second, the idea that the state is no longer to be viewed as a 'free-standing agent', and nor is that 'traditional figure of resistance, a subject who stands outside the state' (Mitchell 1991:93). The disciplinary power of the state is

at once both within and outside the state, just as the strategies of resistance are not necessarily clearly outside the state, but are in fact, framed within a context of state practices.

The paper weaves a narrative of four key informants, focussing on the negotiations with the state and the ways in which key institutions of Christiania embody, counter and grapple with these negotiations. The four participants in this dialogue are: R, one of the few people who articulates the right to private property in Christiania; L, the archivist; S, a member of the contact group which was instrumental in the negotiations with the state and T, who lives in one of the houses that Christiania has agreed to remove as part of this agreement with the state. Of course they all have many other identities but I have chosen to highlight the one most significant for the narratives of negotiating with the state and the paradoxes of life in Christiania.

Framing a Dialogue

This is not a real negotiation. It is gun-point negotiation.

A Christiania citizen in one of the many informal conversations I had about the community's agreement with the state.

I sort of welcome the gun-point. I think that's the only way Christiania takes major decisions.

S, a member of the negotiation group on being asked what he thought of the common perception of the negotiations.

My intuition about the agreement and the fund is that it is not going to work as the propaganda says it will.

L, the Christiania archivist and a long time member of the community.

We all hope something good will come out of it (the agreement). I am going to lose my home. I don't know where I will live. There are trying times ahead...

T, who lives in one of the wagons to be removed as part of the agreement with the State.

I think people in Christiania should have the right to buy the property they have been living in, if they wish. It is about individual will. Christiania has never been about suppressing personal freedom.

R, one of the few voices in Christiania that openly articulates the right to private property.

If anyone wants to own the house he lives in, Christiania is not the place for him. He should just move and realise this incredible dream in any other place in the city.

An outsider and Christiania supporter with a close connection to the community through a network of friends.

The expressions above represent a dialogue in Christiania, in the context of the community's prolonged negotiations with the State and a consequent agreement, which is seen as a settlement of a long-standing face off between Christiania and the State. As this paper criss-crosses the conflicting, complex, yet in some way unifying threads of this dialogue, I will focus on the differential relations to property that are articulated through this.

Christiania's belligerent encounters with the state, in the years since its inception is, not merely a function of ideological distancing. It is, as Karpantschhof (2011) pointed out the consequence of a sustained subversion of the capitalist norm of private property and the 'traditional bourgeois' values of hard work and nuclear-family life. The latter was challenged not just through the fact that many Christiania members lived and worked in collectives, but also more fundamentally through the hash market and the consumption of hash. Finally all of this was not happening in a remote corner, away from the eyes and ears of the state; rather it was right in the centre of Copenhagen, a visibly open challenge to the state.

Paradoxes and Self-Governance

The new agreement is an instrument through which the state has initiated a legalization and normalization process in Christiania, even though many locals would be quick to point out that 'Christiania can never really be normal'. The agreement mandates that a majority of the area that now stands as Christiania will be bought by the Christianites from the state at a price of 120 million kroner. The rest of it will be rented out to the current residents. The logistics of the sale and thereafter the management of Christiania will be done by a foundation, consisting of eleven members, five of whom will be Christianites and the remaining six, outsiders. While Christiania will have a say in choosing or

suggesting the outside members, the state would have the final right to decide who would constitute this segment of the foundation. Further Christianites, as part of this agreement have agreed to remove some houses in the picturesque lake area of Christiania. As the agreement is implemented, seven such houses will have to be removed immediately. Subsequently over the next couple of years some more of such houses will have to be demolished. However, a general feeling seems to be that Christiania has succeeded in maintaining their flat structure of consent democracy or direct democracy. They also feel confident that they will be able to hold on to their socially inclusive ideology, which enables all those who fulfill the criteria and the due of process of finding living space in Christiania, never have to give up this right, because they don't have the required means. Beneath this veneer of confidence in the agreement and the positive feelings that people tended to share with me, there was also deep anxiety and concern both about the manner in which the agreement was reached and the nitty-gritty of the implementation of the agreement. I draw on L's sharp and substantive critique of this agreement.

L came to live in Christiania as a young man in the early years of its establishment as a commune and has been instrumental in creating and maintaining the Christiania archive. As he was away on holiday, during the initial period of my fieldwork stint, I met him the day before my fieldwork was coming to an end. I met him at the archive, in the tiny back room, which was his office. The archive was undergoing some renovation so there was a lot of stuff lying around, books, old posters, building material etc. L seemed happy to talk to me, was very open and interestingly offered not a view of anxiety (as many others did, while implicitly supporting the new agreement) with the agreement but a rather trenchant critique of the negotiation process and the agreement itself.

'When Denmark joined the European Union, most of the debates were about if we don't do it, then something terrible will happen. The Christiania debate has been the same. If we don't take this agreement something really bad will happen'. With these words, L marked a deep similarity in the way that Freetown had engaged in a debate about its survival, maintenance and ideology in effectively the same way as the Danish state had done in becoming part of the European Union. What most others voiced as an uneasiness with process, a feeling of not knowing enough despite attending most of the common meetings and trying to find out as much as possible through the informal structures, L articulated as a 'failure of the Christiania way' and the

community's slippage into the Danish state's way of arriving at a decision. Both these aspects marked, in his view, an erosion of Christiania's collective self-determination. 'The reason I am a bit pissed with the situation is that I have experienced my way. I have lived here long enough. We had a pretty perfect democratic way of making the solutions. It is not that I am against the idea of a fund, but I am against the idea of giving the fund a lot of power without some idea upfront about how the fund and Christiania should cooperate. I am in fact a bit tempted to rent individually, because my intuition with the fund is that it is not going to work as the propaganda says it will', he said.

In the negotiations leading to the agreement, L felt that a very weak democratic structure of Christiania was revealed. According to the formal structure the contact group was leading the discussions with the state about the future of the community. The contact group was formed with two members from each of the fourteen areas in Christiania. Some people from the contact group felt that this group was too large and that they should form another negotiation group. The state too claimed that they did not want to discuss with the common meeting or the contact group, but only with the negotiation group. L pointed out that his experience with the negotiation group was that they would lose touch with the community and then at the common meeting, most people would have no clue about the many bases of discussions or their viewpoints were not necessarily represented. L said, 'so it has been somewhat like this: the negotiation group has a meeting, then the group has a meeting with the lawyer, the lawyer goes and has a meeting with the state, comes back and tells the negotiation group and the negotiation group then tells the contact group and then it reaches the Christiania citizens. This is clearly top down and not down up. Moreover, I feel the informal practice of consensus democracy in Christiania has also enabled this kind of a process. Christiania is a place with many different kinds of people with different viewpoints so even though the ideal of consensus democracy is that all people must agree before coming to a decision it is an ideal that you never reach. But when everyone does not agree there is space for informal ways of decision-making. One of the informal strategies that I think was applied with reference to this agreement is the keeping back of information that does not suit your purpose'. L articulated an understanding of manufactured consent about the way in which the agreement with the state had been reached. He succinctly said that 'consent democracy is a great tool to prevent majority democracy

and create minority dictatorship'. L went on to articulate the relationship of Christiania to Pusher street. There is this really self-righteous group of people who thought we are socialists, its very good to be a collective and they took over the whole. There is no one in that group that is really opposing the Pusher Street. My ideal is we get a decriminalisation of hemp and in Christiania it could be like in the seventies when we had a lot of hash dealing from the barns and not the streets. When police tried to remove Pusher Street in 2004 through constant surveillance and continuous raids, it didn't work. In the end, they got exhausted and as soon as the work of the police was limited, the pushers came back. It was around this time that there was discussion in Christiania about how big the Golden Triangle should be. If you want Pusher Street to get smaller you have to take the trade elsewhere as well. Christiania without hash is a contradiction. Christiania with a little less hash and legal hash would make it easier for the community to make the pushers pay. In here a lot of energy is invested in a keeping a tolerable style around Pusher Street. I don't like to see 19-20 year olds in Pusher Street as they get involved in the criminal organisation. They end up living in a very hierarchic mafia like structure. The Danish Hells Angels and the Bandidos are two biker gangs with international linkages that have a base here in Christiania. 81HA is the supporter group for Hells Angels. It means always ready for the Hells Angels. These organisations have soldiers, those who help. They are paid everyday. You will see them hanging out right at the beginning of Pusher Street, very clearly marked off by their leather jackets, uniform like clothing and tattooed bodies. The hierarchical structure of these organisations is becoming more and more mafia like. Any kind of mafia needs the psychopath. They need people that other people will be afraid of. It is then a matter of principle that these guys don't want a common meeting to rule over Pusher Street. So Pusher Street remains an informal structure within Christiania. No doubt, there is a softening influence because they are in Christiania. Most of them can see that keeping good terms with the rest of Christiania is a good idea. So CA in my mind is more than one society. Specially the Pusher Street – it is a parallel society. There are rules but most pushers are not connected to Christiania, so most don't take part in meetings or decisions. They are just doing their business. Some years ago there was a case of violence against a young couple. They were badly beaten up. In Christiania, we have a rule that if you are violent, you have to leave the place. In this case, all the people involved in inflicting the violence, did not even come forward. One of them was sent to rehab and

another was debarred for some months. For me this was a pretty depressing story. I was only confirmed in my opinion that its impossible to come from the outside and make any changes in the closed milieu of the pushers.

In a similar vein, E another long term member and an active participant in the women's meetings as well as in the women's interventions to restrict the drug selling business to certain areas within Christiania expressed the complex relation that Christianites have with the hash market. In her words, 'hash is illegal but a lot of people are interested in keeping it illegal. We are victims in that game. The reason that Pusher street exists is that in the early days of Christiania it was like one big festival. People came here and began dumping junk here. In the seventies people were doping a lot. People in the mafia then began to find ways to build markets. The police were also pushing people in here, away from the centres. All of a sudden we realised we were living with junkies. Christiania had to do something. We had to decide where to draw the line. We had big discussions about where is that line. So we drew the line to say that people smoke marijuana and hashish but the rest we cannot tolerate. The police weren't friends of Christiania. So we could not go to the police with the junkies. So the people of Christiania had to fight the junkies and those who were making money. Christiania made an enormous programme for the junkies, identified them, confronted them and gave them half a year or something to go into rehab or leave the place. Of course despite all our attempts Pusher Street continues. In recent times I have felt a big fear from the existence of Pusher street – that Christiania people were afraid to talk because of Pusher street and its obvious connections to Hells Angels. They have exactly the opposite code of Christiania – marked by a deeply hierarchical structure, extreme violence to ensure compliance to decisions, prostitution, money making and lavish lives. It is totally the opposite of what we believe in as Christianites.

S, a young member of the negotiation team and also a comparatively new member of Christiania paints a picture that runs counter to the earlier portrayal of arriving at the consensus agreement and the negative feelings of the process. According to him, 'our discussions of the agreement have revolved around 4 points: on whether we can buy Christiania. The issue for us really has been how can we contain this collective ownership. And the solution to this has been that we make a fund that owns the area, the buildings. The foundation is self-governing. It complies with the law but still remains common. The second point of discussion has been the price, how much are going

to pay to continue to live here the way we have. The third point has been around the issue of who gets to decide who is going to live here. And finally, we have debated about the requirement that some houses in the green areas and the lake will have to be removed as per the agreement'. S perceived the decision making process in Christiania an organic process where people argued endlessly and debated endlessly till they could all agree on something. So the several common meetings, area meetings, informal conversations were the platforms in which awareness about the agreement was generated and the four critical points as mentioned above were discussed. A lot of time was spent reading through the agreement document in the meetings. 'The negotiation group has eight people who were generally in agreement. We do have different perspectives and differences have cropped up on which points of the agreement we should put pressure on and how we communicate the prices to Christianites. But the good part of the Christiania way is that because we work in the realm of collective consciousness, I, as an individual, don't have to take responsibility. I share this responsibility with others and this gives every member confidence'.

In the last common meeting there was a general discussion. I told a colleague from the negotiation group, I think they are ready to decide. I think through the meetings Christiania tested the negotiation group. Then the common meeting asks if anyone wants to protest and there was silence followed by applause. There was applause but there wasn't a feeling of celebration. It was emotional but it always is. Christiania decisions are taken on an emotional basis. I feel it is quite a victory for Christiania. The majority, are on the one hand, happy that there is an agreement but there is anxiety about the economic consequences.

A radically different view is presented through R's narrative. R has been living here for more than thirty years. He is the only person in Christiania who has voiced his support for private ownership and was clear that he at least, was going to buy his own house from the state and not be a part of the collective ownership through the foundation. In his opinion, 'Christiania was always very individualistic. Every man, his own chimney. We came here, took some houses and started living here. We came here to manage our own houses so buying the houses should not be so difficult'.

'Christiania as a place that takes care of anybody, that's an ad. It has very little to do with reality. We teach people how to get on social welfare and stay there without having to go out and work. The self-governance that we

talk about here has its roots in Pusher Street. So if you know that a very big criminal organization dominates the place, then you don't want to call the police, as the pushers won't like it. Pusher street is big business. I don't know how many people would get some money directly or indirectly from Pusher Street. They would give little jobs to a lot of people. If one does this kind of odd jobs for ten years it becomes very difficult to get out and get another job. I think Christiania has become an asylum, a monastery for people who don't like to work. People who do work have ordinary jobs here or outside in the city. Christiania would not survive in most other countries. So Pusher street is a big institution in Christiania.

However, the big institution that most people would have talked to you about would be the common meeting. I think the common meeting is a lot about violence. Most of what a common meeting can do is make up good advice for people and then it has to be left to the people if they want to and can follow the advice or not. The last few years in Christiania have been really difficult. It takes half my brain to just stay normal. I do think that the current agreement is a consensus agreement. It basically says that Christiania can be bought by a foundation and those who don't want to be a part of the foundation can buy the houses they live in and rent the land. The agreement does involve many little rules intended to prevent the pushers from buying up the whole thing. They do have that kind of money. So there are rules like you can't buy the house you live in and sell it for a profit. But then I think that the pushers can take over the foundation.

R feels that the common meetings have not really debated anything. What should we do and why? Nobody has talked about what is the beauty of the foundation? Or why do people think that they should not own anything. There are a lot of people on social welfare, people who think that they would not be able to manage their own houses. So it is better to let things remain. Another thing I feel is that when people live from welfare most of their lives, they can't do that being ashamed of it. You can deal with it by saying I give my home to the foundation and then you are one up again.

R's is a lone voice in Christiania. Christianites believe that the fount of self-governance is in the collective ownership of property. There is nothing like this is mine. Even though Christianities are actually constantly fighting this tendency. T's narrative shows us this struggle. After years of traveling, T has settled in Christiania, with her boyfriend. She lives in a little red wagon by the lake – the red castle as she calls it. Bohemian in spirit and style, warm and

friendly and a firm believer in the collective powers of Christiania, T personifies the free spirit and collective consciousness that many people talked about. The red castle is one of the houses that will be soon demolished as part of the agreement with the state. T was happy about the agreement as it marked a closure to endless debating and struggle. But she is also apprehensive about where she would live and as she said, so were many others. 'We have given up the right to our house and enabled the common meeting to come to a consensus agreement. Because even if one person disagrees, in Christiania you cannot go ahead with the decision. There has to be 100% consensus. We have chosen to let go of our home for a collective decision to come through for all of us. We don't yet know where we will have to move to, which neighbourhood. We know that we will be in the lake area. But I think this relocation of seven houses makes a lot of people nervous. So there will be people who tell me, you cant come to this neighbourhood. There have been people who have said, you will now get a house with more space, with water and toilet. You should not be complaining. It is better for you. I think people don't understand that we don't care about the water and the toilet and the space. We have lived in the red castle and have managed pretty well without those. But people don't understand that.

R, T, L and S present competing narratives of the negotiation process, the agreement and possible outcomes of these as well of the location of Pusher street as a parallel society within Christiania. In this dialogue all the participants are aware that they gave their consent to the agreement and if they had not consented, then the agreement may not have been made. The idea of self-governance and the force of the collective that most people consider as the basis of life here also express paradoxical relations to the institutional structures and practices in Christiania: the paradox of radical, free life along with a focus on traditionalism; that of common meeting as the highest body and the practice of the contact group negotiating with the state; that of self-governance and flat structures associated with it and simultaneously the presence of a very strong mafia-like structure of pusher street and the hash business; positioning of Christiania as a 'micro-nation', as a unit against the Danish state, while being in negotiations with the state to retain its essential character, and the contrast of the calm, peaceful, anti-capitalist, free alternative life of Christiania with the violent and ostentatious lifestyles on Pusher street. These are some of the paradoxes that the narratives draw upon. These paradoxes articulated in the narratives presented here, would in some senses negate the commonly

understood and articulated anchors of Christiania, namely communal ownership of property, a flat structure of governance, a collective focus on maintaining an alternative lifestyle and on resisting the state's attempt to 'normalise' Christiania. Despite these fissures and frictions of life in Christiania, as a fieldworker I could not help but accept the feeling of a sense of cohesion, one that is possibly drawn not from one of the established and well-rehearsed pillars of Christiania that Christianites seem to articulate, but from their ability to enter into dialogues, both at personal and collective levels, about the inherent paradoxes of Christiania life. The dialogue presented here indicates that the agreement Christiania made with the state is both an exercise in reinforcing state effects, as well as an affirmation of the resistant subject, an alternative society and self-governance.

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