



Populism In the Danish Social Democracy During the Interwar Period

Presentation for PSA Liverpool 2023, April 3. to 5.
Populism SG:
Anders Hovmøller and Allan Dreyer Hansen,
Dept. of Social Science and Business



Roskilde University

Approaches to populism

- Abundance of definitions
- We choose Laclau's (discourse theoretical) 'articulatory logic':
 - Populism is not an object/ phenomenon (not an 'imagination' (Müller), nor an ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser))
 - The people in (strong) opposition to an elite/ power bloc
 - Not sufficient to invoke 'the people('s true interests)'
 - Articulation of different demands (and identities)
 - Not national conservative hierarchical unity of the (national) people
 - Not class-struggle (in the meaning defending pre-given unitarian interests)
- (with some qualifications)
 - Not ontological – not an instance of pure naming/ empty signifier
 - (The logic of) The people (the underdogs) must be discernible – not e.g. market, not (the logic of) the nation.)

Alternatives 2)

Mudde: Populism as a thin-centered ideology

- “... a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”. (Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”, 543)
- There is a set of often mentioned criticisms:
 - Ideology – even if thin centered – is an objectification;
 - People vs elite is not enough to constitute an ideological core – therefore ‘morality’ is introduced (like in Müller):

General claim: Social Democracies (SD) are not populist

- Populism debate, e.g. Mudde & Kaltwasser (2012):
“However, the formation of multi-class alliances is not a defining attribute of populism, but rather a central element of mass politics. As has [been] pointed out, **successful political parties such as the Christian democratic and social democratic parties in Europe are characterized precisely by their capacity to mobilize and represent a plethora of social groups, yet we do not refer to these cases as examples of populism. ... the notion of *Volksparteien* (catch-all parties), [has been developed] to describe those parties able to build a programme that is appealing to voters with very different socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds.**”
- In Danish debate: e.g. Korsgaard 2004, Lidegaard 2006
 - The analysis of the transition from a class party to a people’s party, generally overlook, or at least seriously downplay the (abundant) presence of antagonistic people vs. elite articulations in some of SD’s most famous political programmes and campaigns.

The SD election campaign in 1929

- SD articulated a people that consisted of not only the working class but also of 'entrepreneurs, civil servants, farmers and others that have an interest in progressive development' (SD manifesto, 1929)
- However, the concept of the people is very complex (also in SD): people as *plebs*, *demos*, and *ethnos*
- But the people in SD was not an all-inclusive category. SD articulated a variety of different antagonisms



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) ('the power of capital').
Thorvald Stauning (leader of SD):
'Everywhere support for SD is greatly increasing, and everywhere expectations are high for the workers of Copenhagen to clean the capital of the reaction. **On Wednesday the voters decide whether Madsen-Mygdal will continue to mock, dominate, and oppress the working people. (...)**
Let the decision on Wednesday be clear, let it be socialist! **We do not need the hidden dictatorship of the power of capital. Now is the time to meet the great tasks, to make the people become master in its own house. On Wednesday we shall lay the ground for the abolishment of the Upper House. It is the youth, the future, and the very course of life for the people which is at stake.** Get SD a giant victory, get that majority, make the working people prevail, so that the efforts for the realisation of socialism can begin. Hurray for a socialist victory!' (Social-Demokraten, 22 April 1929)

The SD election campaign in 1929

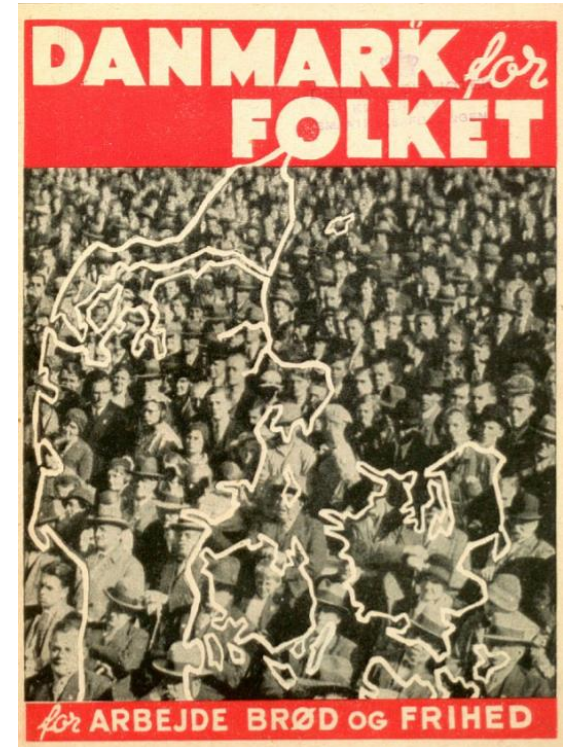
- But the elite also consisted of the established political system: various election laws and especially the upper house. Stauning (SD):
‘When universal suffrage prevails, and artificial obstacles to its unfolding – such as the upper house – are removed, then the law is the expression of the majority 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 1935

- SD had been in government for 6½ years
- SD rallied on the programme: 'Denmark for the People' (1934) and the slogan 'Staining or Chaos'
- The people still consisted of workers, entrepreneurs, civil servants, small farmers, etc. However, it is possible to detect a movement towards a cultural (*ethnos*) concept of the people, e.g.: 'Denmark for the People' (1934)
- SD articulated the people (*plebs*), the nation, and democracy in a 'trinity' (thus safeguarding the concept of the nation from their political enemies)



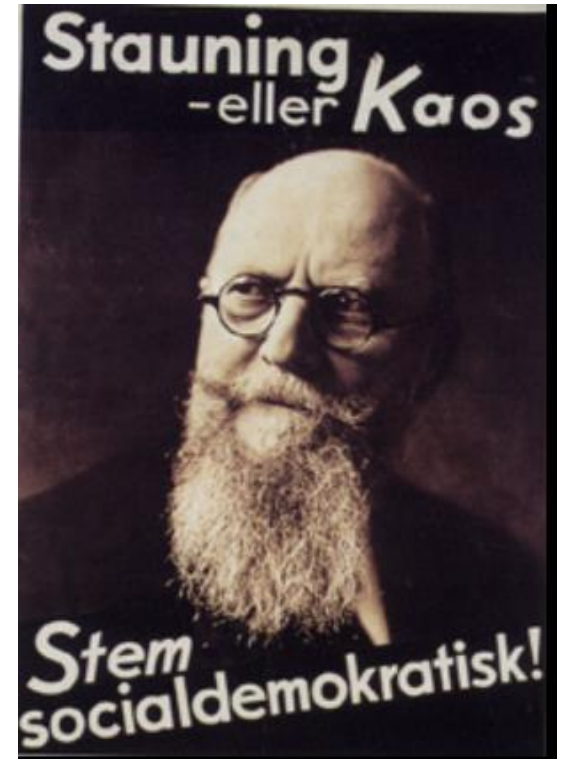
SD's political programme: 'Denmark for the people – for work, bread, and liberty' (1934).

The SD election campaign in 1935

- The elite still consisted of big capital, the upper class, and the upper house
- However, the people versus elite conflict was not the main conflict. SD also wanted to protect the established order from threats such as communism, fascism, Nazism, Polish migrant workers, and the so-called deviants and deplorables. However, sometimes the threat from Nazism was also articulated in populist terms. Stauning (SD):
‘We do not want [the Nazi infiltrated aristocracy, AH] to be the vanguard of the people. We know they are the people’s exploiters and enemies. We want honest work, securing social rights, and political freedom. We want Denmark for the people.’ (Social-Demokraterne, 21 October 1935)

The SD election campaign in 1935

- Stauning (SD) as the empty signifier:
‘Today the electorate will decide. It is so fortunate that our country is led by a man who has the trust of the people. Prime Minister Stauning is a true son of the working people, a Danish worker who has become Prime Minister of the country. But he is more. Johannes V. Jensen [one of Denmark’s most famous authors] wrote at his 60th birthday: “Where is the essence of an entire country incarnated in a single individual? STAUNING is the full expression for the Danish people with all of its best characteristics.”
He is the centre of the election!
COPENHAGENERS! Do not fail. Do your duty! STAUNING AGAIN!’ (Social-Demokraten, 22 October 1935)



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

Conclusion

- Populism was the dominant logic in SD's 1929 campaign
- Populism was still present in the 1935 campaign. However, it was not the dominant logic:
 - There were many other threats present: communism, fascism, Nazism, Polish migrant workers, and the so-called deviants and deplorables
 - SD wanted to protect many aspects of the established order, but they also wanted to change certain aspects of this order (e.g. the upper house and certain election laws)
- 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)

Overall conclusions

- Theoretical : ‘The people’ appears in many different forms, the specific populist articulation is antagonistic
 - Not catch -all, not national-conservative
- Normative/ political: Populism is not anti-democratic
 - Historically populism has been a condition of introducing – and as in our case – furthering democratization