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Conservatism and Tradition in Danish Social Welfare Legislation, 1890-1933: A Comparative View

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Before Denmark finally achieved parliamentary democracy in 1901, it was already well on the way to becoming a thorough-going welfare state and was, until about the Second World War, a leader in developing the institutions and ideology of welfare capitalism. The contrast with the United States, where democratic political institutions are much older, but where welfare institutions have developed more slowly and in very different form, is striking. The two countries, of course, vary enormously in size and circumstances, but as with any industrializing nation, they have some things in common: cities, an urban poor, an organized demand for the passage of social welfare legislation. A comparative view may reveal aspects of each country in sharper perspective than an examination of either in isolation. The question is: How is it that welfare institutions were so much more intellectually available in Denmark than in the United States? The conclusion is that institutions of modern welfare capitalism in Denmark were designed to resemble as much as possible traditional pre-democratic—and pre-socialist—Danish institutions, and that the institutions were successful precisely because they did not require any break with historical continuity and fit so well into long-familiar traditions and habits of thought.

Rather than emphasizing the differences between various groups and political parties, this article is an attempt to define the framework within which Danish social legislation was worked out;¹ that is, the fundamental social assumptions which the various groups held in common. These ideas, moreover, remained essentially constant from the 1890s to the 1930s. Social legislation was particularly important at the beginning and end of the period, *c.* 1890-92 and *c.* 1924-33. There were no significant ideological changes from the early to the later period, so that both horizontally and vertically, as it were, one can speak of national values, or ideological foundations, or a fundamental mind-set which lay behind Danish social legislation 1890-1933.

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¹ In this paper, the terms 'social legislation', 'social welfare legislation', and 'welfare legislation' are used interchangeably. The boundaries of the term are taken from Social-reformkommissionens 1. Betænkning, *Det Social Tryghedssystem: Struktur og Dagpenge* (1969). That report, the basis for the reforms of 1973, divides 'social expenditures' into seven categories: sickness, accident insurance and workers' safety, old age and invalidity, unemployment, general aid, family and children's allowances, wounded military veterans. With the exception of the last two, not significant during the period, these are the categories here considered. The author gratefully acknowledges support from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, which made research for this article possible.

of the 1920s and 1930s are clear. Such interest in the 1890s was a product not so much of economic but of political circumstances. The two major political parties, the Left and the Right, were worried that the Social Democrats might become a serious threat unless dissatisfaction at the bottom of society was dealt with. But more important, the two major parties feared that they were headed for an impasse which only violence could resolve. The Right, with the support of the King, maintained political power in the face of decreasing strength at the polls. The Left won increasingly large majorities in elections, but was never asked to form the government. Both wanted political power; neither was willing to risk revolution. Looking for an area of cooperation, moderate members of both parties hit upon social welfare legislation. The stratagem worked and passions were cooled until parliamentary principles could be finally established in practice in 1901. It is significant that welfare legislation provided the common ground, for the point of this paper is that, in spite of disagreements on details, such legislation was a product of assumptions held in common by most segments of Danish society.

These fundamental assumptions can be illustrated by a statement of Baron Reedtz-Thott, in the upper house of the Rigsdag in 1888 during the debates on one of the first modern national welfare laws, that relating to public subsidies for mutual-help sickness societies. As one of the country's largest landowners, he is hardly the person one might expect to have the greatest insight into social welfare problems, yet his statement sums up much of the thought which dominated the direction of legislation from then on. He said that in the past

there had gradually developed a chain of small societies with internal cohesion, where the individual received support in difficult times, but on the other hand, the individual did not have the freedom of movement he ought to have had. Through the legislation of the last forty years, we have changed all that. At the moment, the individual stands entirely free.... All the oppressive bonds which existed have now fallen away, but at the same time the individual floats free, unattached in society. He has no firm ground under his feet. I believe that the great duty which the future imposes on us, is to rebuild a society such that the chain of sub-societies, which we have gotten rid of, and which were bound to each other historically, come into existence again in a way which is equally distant from the past's restrictive as from socialism's chaotic condition.²

² *Rigsdagstidende, Landsting* (hereafter cited as *LT*), 1888/9, October 13, 1888, cols. 69-79

It can be shown that by far the largest part of the political spectrum in Denmark, including those who might oppose a particular piece of legislation, believed that some sort of mutual help was desirable, and, more important, that the pattern for such help could be found in the Danish past, specifically the guilds, rather than in newly invented or imported institutions.

The monopoly power of the guilds had formally ended in 1862, but they continued to exist as trade unions. Their internal feeling of solidarity was not diminished, nor was the popular acceptance of such solidarity as legitimate and legal. This mutualism led to the continuance of various forms of mutual-aid funds (kasser) within the unions, and these formed the basis for later social legislation. Even more conservative-minded politicians were willing to go so far as to give public subsidies to these familiar mutual-aid funds, and most Social Democrats did not fight for much more.³

The shape of Danish welfare legislation was predicated on a conception of the relationship between the apparatus of government, on the one hand, and the society on the other, which will be striking to anyone who has studied cognate debates in the United States. All sides of the debates, during the entire period from the 1880s on, used the terms 'society' (samfund), 'the public' (det offentlige), and 'national and local government' (staten og kommunerne) either as synonyms or as very nearly synonyms. One can see this usage in 1885 in the report on the condition of workers written by a commission dominated by men of the Right.⁴ Interior Minister Ingerslev, also of the Right, in defending his old-age pension bill, used the terms 'the public' and 'local government' as synonyms.⁵ Scharling, opposing Ingerslev's bill, used the word 'society' and assumed that it meant 'government' in some form.⁶

From the opposite end of the political spectrum, in the lower house (Folketing), Viggo Hørup attacked the proposal by arguing that his more generous bill was better. 'It is a principle, expressed in our constitution. It is recognized there that society has a responsibility for its helpless members.'⁷ He, too, used the word 'society' and meant thereby 'government'.

³ Henry Bruun, *Den Føglige Arbejderbevægelse i Danmark indtil Aar 1900* (Copenhagen, 1938), pp. 63-71, 466-86. Sygekassevssnet, *Fra Laugsygekasser til Folkeforsikring* (Copenhagen, 1942), especially the chapter, 'Sygekasseloven af 1892, Forudsætninger og Tilblivelse', by Svend Christiansen, pp. 9-99.

⁴ Party names in Denmark are confusing. The party called 'Right' remained conservative. The party called 'Left' was, in the 1890s, a reform party. By the 1920s, however, other parties, particularly the 'Radical Left' and, further to the left, the 'Social Democrats', took over leadership of various reforms. The 'Left' kept its name, even though it stood near the conservative end of the political spectrum. The commission: Nedsat af Indenrigsministeren, July 4, 1885, til 'Overvejelsen af Spørgsmaalene om Sygekassernes Ordning og om Arbejdernes Sikring mod Følgerne af Ulykkestilfælde under Arbejdet', 21-2.

⁵ *Rigsdagstidende, Folketing* (hereafter cited as *FT*), 1890/1, December 20, 1890, col. 1721.

⁶ *Ibid.*, December 20, 1890, 1738-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, December 12, 1890, 1771.

A large part of the debate about public subsidies for mutual-help sickness societies, the foundation of welfare institutions, was whether the ordinary worker could afford a significant health insurance premium. Some groups thought he could, others that he could not, but both sides agreed that if he could not, society, or as Madsen-Mygdahl, later a Conservative prime minister, expressed it, a 'just society', had a duty to meet his needs. And it is clear that all sides agreed that that meant financial support from the national treasury to the sickness societies.⁸

This usage continues throughout the period under discussion and beyond. Knud Kristensen said in 1926 during a debate on proposed aid for businesses which were especially hard hit by worldwide financial troubles, 'There are two ways in which one can, from society, from the state, provide support for business life.'⁹ He used 'the state' in simple apposition to 'society'.

That is, rather than see 'government' (for which no precisely corresponding Danish word exists) as one of many institutions in society with important but limited spheres of activity, government was society manifest. Since government *was* society, the distinction between them was not only unimportant, it did not exist. There was disagreement as to exactly what government ought to do, but, that was the same as the question of what society ought to do. If society had a responsibility to the sick, the old, the unemployed, that responsibility was expressed through government. And this was an assumption upon which a social democrat like Holm would find himself in agreement with a classical conservative like Baron Reedtz-Thott.

It follows that there was no need to differentiate very sharply between public aid and private aid to the needy. That differentiation, that wall, almost a matter of religious principle in discussions of welfare in the United States, disappears.¹⁰

What then can be said of the relation between society or government on one hand, and the individual on the other? The nature of this relationship can be illustrated with a quotation from the debates on the first old-age pension act in 1890 and 1891. The original government proposal was for an old-age pension for the aged poor as part of a revised poor law. Some of the more reform-minded elements in the Left party thought the two categories of recipient should be dealt with in separate programs. In support of this viewpoint, Geltzer said, 'Honest men and women who have worn themselves out in work for the service of society, really have a right, in their

⁸ LT88/9, October 12, 1888, 46-53.

⁹ FT 25/6, January 13, 1926, 3291.

¹⁰ For example, the sickness societies began as purely private ventures, were for many years financed by a combination of private and public funds, and since 1973 have been totally publicly financed.

old age, to claim more [than poor-law support].¹¹ That is, Geltzer assumed that individual members of society were not only working for themselves, but also served society, which in turn owed them something. It would be difficult to prove conclusively that Geltzer here expressed common assumptions, but certainly his description stood uncontradicted. Even the Interior Minister, who had originally proposed the government bill, argued only that indeed his bill did adequately distinguish between the aged and the ordinary poor, and he had nothing to say against the concept of mutual responsibility between society and the individual. One might well call the relationship an organic one.

The same sort of thing from a different angle is illustrated by the fact that very little of the welfare system was explicit in the law. As late as 1933 it was somewhat radical to propose that the level of support under various programs should be specified at all. The traditional method was to leave the amount up to the judgment of the men, often the two or three most prominent in the village, who administered the law. The original democratic constitution of 1849 had been altered several times by 1933, but the remarkable paragraph 89 had been left untouched:

Anyone who cannot support himself or his dependents, and is not himself the dependent of some one else, has a right to public support, though he must comply with the obligations imposed by law in such cases.¹²

The right was constitutionally established. To Americans, accustomed to litigation about every right mentioned in the Constitution of the United States, it is striking that, although Denmark placed a high value on the constitution and legality, the poor law of 1933 contained the provision that Complaints about the decisions made by the relevant local authorities pursuant to this law, cannot be brought in court by private individuals ... but are first brought to the county administrator [amtmand] whose decision may then be appealed to the Social Minister.¹³

and later in the law that 'The Social Minister is the *highest administrative authority* in welfare cases.'¹⁴ That is, the constitution gave a right, but the right could not be enforced at law. One could only complain to just those authorities against whom one was complaining and, in the final instance, to an administrator who is a political, not a judicial, figure. The system simply assumed that the local administrators would carry out their duties in an honest manner, and that society would be thereby protected. No objection to this arrangement was voiced.¹⁵

¹¹ FT 90/1, December 21, 1890, 1783. See also Nils Neergaard, e.g., FT 89/90, November 11, 1889, 122-34. Geltzer's assumption and language are still used in the twentieth century. See Povl Sabroe, 'Abent Brev til Spare-Per', *Politiken*, April 19, 1973, p. 11.

¹² Though any one who received that help from the Poor Law Authority lost his vote.

¹³ Para. 50, clause 1.

¹⁴ Para. 52, clause 1. Italics in original

¹⁵ That it was in fact taken for granted is shown by Klein as early as November 6, 1889. FT 89/90, 818.

Confidence in public officials had been built up during the nearly two centuries of relatively enlightened and honest absolute monarchy before 1848. In those years, even though final authority lay with the monarch, councils of generally competent civil servants ran the day-to-day operations of the government. When democracy came, the same staff of civil servants administered the new forms of government as they had the old.

In the case of unemployment compensation, workmen's compensation and old-age pensions, the situation was somewhat different. People were entitled to benefits under these programs by ordinary statute, not constitutional provision. One was entitled, for example, to be a member of a sickness society. If one were refused membership, one complained not to the courts but, in the last instance, to the minister.¹⁶ The decision as to whether a worker was entitled to workman's compensation, and if so how much, was made by something called the 'Invalid Court' (Invalidretten) whose members were not judges, but civil servants. One appeared not as a plaintiff, but as a suppliant.¹⁷

It is not easy to find a term which covers this relationship. Perhaps 'modernization paternalism' would do, but it has a pejorative ring which is inappropriate. Again, organic is probably the best. Society and its officials recognized their responsibility to the individual citizen, and the citizen acknowledged that recognition. Quite apart from the term used, it is clear that most Danes believed that 'society' or 'the system' was more or less just. There was no belief that government was in and of itself a danger, against whose expansion the citizen needed protection from the courts and from a bill of rights. Thus, social legislation simply did not have to fight the battle against suspicion of any and all expansion of government.

It may be possible to trace some of these ideas, as well, back to the long experience with absolutist government. Increase in the power of the central government had meant, in general, an increase in the fairness with which governmental policies, taxation for example, were administered. And when the democratic constitution was finally achieved it came not after a victorious revolution but with the support, albeit somewhat grudging, of the King. The constitution itself puts far less emphasis on protection from the state, though there is a section on individual rights, than does the Constitution of the United States. Thus liberty and democracy were not so clearly linked to anti-state ideas as they were in the United States, and social legislation simply did not have to fight the battle against suspicion of any and all expansion of government.

Within this ideological context, what was thought to be the highest duty

¹⁶ Leth, *FT* 89/90, February 2, 1890, 2588-94. Formally, one could go to court if the minister acted illegally, but this right was virtually never used and was intended to correct cases of gross abuse of power, not simply differences in judgement.

¹⁷ K. K. Steincke, *Fra hele Valpladsen* (Copenhagen, 1946), pp. 70-85.

of society? One way to make such a large and general question more manageable is to ask: if a political party wishes to attack an opposition party, what is the worst that can be said about the opponent? It is clear from the press as well as from debates in the Rigsdag that the strongest ammunition in Danish political warfare was the charge that one's opponent was following a policy which would produce social conflict, a break in the social order. Avoiding open social conflict was the first duty of government.

It is worth noting that when Baron Reedtz-Thott wanted to attack socialism, he did not claim that it was, for example, unchristian, that it would threaten freedom, or prosperity, or the right of private property, which could have been an effective argument in Denmark, where so many people had at least some land, but (and he was undoubtedly thinking of the Paris Commune) that socialism brought chaos. Reedtz-Thott is only one man, but he was probably right in his judgment that it was disorder which would frighten his countrymen most.

Nor did this view change in the twenties. Dahlgaard, in 1925, compared a number of social systems. The worst he can say of any system is that it is characterized by conflict.¹⁸ Slebsager, of the Left, attacked the Social Democrats by saying that The policy of the Social Democrats is, of course, class politics.¹⁹ And Borbjerg responded for the Social Democrats, not by defending class politics, but by directing the same accusation against the Left.²⁰ Earlier he had defended his bill (which did not pass) setting up joint worker-management councils in various industries, with the argument that it would avoid, or at least minimize class conflict.²¹ He did not claim that these councils would produce a more just division of power in society, or increase productivity, but that they would dampen class conflict. When Thomas Stauning, speaking for the Social Democrats, opposed a Left argument against special help to the unemployed, 1924-5, he accused the Left of being 'the most one sided class party ... which has ever existed'.²² Hans Nielsen, also for the Social Democrats, argued against a Left proposal called 'Protection for the Freedom of Workers and Businessmen' on the grounds that it was pure class legislation.²³ One can agree with him and still notice that he might have used other arguments, such as, that if the Left began on that sort of class legislation, the workers, for their own protection, might be forced to do the same. But he knew that within Danish politics, it did not do to admit one favored sponsoring class legislation. Dr. Krag (Left) opposed Stauning's unemployment act of 1929 because, he

¹⁸ FT 24/5, March 11, 1925, 5946-50.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, March 11, 1925, 5899.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, December 3, 1924, 2627

²² *Ibid.*, January 14, 1926, 3936-41.

²³ *Ibid.*, January 26, 1927, 2028

claimed, it was not neutral in its relation to social classes, and Steincke (S.D.) defended the bill on the grounds that it was.²⁴

One can see the same thing outside the Rigsdag, where *The Social Democrat*, the official newspaper of the Social Democratic Party, accused the Prime Minister in 1927, Madsen-Mygdahl, of following a policy of conflict and class hate. *The Social Democrat* did not argue that Madsen-Mygdahl's policy was proof that class conflict was unavoidable, but rather that the Social Democrats were less characterized by conflict than the Left.²⁵

It is true that these statements come from political speeches, not sociological treatises. Also, they are from the twenties, after a series of frightening (though relatively mild) strikes in Denmark, revolution and civil war in Russia, and after the so-called Easter Crisis, in which the king tried to influence the selection of the prime minister, thereby emphasizing the fragility of Danish democracy.²⁶ But precisely as political rhetoric, these statements are striking. Political rhetoric, did not accuse an opponent of wanting to limit freedom, or prosperity, or equality. Nor did one claim that one's opponents' policies would weaken the nation in relation to its enemies. No, the largest canon, and one which could point both left and right, was that one's opponent's policies would increase conflict.

Danish politicians, then, behaved as though they were convinced that the electorate regarded the first duty of government to be the avoidance of open social conflict, the preservation of the fragile bonds between society's layers upon which all were dependent.

The social structure should also be preserved in an historical sense. Unbroken continuity should be maintained. In debates in the Rigsdag, from the 1890s to the 1930s, the phrase 'build on existing foundations' (bygge paa den bestaaende) occurs so often that it becomes virtually a ritual refrain, rather than a description of reality. This proposal is nothing new', everyone insisted, quite apart from whether it was or not. Obviously there are political explanations for this approach. The more conservative wanted to assure their followers that they were not falling into the toils of radicalism, and the more reform-minded wanted to emphasize that *they* at any rate were not dangerous. But the significance of this political style can perhaps be illuminated by comparing it to the American where all proposals, even the most reactionary, have to be characterized as new and revolutionary. It is clear that all sides in Danish politics, or almost all, believed that reference to the traditional would win more response from the electorate than reference to the new.

²⁴ Krag: FT 28/9, October 31, 1929, 1473. Steincke : *ibid.*, November 4, 1929, 1545-46.

²⁵ See the editorials in *Social-Demokraten*, February 6, 1927, 6; February 10, 1927, 6; and February 18, 1927, 8.

²⁶ Tage Kaarsted, *Påskekrisen* (Aarhus, 1968).

For example, Viggo Hørup declared in defense of his proposals for old-age insurance, 'Our proposals in this respect do not, of course, go in for anything new. They simply continue principles which are widely recognized.'²⁷ In the upper house, Thomas Nielsen argued against a compulsory insurance scheme like the German one by saying that Denmark should not 'build on bare ground' but rather on foundations which already exist.²⁸ The whole argument for public recognition and subsidizing of the sickness societies was that they were old familiar features of Danish society and did not contain any dangers.²⁹

Later, unemployment insurance was constructed on the pattern of the sickness societies, and defended on the grounds that the country really ought to take advantage of the good experience from sickness societies and build on existing foundations. As the committee report put it, 'by furthering and supporting the voluntary [insurance] movement, there is the advantage that we will only be building on foundations which already exist'.³⁰ Later on Borbjerg justified his proposal for a worker-management council by claiming that it would re-create the healthy atmosphere of the old preindustrial days of the hand craftsmen—theoretically a somewhat unexpected argument from a Social Democrat.³¹

Even K. K. Steincke, who occasionally claimed he was a revolutionary, argued in *Welfare for the Future (Fremtidens Forsørgelsesveseri)* that 'one does not break continuity to try new and unproven ways, unless it is necessary, or there are solid reasons for doing so'.³² Neither in 1920 when he published the book, or 1929 when he introduced his 'Social Reform', did he find that necessity. Near the beginning of that book, in fact, he wrote about working-class housing in Copenhagen:

What is left of calm, well being, quiet and human warmth in those rooms filled with people, furniture and all sorts of junk; in houses whose stairs, hallways and doors are full of the noise of factories, arguments and gossip, of dust and stink? Where is there any sense of good order, where the basis for fulfilling well planned duties, where any regular pattern of life, in these alleys and corners where there is no definite place for anything, and where nothing is in its right place?³³

²⁷ FT90/91, December 12, 1890, 1771.

²⁸ LT 89/90, November 2, 1889, 239.

²⁹ This attitude is clearly expressed in the Folketing Committee Report, *Rigsdagstidende* 89/90, Tillæg B, 545-9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 06/07, Tillæg A, 2779.

³¹ FT 24/25, December 12, 1924, 2614. The phrase 'den gamle haandvaerks tid' evoked associations of warm personal relationships between master and journeyman, lack of class feeling and pride in product. The reality was not necessarily so idyllic.

³² K. K. Steincke, *Fremtidens Forsørgelsesvesen* (Copenhagen, 1920), p. 13. The first seven pages and last half page of the book discuss theoretical issues of capitalism and socialism. Between these theoretical discussions come 507 pages on what in fact should be done in the present situation. See also the second and third volumes of his autobiography, *Fra Hele Valpladsen* (Copenhagen, 1946), pp. 60-2, and *Det Trækker Op* (Copenhagen, 1947), pp. 9-35, 105-41.

³³ Steincke, *Fremtidens Forsørgelsesvasen*, p. 7.

In other words, what the proletariat needs is not a revolution, but a neat Danish home.

Steincke was certainly the most important figure in welfare reform between the wars and perhaps the most prominent Social Democrat, after Prime Minister Thomas Stauning. He was at various times administrator of a large poor-law district, member of the upper house, chief of the 'Invalid Court', justice minister and social minister. *Welfare for the Future* proposed a reorganization and reform of the entire social welfare system and became in 1929, when its author was social minister, the basis for major legislation known simply as 'The Social Reform'. Defending his proposals against alternatives from the Conservative Party, he attacked them because they built from the ground up, instead of on foundations which already existed. The Conservative proposal was a wide-ranging compulsory insurance law with regressive financing, somewhat on the order of the American Social Security Act. Steincke defended his own proposals by claiming they were simply administrative systematization.³⁴

It is really astonishing that no previous government has thought of taking advantage of the rare opportunity we have here in this country for creating a national insurance system without destructive fights, as we have here proposed. Simply by building the health insurance system further, by tying in old age pensions, and by balancing old age pensions with workmen's compensation, we have the whole thing; we have a system.³⁵

Of course Steincke's approach was partly tactical. He faced a permanent Conservative block in the upper house, and he was hoping for at least neutrality from the Left in the lower house. Nevertheless, his choice of arguments is significant.

Speeches on the hustings were, to be sure, stronger than those in the halls of the Rigsdag. Borbjerg and Stauning argued that social welfare legislation was a step on the road to socialism, but as with Steincke's speech introducing 'The Social Reform', these were simply introductory, formally requisite remarks. When the substance of particular laws was under discussion, tradition and continuity were emphasized.³⁶

In sum then, Danish politicians from left to right behaved by and large as though they believed that the voters would react positively to appeals to tradition, continuity and the past rather than to experimentation and the future: a Burkean, organic view of the course of history.

In debates on poverty in the United States from the 1890s to the 1930s, one finds the concept of social mobility at the center. When one tries to discuss the idea of social mobility as shown in Danish debates, one is forced

³⁴ *FT* 29/30, December 17, 1929, 3402-54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, January 21, 1930, 4121-13. Note that he uses 'battles' (kamp) as that which should be avoided.

³⁶ *Social-Demokraten*, June 14, 1927, pp. 1, 6-8.

to use negative evidence, which is precisely the point. Individual social mobility was not highly valued, and that fact is crucial in the debates on welfare legislation in Denmark. What is significant is not the question of whether many or only a few individuals did in fact move across class lines, but rather about ideas, myths, values. "Did people believe that one of society's or government's major duties was to establish and preserve an open system where people could work their way up? *Ought* people want to work their way up? Was it to society's advantage that people struggled upward, ever upward?"

Nowhere, either within or without the *Rigsdag*, was social mobility taken as a goal of social legislation. Even the ritual invocation of the phrase 'help-to-self-help', which might mean nearly anything, was never taken to mean that society should help people to the first rung on the ladder, after which they should be able to climb further under their own power.³⁷ People should be helped to support themselves and their dependents. In an emergency, for instance, a seamstress could be provided with a sewing machine. But there was no idea that, at least through social legislation, the poor should be helped to be anything other than folk-of-modest-circumstances (*smaakaarsfolk*).

In fact, social legislation of the 1890s took immobility for granted. The first subsidies to sickness-insurance societies were explicitly designed to aid 'poor workers, small holders, craftsmen, store keepers, low paid functionaries, and other men and women who are economically on a par with these groups'. Anyone in better circumstances already a member of the societies might remain, but there was no word, either in the law or the discussion of it, about what might happen if one moved from the class of poor to those designated 'non-poor' (*ikke-ubemidlede*).

The debates, in fact, give the distinct impression that being poor (*ubemidlede*) or 'low paid' or 'folk-of-modest-circumstances' was something a person *was*, like being short, or dark haired. It was not that a person had a low-paying job, it was that he *was* a low-paid worker. His 'position' (not his 'employment' or his 'job') was very nearly part of his name, a part of his very being.³⁸

³⁷ The charity organization societies in England and America had precisely the goal of encouraging the poor to lift themselves up by their bootstraps. See Robert H. Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in America* (New York, 1956), pp. 46-85; Kenneth L. Kusmer, 'The Functions of Organized Charity in the Progressive Era. Chicago as a Case Study', *Journal of American History*, LX (December 1973), 657-79; Kusmer emphasizes that charity workers sought a sense of community, but their implicit assumptions are readily apparent. Nathan I. Huggins, *Protestants Against Poverty. Boston's Charities, 1870-1900* (Westport, 1971); Robert Treat Paine, Jr., 'Address', delivered at the Charity Building, March 12, 1879.

³⁸ Kaare Svalastoga and Gösta Carsson, 'Scandinavia', in Margaret Scotford Archer and Salvador Ginner (eds.), *Contemporary Europe: Class, Status and Power* (London, 1971), p. 359, emphasize how important one's 'position' is to one's identity. Until 1974, the Copenhagen telephone book was arranged first by last name, then by occupation, then by first name.

This is expressed in the reports of two commissions in the 1880s about sickness-insurance societies. One was an official commission of the Interior Ministry, and was largely made up of men from the Right. The other was under the leadership of P. Knudsen, prominent Social Democrat and administrator of one of the largest sickness-insurance societies, which were not yet subsidized. Their conclusions, to put it mildly, were not in agreement. Both built their arguments on statistical information about workers' salaries. Both took it for granted, without feeling the need to argue the point, that their subject of study was folk-of-modest-circumstances, who would remain of modest circumstances. That either the whole level would rise, or that, for example, being an 'office worker or shop assistant' (one of the eight categories in the interior ministry's definition of folk-of-modest-means) was a temporary stage in life, was never considered.

If one reads corresponding investigations in the United States from the 1890s, it is clear that reform-minded men and women felt they had to argue over and over that poverty could be a lasting condition, rather than a temporary stage on the way up or down, or a weakness, or sickness. In both countries one finds the concept of 'worthy' and 'unworthy' poor, but in the United States the category of worthy before the 1930s was pretty much reserved for people who had suffered temporary misfortune. It could not, almost by definition, be a lasting condition. The Danish commissions took a static condition for granted.³⁹

Legislation since the unemployment insurance act of 1907 did contain provision for those who became 'non-poor', but the basic assumption right through the period was, as Hørup said just before Christmas, 1890, 'They have their needs, and we have our duties.' That 'they' could become 'we' was never the purpose of social legislation.

One can almost say that the very existence of old-age pensions for the poor without premiums is evidence for the assumption of immobility. If people were honest and industrious, had worked hard all their lives, why did they remain poor? Because they were 'people-of-modest-circumstances'. In addition, it is clear that there was no idea that poor people ought to have the backbone to work their way up. Scharling opposed the first old-age pension law because it did not require enough 'self-help' for the 'clever, understanding, economical and provident worker'. He here catalogues the attributes of the virtuous man, and ambition is not among

³⁹ Aside from the commission referred to in note 4, see: Indenrigsministeriet, *De Danske Sygekasser* (Copenhagen, 1887), and P. Knudsen, *Sygeforsikring og Alderdomsforsørgelse, afgiven af de paa de københavnske og frederiksbergske Sygekassers Fællesmøde den 29 de og 30 de August, 1883, nedsatte Udvalg, 1888*. The material on American attitudes is summarized in Daniel Levine, *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition* (Madison, 197J), pp. 129-36. Even the reformers regarded poverty as a mistake. However, they insisted the fault lay in a misconstrued society rather than individual weakness. They did not regard the permanent existence of poverty as natural or normal.

them. There was neither pressure from the well-off, nor guilt feeling among the poor, if they remained poor to the end of their days. A man had fulfilled his duties by supporting himself and his dependents, including insuring them against misfortune.⁴⁰

One of the consequences has been that social legislation has never had equality as one of its goals, and when more radical speakers denounce the welfare state for not keeping its promise, they are accusing it of breaking a promise it never made.⁴¹ The terms 'equality' and 'leveling' (udjævning) were simply not used. Neither word turns up in any of the debates on social welfare legislation in the Rigsdag, in the press, nor, where one might expect it, in election propaganda of the Social Democrats. And when Steincke proposed his 'Social Reform', in *Welfare for the Future*, he did not mention them. It was a 'social minimums policy' he favored, a safety net, not a leveling.⁴²

Absence of expectations of mobility are thus part of the reason why the levels of political conflict are kept low. Just the opposite has been argued for the American case: that high expectations of mobility muted political and economic conflict. Both conclusions can be accepted if one makes the level of frustrated expectations, not expectations themselves, the key index. Where levels of expectations are low, absence of mobility does not lead to frustration. Where levels of expectation are relatively high, and the perception (whether right or wrong) is that mobility can and is taking place, levels of frustration are also low. In both cases political conflict can be muted.

Another consequence has been that those who opposed social legislation never referred to the effect which such legislation might have on incentives. There were many who opposed social legislation because it was too expensive, and the journal *The Taxpayer (Skatteborgereri)* is an extreme example of this viewpoint. *The Taxpayer* argued at length that taxes were taking so much that there was no point in an individual trying to earn more money. But even *The Taxpayer* did not claim that the very process of people trying to become rich was to the benefit of society, or that the system ought to include rewards to tempt people to the struggle. This argument, practically a necessity for those who oppose welfare legislation in the United States, simply cannot be found, even in the most likely of places in

⁴⁰ This may be contrasted with attitudes still current in the United States. Susan Jacoby, 'Waiting for the End', *New York Times*, VI (March 31, 1974), 90, quotes the vice-president of a nursing home as saying, 'There is a feeling in this state that people who are old and poor have somehow mismanaged their affairs.'

⁴¹ Although Jørgen Dich, *Den Herskende Klasse* (Odense, 1973), pp. 203-31, argues in a controversial study, that since the Second World War substantial levelling has taken place. See my review of Dich's book in *The Journal of Social History*, September, 1974.

⁴² Steincke, *Fremtidens Forsørgelsesvesen*, 228-37. See election propaganda preserved in Arbejderbevaegelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv.

Denmark. Again, social mobility was not considered enough of a social value for social welfare legislation to consider it.

Traditionally, America has believed that one of the major institutions fostering social mobility was the common school.⁴³ A glance at Danish school history will serve to show that such was not the case in Denmark. On the contrary, the school system was designed so that the various groups in society would reproduce themselves in the next generation. What is even more striking is that when the Social Democrats proposed reform of the common schools, first by Nina Bang, wife of the outstanding left ideologist of the Social Democratic Party, and then by Borbjerg, they in no way challenged this aspect of the school system. Neither they nor any other party to the school debates between the wars mention the social effects of the schools.⁴⁴ Nor were the Folk Highschools in any way designed to encourage mobility.⁴⁵

On the other hand, if one did receive higher education, one was firmly in the upper layers of society, almost irrespective of income.⁴⁶ In fact the word 'educated' (uddannede) and the word 'bourgeois' (borgerskap) are frequently used as though they were synonyms. Perhaps this is one reason the 'student exam', the admission card to higher education and therefore high social status, plays such an important role in Danish life and Danish fiction.⁴⁷

In the United States, of course, the idea of social mobility and an open society has been used to oppose social welfare arrangements, since by

⁴³ For a suggestive analysis of the relationship between school and mobility in American ideology, see Ralph H. Turner, 'Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System', *American Sociological Review*, 25, (1960), 855-67. Lawrence A. Cremin shows how a utilitarian element became part of the school picture, in the spirit of Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard, in *American Education, the Colonial Experience, 1607-1783* (New York, 1970), 359-87. Recently, American sociologists, historians and polemicists have discovered that schools often function as a barrier rather than a ladder. Their anger over this discovery is further evidence that schools were supposed to further mobility. See Christopher Jenks (ed.), *Inequality, A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York, 1972), especially pp. 16-52 and 138-41; Colin Greer, *The Great School Legend: A Revisionist Interpretation of American Public Education* (New York, 1973); James S. Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, D.C., 1966).

⁴⁴ Willis Dixon, *Education in Denmark* (Copenhagen, 1958), pp. 133-73. Nina Bang, 'Fremlæggelsestale', *FT* 24/25, February 6, 1925, 4755-69. Forslag til Lov om Skolevæsnets Styrelse og Tilsyn, *Rigsdagstidende* 25/26, Tillæg A, 2687-726. Cf. Vagn Skovgaard-Petersen, *Dannelse og Demokrati: Fra Latin- til Almenskole* (Copenhagen, 1976) which gives some weight to class considerations, in the school reform of 1903.

⁴⁵ Roar Skovmand, *Folkehejskolen i Danmark, 1841-1892* (Copenhagen, 1944) makes clear that the højskol movement was designed to make better educated and more nationally conscious farmers, not to move people up the ladder.

⁴⁶ Povl Bagge, 'Akademikerne i dansk politik i det 19. århundrede, nogle synspunkter', *Historisk Tidsskrift* (Copenhagen), 12 Række, Bind IV, Hæfte 3, 1970, 423-74.

⁴⁷ For fiction, see for example Klaus Rifbjerg, *Den Kroniske Uskyld* (Copenhagen, 1958); Anders Bodeisen, *Ferie* (Copenhagen, 1970). See also Nils Neergaard, *Erindringer* (Copenhagen, 1935).

definition in an open society, the only poor are the unworthy poor, for whom very minimal institutions will suffice.⁴⁸ Danish social legislation, on the other hand, assumed a more or less stable society, of which social rank and differentiation were important parts.⁴⁹

In sum, Danish social legislation was to a high degree based on traditionalism: institutional traditions like sickness societies, but more important, ideological traditionalism, which posed no challenge to conceptions of the relationship between society and the individual, the class system and the like. One might say that social legislation was an attempt to adapt traditional institutions, within a traditional ideological framework, to a growing urban industrial society such that neither the institutions nor the ideology would be destroyed. Socialism, the Middle Way, as Marquis Childs has called the Swedish system, or a step toward socialism, as the Social Democratic leadership claimed, are not valid explanations for social welfare history in Denmark. Continuity is the decisive factor.

Like the United States, Denmark achieved democracy without a social revolution, nor, any more than the United States, did it have a significant socialist movement.⁵⁰ But one of the most influential explanations of the absence of socialism in the United States posits the absence of 'feudalism' as the explanation. One can explain the absence of socialism in Denmark precisely because pre-democratic institutions, like the sickness societies and the confidence in royal civil servants, survived.⁵¹

One might even propose that Danish welfare legislation is built on a view of both historical and social continuity and an evaluation of that continuity as an important, perhaps the most important, social value. The reasoning can be constructed as follows: (1) there exists an unbroken historical continuity; (2) there exists an unbroken social continuity, in the sense that society's different groups are bound together by mutual responsibility;⁵² (3) the historical continuity can only be maintained if the social continuity is maintained; (4) the best way to do so is through welfare legislation.

⁴⁸ For two clearly illustrative examples of many which could be cited, see: G. H. Hubbard, 'The Why of Poverty', *New Englander, L* (March 1889), 180-8; F. G. Peabody, 'How Should a City Care for Its Poor?', *Forum*, XIV (1892), 474-5.

⁴⁹ De Tocqueville wrote of American attitudes toward poverty that where social rank was eliminated 'the desire of acquiring the comforts of the world haunts the imagination of the poor, and the threat of losing them that of the rich', *Democracy in America* (ed. Phillips Bradley, New York, 1945), vol. II, p. 129.

⁵⁰ Despite Gustav Bang, there was virtually not a trace of socialism in the Social Democratic Party's new program in 1913, and there has not been since. See the party program in Arbejderbevægelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv. Oluf Bertolt, Ernst Christiansen and Poul Hansen, *En Bygning vi Rejser* (Copenhagen, 1954), pp. 344-52. Nils Finn Christiansen, 'Revisionismens betydning for det danske socialdemokratis idéudvikling fra 1890'erne til 1930'erne', Magisterafhandling, History, Copenhagen University, 1964, Unpublished.

⁵¹ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955).

⁵² Again, de Tocqueville contrasts America and at least France: 'Aristocracy links everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain and frees each link', *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 99.

Europeans are justly resentful when Americans—Frederick Jackson Turner is an outstanding example—write of “Europe” as a unit, and seem to ignore the differences between, say, England and Poland, Sweden and Spain. Yet to a certain degree, what these pages have proposed as significant differences between Denmark and the United States are differences between the United States and all of Western Europe. In a provocative article some years ago, Nathan Glazer proposed that one of the limiting factors on American social reform has been a lack of 'authority' in the United States when compared with many European countries, a point reinforced by this investigation of the Danish world view.⁵³ In many European countries, a degree of obligation was felt by the upper orders of society toward the lower orders. Many nations of Europe have made the transition from some form of 'status society' to some form of 'contract society', from rural to industrial in ways which mean that some remnants of the old survived into the new. As Louis Hartz hazarded many years ago, perhaps American society was less affected by the old than societies which had to play out the transition amid the institutions and on the very ground of the old. To an extent, the value system here described can be enlarged beyond the tiny kingdom of Denmark, to include other parts of Western Europe.

Yet it would be dangerous to go too far in that direction, to treat Denmark as an example of the differences between the 'old' world and the 'new'—themselves expressions implying a wealth of interpretations. One can, perhaps find similarities among Denmark and some other Scandinavian, or small northern European countries. Differences in pace and degree of industrialism, however, made the situation different in England, as did the relative strength of Manchester Liberalism. In Germany there was less devotion to a conflict-free society—a crucial element in the Danish case—and no triumph for democratic parliamentarism. What has been termed 'American Exceptionalism' can be better seen as a more universal exceptionalism. Each society—and in modern Western history that has pretty well meant each nation—has dealt with its problems in ways which were compatible with its own institutions and value system. The uses of comparative history are probably not those of discovering solutions which work in one country and ought to be translated to another. In such cases, like skin grafts from an incompatible donor, the rejection reaction would mean the withering of the graft. Solutions to problems—old age far from one's children, for example, or disabling illness for a breadwinner—will have to be found which are compatible with a society's own history and value system. The uses of comparative history are to illuminate what in fact those value systems are.

⁵³ Nathan Glazer, 'The Limits of Social Policy', *Commentary*, vol. 52, no. 3 (Sept. 1971), 51-8.