



On the History of Socialism in Denmark before 1914 (2/3)

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Evolutionist, reformist Marxism

During the 1880's and 1890's the Danish Social Democratic leadership followed the German SPD in skipping some elements of Lassalleanism in favour of Marxist elements. This was codified in the new party program adopted in 1913, just before the war.

However, the versions of Marxism adopted by Danish Social Democratic leaders in these years clearly tended to accentuate the elements of gradualism, evolutionism and reformism of the Marxism of Karl Kautsky and the German party. The main figure among the very small core of knowledgeable Marxists in the movement, the historian Gustav Bang, defined the long-term socialist objectives of the party along such lines:

”The task of socialism,” he wrote in a newspaper commentary of 1902, ”is to maintain the social production created by capitalism, but also to make the appropriation social, to allow the working society itself to reap the profits”. Modern socialism, as opposed to the earlier, utopian types of socialist thought, was characterized by having ”both feet on the ground and only seeking to understand and to follow the main lines of the existing development”.¹

¹ Gustav Bang: ”Fra Kapitalisme til Socialisme” (1902), in Uffe Østergård (ed.), *Den materialistiske historieopfattelse i Danmark før 1945, I*, Aarhus: Modtryk 1973, p. 244.

The evolutionist, gradualist implications of this conception of socialism was perhaps even more clearly stated by another leading party ideologist, Frederik Borgbjerg, in a parliamentary speech in 1899:

”Socialism means that a new society, socialist society, grows out of the present society, just as the present society grew out of the previous, feudal society. [...] In the midst of capitalist society germs of a new society have arisen gradually, socialist germs here and there [...]. In time, these germs will grow, until the point when all working members of society will gain the the full results of the labour value that they produce, and by that time, socialism will be in existence [...]. Socialism is a mighty international movement progressing year after year because it is carrying the truth and is itself carried by development”.²

Socialism was thus identified with the result of a long-term development already unfolding. This long-term development was sometimes termed *revolution*, while revolution in the sense of a rapid, violent overthrow of the existing order was persistently rejected. Accordingly, the immediate, main task of the party was not that of creating a radically different society. It was, rather, that of supporting the existing, already ongoing historical evolution of society, while working for any political or social improvement in the lot of the workers.

Also, socialism was identified not with the decline of state power, but with the full development of the state, that is with its omnipotence in the sphere of production *and* its political democratization. In one of the first longer Marxist texts of any Danish Social Democrat, Peter Knudsen – the party chairman for almost three decades (1882-1910) – identified socialism with state ownership of the means of production. This, according to Knudsen, would realize the very purpose and essence of the state:

”When the state [...] owns the means of production and is in charge of production, then its relation to all its individual members will be the relation proper to its purpose [*Bestemmelse*]. [...] At that point, the state will be identical with the people as a whole, and will fully realize its purpose of being a means to securing each of its citizens all of the goods that they are unable to acquire individually”.³

Weak left-wing oppositions

There was little opposition to these conceptions of socialism within the Social Democratic movement. At the time of the formation of the Socialist International in 1889, a left-wing opposition did develop within the party, seeking to take the revolutionary rhetoric of the party literally, but it had few independent ideas or alternative strategies to support its course, and it achieved only limited membership support. Its main members were excluded, and after a brief period of seeking to build a new labour party, it dissolved in the early 1890’s.

² Frederik Borgbjerg, speech in parliament, 23 March 1899, in *Rigsdagstidende. Folketingets Forhandlinger. 51de ordentlige Samling 1898-99*, Copenhagen: J.H. Schultz 1899, columns 5158-5159.

³ P. Knudsen, ‘Socialismen’ (1885), in Østergård, *Den materialistiske historieopfattelse*, p. 44.

Thus, throughout this entire period, the Social Democratic party and its leadership retained its unity and remained the only political force within the workers movement. The anarchist ideas spreading in many countries during these years had practically no influence in Denmark. It was only in the last year before the war that a left-wing opposition of some strength appeared in Denmark. A syndicalist movement emerged around 1910, gaining about 4.000 members but gaining significant support in some trade unions before the war. Also, the Social Democratic youth organization developed positions clearly to the left of the party, and during the war, the majority of the youth organization participated in the founding of what would become the small Communist Party of Denmark.

A tradition of moderation

The characteristic moderation of the socialist movement in Denmark, and the near-monopoly of the Social Democratic party over the definition of socialism, continued throughout the First World War and into the interwar years. During the 1920's and 1930's the party succeeded in redefining itself as a *popular* party, that is a party for all classes, without suffering any significant losses among its core supporters, the industrial workers. The Communist Party of Denmark, established in 1920 and gaining two members of parliament twelve years later, certainly had a visible presence in some workplaces and in street demonstrations, but it remained marginal until the mid-1940's, when the Social Democrats temporarily had to pay the cost for supporting austerity politics during the war and the German occupation of Denmark.

While the consensualist welfare state type of democracy characterized all Scandinavian countries during the interwar years and, even more, after the Second World War, the Danish case was still relatively peculiar in this context. Admittedly, Swedish Social Democracy has been even more successful in combining elements of socialist thought with notions of popular unity and the welfare state, which in turn positions the party clearly to the left of Danish Social Democracy today. The Norwegian party, *Arbeiderpartiet*, on the other hand, has a more complex history of shifting between the extreme moderate left (even joining the Communist International after the First World War). But even the Swedish party has had some very persistent (even if marginal) contenders to its monopoly position: Syndicalism, for example, did not simply die out in Sweden after the First World War, but remains an organized force in the Swedish extreme left to this day. Thus, Danish socialism was relatively peculiar in its long continuity of combining political moderation with a practically unchallenged Social Democratic hegemony within the labour movement, later transferred into a hegemonic position in the political arena at large. A crucial element in explaining this is, undoubtedly, the continuity of consensualist, pragmatist political culture in Denmark, reaching back to the 18th century at least.

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