



On the History of Socialism in Denmark before 1914

Full version

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Keywords

Anarchism, Arbejderpartiet, Bertel Nygaard, Charles Fourier, Communism, Communist International, Communist Party of Denmark, Danish Labour movement, Denmark, Danish Social Democratic Party, Fædrelandet newspaper, Frederik Borgbjerg, Frederik Dreier, French July Revolution of 1830, Gotha program, Gustav Bang, Journal Socialisten, Karl Kautsky, Karl Marx, Kjøbenhavnsposten, Lassalleism, Lorenz von Stein, Louis Blanc, Louis Pio, Norwegian Party, Peter Knudsen, Proudhon, Social democracy, Social Democratic League, Socialdemokratisk Forbund, Socialism, SPD, Swedish Party, Syndicalism, The Copenhagen Courier, The International Working Men's Association, The Social Democrat Newspaper,

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.

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

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

Bertel Nygaard

Archival resources

Arbejderbevægelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv (ABA), Copenhagen <http://aba.dk/> (voluminous archive on the Danish labour movement)

(Not much is digitalized here, but a few documents are available at http://aba.dk/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=239 ; the programs of the main labour parties at http://aba.dk/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=238 ; and a few movies produced by the Social Democratic and Communist parties at http://aba.dk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=91&Itemid=18)

Scholarly journals

Arbejderhistorie (Labour History), published by *Selskabet til Forskning i Arbejderbevægelsens Historie* (Society for the Study of the History of the Labour Movement). In Danish but with English abstracts. Still in publication. All issues since 1995 are available in digital form at <http://sfah.dk/tidsskrift/> . Index of earlier issues at http://sfah.dk/upload_dir/pics/Tidsskrift/Indeks-til-Meddelelser-om-Forskning-i-Arbejderbevaegelsens-Historie-og-Arbejderhistorie-nummer-1-43-fra-1973-1994.pdf

(Predecessors of the journal from the 1970's and 1980's available at http://www.slideshare.net/SFAH?utm_campaign=profiletracking&utm_medium=sssite&utm_source=ssslideview)

Selected primary sources. Journals

Socialisten / Social-Demokraten (national news paper of the Danish Social Democratic party, all issues from 1871 on are digitalized and available through <http://www2.statsbiblioteket.dk/mediestream/> . Only issues before 1917 are accessible from all computers, however. More recent issues are only available at a few Danish research libraries)

Rigsdagstidende (published minutes of the Danish parliament, are being digitalized currently, though only the years 1985 till the present are available yet at <http://www.folketingstidende.dk/Folketingstidende.aspx>)

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Bang, Gustav. "Fra Kapitalisme til Socialisme" (1902), in Uffe Østergård (ed.), *Den materialistiske historieopfattelse i Danmark før 1945, I*, Aarhus: Modtryk 1973, pp. 235-244. (This particular article has not been digitalized, but several articles by Bang are available at <http://www.marxisme.dk/arkiv/forfatter.asp?id=47>).

Knudsen, P., 'Socialismen' (1885), in Østergård, *Den materialistiske historieopfattelse*, pp. 33-61.

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Claus Bryld, *Den demokratiske socialismes gennembrudsår*, Copenhagen: SFAH 1992.

Gerd Callesen, "Denmark", in Marcel van der Linden & Jürgen Rojahn (eds.), *The Formation of Labour Movements, 1870-1914, An International Perspective*, Leiden: Brill 1990, pp. 131-160.

Gerd Callesen: "A brief history of the Danish labour movement" (1990), <http://modkraft.dk/artikel/brief-history-danish-labour-movement#intr>

Christiansen, Niels Finn. *Arbejderbevægelsens forhistorie*, Copenhagen: SFAH 1986.

VERSION FRANCAISE

Résumé du billet de Bertel Nygaard, *Le socialisme au Danemark*

Le socialisme au Danemark est à comprendre dans le cadre spécifique d'un pays de la « semi-périphérie » de l'Europe ; il est historiquement imprégné de la culture politique consensuelle et pragmatique qui traverse tout le champ politique.

Comme dans d'autres pays, le socialisme apparaît dans les années 1840. Signe de l'effroi que provoque ce concept « français », le premier commentaire à son sujet paru dans le journal libéral *Fadrelandet* se fonde sur la lecture du prussien Lorenz von Stein.

Au lendemain de la Commune de 1871, un premier petit groupe socialiste se forme. En 1876 le premier congrès social-démocrate danois avec ses 6000 délégués s'inspire ouvertement de la social-démocratie allemande et de son programme de Gotha adopté l'année précédente. En 1878 le mouvement syndical se structure avec le *Socialdemokratisk Forbund*. Comme d'autres pays européens, le parti gagne d'importantes positions dans les années 1880-1890. Il réalise 30 % des voix avant la guerre et en 1935 regroupera 45 % de l'électorat.

Avant 1914, si la social-démocratie est nettement influencée par le marxisme, son orientation gradualiste et réformiste est nette dès le tout début du vingtième siècle. C'est particulièrement clair lorsque nous lisons Gustave Bang, historien et un des rares théoriciens du mouvement social-démocrate danois. Gustav Bang ("Fra Kapitalisme til Socialisme" (1902), in Uffe Østergård (ed.), *Den materialistiske historieopfattelse i Danmark før 1945, I*, Aarhus, Modtryk 1973). Le rejet de la révolution, si on l'envisage comme un renversement violent et radical, est précoce. Le président du parti, Peter Knudsen, identifie le socialisme avant tout avec la propriété étatisée des moyens de production. Les dissidences de gauche contestant cette orientation demeurèrent très faibles. Ce n'est qu'à partir de 1910 qu'une aile gauche syndicale se structure, tandis que l'organisation de jeunesse sociale-démocrate conteste l'orientation modérée.

Par la suite, dans les années 1920, le parti se définit rapidement comme un parti « du peuple » plus que comme un parti de classe. Le Parti communiste danois, à l'origine formé par des dissidents de gauche, restera très minoritaire. Sur un plus long terme, dans le cadre des pays scandinaves, la tradition de modération politique du Danemark reste spécifique, l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier suédois ou norvégien étant par exemple moins linéaire et heurtée par des dissidences de gauche.