



## On the History of Socialism in Denmark before 1914

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An initial sketch by Bertel Nygaard (Aarhus University), February 2016.

[bertel.nygaard@cas.au.dk](mailto:bertel.nygaard@cas.au.dk)

### Introduction

To study the history of socialism in Denmark is to study the history of European socialism from a specific type of European semi-periphery, i.e. a nation which has looked towards the social and cultural centres of Europe (especially Britain and France) and conceived itself as a rightful part of this European heritage, while also being aware of its marginality, not only in a basic geographical sense, but also politically and culturally. Being a small state for centuries and having a distinctly non-revolutionary, consensualist and pragmatist political culture, Denmark has been on the receiving end of most political and intellectual innovations during the last 250 years, yet it has often integrated these innovations with a remarkable degree of national pride. The European revolutionary waves of 1789, 1830 and 1848 were invariably greeted with enthusiasm for progress and enlightenment, combined with horror of the revolutionary forms of change, all tackled by means of pre-emptive, moderately progressive political and economic reforms. This long tradition of consensualism inevitably put its mark on the development of socialism in Denmark, too.

### Early socialism, 1840's

The history of socialism in Denmark should begin some decades before the growth of a strong, avowedly socialist labour movement. The first debates on socialist views and the first few supporters of socialism in Denmark began, as in many other European countries, during the 1840's. For the hegemonic forces of the Danish public sphere at that time, socialism (and its more sinister twin, communism) was a horrifying spectre – and a very *French* spectre too, conjured by the French

July Revolution of 1830 and carrying the French revolutionary and utopian promises of a radically different future into new extremes. Yet, many Danish commentators tended to regard the Parisian centre of modern political culture *indirectly*, especially through German writers whose own semi-peripheral perspectives on 'Frenchness' and whose somewhat comparable social background often made them easier to identify with for Danish commentators. Thus, for example, the first comprehensive account of French Socialism and Communism in Danish, published in the liberal newspaper *Fædrelandet* in 1842 and 1843, was based on Lorenz von Stein, the enlightened Prussian observer of Parisian socialism during the early 1840's. Like Stein, Danish liberals argued that socialism ought to be taken seriously as a sign that the current processes of commercial, liberal civilization risked leaving the workers behind.

The first tiny wave of outright socialist sympathies emerged in Denmark during the 1840's, in dialogue with French left-wing figures such as Proudhon, Louis Blanc and, to a certain degree, Charles Fourier and his followers. Such new political currents were a source of inspiration for the small democratic newspaper *The Copenhagen Courier* (*Kjøbenhavnsposten*) from the mid-1840's till around 1849. During the European Revolutions of 1848, when Danish absolutism was toppled by a combination of peaceful reform and violent civil war with Prussia concerning the national fate of Schleswig-Holstein, a small group of artisans somewhat inspired by the Buzhezian socialism of *l'Atelier* briefly appeared at the head of the democratic left. But the most prominent socialist figure of this first wave – and the only one recalled by later generations of socialists – was the young medical student Frederik Dreier who published some remarkable books and pamphlets along with the first outspokenly socialist journal, *The Reform of Society* (*Samfundets Reform*) in the early 1850's. But this was only a small and weak current, with very limited support even within the early labour organizations formed during the same time. And with the political reaction following the defeat of the 1848-49 revolutions and with the early death of Dreier in 1853, this early wave of Danish socialism died out.

### **After the Paris Commune: Social Democracy**

It took the Paris Commune of 1871 to reinvigorate the memories of socialism and communism, among the frightened bourgeois as well as among the growing class of (more-or-less) industrial workers. While most of the Danish public sphere was thoroughly frightened by the Commune, a small group of worker agitators, led by the postal service official Louis Pio, formed *The International Working Men's Association* in October 1871. This organization openly declared itself socialist, publishing the weekly journal *Socialisten*. Swiftly gaining a membership in the thousands, it was affiliated to the First International from the first months. During the first years, it functioned as both a political movement and a trade union movement.

By now, it was possible to regard the German Social Democratic Party as the main model of a Socialist movement. To a certain extent, the politico-cultural centre of Socialism – as viewed from the North – became Berlin rather than Paris. The first proper congress of the Danish Social Democratic movement, held in 1876 with 6.000 delegates, adopted a program very close to the Gotha program of the German SPD (the one famously criticized by Marx). This constituted the beginnings of the earliest of the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties that were all to become highly influential in designing different versions of the Scandinavian welfare states, with the Norwegian party founded in 1887 and the Swedish party in 1889.

The organization was severely repressed by the authorities by the mid-1870's. The original leadership was in part pressured, in part bribed to move to the United States. A more moderate group of leaders then took over, still committed to socialist ideals, but with a less outspoken, radical political identity. In 1878 the trade union wing was separated from the political wing, which then was renamed the Social Democratic League (*Socialdemokratisk Forbund*).

During the 1880's and 1890's the party and its influence began to grow again. The main newspaper of the movement, named *The Social Democrat* (*Social-Demokraten*) since 1874, became the widest circulated national newspaper in the 1890's, and a number of local Social Democratic newspapers appeared during the same period. Winning its first few seats in the lower chamber of Parliament in 1884, it won representation in 25 municipalities too during the 1890's. At the last parliamentary election before the outbreak of the First World War, the party achieved the largest number of votes, just below 30 percent, though the liberal peasant party still won the most seats, due to election rules. During the war itself, in which Denmark held a position of principled neutrality, the Social Democratic party won its first seat in the national government. In the interwar years, the party grew steadily, forming its first coalition government (with the Radical party, rallying the support of urban intellectuals and poor farmers) in 1924. Eleven years later, in 1935, it achieved the best parliamentary result of any Danish political party ever, with 46.1 percent of the votes. While the Norwegian and Swedish Social Democratic parties achieved even better electoral results during the next three decades – with the Swedish party peaking at 53.8 percent in 1940 – this attested to near-monopoly of this party within the Danish labour movement.

Bertel Nygaard