

13. The Danish Way: Freedom and Absolutism. Political Theory and Identity in the Danish State ca. 1784-1800.

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The period 1784-1800 was formative and crucial in Danish history. In 1784 the old power-holders were deposed in a peaceful coup d'état staged by Crown Prince Frederick, the later Frederick VI, who became virtual head of state, acting on behalf of his father, the mentally deranged King Christian VII. Those who took power in 1784 were in favour of a policy of progress and modernization of society. The agricultural reforms of the late 1780s are a striking example in that regard. Freedom of expression had been introduced in 1770, and although later limited, the legislation was, especially during the period 1784 to 1799, administered most liberally and the limits of expression were exceptionally wide. Still, Danish absolutism was nevertheless challenged, especially after the French Revolution in 1789 when a trenchant ideological, political and social alternative was formulated.⁶⁰⁸

In the period under consideration, Denmark was but part of a larger conglomerate state, comprising also Norway and the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, the latter of which was a member of the German Empire. Thus, in his capacity of Duke of Holstein, the King of Denmark was also a German prince. Furthermore, to this composite state belonged also some small trading colonies in India, Africa and the West Indies.⁶⁰⁹

Research

In the historiography, the political system of the period has traditionally been described as a classic example of enlightened absolutism at its best⁶¹⁰. The crucial feature of virtual freedom of the press has been emphasized and one historian has even characterized the prevailing political theory of the age as an "opinion-guided absolutism"⁶¹¹ in which the government supposedly listened to public opinion and ruled in

accordance with it, thus acquiring legitimacy. Yet, scholars have also stressed internal ideological and political tensions and inconsistencies within the political system⁶¹². Within the Danish conglomerate state tensions between different nationalities were beginning to grow during the second half of the 18th century. This was first and foremost the case with Danes and German, though not so much in the duchies as in Copenhagen where approximately one fifth of the inhabitants had German as their native language and where the royal court, the government, the civil service, the army, and the cultural and industrial sectors had tended to be dominated by foreigners, mostly Germans born outside the Danish realm. This was beginning to provoke frustration and resentment among the Danish-speaking population in Denmark, especially the middle class, and it contributed to the formation of a distinct and self-conscious Danish identity⁶¹³. In Norway, there was a growing resentment against the government in Copenhagen and many Norwegians had the feeling – which they openly expressed – that their country was being financially exploited and disadvantaged in comparison with the kingdom of Denmark⁶¹⁴. These cases of a growing awareness of national identity were hardly threatening the integrity of the conglomerate state and it is difficult to be certain how widespread they were, but it is clear that from now on the government had to take these factors into consideration.

As for Danish political theory, we may point to Øystein Sørensen's study of Jens Schielderup Sneedorff, in which he sees "freedom" and "absolutism" as two key concepts and traces their development in the political theory of the later political philosophers, Tyge Rothe, Andreas Schytte, Michael Gottlieb Birckner and Peter Collett.⁶¹⁵ This should then be seen as a way to reconcile the Danish system of absolutist government with the political and ideological challenge – some would say threat – from France after 1789.

Yet, "freedom" and "absolutism" seem mutually incompatible, in fact, complete contrasts. The question to be addressed here is therefore: how was it possible to combine concepts such as "freedom" and "absolutism" in the prevailing political theory of the age, and which context of identity was associated with that theory? My emphasis in this will be to trace cohesion.

Source material

My interest is in the public debate and its presentation of ideas of freedom and absolutism to a wider audience, not in the learned works of professional philosophers. I am focussing on major speeches in the vernacular at the university, in grammar schools and in various clubs and societies, where such orations often were delivered in connection with solemnities such as the king's birthday. Other materials include cantatas, occasional poems, articles from periodicals, and printed sermons. It is debatable whether this source material reflects public opinion or merely published opinion – opinion having its origin in the absolutist regime and serving as propaganda. A sharp distinction may be difficult. The grammar schools, the university and the churches where prominent speeches were delivered, poems recited, cantatas sung, and sermons given were certainly public and official institutions. And while the clubs, associations and periodicals were private, their members and subscribers were overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, civil servants.⁶¹⁶ Still, all this material was hardly engineered or controlled by the government. The limits of free expression were indeed wide, and all speeches, sermons, articles cantatas etc. were published and thus part of the public debate. The question raised here is how coherent this public debate was concerning freedom and absolutism, not whether it was accurate and true to the historical circumstances. The impact of those arguments on the general public is barely taken into consideration.

Danish absolutism

The Danish system of absolutism had been established in 1660 and received its constitutional foundation in the Royal Law of 1665. This was achieved only after protracted conflicts between the king and the aristocracy. All executive, legislative and judiciary powers were vested in the king, there were no assemblies of estates, no *parlements* or other institutions which had any say in political or fiscal matters.⁶¹⁷ The Danish nobility had no special rights or privileged access to public positions, even if it did possess privileges through the possession of large landed estates. However, these were privileges which any great landowner could enjoy regardless of whether or not he was a nobleman. Conversely, nobility was not worth much to a nobleman who did not own landed property.⁶¹⁸ Unlike in Prussia, for example, posts as army

officers were open to anyone talented, commoner or noble; there was no preferential treatment of noblemen and no maximum quota for commoners seeking the officer's profession⁶¹⁹. Thus, due to the circumstances under which Danish absolutism had been introduced more than 100 years before, during the period under consideration here, the system retained certain anti-aristocratic and egalitarian features which must be taken into consideration.

Freedom and absolutism in Denmark

As usual, the concept of freedom had more than one meaning. As the opposite of force or slavery, everyone spoke out in favour of freedom. The agricultural reforms that liberated peasants from subjection to their landlords were often pointed out as an example of the desirability of freedom. However, freedom could also mean licence, as when publicists talked about lawlessness, disorder, destruction and oppression. Especially after the deterioration of the French revolution, this kind of freedom was seen as the rationale for "rebellious spirit", regicide, wars and civil strife. What opinion-makers in Denmark favoured was another type of freedom, namely "civic freedom" (*borgerlig frihed*). By this they meant civil rights: freedom from feudal restraints, freedom of trade, rule of law, and, not least, freedom of expression. It was a generally recurrent theme that in Denmark, such civic freedom had already been introduced by a benevolent absolutist government. At the same time, it was emphasised that being a citizen enjoying such freedoms also meant that one in return had a responsibility towards society, country and king. It was not enough just to abide by the law, an active and positive commitment to the promotion of the general good was demanded.⁶²⁰

The absolutist government was generally praised for its policy of securing peace and neutrality so that trade and shipping could prosper and resources could be concentrated on reforms and social development for the general good. In comparison with less absolutist regimes, the Danish one was considered superior as there were no vested interests (nobility or assemblies of estates or *parlements*) which for purely selfish reasons might block the king's endeavours to promote the general good. It was better to be under the rule of one than under the rule of a hundred⁶²¹. The expressions in favour of absolutism as an ideal political system tended to be based on inductive inferences: the Danish



The assembly hall at the Gymnasium or Grammar School in the town of Odense. During the eighteenth century, the professors gave major speeches on the King's birthday to celebrate the monarch's policies. From Holger Dyrbye: *Hugo Matthiessens Odense* (Odense 1991) 95.

system of absolutism works well, consequently absolutism as such is a good political system. Comparisons with other absolutist regimes were also made. A grammar school professor in Odense, Christian Gotthold Seydlitz, suggested in a public speech at the birthday of King Christian VII in 1794 that France before 1789 had been characterized by "princely despotism" and "monarchical tyranny" which had now been replaced by "despotism of the mob" and "republican tyranny" which was not any better. Furthermore, in France, the civil order had been replaced by a "ghastly spirit of party". Freedom of religion in France had led to persecution of Christians, and freedom and equality in general had caused "the most terrible disasters."⁶²² And in his speech on the same occasion the following year, the professor remonstrated with those who considered Louis XVI "the most virtuous man in the world." Seydlitz could not endorse such a characterization: Louis XVI had among other things been a perjurer and had made other errors so serious that he could not rightly be called a virtuous man. That said, Seydlitz emphasized that fortunately, not all kings were like that,⁶²³ but

he was not led to any general reflections on absolutism as a political system.

Occasionally, however, other types of government were discussed in comparison with the Danish one. In a sermon in 1794, Peder Baagøe, a parson in Roskilde explained the impracticality and absurdity of democracy: the farmer would have to leave his plough, the citizen his trade, the learned his book, and the aristocrat his party and join together to discuss and vote on all public matters every time the need arose. He asked: "Into what confusion would public administration sink? What chaos would not be the result of so many different and conflicting views of which most were focussed on one's personal advantage and only a few on the general good"⁶²⁴.

Freedom and absolutism certainly existed side by side in the political theory of the age, but sometimes on uneasy terms. On the king's birthday in 1798, H.G. Clausen, a pastor, held the speech in a patriotic club in the city of Kalundborg. Here, he described freedom of expression as "humanity's most holy right". He argued in favour of free exchange of opinion, because it led to greater clarity of thought and approximation to the truth, while promoting tolerance of those with different opinions. Disagreement among thinking people was a healthy sign, he thought. However, it was a quite different matter if disagreement "led to a spirit of party, personal hate and animosity" and if the debate reflected the views of special interests and cliques instead of different objective approaches to the matter in hand.⁶²⁵ In other words, freedom of expression should be used to discuss how to achieve *the* common goal but not what the common goal should be, still less to set up different parties.

The Danish way

From this outline, the political theory of freedom and absolutism may seem flawed and ad hoc, if not opportunistic. It did, however, have more cohesion and power of conviction than may appear and this has to do with its importance for the issue of identity. I will refer to sermons by three pastors of the Lutheran state church, one conservative, one progressive and one moderate.

The conservative was Abraham Volchersen, pastor in Elsinore. Under the impression of the reign of terror in France, he condemned the



Portrait of the progressive parson Frederik Carl Gutfeld, who contributed to the journal *Minerva*.

French revolution and all its deeds vehemently and passionately. He spoke of the “damned teachings of freedom, equality and rights” which was “the stupidest, the cruellest rabble learning.” But pastor Volchersen also emphasized that no government on earth was more reluctant to impose taxes than the Danish one, no royal house did more to help the different estates, also the lower ones, than the Danish one, and he praised the king of Denmark for promoting trade and industry and for having given the peasantry its freedom.⁶²⁶

The progressive country parson, Frederik Carl Gutfeld, spoke of an unfortunate people – of course, the French – who thought that the way to freedom was paved with the dead bodies of their fellow citizens. In Denmark, however, abuse had been abolished, prejudices been wiped

out, and chains been broken without violence. Ignorance and suppression had vanished like fog before the rising sun. In fact, Gutfeld showed some understanding of why things had developed the way they had in France. This becomes clear from his attack on the Danish nobility. Addressing a fictive nobleman, he said: "you who in your dreams may have dreaded violent revolution because you felt yourself worthy of being the first victim; you who in secure and happy Denmark maybe spoke of events that alone could, that alone had to take place in a nation which, tired of centuries of abuse, threw off its yoke and crushed its suppressors."⁶²⁷ But though violent revolution might be understandable in France, in Denmark the situation was very different and such violent deeds were not necessary.

The Copenhagen pastor Lauritz Smith said in his Christmas sermon in 1792 that freedom and equality were the watchwords by which the spirit of discord and rebellion were nowadays being spread from one country to country. According to Smith, these expressions did not contain anything novel that the world had not formerly known. Smith found the concepts equivocal and said that they were used as "incendiaries ... which were supposed to start fires, raise false ideas and seduce men to ferocious frenzy and destructive excesses." Smith for his part preferred orderly freedom, not licentiousness or lawlessness, but rational or civic freedom (*fornuftig* or *borgerlig frihed*). This kind of freedom was achieved by mastering the heart, tearing oneself away from the passions and desires and following the commands and precepts of reason without distraction from the senses. In civic life, everyone was entitled unhindered to seek their own perfection and happiness as long as it did not hurt other people or society in general. This kind of freedom, pastor Smith emphasized, existed in Denmark.⁶²⁸

Despite their differences, all three pastors were, at least in principle, in agreement that the goals of the French revolution were good and desirable, but they all – each in his own way – disapproved the means. The way in which these goals were pursued in Denmark was much better, more peaceful and harmonious. It was this idea of an alternative way to a society characterized by measured and appropriate freedom, equality and human rights that kept the ideas of freedom and absolutism together in what was considered a coherent and convincing political theory that may be called the Danish way.⁶²⁹ In the language of the time, namely in an article from 1793, it was described as follows:

“freedom hand in hand with wisdom had already ascended the most absolute throne in Europe, namely that of fortunate Denmark. Here it is sitting besides the royal power which has benevolently lifted it up and together they are blessing the people.”⁶³⁰

Another and crucially important aspect of this notion of a Danish way was the endeavours of the government to avoid war. One of the most frequently recurring political themes in sermons, major speeches, cantatas, articles etc was the notion that the foreign policy of the Danish government was different than that of other governments.⁶³¹ It was reiterated again and again that the king of Denmark preferred to be a benevolent father of the country rather than a war hero. It was a point of honour for the king not to conquer foreign territories but to develop his country and to improve the lot of its inhabitants.⁶³²

In sum, the semi-popular materials considered in this paper presented a political theory of absolutism and freedom by a constructive consideration of each of the two components. The concept of freedom was defined in such a way that the more radical elements which would have been politically dangerous because incompatible with the Danish system of government were taken out. Instead the focus was on civic freedom understood as personal and judicial liberties, not least, freedom of speech. But nobody spoke about political freedom, the freedom of the people to participate in the political process. As for absolutism, the tendency was to conclude from the special case of how well this system of government was working in Denmark to its general desirability, a point supported by the one-sided identification of the alternative as “democracy” which, stereotypically could be rejected as dangerous anarchy.

The question of identity

The political theory behind the “Danish way” helped to build up the idea and ideal of a Danish identity characterised by external peace, domestic tranquillity and harmonious cooperation between the monarchical government and the people in order to promote the general good, to improve the welfare of the population and by peaceful means to achieve freedom, equality and human rights (“menneskerettigheder”). But what kind of identity was this? Not a national identity. On the contrary, the attitudes and values which constituted the Danish way

could be shared by the full variety of ethnic groups within the composite state, and to a significant degree this was the case. In the many and varied sources investigated here, we find expressions of the attitudes of the Danish way by Norwegians⁶³³, Holsteiners⁶³⁴, Icelanders⁶³⁵ and even a speech at the king's birthday delivered in a Jewish community in Schleswig⁶³⁶. The Danish way did not mean a common language, origin or culture and can thus not be characterized as a national identity. It was based on certain values which anyone within the territories of the Danish monarch could endorse, irrespective of language or culture. The Danish way is therefore best characterized as a *patriotic identity*⁶³⁷. Besides aiming at presenting the Danish system of absolutist government as a much better way of securing freedom than the means adopted in France after 1789, another function of the discourse of a Danish way was to seek a common patriotic identity for the different peoples and territories within the conglomerate state.

A still from the end of the film *Kongen bød* (The King Commanded; 1938) commemorating the freeing of the peasants in 1788. The shadow of the French Guillotine looms over the working peasant as an alternative to agricultural reform and the Danish Way. From Thorkild Kjærgaard: *Danmark og den franske revolution/Le Danemark et la revolution française*, (Copenhagen 1989) 14



In 1799, freedom of expression was strongly curbed. In 1801 and again from 1807, Denmark was caught up in the Napoleonic Wars with disastrous results: the bombing of Copenhagen and seizure of the navy in 1807 and the cession of Norway in 1814. The long peace that had preceded these events had been a key element in the notion of Danish way, and after 1801 and 1807 the notion seems to have remained so consolidated that it could still be used. The argument was that the country had undeservedly and involuntarily been involved in the war, and that a consideration of all the good that the king had done for his people previously was the right incentive to self-defence and to make the necessary sacrifices.⁶³⁸

After the disastrous Danish defeat in the war of 1864, Denmark lost the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein and became a nation state living in the shadow of the overwhelming German Empire. In this situation the Danish way was transformed to become part of the Danish national identity. Externally the emphasis was on neutrality and extreme reluctance to be involved in international political affairs but with strong interests in foreign trade. Internally, the foundation was consensus in the form of state-supervised cooperation. Thus, a political theory aimed at shaping a common identity in a multinational, multilingual, middle sized absolutist conglomerate state in response to revolution abroad and growing ethnic tensions at home eventually transformed itself into the national identity of a small democratic nation-state.