

Social Democratic Populism in the Interwar Period in Denmark

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The poster states: 'Workers, civil servants, small farmers – you have the power, if you want it! Vote Social Democracy' (A la Les Misérables, 1926).

The Danish Constitution – a brief overview

Established in 1849:

- The political system: **Two houses (upper- and lower house)**.
- Suffrage: Economically independent men above 30 years of age (**15 % of the population could vote**).
- Elections: Direct elections to the lower house every third year and indirect elections to the upper house every eight year.

Significant changes:

- **1866: Democratic regression:** Only the wealthiest and the king could elect members to the upper house + the king appointed the government → Major disagreement between the upper- and the lower house in the following years.
- **1915:** Women obtained suffrage + lowering of the suffrage age to the lower house from 30 to 25 years + removal of the privileged suffrage to the upper house, but suffrage age was now 35 years (**41 % of the population could vote**).
- **1953: Abolishment of the upper house** + lowering of the suffrage age from 25 to 23 years + ‘negative parliamentarism’ codified.

The SD and RV government (1929-1940) could despite a comfortable majority in the lower house not rule independently of the upper house in the period 1929-1936.

The logic of populism and the question of constitutionalism

- No agreement on 'populism'. Largely a pejorative term.
- Most scholars claim to have an essential definition, clearly distinguishing populists from non-populists.
- 'A thin centered ideology' (Mudde and Kaltwasser).
- A moralistic imagination of politics, setting a pure homogeneous people against minorities, often elites (Müller).

The (good) popular vs. the (bad) populist

- Behind most definitions lies a distinction between the good popular vs the bad populist:
 - cf. Müller's distinction between popular and populist constitutions (Müller 2017).
 - Populists are not *per se* anti-constitutionalists, but a populist constitution will be undemocratic.
- Müller's distinction between popular and populist is based on a distinction between the moralistic, ultimately illusory representation of the people as *One* (pure), vs a realistic notion of the people in its 'empirical entirety'.
- What does such an 'empirical entirety' amount to?
- The 'citizens' (as he sometimes suggests)?

The constitution as in/exclusionary

- A constitution is a *delimitation* of the people: who is in- and who is excluded?
- Any struggle over the expansion of formal/constitutional citizenship must move beyond any 'empirical entirety' and refer to a symbolic people – to be included
- The line between the symbolic and the empirical is blurred.
- cf. Müller “whether a particular claim is democratic or populist will not always be a clear-cut, obvious matter”
- e.g. “We are the people” in Eastern Germany:

“(...) entirely legitimate in the face of a regime that claims exclusively to represent the people but in fact oppresses large sections of the populace. One could go further and argue that what prima facie seems to be an arch-populist slogan was in fact an *anti*-populist slogan: the regime pretended exclusively to represent the people and their well-considered long-term interest (or so a standard justification of the ‘leading role’ of state socialist parties went) – but in reality *das Volk* are something else, and want something else. In non-democracies ‘We are the people’ is a justified revolutionary claim, not a populist one.” (Müller 2015, 87).

Liberal (popular) constitutions are ‘partisan’

- Müller would argue SD in DK were not populists, because their demands were legitimate (and their claims were not moralistic):
 - Ergo, their fight for change of the constitution was democratic
 - They were in accordance with Müller’s definition of liberal constitutionalism
- But his position can only be maintained if the clear-cut distinction between the legitimate and the illegitimate claims – i.e., popular vs populist – can be maintained. And we claim it cannot.
- As has been pointed out:

“The constitutional order is *partisan* in Müller’s sense because it is always also the crystallization of a *particular* people; at the end of the day, a *particular image* of the people is always written into the constitutional order.” (Thomassen 2022: 999).

Populism without clear-cut distinctions: a political logic

- Laclau & Mouffe: Deconstruction the distinction between the popular and the populist turns it from an object (imagination/ideology) to *a logic*:
 - A matter of *degrees*, more or less prominent at different times.
- *The People doesn't exist*:
 - No empirical entirety, nor a genuine 'people-ness' beyond the representations.
 - A spectral being to be represented/ incarnated in particular attempts.
 - By definition a particular representing the totality.

Populism as a logic

- In conflict with the establishment/ the elite:
 - Down – up antagonism.
 - Can, but need not, be moral – and even when moral, not necessarily a democratic problem.
- An alliance ('equivalence') between different demands and identities.
- To be represented/incarnated/united by a particular instance – e.g. the name of the leader.

The SD election campaign in 1929

- SD had (unsuccessfully) governed once before (1924-1926).
- In 1926-1929, a liberal government supported by the conservatives was in power:
 - They carried out major cuts to public spending, including in social welfare, and gave tax reductions to the wealthiest (so-called 'adjustment policies' due to a stronger currency).
 - This created a lot of anger amongst the working and middle classes affected by these policies (conflict between big capital and working people).

The SD election campaign in 1929

- SD manifesto:

‘Never before has a Danish government established a class war like the one initiated by the liberal government; never before has a government pursued such reactionary upper-class politics; and never has a government spread such hatred for the working population and for socially beneficial organisations as the current [liberal] government has’ (Vestsjællands Social-Demokrat, 2 April 1929).

- Michael Christian Lyngsie (SD):

‘When Social Democracy gained power in 1924 it knew that the only goal was the welfare of the population and the good of the country. This election cannot be difficult. Workers and other middle-class people – you have much to retaliate and much to prevent! “Tugthusloven” [a law undermining the unions] was the chain of slavery put around your feet. If they [liberals and conservatives] win the election, they will put it around your neck. Do you want to be slaves? It has to be criminals that would let this happen to our country’ (Social-Demokraten, 22 April 1929).

- Editorial in an SD newspaper:

‘It is a people who rise up against an evil government, against a political class that must be replaced by the new one that we are waiting for and believe in, the new one that makes our hearts tremble. And what is this new one other than socialism!’ (Klokken 5, 24 April 1929).

The SD election campaign in 1929



The illustration is titled 'The landowner's fall' and shows the liberal PM (1926-1929) being dragged down by the people (Social-Demokraten, 22 March 1929).



Luren den gjalder,
til Valg den kalder
paa Mænd som Kvinder,
saa Sejren vi vinder
mod Folkets Fjender.
Sæt Mygdal fra Styret,
Stød Rytter af Hesten,
Lad Krag blive fyret
og hele Resten
af Venstre-Kleresiet og Sejren viet
Socialdemokratiet!

The poem says: 'The horn calls\election is coming\men and women\do your duty\against the enemies of the people\remove Mygdal [PM], Rytter [politician], and Krag [politician]\and remove the entire liberal establishment\so SD can gain power!' (Lolland-Falster Social-Demokrat, 24 April 1929).

The SD election campaign in 1929

- The people in SD did not consist only of the working class, but also of ‘entrepreneurs, civil servants, farmers and others that have an interest in progressive development’ (SD manifesto, 1929).
- Construction of a people through ‘chains of equivalences’.
- Transition from a class party to a people’s party.
- However, the concept of ‘the people’ is very complex (also in SD): people as *plebs*, *demos*, and *ethnos*.



The poster states: ‘Workers, civil servants, small farmers – you have the power, if you want it! Vote Social Democracy’ (A la Les Misérables, 1926).

The SD election campaign in 1929

- The elite consisted predominantly of capitalists, the upper class, and their political representatives in parliament (liberals and conservatives). Thorvald Stauning (leader of SD):
 - ‘The real dividing line is between those, on the one side, who are in possession of capital and get wealthy by exploiting the work of others without making a fair contribution. On the other side are all those who are subjected to domination and exploitation by the economic elite.
 - ‘This division has been strengthened over the last couple of years. This has to stop.
 - ‘It is not persons, but the policies enforced by the two responsible parties [liberals and conservatives] that need to be judged. People are tools in the hands of classes and interest groups, and you always have to go to the root of the evil [capitalism] when you want to weed it out.’ (Social-Demokraten, 24 April 1929).

The SD election campaign in 1929

- But the elite also consisted of the established political system: various election laws and especially the upper house. Stauning (SD):
‘When universal suffrage prevails, and artificial obstacles to its unfolding – such as the upper house – are removed, then the law is the expression of the majority of the people, and the will of the people must be the highest law in a democratic society.’ (Social-Demokraten, 24 April 1929).



The poster states: 'He [the upper house] stops the construction work – tear him down! Vote Social Democracy.' (1932).

The SD election campaign in 1929

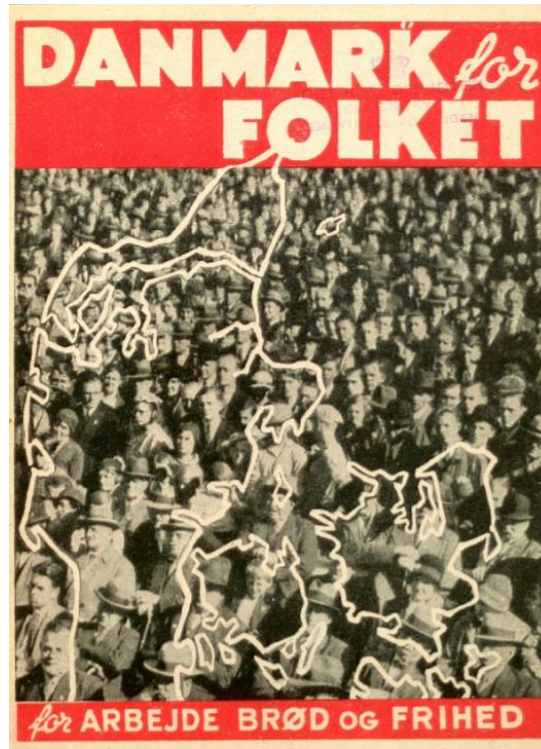
- SD articulated a variety of demands against the power block: reestablishment of social welfare, revision of the 1920 constitution, change of the economic system (state intervention), more taxing of the wealthiest etc.
- These demands were expressed in the different identities in SD – workers, entrepreneurs, civil servants, small farmers, etc.
- These identities were ultimately expressed in the ‘empty signifier’ of the people. Stauning (SD):
‘It is up to the voters to decide whether the liberal government’s reactionary upper-class politics should be continued or stopped. Now it is time to make a decision. Now it is a matter of establishing politics for the future, not for the benefit of the upper class, but for the benefit of the whole people’
(Vestjyllands Social-Demokrat, 25 March 1929).

The SD election campaign in 1929

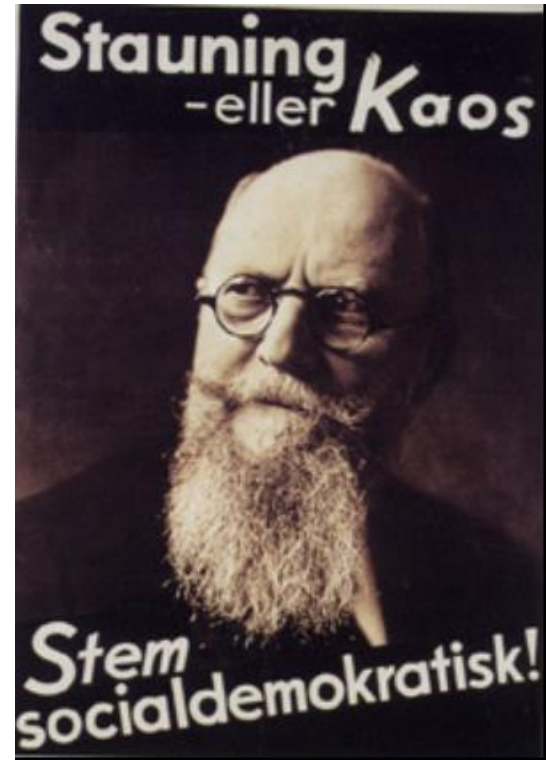
- Conclusion:
 - Populism was the dominant logic in the 1929 campaign.
 - The 'people' did not mean all the people. It was a *plebs* claiming to be the entire *populus*, which they did very successfully (establishment of a hegemonic order that functions today).
 - SD did not argue for revolution but for 'evolutionary socialism'.

The SD election campaign in 1935

- SD rallied on the programme: 'Denmark for the People' (1934) and the slogan 'Stauning or Chaos'.
- Still possible to identify strong populist logics in the 1935 SD campaign. However, it was not the dominant political logic; there were many other threats present – fascism, Nazism, and communism.
- SD still wanted to change fundamentals (e.g., the 1920 constitution), but they also wanted to preserve many aspects of the established order.



SD's political programme: 'Denmark for the people – for work, bread, and liberty' (1934).



Iconic SD poster from the 1935 election: 'Stauning or Chaos! Vote Social Democracy!'

The SD election campaign in 1935

- In the SD election campaign in 1935 it is still possible to find strong ‘people versus elite’ articulations, especially regarding the upper house. In the SD manifesto:
 - ‘Brutally, a small majority in the upper house has refused to provide help to the unemployed. After refusing to provide economic support for these groups, they have also refused to pass laws that could help them to secure work.
 - ‘The two parties [liberals and conservatives] have ended up in a hopeless opposition policy whose only goal has been to save the rich, the stockholders, and others of the economic elite from making a contribution in the current crisis.
 - ‘Under these conditions, an election must be held, so that the voters can decide. Social Democracy is anticipating this election with great expectation. We [Social Democracy] have full confidence in the responsibility of the Danish people.’
(Social-Demokraten, 2 October 1935).

Overall conclusion

- The Danish Social Democracy articulated its project through populist logics:
 - More so in 1929 than in 1935 but present in both campaigns.
- Constitutional changes made possible through populist logics were in no way a threat to the constitution – they were the very condition for the further democratization of it.