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SCANDINAVIAN SOCIALISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

TRACING THE SCATTERED HISTORY OF SCANDINAVIAN-AMERICAN SOCIALISM, 1876-1920s
(WORKING TITLE)

My PhD-Project will investigate the political activities of Scandinavian emigrants in the US during the rise of Social-Democracy. The main objective of this project will be to uncover the history of Scandinavian-American socialists, mapping out their organizations and their national and transnational affiliations. The project will seek to answer the following research question: *What characterized the Scandinavian-American socialist movement in the period between 1876-1924?*

The rapid growth of industrialization during the mid- to late 1800s brought masses of workers into towns and cities where they took up new, specialized forms of manufacturing. The gradual process of interlinking what we now know as “the world market” meant new opportunities for capitalists, entrepreneurs, labourers, and farmers to find greener pastures across the pond. Many Scandinavians left the old world for the new where they settled as farmers and labourers in the American Midwest, as well as the rapidly growing industrial cities like Minneapolis, Chicago and New York. Norwegians, Swedes and Danes all brought with them political traditions from their home countries which this project will seek to examine.

The European socialist and trade-union movement, spearheaded by the German Social-Democratic Party, inspired the Scandinavians to form socialist parties and trade-unions of their own during the 1870s up to the late 1880s. In the US, the Germans also were some of the main driving forces behind the first socialist clubs and trade-unions. Despite their size, Scandinavian workers contributed substantially to the US labour movement. Scandinavians were involved in the US socialist movement already from its early days: Pioneers like the Norwegian labour-leader Marcus Thrane, already in 1871, helped found a Scandinavian section of the International Workingmen’s Association, better known as “The First International”.¹ Scandinavians played a crucial role for the socialist parties and radical trade-unions across many US states. The state of research on this topic is however quite meagre, we can state two main reasons for this: firstly, because most Scandinavian-Americans were not involved in socialist activities, rather they were organized in local Scandinavian churches and lodges, on the political plane many voted republican, democrat and for the populist parties. Secondly, the “Scandinavian-American socialist movement” were scattered, and, like the rest of the US socialist movement, torn between different warring factions on the left. Most of the leadership of the US socialist movement being of British, German, Jewish, Russian and Irish-decent, left the already small ethnic group of Scandinavians “outside” of the popular imagination of the US labour movement. It did not help either that many in the labour movement, including devoted

¹ Oddvar Bjørklund, *Marcus Thrane* (Tiden Norsk Forlag, 1982). 57

socialists, held onto prejudice against other ethnic groups, as well as conservative stances on immigration.² Although the Socialist Party of America, the SPA, were the dominant socialist party during the early 1900s, many Scandinavians also found their way into the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), and other radical clubs and trade-unions. Focusing on the US left in this period will also entail looking into the conflicts within the socialist movement, their international affiliations, as well as the emerging conflicts with the “traditional” trade-union movement in the US. The socialist left in this period met not only resistance from the capitalists, the police and other state institutions, but also by labour organizations such as the American Federation of Labour (AFL) and the Knights of Labour (K of L). State repression of workers, ethnic tensions and political sectarianism are some of the reasons why the growth of socialism in the US never took hold in the same way as in Europe. How did a large industrial nation like the US end up with such a scattered labour movement? Answering the question of the US labour movements struggle for unity will therefore also be of vital interest for this project.

The Scandinavian labour movement had a tradition of united labour congresses dating back to 1883, where trade-unions raised money for striking workers and drafted common political platforms.³ The programmatic unity of the Scandinavian socialist parties can also be seen clearly in the adoptions of the socialist program during the 1890s, modelled on the German social-democratic party’s famous “Erfurt Program”, a program drafted alongside the book *The Class Struggle* by Friedrich Engels’ apprentice, Karl Kautsky. This official commentary on the program outlined what Lars T. Lih have coined as “the merger formula” of social democracy, that being the unity of the labour movement alongside the socialist parties.⁴ In many countries (like France and the UK) these two movements were separated for a longer period. Few places outside Germany were this merger more evident than in the Scandinavian countries, where the trade-union movement alongside the socialist parties carried forth demands of better wages, the 8-hour workday and labour regulations. This is the organized spirit that many Scandinavian workers brought with them to the new world. Although the historical record of Scandinavian trade-unionists in the US is meagre, there is no doubt that they were well-organized in both local and international unions. We can mention the local Scandinavian unions in Minneapolis, Chicago and New York, organizing bakers, painters, decorators, shoemakers, bricklayers and typographers.⁵ Most of these trade-unions can be traced as far back as to early 1870s.⁶

The 1909 general strike in Sweden, brought forth by a lockout of nearly 160,000 workers, showed that Scandinavian trade-unionists in the US could raise money and spread propaganda about events in their homeland.⁷ The contribution of American-Scandinavians in the 1909 general strike, as well as similar events in the US has yet to be properly evaluated. Outside trade-union agitation there is also the question of political power, the Scandinavians

² Sally M. Miller, «For White Men Only: The Socialist Party of America and Issues of Gender, Ethnicity and Race», *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2, nr. 3 (2003): 283–302. 295-302

³ Kaare Fostervoll, *Arbeiderskandinavismen*, Arbeidernes Historiske Forenings Skriftserie (Oslo: Det Norske Arbeiderpartiet Forlag, 1935). 57

⁴ Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008). 44

⁵ Jørn Brøndal, «Socialister, Fagforeninger og Broderskaber i Skandinavisk Amerika 1870-1914», *Arbejderhistorie*, nr. 1 (1999): 33–50. 39

⁶ Odd S Lovoll, *A Century of Urban Life: The Norwegians in Chicago before 1930* (The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1988). 166-167

⁷ Per Nordahl, *Weaving the Ethnic Fabric: Social Networks Among Swedish-American Radicals in Chicago 1890-1940* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994). 79

impact on local state councils, assemblies and on the presidential elections. Socialists did not only settle for the right to vote or simple social reforms, but many also set their sights on the conquering of state power, the abolishment of the capitalist system and subsequent end of class society, which Karl Marx famously named communism. Many socialists viewed their struggle as historical process where the workers would become the masters of society, which were already well on its way. How this would look like in practice, as well the strategic and tactical policies to instigate such a revolution were widely debated topics. Many socialists held the view that the right to vote rendered revolutions unnecessary, and that socialism could be brought about by winning a majority in parliament. Although this was a normal standpoint, many also believed that winning a majority would give them the right to take power, predicated on popular support of workers and trade-unions. This notion of a social revolution meant that the struggle for socialism was not exclusive for the ballot box, but also entailed grassroots trade-union struggle.⁸ A few, during this period, particularly the syndicalists, believed that only trade-unions could conquer power and that a revolution would come about through a series of general strikes. Although mostly a French and Spanish trend among the left, the syndicalists also found prominence in Sweden and in the US. Despite these international debates, the US socialist movement compared to their European counterparts saw very little success in the presidential elections as well as in labour struggles. However, it must be noted that the Socialist Party of America had one of the largest third-party voter turnouts in US history. The monumental election campaign of the SPA in 1912 saw labour-leader Eugene V. Debs win almost a million votes (roughly six percent).⁹ The success was, however, short-lived: Debs subsequent arrest in 1918 struck a huge blow to the US labour movement, which by then were on a rapid decline. There have been written no complete record of Scandinavians involvement in the US socialist movement during this period. On the other hand, scholars of Scandinavian emigrant history have for decades covered local political involvement, especially in the Midwest. Trying to piece together the local activity of scattered groups alongside the national organizations of the socialists and trade-unionists will be one of the main obstacles facing this project.

The vast Scandinavian-American socialist press will be the primary source for this project. Few of the Scandinavian-American socialist newspapers survived more than a decade of publishing. Many struggled financially and were in local competition with other Scandinavian and English-language newspapers. Ethnic-language newspapers at the time had a broad audience; Magazines like the Chicago-based *Skandinavien* reached a weekly circulation of 44.500 copies, which we can compare to well-established daily newspapers like *The New York Times*, which at the time had a little over 50.000.¹⁰ Newspapers such as the Norwegian *Gaa Paa!* (Forward!), Swedish *Svenska Socialisten* (The Swedish Socialist), and Danish-Norwegian *Social-Demokraten* (The Social-Democrat) all saw some level of success in their respective states. The list of short-run Scandinavian socialist newspapers in the US is long, and most, except for a few Swedish papers, have barely been researched by historians, if at all. These newspapers held different positions within the US labour movement, some aligned with the SLP, some with the SPA and the IWW, and a few independently showing support for socialist and radical populist politicians. Not only were these newspapers organs for agitational

⁸ Jukka Gronow, *On the Formation of Marxism : Karl Kautsky's Theory of Capitalism, the Marxism of the Second International and Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy* (Haymarket Books, 2016). 159-180

⁹ Robert Tuttle, «The Appeal of Reason And The Failure of The Socialist Party in 1912», *Mid-American Review of Sociology* 8, nr. 1 (1983): 51–81.

¹⁰ Brøndal, «Socialister, Fagforeninger og Broderskaber i Skandinavisk Amerika 1870-1914». 34

and educational purposes, but also a bridge between the old world and the new, where news regarding the political situation at home was discussed. Journalists like the influential editor of the *Social-Demokraten*, Olav Kringen, travelled in the US and wrote for both local socialist papers and the Norwegian labour press back home. Transatlantic connections consisting of travelling journalists, seasonal workers and returning emigrants shaped the identity of Scandinavian-American socialists. These connections, as well as political tensions between Scandinavians, especially regarding the dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway (1890-1905), and how this were discussed in the press is also a topic in need of wider discussion.

Henry Bengston, editor of *Svenska Socialisten* wrote pessimistically in his 1955 work *On the Left in America: Memoirs of the Scandinavian-American Labor Movement*:

“It is open to question whether even the memory of the Swedish-American labor movement will survive the present generation, and one can ask whether the explanation is to be found in the biases of those who, up to now, have done historical research on Swedish America”.¹¹

Concerns such as Bengstons were not unfounded, as his memoirs remain the essential first-hand account of the movement of which he partook in, as well as one of a few books dealing with the Scandinavian-American labour movement. The history of the Swedish American socialists has on the other hand been preserved by historians compared to their Danish and Norwegian counterparts. We can still note that the topic of Swedish-American socialists remains understudied by historians, despite the occasional journal articles, books and academic thesis like Kaj Landberg’s *the Swedish Socialist Labour Federation 1904-1928* from 2015.¹² The scattered nature of this topic is also shown in the literature. We can assume that some of the lack of research have to do with the meagre transnational connection between US and Scandinavian historians. Journals like the *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*, the Scandinavian labour journals (*Arbeiderhistorie*, *Arbejderhistorie* and *Arbetarhistoria*), to name a few, have all published its share for Scandinavian-American labour history. Without any transnational conferences or journals, the topic at hand has for a long period been carried forth by a handful of scholars like Norwegian Odd S. Lovoll, Danish Jørn Brøndal and Swedish Per Nordahl, to name a few. Luckily, the recent upswing in transnational labour history has brought more scholars to investigate the “forgotten” history of Social-Democracy from the late 19th to the early 20th century. It is also worth mentioning Danish scholar Anders Bo Rasmussens current project on the Danish socialist women’s movement in Chicago over at the University of Southern Denmark.

There is also the part of this literature, mainly biography’s, focusing on the famous Scandinavian labour leader’s involvement in the US labour movement. People such as Marcus Thrane, Martin Tranmæl, Louis Pio, Joe Hill and August Palm are all well-grounded in the literature as having inspired both the Scandinavian and the Scandinavian-American labour movements. Large parts of this literature however focus more thoroughly on the leaders themselves than the surrounding movement, especially the Scandinavian-Americans. US organizations such as the Scandinavian Socialist Labour Federation, the SSAF and the larger Scandinavian Socialist Federation, the SSF, have mostly been left out of the field of both

¹¹ Henry Bengston, *On the Left in America: Memoirs of the Scandinavian-American Labor Movement* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1999). 173

¹² Kaj Landberg, «Skandinaviska Socialistiska Arbetareförbundet 1904-1928» (Malmö Högskola, 2015).

emigrant and labour history. The exceptions here are few and far between, partly dated and often found outside Academia in historical societies and local history journals. There is good reason for this: The archival material on the Scandinavian-American socialist movement is, much like the past movement itself, scattered. The primary sources that this project will examine is found in different archives belonging to both US state archives and partially private institutions. We can also assume that US labour historians have focused more thoroughly on the larger ethnic groupings within the socialist movement. Another explanation can be the fact that only a handful of Scandinavian-Americans got elected to local state assemblies and higher positions within the Socialist parties and trade-unions. To not further dwell on the state of this historical field, we can conclude that there is indeed a lot of work that must be done to tie together the knots of what was once the Scandinavian-American socialist movement. Uncovering this history will be the main objective of this project.

This project seeks to highlight the activity of Scandinavian-American socialists, their impacts, struggles, debates and relations with other groupings, that being ethnic groups, trade-unions, political parties in both their home countries and within in the US. This will primarily be done by looking at official documents of the Scandinavian-American organizations and their respective newspapers. As very few of these have been digitalized, the project will demand extensive archival work, mainly in the American Midwest. The projects primary topic of study will to a large extent be determined by the source material. Since the research is still in an early stage, considerations regarding the different topical areas (economic, political, national, transnational etc.) may change along the way. As a part of the research group “Democracy, Freedom and Boundaries” at IAKH (Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History at the University of Oslo) I hope that my Ph.D.-research can bring about fruitful collaborations and positive synergy effects. Although the project is still in a very early phase I have good reason to believe that it can give valuable insight, tying together a fragmented chapter of US and Scandinavian labour history.

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