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A state within reach? An ethnographic case study on the relocation of a government workplace from Copenhagen to a small town in rural Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the redistribution of state jobs from Copenhagen to provincial Denmark, this article draws upon an ethnographic case study involving the relocation of a government workplace, *Nota*, to the small town of *Nakskov* (12,500 inhabitants) on the rural island of Lolland. Taking up residence in the town's central square, the article examines the everyday social and economic expectations and norms *Nota* encounters in this new locale. Based on social scientific theories of practice communities and local economic circles, the analysis illustrates how the state institution must navigate two parallel and opposing economic circuits: that of the state, marked by inflexibility and uniformity, and that of the local town community, grounded in pragmatism and adaptability. The state's standardising central-economic line of procedure is shown to hinder the relocated workplace in becoming part of and contributing to the new host town's own local-economic systems of exchange. In conclusion, the article argues that in daily life a fundamental conflict of interests between *state-economic rules* and *local-economic norms* emerges on the ground, meaning that, despite being introduced as *decentralisation*, when seen from the perspective of the site of relocation, the redistribution of state jobs in Denmark remains bound by logic of *centralisation*.

1. Introduction

With an anthropological interest in the impact of the recent Danish national policy programme to redistribute state jobs from the capital of Copenhagen to provincial and rural districts, this article draws on an ethnographic case study of the everyday encounter between a relocated government workplace and the local town community in its new location. The national policy initiative in question, *Better Balance – government workplaces closer to citizens and enterprises* (my translation), was launched in 2015 by the Danish centre-right government in the wake of a decade characterised by increasing centralisation of the Danish public sector that had resulted in a significant reduction in the number of state institutions and other public sector workplaces located outside Denmark's main cities.

In Denmark, with a population of approximately 5.9 million, there were a total of 187,281 state jobs in 2022 (Balance Denmark, 2022). Meanwhile, it is striking how unevenly these jobs are distributed between the country's urban and rural districts: for instance, while in the city of Copenhagen there are 71 state jobs per 1000 inhabitants, this figure ranges between 14 and 34 jobs per 1000 inhabitants in the rest of

the country (ibid.). Likewise, if we look at the nearly 12,000 new state jobs that were created in Denmark in the period 2008–20, 98 per cent were located within the country's four largest urban districts (Copenhagen, Aarhus, Odense, Aalborg), whereas, during the same period, approximately 900 state jobs were lost in the rest of Denmark (Balance Denmark, 2020).

This increasing state centralisation can be partially attributed to a major structural reform of the Danish public sector in 2007 (Dybvad, 2015), which merged Denmark's previous 271 local municipalities into 98 larger municipal entities and its 13 regional counties into 5 major national regions. A decade and a half after this reform, which was aimed at improving efficiency within the Danish public sector, the current political debate is focused on creating a more even distribution of state jobs, which is now seen as the first and most important step in countering the growing demographic and socioeconomic imbalance between rural and urban areas in Denmark (e.g., Dybvad, 2015). As the then Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen stated at a national press conference on January 17, 2018, when presenting the second and final round of the wide-ranging *Better Balance* initiative: "Denmark must not be split between development and dismantlement. Therefore, today we

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present another major plan to move state jobs to those parts of the country in desperate need of more growth and more opportunities” (Statsministeriet, 2018; my translation).

As a result of the *Better Balance* programme, a total of 7927 state jobs (equivalent to about one-fifth of all state jobs in the Capital Region of Denmark in 2015) were relocated to 51 smaller Danish towns during 2016–19, spread across 89 state institutions (Finansministeriet, 2018). This represents the most comprehensive geographical redistribution of government workplaces ever seen in Denmark. While Danish attempts to relocate state jobs from urban to rural areas had been sporadic and on a limited scale prior to the *Better Balance* initiative (see, Schmidt et al., 2021), this is not the case in the rest of Scandinavia and other parts of Europe. For instance, in Norway, Sweden, and the UK, from the 1960s to the present day, the relocation of public sector workplaces has been a common and widespread practice in promoting national cohesion between urban and rural areas (see, e.g., Marshall et al., 2005; Nilsson, 1992; Trondal and Kiland, 2010). In Denmark, however, the recent nature of this political project means data are limited, most notably concerning the many qualitative dimensions and problems intrinsic to the relocation of government workplaces from one geographical milieu to another.

Based on an ethnographic case study, in this article I invite readers to journey to the small town of Nakskov (12,500 inhabitants) located on the westernmost part of the rural island of Lolland, to where the state institution, Nota (*the Danish Library and Expertise Center for People with Print Disabilities*), was moved from Copenhagen in 2019. Qualitative methods and data are used to cast light on this migratory encounter from an everyday, local perspective. The study is part of a larger collaborative anthropological research project, *Remote Relocations – Work, Precarity and the Inclusion of Newcomers on Lolland* (2019–2022), that has explored the social impact of different kinds of national and international in-migration on the local labour market and community life on Lolland.

1.2. Lolland Municipality – and the quest to attract state jobs

Among Denmark’s 16 ‘peripheral municipalities’ – the municipalities with the greatest distance to the nearest urban centre – Lolland Municipality lost by far the highest number of state jobs between 2008 and 2020 (Balance Danmark, 2020).¹ During a debate on Danish national radio, the elected mayor of Lolland Municipality, Holger Schou Rasmussen, described the structural consequences as follows:

“When [as a result of centralisation] you remove those jobs from an area, you also remove well-educated and well-off people, leaving behind empty houses that fall in price and thus become attractive to other sections of the population – then you really start to create demographic shifts on a national scale” (DR, 2020, my translation).

The mayor’s words may seem sombre. However, in Lolland Municipality, which was formed in 2007 as part of the aforementioned major structural reform of the Danish public sector, the statistics speak for themselves. Lolland is among the Danish municipalities that has experienced the largest population decline in recent decades, with numbers dropping from 48,642 inhabitants in 2007 to 40,103 in 2022 (Lolland Kommune, 2019). This decline can be attributed, in part, to the municipality’s high proportion of elderly residents, resulting in a higher number of deaths than births (ibid.), as well as a notable trend for the younger generations to move to larger Danish cities to pursue an education. Additionally, Lolland Municipality has the smallest workforce relative to population when compared to other Danish municipalities (Lolland Kommune, 2017), with a significant portion of in-migration to

the municipality involving recipients of public benefits – a pattern also found in other rural and peripheral municipalities across Denmark. In recent years, Lolland Municipality has in fact seen the highest share of new residents that are reliant on long-term public assistance (ibid.). Taken together, the high proportion of elderly people, the out-migration of young people, and the in-migration of people dependent on public benefits contribute to a pronounced structural imbalance in the municipality’s economy.

Consequently, in Danish national media and popular culture, Lolland Municipality is today widely regarded and referenced as a clear example of the growing geographical disparity between centre and periphery in post-industrial Denmark (Ledstrup, 2021). In fact, Danish rural researchers have argued that, in contemporary Danish public debate, Lolland is frequently assigned the role as the “go to scene of precarity in Denmark” (Ledstrup, 2021: 367) and as “Outlying Denmark’s [*Udkantsdanmarks*] locus classicus” (Sørensen, 2016: 24, my translation).

Meanwhile, a municipal strategy paper outlines a vision for 2030 of “a new Lolland” in the form of “a self-sustaining Lolland that has found a new balance” (Lolland Kommune, 2016: 4, my translation). This vision is particularly based on the hope that the under-construction Fehmarnbelt Tunnel between Lolland and Germany will generate local employment, foster growth, and attract new residents and businesses. According to a recent status report (Iris Group, 2022) tracking business sector developments in Denmark’s 98 municipalities, there is already some evidence of such local spillover effects. Besides the anticipated social and economic impact of the future Fehmarnbelt connection, Lolland Municipality’s vision of “a self-sustaining Lolland in 2030” also rests on its efforts to attract state jobs. After being overlooked during the first round of the *Better Balance* initiative, in spite of significant lobbying efforts, the joy at the local mayor’s office was therefore profound when news broke during the national press conference in January 2018, marking the final phase of the *Better Balance* programme: Lolland Municipality was granted 111 government jobs, 80 of which were allocated through the relocation of Nota to Nakskov.

On the same day, 185 km away in Copenhagen, the announcement made an equally big impression on the staff of Nota. Nota is a knowledge centre and library under the Danish Ministry of Culture that produces audiobooks, e-books, and braille books for individuals who have difficulty reading ordinary printed text, such as those with dyslexia or visual impairments. Due to the specialised nature of their work, one concern among Nota employees was the ability to recruit sufficiently qualified staff within the local labour market to fill vacancies caused by anticipated resignations in relation to the move. Overall, their concerns revolved around the following question: *How would everyday life as a government workplace located in a small town in a rural area differ from life in Nota’s previous, more anonymous location in an urban area of Copenhagen – what challenges might this new location pose for Nota?* This question forms the article’s central focus of enquiry.

2. Methodology and research approach

Based on a case study of Nota’s relocation to Nakskov, conducted through ethnographic fieldwork spanning 2019–20, the article focuses on the local migratory encounter between the government workplace and the town community of Nakskov, exploring how this has played out in everyday life. By incorporating the perspectives of both the relocated workplace and local townspeople, the case study’s overarching aim has been to generate qualitative insights into the sundry multilayered, and previously unexplored, sociocultural aspects and microsociological dynamics involved in the relocation of a state institution from an urban environment to a small-town rural setting.

Such qualitative and microsociological approaches are not part of the existing body of research on the redistribution of state jobs in Denmark. Instead, studies and evaluation reports on the outcomes of the *Better Balance* initiative have essentially focused on specific large-scale measurable factors, such as costs, productivity, absenteeism, staff

¹ Since 2007, Denmark’s 98 municipalities have been divided into four types: ‘Urban municipalities’ (*Bykommuner*) (35), ‘Intermediate municipalities’ (*Mellemkommuner*) (18), ‘Rural municipalities’ (*Landkommuner*) (29), and ‘Peripheral municipalities’ (*Yderkommuner*) (16, including Lolland Municipality).

mobility (relocation, commuting, resignation), and the recruitment of new employees (e.g., Christensen et al., 2017; Djøf, 2016; Finansministeriet 2018, 2019; Rambøll, 2017). While emphasising such quantifiable outcomes, these studies thus examine a variety of *internal* dynamics between the relocated government workplaces and the state itself. They hereby form an enclosed knowledge circuit, one might say, asking how the relocation has affected the various state institutions, and thus, ultimately, the state itself – a limited scope meaning that the *external* relationships between government workplaces and the local towns and areas to which they have been relocated are overlooked.

In light of the *Better Balance* initiative's stated purpose of "helping to create activity and stimulate development *in the surrounding areas*" (Finansministeriet, 2018: 3, my translation and italicisation), there are surprisingly few studies and reports that examine the relationship between relocated government workplaces and their new environments. The few reports that exist consist of quantitative macroeconomic studies and impact analyses, largely focusing on the effects on local labour markets and employment rates (Balance Danmark, 2020; Javakhishvili-Larsen et al., 2018; Schmidt et al., 2021). Examining the literature on the redistribution of public sector jobs in a broader Scandinavian and European context, including countries such as Sweden, the UK, and Spain, reveals a similar pattern, with quantitative and macroeconomic approaches dominating in studies on the relationship between relocated workplaces and their new surroundings (e.g., Andersson, 2005; Faggio and Overman, 2014; Jofre-Monseny et al., 2020).

In summary, an overview of the existing literature on state decentralisation in Denmark and beyond reveals a significant gap in knowledge in terms of qualitative and microsociological explorations of how relocated government workplaces and their new environments encounter, experience, and influence one another in everyday local life – socially, culturally, and at the microeconomic level. The ethnographic case study upon which this article is based takes some steps towards closing this knowledge gap.

To this end, I am inspired by Gibson-Graham's (2014) call to rethink larger economic dynamics and connections – of which state relocation processes are a clear expression – with "thick description and weak theory". The article hence presents its argument through ethnographic analysis grounded in local contexts, understandings, and interactions. I hereby employ an *inductive* analytical approach, characterised by a dynamic investigative process where new empirical insights continuously advance and enhance the understanding of the larger phenomenon under study (Glaser and Strauss, 2017): in this case, the relocation of a government workplace from the Danish capital of Copenhagen to a rural small town.

In order to incorporate the perspectives of both the relocated state institution and the local town community, during the ethnographic fieldwork in Nakskov, I divided my time between Nota's new premises and the surrounding town community. Inside Nota's new domicile, my focus was on examining the day-to-day experiences and developments in re-establishing Nota within its new surroundings in Nakskov, adopting a workplace perspective. Ethnographic participant observation and "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998) were key data collection methods. In addition, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews and informal conversations with employees, as well as document analyses of, for instance, job advertisements and internal evaluations. Similarly, while spending time in the local town itself, my aim was to explore the local migratory encounter between Nakskov and Nota from a local town community perspective. Once again, ethnographic participant observation and "deep hanging out" (ibid.) were key methods; in this case, used in local public spaces, including Nota's immediate surroundings in the town centre and central town square. Informal conversations and semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with local townspeople, including key local figures and representatives of relevant associations. Moreover, webnography was employed to examine discussions about Nota's arrival in the town's Facebook community. The extensive coverage of Nota's relocation in national, regional, and local

media (newspapers, radio, television) was also an important part of the overall dataset.

Altogether, a total of 25 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted, each lasting between 1 and 3 h, representing a diverse range of participants, including Nota employees, local townspeople, and other relevant individuals and professionals. The audio recordings of the interviews were later transcribed in full. Also, approximately 300 pages of computer-written ethnographic fieldnotes were generated along the way, documenting detailed recollections of recent informal conversations and participant observations. This extensive body of ethnographic data, comprising all fieldnotes and interview transcripts, has subsequently been analysed through inductive coding, allowing for the emergence and bottom-up identification of recurrent, cross-cutting themes and patterns within the full material.

In the following analysis, I focus in particular on one such recurrent theme, identified through inductive coding of the overall data material. This theme relates to the various social and economic expectations and norms that Nota encounters at the local level, and which the workplace therefore has to navigate in day-to-day life after relocating to Nakskov. In analysing this prominent theme within the data material, I draw especially upon social scientific theory on 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2006) and anthropological theory on local economic 'circles of mutuality' (Gudeman, 2008). Employing these analytical concepts, I first demonstrate how local townspeople perceive Nota as a locally situated workplace that is obliged, socially and economically, to actively participate and engage in the surrounding small-town community. I then shift focus to an examination of Nota's mundane operational conditions and room for manoeuvre as a state institution with respect to meeting these everyday local expectations. In this context, I especially flesh out how, despite having relocated to an essentially different environment, Nota remains bound to an internal state-economic regulatory logic through a series of central public supply contracts that just simply remain the same. In this way, the article calls attention to a paradox intrinsic to the study and to the Danish redistribution of state jobs more broadly. As a government workplace relocated from an urban to a rural district, during everyday operations, Nota must now simultaneously navigate two parallel and opposing *economic circuits*: that of *the local town community*, based on pragmatism and place-specific adaptability, and that of *the central state*, marked by inflexibility and uniformity.

3. The ethnographic case, analysis, and discussion

In October 2019, Nota moved into Nakskov's former town hall building, which Lolland Municipality had now sold to the state as part of the relocation process. The large, white cultural-historical building is centrally located on Nakskov's main square. It had served as Nakskov's town hall from its completion in 1876 until the structural reform of the Danish public sector in 2007. At that time, Nakskov Municipality was merged with six other municipalities on the island of Lolland to form Lolland Municipality, with its town hall placed elsewhere rather than in Nakskov.² During the one year and nine months between the press conference and the move, several employees had resigned, prompting Nota to recruit new staff from the regional labour market, including several individuals from Nakskov. The employees who remained in their positions either relocated to the vicinity or arranged living arrangements locally in smaller commuter households, where during weekdays they reside either alone or together with colleagues.³

Nota chose to mark their move to Nakskov with a public opening for the townspeople on a Friday afternoon. The aim was to create an

² For a separate analysis of how Nota's placement in the now defunct Nakskov Town Hall has rekindled local collective memories of a municipal sovereign past, see Larsen (2023a).

³ For separate analyses of employees' personal reactions to and ways of dealing with Nota's relocation, see Larsen (2023b, 2024).

atmosphere that was “completely down-to-earth”, as members of staff told me, with free sausages, draft beer, and jazz music on the central town square in front of the former town hall building. Approximately 1700 people attended the event, which spanned 5 h. As one of the employees who relocated with Nota later explained to me:⁴

“It *had* to be folksy [folkelig]. Because there were lots of rumours circulating about Nota – and ‘maybe we were in fact part of NATO’ [the vowels O and A exchanged], some people claimed. So we wanted to show that we are completely down-to-earth. It simply just had to be beer and sausages! Nothing too highbrow and stuck-up”.

Therefore, Nota also opted not to have the opening speech made by a representative from the Ministry of Culture. Instead, the mayor of Lolland and Nota’s managing director both spoke in a jokey back-and-forth on a stage erected in the middle of the town square. Here, the latter emphasised:

“We are a very down-to-earth organisation. Some might think that because we are part of a ministry, we probably wear black shoes and nicely tailored dark suits – but you hardly see anyone like that at Nota. I mean, we are ... we are workers in the most beautiful sense of the word. As you will see for yourselves”.

These examples illustrate how, as a workplace, Nota was concerned with showing the local population that they are not so different after all and can thus easily blend in with the local way of life (which Nota’s employees felt meant being “workers”, “folksy”, “down-to-earth”, “not highbrow”, and “not stuck-up”). This desire not to appear to be “fancy folk from a ministry” has proved successful, judging by the following statement from a local resident one year after the opening:

“You can’t tell who works at Nota and who doesn’t. It’s cool when they walk across the town square with blue hair or in a faded T-shirt and droopy jeans. There’s nothing pompous or arrogant about it, right? Many people in town were concerned, thinking, ‘Oh dear, is it going to be those kinds of people all stiff in suits arriving?’ But now you just think, ‘Wow, they’re really totally down-to-earth’, you know?”

However, within this everyday migratory encounter, it is one thing for Nota to succeed in signalling a desire for social acceptance and local membership to the surrounding town community through physical and communicative *appearance* (such as when signalling being “down-to-earth” through clothing or an informal opening with beer and sausages). Obviously, however, it is another thing to actually achieve such local acceptance and inclusion through *action* and *participation*.

3.1. When the state “moves closer” – looking deeper into relocation and local engagement

As indicated by the title of the 2015 policy initiative, *Better Balance – government workplaces closer to citizens and enterprises*, the emphasis is on a particular “closeness” between state institutions and local areas around the country. This envisioned ideal of *state proximity* has since continued and intensified under subsequent Danish governments. For instance, in 2020, the Social Democratic government decided to establish 20 new local police stations outside Denmark’s major cities, referred to in Danish as “nearby police stations” (*nærpoliti-stationer*). In 2021, the same government launched two initiatives, *Moving Closer I and II* (my translation). While the former was aimed at redistributing state higher education institutions from urban to rural areas, the latter was intended to “bring welfare closer to the citizens” (my translation), through, for instance, the proposed establishment of 20 local hospitals in rural

⁴ Throughout the article, statements quoted from interviews and informal conversations with Nota employees and local townspeople have been translated from Danish to English by the author.

districts, referred to in Danish as “nearby hospitals” (*nærhospitaler*). In 2018, the Social Democrats also launched the far-reaching “Bringing proximity back: The Social Democratic Party’s action plan for strong local communities and welfare closer to citizens” (*Socialdemokratiet, 2018*, my translation), outlining all the above ideas that have since been implemented.

These initiatives all make frequent use of the words “proximity” and “closer”. But what does such *proximity* or moving *closer* actually mean in an everyday local perspective? What does it take, in ordinary everyday life, for a relocated state institution like Nota to be perceived by locals as “close” or “near”, beyond its mere *physical* presence? Or put differently, drawing upon a conceptual framework proposed by Elias and Scotson (1994 [1965]): What does it take for Nota as a government workplace to be considered ‘an established insider’ in a small-town community like Nakskov, as opposed to ‘an outsider’ who has now just moved “closer”? For, as local community research has shown (e.g., *Cresswell, 1996; Elias and Scotson, 1994* [1965]; *Larsen, 2011; Phillips, 1986*), the local social acceptance and inclusion of newcomers in small-scale local communities rarely occurs through physical presence and visibility alone, but through active participation in the local community, taking part in its established norms and common practices.

In this analysis, I understand such *active participation in the local community*, more precisely, as socially and economically becoming part of what anthropologist *Stephen Gudeman* (2008: 37) refers to as local ‘circles of mutuality’. According to Gudeman, such circles exist in the various reciprocal local exchanges and ‘interactions of mutuality’ (*ibid.*: 27) that typically take place across different local institutions in small communities (e.g., associations, welfare institutions, businesses, companies, and other workplaces and organisations). The social and economic sustainability of the small town or local community, Gudeman emphasises, is both *rooted in* and *dependent on* precisely the various forms of exchange of economic, material, cultural, and knowledge resources that occur in day-to-day life within these local ‘circles of mutuality’ (*ibid.*).

Relocating from a somewhat secluded industrial area on the outskirts of central Copenhagen to Nakskov town square, the very heart of the town, the ethnographic material illustrates how Nota is simultaneously positioned in the middle of such an existing *local circle of mutual exchange interactions* (cf. *Gudeman, 2008*). Furthermore, it demonstrates the firm expectation within the established town community that Nota, as a workplace now situated in Nakskov, must actively engage and participate, socially and economically, within this local ‘circle of mutuality’ (*ibid.*). Nota had already sensed this local expectation prior to moving, and in the director’s speech during the opening event, he emphasised to the many townspeople in attendance:

“In Copenhagen, we were completely anonymous; no one [locally] showed any interest in Nota. That’s a *whole* different story here, and it’s a pleasure. And we will do *our* best to be contributors ... You see, we’re now *part of* society down here – not just a piece of Copenhagen that has moved down. No, we’re now a part of Lolland, even though we represent a ministry in Copenhagen”.

The following statement from an employee who relocated with Nota further exemplifies this new experience as a workplace of suddenly being in the role as a “neighbour”, in the sense of someone expected to pay attention to and care about the local area:

“It’s difficult to be anonymous in Nakskov. Just from a building perspective, we occupy much more room in the local urban space here, right in the middle of the town square. We may be a government workplace, but we really *are* neighbours with the entire town now, and with that comes certain obligations! We cannot just ensconce ourselves behind the thick walls of the state. We *have* to get involved in town life”.

Nota is now “part of society” on Lolland, as the director pointed out in his opening speech – and more specifically, Nota is now part of

Nakskov's central square and town centre. Over the past few decades, the town centre has grappled with a growing number of shop closures and vacant commercial spaces. In an effort to reverse this trend and maintain an active and thriving commercial town centre, the persistence of the *local circle of mutual exchange interactions* (cf. Gudeman, 2008) between the diverse businesses and institutions located within the town centre becomes even more crucial. On Nakskov town square, such a local 'circle of mutuality' (ibid.) is apparent through direct exchanges, such as when the bookstore's window is repaired by the local glazier, who, in turn, purchases stationery from the bookstore. However, it also manifests in the larger chain of local reciprocal exchanges and 'interactions of mutuality' (ibid.), focused on the total cumulative effect of these interactions. Such as when the town square's hairdresser purchases flowers from the florist, who buys curtains for his shop window from the curtain seller, who enjoys his lunch at the local café, where one finds brochures promoting the local tourist information centre, which proudly displays materials advertising the various town square shops – and so it continues. Such interwoven local-economic collaborative practices are of course not unique to Nakskov but can be observed in a broader context of small towns in rural Denmark (see, e.g., Høst and Larsen, 2016).

I suggest that such *local circles of mutual exchange interactions* (cf. Gudeman, 2008) can be further conceptualised as an expression of what Etienne Wenger (2006) refers to as a 'community of practice'. Wenger defines such a community, firstly, by the way it centres on a particular goal-oriented *common interest*, and secondly, by the way in which it is the *common practice* itself that serves as the very foundation of the community's cohesive force. Membership within a specific community of practice thus primarily involves 'mutual engagement' (ibid.: 90 f.), as manifested through *shared actions*. This cooperative aim-directed practice is what distinguishes and defines a 'community of practice'. In this manner, Wenger underscores how such kind of community does not simply involve an assembly of individuals united by a particular common trait, like a social category or organisational affiliation, and nor is it solely based on, for instance, geographical proximity, such as living within the same local community.

In this context, this means that the specific 'community of practice' that spans Nakskov's town square and commercial centre transcends more simple definitions such as being either a 'native' inhabitant of Nakskov or a 'newcomer'. Moreover, it goes beyond mere coexistence within the same main square and town centre. Instead, in line with Wenger's understanding (2006), the 'community of practice' in question is grounded in the *mutual engagement* of its members, focused on a specific *common interest*: namely, that of preserving a lively and sustainable town and commercial centre in Nakskov. The established town community expects Nota to actively strive to become an *established insider* within this specific local 'community of practice' – or local 'circle of mutuality' (Gudeman 2008) – as opposed to a state *outsider* that has simply moved closer (cf. Elias and Scotson, 1994 [1965]).

With regard to the shared responsibility for contributing to a sustainable town centre among Nakskov's businesses, associations, and enterprises, a representative of the local trade association, Nakskov Trade & Business (*Nakskov Handel & Erhverv*), explained to me: "As a workplace in this town, it's about *offering* something to the local community – contributing to something *happening* in town. So that you give the town some added *value*, beyond *just* being one's own workplace". This representative further recounted how certain workplaces in town do not support, for example, collaborative endeavours to enhance the town centre's appeal, such as decorating one's own store with Christmas lights. This was particularly true of local branches of nationwide retail chains. Among the remaining businesses located in the town centre, who generally actively engage in such communal initiatives, this failure to participate is perceived as an unwillingness to contribute to the town, as expressed by the representative:

"When a workplace invests in itself by putting up Christmas lights, they're also investing in the town, you see – because we stand stronger as a community. But some of the nationwide chains in town don't even *bother* to be part of the local [community]. Even though it would take *so little* for them to become just a *little bit* local. But the question is whether they even *want* to become local – they just think 'we're here as part of a larger chain, so we'll do *nothing* more than run a store'".

As part of a nationwide chain of stores, each local branch is of course subject to rules and restrictions set out by a central office, which may limit their autonomy. For example, in Nakskov, there is a local branch of a national chain that has a central policy prohibiting the use of Christmas decorations. Similarly, as a government workplace, Nota is subject to a central administration – in this case, the central state apparatus. This results in a certain degree of standardisation across individual state institutions and workplaces. By comparison, independent businesses, like the local butcher, café, or carpentry company, can make their own decisions. However, as the above quotation illustrates, whether or not a workplace is subject to central administration, there is a strong expectation among the local community in Nakskov that all the town's workplaces should actively participate in the 'community of practice' (Wenger 2006) and 'circle of mutuality' (Gudeman 2008) that exists within the local commercial town centre. This is especially true if the workplace wants to be perceived and accepted as "local", as articulated by the representative of Nakskov Trade & Business.

In essence, the townspeople in Nakskov have similar strong expectations that the town's workplaces actively participate in local community life, both socially and economically, regardless of whether a standalone private business, a branch of a nationwide chain, or, as we will see, a state institution.⁵

4. Case descriptions: the everyday tension between central rules and local norms

In Denmark, as in other countries, a set of well-established regulations exists that governs the expenditure patterns of state institutions, specifying both the available budget and the permitted items of expenditure. Equally crucial, if not more so in this context, is the process of determining eligible recipients of these funds. When it comes to the acquisition of various *goods*, such as office supplies, furniture, and IT equipment, Danish state institutions are mandated to procure such items through the central supply contract system known as 'the State and Municipalities' Procurement Service' (*SKI – Staten og Kommunernes Indkøbsservice*). Since its inception in 1994, the primary objective of this system has been to streamline public expenses by establishing central purchase agreements with an array of state-approved suppliers. Moreover, Danish state institutions are increasingly also required to adhere to centralised supply contracts for various *services*, such as catering, maintenance, and cleaning. This situation arises from 'the State Facility Management Agreement' (*FM – Statens Facility Management-aftale*), introduced in 2017, with the goal of centralising the many service agreements for individual state institutions, with just two main suppliers contracted by the state.

At the same time, there are certain areas that do not fit within either the goods or services categories, and on which state institutions are consequently not allowed to spend money. Examples include sponsoring various associations, cultural events, or social gatherings. Interestingly, such sponsorship expenditures are commonplace among other types of institutions and workplaces in both small and larger Danish towns. For example, it is common for a grocery store to sponsor the jerseys of the

⁵ For a parallel expectation of active participation and involvement in the wider local environment concerning asylum centres placed by the state in Danish rural areas and small towns, see Whyte et al. (2019).

local football team, or for a café or timber merchant to support town events such as the local summer fair, by sponsoring a bouncy castle or popcorn machine.

Having established the framework of financial regulations that govern state institutions in Denmark, we now turn our attention to the day-to-day challenges faced by Nota as a workplace trying to navigate these regulations within its new social setting in a small town in a Danish rural district. In this respect, I flesh out how the above financial areas – *goods, services, and sponsorships* – present a series of obstacles for Nota within its new environment. Across three ethnographic case descriptions, I illustrate how these obstacles call attention to a fundamental paradox intrinsic to Nota's new everyday reality as a workplace located in Nakskov.

4.1. Case 1: "The state just keeps rolling on as usual" – the forbidden goods at the local office supply store

One day, an employee who relocated with Nota exclaimed to me: "We're really *trying* to be part of the local [community] and contribute locally as far as possible within the central procurement rules – which occasionally we've had to bend just a *little* ... without crossing the line". Thus, for instance, during the initial period after the move to Nakskov, Nota's management independently decided that, given the institution was still in a state of disarray, in cases of urgent need, staff members were allowed to make small-scale purchases from the local office supply store, *Daugbjerg*, conveniently located on the town square just across from Nota. Should anyone from the central state administration ask about these deviations from the central procurement regulations, the workplace's argument was grounded in the understanding that the period surrounding the move was inherently chaotic. As such, it was only a matter of time until the workplace would be fully equipped with office supplies ordered through the State and Municipalities' Procurement Service (*SKT*). The same employee added: "When you're out of paper, waiting for the state's delivery the next day just isn't an option ... and, being newcomers to town, we really wanted to spend this money right here, locally. We even bought coffee beans from *Daugbjerg* because we badly needed coffee. He has everything".

On another occasion, I had a conversation with a local resident who, from his office window elsewhere on the town square, had observed Nota's employees making such minor purchases from the local office supply store. In this context, he confided:

"When you show that you think about just popping over to *Daugbjerg* to buy your printer paper, instead of going through some big central warehouse, it signals that you're open to the local [community] and that you wish to contribute to the town. It is of *huge* value down here, shopping locally".

Months later, when Nota had had to stop making small purchases from the local office supply store as the workplace had now transitioned out of the chaotic settling-in phase, an employee who relocated with Nota told me:

"It may very well be that some government workplaces have been relocated, but at the same time, the state just keeps rolling on as usual. As long as the goods look cheaper on the state's balance sheet, they don't care about having to send a van from the Copenhagen area loaded with office supplies for, let's say, 523 Danish kroner [approx. 70 Euros] – and they *don't* consider how it would profit local businesses if we were allowed to place that order here. *Daugbjerg* has been here for a long time – it's an institution in Nakskov. We've talked to the store about cutting a deal, and it would be able to match the state prices one-to-one. But we're just not *allowed*. And in a small community like Nakskov, it's also about the symbolic aspect of it all, you know ... that we're not coming across like 'we don't want to participate'. But the rules are hard as nails and uncompromising. So, we're *really* tied down by the state regulations here".

The act of *shopping locally* represents one of the key symbolic actions through which local townspeople in Nakskov assess whether Nota (and all other workplaces in town) wishes to engage locally and contribute to the town. This also means that many local residents closely observe whether or not Nota staff members shop locally – for instance, do they shop at *Daugbjerg*? When it comes to shaping the local population's perception of Nota as a workplace in their town, the following statement from a local resident who owns a business in the town centre illustrates the importance of such directly visible actions at street level (or the lack thereof). When I inquired about how this person generally experienced Nota's everyday presence as a workplace in town, the response was:

"There's kind of a distance, you know. I mean, their contribution isn't really *visible*. I don't think many people in town think of Nota as a local workplace. I mean, the impression that it is trying to make itself *local*, that's missing – instead of being seen as some foreign state institution that has moved in".

At Nota, staff members know that many local townspeople are not aware of the restrictions Nota has when it comes to "making itself local" through local-economic participation (as also proved to be the case with the person cited above). As an employee who relocated with Nota explains: "The locals don't always think about the fact that we are bound by central supply contracts. So there might be some people in town who cannot quite grasp, after we said at our opening event that we would do our best to contribute to local life, then why aren't we?" The following statement from an established local resident, who now works at Nota, reveals how some in town feel such disappointment:

"This whole thing about shopping locally has been a big disappointment for many in town. That's something I hear. Many people, I guess, had probably expected that, after all, Nota had come here to support the local community. And Nota genuinely *wants* to do that, but we cannot. We're not *allowed* to. It's frustrating that, when something new actually comes to this town, then we don't have the opportunity to create some more growth for local businesses. For example, when it comes to such small things like office supplies – why do we *keep* circulating the money within the state itself? Shouldn't that money find its way to the local area – was that not the entire point? This has probably been the greatest disappointment in town, I think, in relation to Nota coming here".

4.2. Case 2: "The standardisation comes rolling down upon us" – from local catering contracts to fixed meals transported from Copenhagen

While it proves challenging for Nota to contribute locally through the procurement of *goods*, the workplace endeavours to incorporate the local businesses in its daily operations in alternative ways. An employee who relocated with Nota explains: "There are still some small pockets within which, of course, we seek to contribute instead ... *as long* as we can". These "small pockets" encompass various *services*, such as maintenance works or catering services. Shortly after moving to Nakskov, Nota thus entered into a contract with a local provider for a lunch buffet through a public tender process. Several local restaurateurs submitted proposals and, based on Nota's assessment of the best price-quality ratio, a local restaurant situated next to Nota on Nakskov town square was chosen. As mentioned, the State Facility Management Agreement (*FM*) was launched in Denmark in 2017. This agreement entails that henceforth, the Danish Building and Property Agency (*Bygningsstyrelsen*) will manage all services provided to individual state institution across the country (e.g., catering services, cleaning, maintenance). All such services are thus provided by two major state-contracted suppliers having the capacity to cater to the entire state at once (currently these are the two large Danish companies *ISS* and *Coor Service Management*). Conversely, prior to this initiative, individual state institutions were free to organise and procure their own services, as long as they had been subjected to public tender processes (as in the case of Nota's local lunch

buffet contract). However, by 2024, when the State Facility Management Agreement (*FM*) will be fully implemented nationwide, including at Nota in Nakskov, such options will be a thing of the past – much to the annoyance of, for example, this employee who relocated with Nota:

“We’ve done what we could to use local service providers. However, it’s only a matter of time before we’re included in the State Facility Management programme. Then the standardisation will come rolling down upon us! And there’ll be nothing left ... then we won’t be able to organise local tenders, and we’ll have to terminate our local lunch buffet contract. And then it *won’t* be the locals who get some work to do! It will be *ISS* stepping in to manage catering operations – not just here but driving across the entire country, serving meatballs on Tuesdays and sausages on Wednesdays. And then, in the Ministry of Finance, they might see some cost savings. But that’s a silly and short-sighted way to think of it ... since it *only* benefits centralisation. So, with one hand, they decentralise [by relocating state institutions], but with the other hand, they just start further centralisation [through the parallel launch of the State Facility Management Agreement]”.

4.3. Case 3: “It can also cost something not to contribute, you know” – sponsorships as a local insurance premium

As we have now seen, in line with the procurement of various *goods*, the use of locally based *services*, such as catering, will in the near future also become unfeasible for Nota. Therefore, the management is actively considering alternative means of contributing locally. Because, as a member of the management team who relocated with Nota emphasises:

“Well, you just simply *cannot* be in a small local community like Nakskov without being involved. It would *really* stand out if this large building we are in just stood here, isolated in the middle of the town square, not really being a neighbour and interacting with the others – like a somewhat distant government authority where we still use quills to write. I mean, you just *cannot* come across that way here. So, we’re trying to figure out ways to show our faces and get involved locally”.

One way to “show their faces and get involved locally” is through the provision of smaller local *sponsorships*. While these sponsorships obviously contribute to local town life, they are also effective as local branding of Nota, and, consequently, the workplace considers them a *marketing* expense – an expenditure item that formally exists within Nota’s budgetary framework, unlike sponsorships. For example, Nota offered symbolic support for a drive-in concert featuring Danish bands, which took place in Nakskov during the spring of 2020 amid the COVID-19 lockdown. This event received contributions from a substantial number of the town’s businesses and entrepreneurs, and, at various intervals during the concert, the names of the sponsors were prominently displayed on a giant screen.

Furthermore, Nota has expressed a wish to support the local business and cultural life in town by becoming a member of the local trade association, Nakskov Trade & Business (hereafter referred to as NTB). Located on the central town square, two buildings from Nota, the association’s mission is to maintain and develop Nakskov as an appealing commercial town with a thriving town centre, and its paying members include many of the town’s businesses, shop owners, restaurateurs, etc. As a workplace, Nota’s membership in NTB would entail an annual cost of approximately 9000 Danish kroner (approx. 1200 Euros). However, such membership expenses are not possible for Nota, since, from a state perspective, NTB does not qualify as ‘a professionally relevant association’ for Nota to join. Consequently, Nota and NTB have arranged for the workplace to be able to make more indirect contributions to the association’s activities and objectives. For instance, NTB has invited Nota to provide symbolic sponsorship of the association’s new extensive Christmas lights project. This project involves beautifying the central

town square and pedestrian zone with new and more impressive lights and garlands, creating an inviting commercial town centre during December – an initiative very close to the heart of the general town community. Hence, Nota volunteered to sponsor the new fairy lights that are to adorn the town square’s large Christmas tree in the years to come. Concerning this contribution, a member of the management team who relocated with Nota explains:

“With the sponsorship of the Christmas tree fairy lights, Nakskov Trade & Business arranged for both an advertisement in the local newspaper and some spots on the local radio station referring to Nota as the sponsor. So, in this way, we chose to regard the sponsorship as an indirect promotion of Nota – since, as a relocated workplace, we regularly have to recruit new employees in the local area. And then, as a state institution, it may well be that calling something like fairy lights for a local Christmas tree *marketing* might be stretching it a bit. But the amount is so small, and it’s a really good way to foster local goodwill – and *that’s* important for us. Because you can also see it as a kind of local insurance premium: if we did *not* contribute to the town’s Christmas decorations, would people then start to get annoyed and angry with us, thinking ‘who do they think they are?’ Because it can also cost something on the bottom line *not* to contribute, you know. It’s a small community where collaboration is central. Just like, for example, when the local trade association provided a stage and marquees for our opening, and we also borrowed their alcohol licence for the town square. So, I mean, you just *have* to be part of it. And that’s also what has been in our minds – because, as a workplace here, can we even afford to stay *outside* of this, you know?”

4.4. Flexibility or standardisation – a simmering tension across the case descriptions

The above interview excerpt underscores how the emergent local collaboration between Nota and various town stakeholders, such as Nakskov Trade & Business, is underpinned by a high degree of mutual *improvisation* – and a *pragmatic* and *flexible* solution-oriented approach. This was evident, for example, when the local trade association lent Nota its alcohol licence for the town square so that the newly arrived workplace could avoid the hassle of applying for a new one for its opening event. Or when the same local association arranged advertising in local media, effectively helping Nota to transform its sponsorship of new fairy lights for the local Christmas tree into a *marketing* initiative – a legitimate expenditure item for Nota as a state institution, unlike *sponsorships*.

The pragmatic and flexible nature of *the local-economic conduct of mutual exchange* found across Nakskov town centre, in which Nota has now become enrolled, stands in sharp contrast to *the state’s central-economic line of procedure*, which, instead of adapting to local conditions, rigidly adheres to rules and universal standards. As the three ethnographic case descriptions concerning *goods*, *services*, and *sponsorship* have shown, this enduring tension has emerged as a pervasive paradox intrinsic to the ethnographic study. As I argue below, this fundamental paradox also impedes the wider-reaching Danish effort to redistribute government workplaces from the capital region to rural small-town Denmark.

5. Conclusion: decentralisation on local terms or the state’s terms?

Based on an ethnographic case study, in this article I have invited readers to journey to the small town of Nakskov (12,500 inhabitants) located on the rural Danish island of Lolland. Here, in 2019, the state institution, Nota (*the Danish Library and Expertise Center for People with Print Disabilities*), took up residence at the local town square – as part of a broader Danish national policy programme, *Better Balance*, aimed at redistributing state jobs from the capital of Copenhagen to Denmark’s

rural districts and small towns. The analysis has demonstrated how Nota suddenly finds itself immersed in an enduring tension between, on one hand, having to adhere to a set of central *state-economic rules* (marked by inflexibility and uniformity) and, on the other hand, a series of decentral *local-economic norms* (grounded in pragmatism and site-specific adaptability). Wanting to be perceived as “a local workplace” by established residents in their new environment rather than simply as “a foreign state institution that has moved in”, Nota therefore has to find ways to navigate this everyday significant conflict of interests. Because as the director emphasised during his opening speech to the townspeople: “We’re now *part of society* down here – not just a piece of Copenhagen that has moved down”.

However, the local town community that Nota must now become part of has certain membership criteria and expectations regarding active local engagement, unlike the urban milieu that surrounded the workplace in the city of Copenhagen. Previously, Nota was not perceived as a “neighbour”, expected to participate in and contribute to its immediate surroundings. Meanwhile, upon relocating to the small town of Nakskov, Nota has been situated in the midst of a local ‘circle of mutuality’ (Gudeman 2008). In everyday town life, this local circle comprises a range of social and economic mutual exchange interactions across the town centre’s various institutions, businesses, shops, and associations. This local-economic ‘circle of mutuality’ – or, to use another concept, this local ‘community of practice’ (Wenger 2006) – is particularly focused on a shared interest in maintaining an attractive and viable town and trade centre in Nakskov – and locally, Nota encounters a clear expectation that it actively engages, socially and economically, in this common endeavour and shared goal. The analysis has revealed how local residents even consider such *active local participation*, for instance through *shopping locally*, as a prerequisite for being considered “part of the local”, as expressed by many in town. Consequently, the *absence* of such active local involvement becomes a talking point among local residents. As a government institution that continuously needs to be able to recruit new employees from the local labour market, Nota cannot underestimate the significance of such “talk”. In its daily operations, like any other workplace in town, Nota must therefore consistently manage and nurture its local social reputation and standing.

In summary, after moving to Nakskov, Nota must become integrated within something that is qualitatively *distinct* from its original environment. Nevertheless, it remains subject to *the same* economic and organisational affiliation with the state. This affiliation entails a series of rigid regulations that have simply just followed Nota to their new environment, unchanged. This includes various central public procurement contracts that effectively hinder Nota, as a state institution, in contributing to local town life through the purchase of *goods* (e.g., local office supplies) and soon also *services* (e.g., local catering). When compelled to operate within the standardised premises of the central state, for instance by *not shopping locally*, it may place Nota in a bad light among Nakskov’s townspeople. However, if Nota adopts the opposite approach, for instance by *shopping locally*, the workplace risks sanctions from the central state itself.

Hence, seen from the perspective of *the site of relocation*, as opposed to that of the state, I argue that in day-to-day local life, the Danish redistribution of government workplaces manifests as a *decentralisation on the terms of centralisation*. Or, as one local resident puts it: “What a relocated workplace could potentially generate locally through local procurements would be far greater than what is saved within the state itself by failing to do so. There is a calculation here that is simply not complete”. In any case, in its approach to reducing costs, heavily grounded in internal annual accounting practices, one might say that the central state fails to consider the *longer-term* national implications of its own enclosed and centralised economic practice. In the long run, encouraging local procurement may save money by, for example, preventing the closure of local businesses such as the small office supply store in a small town like Nakskov. When such businesses close down, neighbouring stores often follow, resulting in fewer local job

opportunities and increased unemployment. Ultimately, this leads to higher local expenditure on public benefits, potentially triggering cost-cutting measures in other municipal areas. In other words, a situation that very much runs counter to the stated national goal of creating *better balance* between Denmark’s urban and rural districts.

In this regard, the article has effectively illustrated how, in the context of government workplace relocations, mundane items like office supplies, lunch arrangements, and Christmas tree fairy lights (all within the same town square) quickly become significant catalysts for broader economic issues with respect to national rural-urban imbalances. Prompted by “local” office supplies, lunch buffets, and fairy lights, the analysis has pointed to the necessity of the central state allowing greater adaptability to local conditions so that “relocated” state institutions can more easily collaborate within the “receiving” small towns’ own local-economic ‘circles of mutuality’ (Gudeman 2008) and ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 2006). As the analysis has shown, achieving a “better balance”, as the policy programme in question is termed, also entails achieving a better balance among the various participants involved in its realisation. Hence, if one aspires to a genuine decentralisation of the state that is experienced as such *at the local level*, it is not sufficient to merely relocate a series of government workplaces with the intention of “helping to create activity and stimulate development” (Finansministeriet, 2018, my translation) *for the local areas* – but also *with the local areas*. If not, as the case study has pointed out, rather than such relocation initiatives being recognised locally as evidence of a *state within reach* across the entire country, they may instead simply feed into a continued local experience of a *distant state closed in on itself* – now just more thinly spread in geographic terms.

Overall, the everyday migratory encounter depicted in this article calls for a rethinking of the prevailing Danish approach to state decentralisation, allowing government workplaces that are relocated to rural areas to open themselves to their new local surroundings much more than is possible today. State institutions must be given more of a free reign in their new, smaller hometowns, framed by a less uniform and more locally adaptable state – with everything that this encounter may involve of local-economic social exchanges, from borrowed marquees to sponsored Christmas tree fairy lights. As one Nota employee indicated, the critical question is: Can the state afford to let its relocated institutions stand *outside* such local-economic norms and exchange systems that exist across the many small-town rural environments in which they are now situated – if locally they are to gain a foothold? Because, as shown by this article, if the relocated workplaces do not become part of such local-economic codes of practice, “the state” can continue to move as geographically “close” to rural Denmark as it wants, but risks appearing more distant and absent the closer it gets.

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