



**FRIENDS OF PEASANTS, KING AND DEMOCRACY: RHETORIC AND CONCEPTS
PUT TO USE BY PEASANT ASSOCIATION IN THE BATTLE FOR DANISH
CONSTITUTION OF 1849***

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Abstract: This article investigates ‘BondevennernesSelskab’ – a Danish peasant association – in the political and social conflicts following the wave of revolutions in Europe 1848. In the twilight of Danish absolutism, Denmark’s first modern political peasant movement came to play a significant part in the battle for the coming constitution. From a declared democratic position, the association orchestrated a remarkably well-organised election campaign signalling the dawn of a new political era and causing great commotion among established elites. Focusing on rhetorical patterns and conceptual usage by members of the peasant association, the article analyses how the association legitimised their claim for a democratic suffrage with reference to the absolute monarch.

Keywords: Democracy, conceptual history, associations, constitution, absolutism, 1848, emancipation, peasant politics, popular sovereignty.

**AMIGOS DOS CAMPONESES, REI E DEMOCRACIA: RETÓRICA E CONCEITOS
COLOCADOS POR UMA ASSOCIAÇÃO CAMPONESA NA BATALHA PELA
CONSTITUIÇÃO DINAMARQUESA DE 1849.**

Resumo: Este artigo investiga a ‘BondevennernesSelskab’ – uma associação de camponeses dinamarqueses – em conflitos políticos e sociais seguindo a onda das revoluções de 1848 na Europa. No crepúsculo do absolutismo dinamarquês, o primeiro movimento político moderno de camponeses da Dinamarca exerceu um papel significativo na batalha pela Constituição que viria. De uma posição declarada democrática, a associação orquestrou uma notável campanha eleitoral bem organizada assinalando o amanhecer de uma nova era política e causando grande comoção entre elites estabelecidas. Focando nos padrões retóricos e usos conceituais de membros da

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associação de camponeses, o artigo analisa como a associação legitimou seu clamor pelo sufrágio democrático com referência ao monarca absoluto.

Palavras-Chave: Democracia, história conceitual, associações, Constituição, absolutismo, 1848, emancipação, política camponesa, soberania popular.

Following the almost revolution of 1848 in Denmark, which led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, a new political player – an organized peasant movement – went right into the centre of the constitutional battle. The peasant association¹ came to represent the most progressive stand in the constitutional battle on Denmark's first national parliament, the constituent assembly. Here members of the association advocated a democratic suffrage and inclusion of the peasantry as legitimate members of the political sphere.

The peasant association was founded at a time when political associations were on the rise in Denmark. It was first of its kind in several senses. It was the first truly political Danish peasant association, it was the first Danish association with a clear organisation structure and it carried out an organised election campaign for the constituent assembly, also first of its kind. By analysing some rhetorical patterns in speeches held by members of the peasant association, this article argues that the association sought to legitimise the peasantry's entry as political player with a conceptual usage that connected the concepts of democracy and the people with the King. While calling for democratic reform, members of the peasant association connected the concept of democracy to the idea of a strong bond between the King and the people. In doing so, members of the peasant association used the absolutist King as a legitimizing figure for democracy.

The article touches upon a central part of the history of modern democracy. The conceptual usage of the peasant association was constitutive to how the 'new' idea *democracy* was to be understood in the broader public. Prior to 1848, the concept of democracy had primarily been an academic concept both in Denmark and in most of Europe. Following the French Revolution in the late 18th Century and the July revolution of 1830, the concept of democracy began to appear in Danish texts, though mainly in academic circles. In the 1840's the concept was every now and then used by members of the educated bourgeoisie of Copenhagen, but not until the spring of 1848 did it

¹ 'Bondevennernes Selskab' translates into the 'Society for Friends of the Peasants'. In this article I use the slightly inaccurate name 'peasant association'.

become a widely used concept. However, following the revolutionary events in Europe in early 1848, the concept of democracy gained political actuality in Denmark and came within a few months to be a widely contested concept used by all sides of the political spectrum.²The public debate in Denmark 1848-49 were dominated by war with Prussia and by a struggle for the constitution, which king Frederik VII promised in March 1848. The rhetorical patterns in speeches held by members of the peasant association in 1848-49 is in other words essential to our understanding of how democracy – one of today's most important political concepts – entered the Danish political vocabulary.

This article will open with a presentation of political developments leading up to the establishment of Denmark as a constitutional monarchy in June 1849. Hereafter it will touch upon the history of the peasant association, their claim to influence and their placement in political and social conflicts of the 1840's. Following a description of the conflict on representation, the main part of the analysis will be an investigation of rhetorical patterns in arguments of members of the peasant association. Here, the concept of democracy is examined in relation to the principle of popular sovereignty and the concepts of people and equality. Concluding, I touch upon possible strategic advantages the peasant association may have had in creating a connection between democracy and the preservation of a strong king.

Political developments in the wake of Constitutional Monarchy

In 1848 the Danish Kingdom underwent an almost-revolution, which resulted in the abolishment of Danish absolutism, a civil war over the German duchies, which eventually led to war with Prussia, and the founding of Denmark as a constitutional monarchy. The year of 1848 consequently marks a significant turning point in the history of the modern Danish state as well as the year 1849; the year of the first Danish constitution.

The tumultuous March-days culminated with a procession towards Christiansborg, residency of the King. That day, the King dismissed his ministry and ordered for a new ministry to be gathered

² The concept of democracy in Denmark has been the object of recent studies in Danish historical research. Jeppe Nevers, *Fra skældsord til slagord*, Odense Universitetsforlag, 2011, and Bertel Nygaard "Demokratibegrebets gennembrud i Danmark i 1848", *Historisk Tidsskrift*, Vol. 111, no. 1, København, pp. 37-73.



with the task of writing a new constitution, thereby abolishing absolutism in Denmark.³ In the following months the ministry wrote a draft for an electoral law that was submitted to the assemblies of the estates of the realm of Jutland and the islands.⁴ When the electoral law passed with a few minor recommended alterations, preparations were made for the first national election in the Danish kingdom.

Elections were held in October and later that month the constituent assembly. During the first months of its gathering, the debates on parliament mostly concerned military questions related to the war against Prussia. Only in early 1849 did debates on the coming constitution begin. The debates were concluded in May and the King ratified the constitution on July 5th 1849.

The peasant association in the 1840's

Political associations were a relatively new phenomenon in the middle of nineteenth century Denmark. Associations began to appear in the eighteenth century; however, the nineteenth century came to be the Danish golden age for associations.⁵ Following Frank Jørgensen, historian Niels Clemmensen describes three phases of the associations in Denmark from 1800-1850. The 1820's was a period for aesthetic associations, in the 1830's the general theme for associations was common enlightenment and during the 1840's associations were politicised. These transitions were of course fluid. It was primarily the middle classes and the academics that pushed the development of associational life and the enhancement of this new public sphere.⁶

The 1840's was a decade dominated by a number of social and political conflicts that influenced the constitutional battle in 1848-49. An ongoing social conflict dominated the countryside where tenant farmers and estate owners found themselves in an apparently deadlock concerning ownership-status of the land. Liberals primarily of Copenhagen positioned themselves more clearly against the absolutist system in the 1840's, a conflict that may be described as a

³ Claus Bjørn, *1848 Borgerkrig og revolution*, Nordisk Forlag A/S 1998, pp. 70-103.

⁴ The duchies of Schleswig and Holstein were kept out of the constitutional matter as a consequence of the civil war; hence no gathering of the assemblies of the estates took place in these regions.

As this article mainly focuses on the political language as it was used on the assemblies in the kingdom of Denmark 1848-49, and not the duchies, I will not treat the case of Schleswig and Holstein in any greater detail.

⁵ Niels Clemmensen, *Associationer og foreningsdannelse i Danmark 1780-1880*, Akademisk Forlag, Øvre Ervik 1987, p. 9.

⁶ Clemmensen (1987), p. 37.



struggle for power between the old and the new elite. Elites and bourgeois of the cities were on the other hand united in their dissociation from the small radical environment of Copenhagen and age-old conflicts between city and countryside proved to be alive and well in 1848-49.

Hence, the 1840's saw the rise of a number of political associations, those being Scandinavian associations hoping for a united Scandinavia, different kinds of bourgeois associations especially in relation to the revolutionary events in Europe 1848 where both radicals, moderates and conservatives in Copenhagen gathered and tried to influence political developments and elections for the constituent assembly, associations concerned with national matters, especially the Schleswig question and even an association of estate owners.

The peasant association was established in 1846 and quickly succeeded in constituting itself as the mouthpiece of the peasantry. The association was initially founded by liberals from Copenhagen with the declared purpose of uniting peasants for the cause of the social and economic interests of the peasantry. It was very well organised with divisions in many districts on Zealand and the Islands, whereas the associations never really gained ground in Jutland. The main explanation for this difference may be sought in the fact that tenant farming was common on Zealand and the islands in contrast to Jutland, which was dominated by freehold. Thus, the founding of the association was part of an ongoing social conflict between tenant farmers and estate owners, and estate owners were quick to organise themselves in an association as a countermove.

When bourgeois liberals had initiated the founding of the peasant association, many had hoped that the association would help gather support for the liberal constitutional cause among the peasantry. This hope was more than fulfilled. Following the abolishment of absolutism, the association turned political and plunged into the struggle for the constitution. At the elections for the constitutional assembly, the association organized an electoral campaign with the pronounced purpose of "the best possible democratic outcome of the coming elections".⁷

In taking up a declared democratic stance, the association went far beyond many of the initiators plans and a split occurred between bourgeois and peasant members. This split reflects a more general split among the former oppositional factions, as the bourgeois liberals, who had led the way in oppositional politics in the 1840's, no longer held the most progressive position, which was taken by radicals of Copenhagen and the peasant association. The election campaign proved to

⁷ "det bedst mulige udfald i demokratisk retning af de forestående valg". Bjørn, Claus: 1848. *Borgerkrig og revolution*, 1998, p. 220.



be very successful and secured about a third of the mandates for members of the peasant association including a large number of peasants.⁸

The politicisation of the association caused for great commotion among the former elites and the bourgeois of the cities. As the association and allies succeeded in organising a very efficient party-like structure within a few years and in gaining significant majority in the preliminary elections, moderates and conservatives feared the potential power of the peasantry, which was associated with tyranny of the masses. When debating the design of the constitution, arguments were especially heated when concerning representation were moderates and conservatives tried to reduce the influence of the peasantry. Hence, the struggle for the constitution was for the peasant association a battle for political equality for the peasantry, but also a struggle to gain legitimate political agency. The association was fighting both to gain this status for the peasantry in general and to establish itself as a legitimate representative for the peasants.

A matter of representation

As mentioned, the constituent assembly consisted of groups of roughly the same size. Apart from a left, which was largely dominated by members of the peasant association, the assembly counted a centre dominated by liberals, who represented the well-educated elites of the cities and a conservative right, counting estate owners and men of the abolished absolutist system. Of these, the peasant left was the most organized group and the conservative the least, though none of them was a party in our present understanding.⁹

The debates on the constitutional assembly were extensive. Not only were the different groups on parliament not organized, for which reason the number of speakers and the length of the speeches were considerable, but the amount of repetitions of already expressed opinions consistently appeared throughout the debates.

⁸ The actual percentage of the votes for members of the peasant association was higher and the association would have constituted the largest group on parliament had it not been for the supplementary mandates selected by the king and his ministry, which counted a fourth of the mandates available. Following the election the king and his ministry supplemented the assembly with moderates or conservatives belonging to the well educated classes in the cities and representatives of the old power elite, leaving the assembly with three almost equally large groups, namely spokesmen of the peasantry, moderates and conservatives. Claus Bjørn, *Kampen om Grundloven*, Fremad 1999, pp. 18-19.

⁹ Claus Bjørn, *Kampen om Grundloven*, Fremad 1999, p. 34.

The main point of discussion with regards to the constitution – and the focus of this article – was §§30-36; the paragraphs concerning representation: the right to vote, eligibility and the arrangement of the legislature (one or two chambers). In the early meetings of the assembly, a committee was selected with the task of discussing the draft for a constitution and presenting its own recommendations to the assembly. These recommendations would function as a starting point of discussion. The committee could not agree on the parts regarding suffrage and the arrangement of the diet, hence six different minorities of the committee presented their amendments and the debate over these came to be the most extensive debate regarding the constitution.

The original draft for a constitution suggested the legislature divided in two chambers, both elected by all men above the age of 30 with their own household, and who had not received unreturned poor-relief. Eligibility was suggested to be from age 25 for the first chamber and 40 for the second. The first of the six amendments was suggested by leading members of the peasant association, Balthazar Christensen, Asmund Glerup and J.R. Jacobsen. This amendment primarily turned against the division of the legislature, suggesting instead a representation of only one chamber to which all men at the age of 25 would be eligible. The debate concerning this amendment is the context in which the speeches analysed in this article, was held. Initially, the debate primarily concerned whether the legislature should consist of one or two chambers but quickly evolved into a debate on the extent of suffrage as well.

Towards the opinion of the peasant association both moderates and conservatives expressed a general concern for a possible oppression of different interests present in society, those being the interests of the estate owners, the clergy, the bourgeoisie, cities contra countryside and so forth – interests that would only account for minorities in comparison to the greater masses, the peasantry. Hence, the debates essentially questioned whether the legislature should be a representation of the people as it appeared in numbers or an equal representation of the different interests or groups present in society.

The liberals or moderates had been at the forefront of the political opposition in the 1840's, agitating for a liberal constitution. But with the European revolutions of 1848 and the following events in March 1848, they were suddenly in power, dominating the government. In this situation, liberals left the opposition to the peasant associations and radicals in Copenhagen. Leading up to the March events, liberals had successfully gained support from the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry by combining their demands for a liberal constitution with demands for democratic measures such

as a broader electoral body as well. On the constitutional assembly however, moderates – now in power – argued against too far reaching democratic measures, as they feared the ruling of the masses. This is a rough characterization though, as the centre united a number of different opinions. Moderates stressed the importance of equal representation of interests against the peasant association's claim for equal rights to vote.¹⁰

The conservative right was poorly organized and gathered a number of different stances as well. They shared a concern for too far-reaching democratic measures with the moderates, but in the case of the conservatives this concern was more directly agitated as a fear. They feared that far-reaching political privileges to the peasantry would result in tyranny of the masses, in their words often termed 'democracy'. Democracy was conceptually connected with revolution, revolt, plunder, communism and despotism.¹¹

Rhetorical patterns

The rhetoric of the peasant association on the constitutional assembly may generally be described as defensive. They were defending what they described as already gained rights of the people – that is, rights or privileges, which the people had obtained in the March days concluded with King Frederik VII's declaration that he now considered himself to be exempt from liability, that the ministers of the coming government would hold responsibility for state affairs and that Denmark with a new constitution would become a constitutional monarchy.

As the debate on political rights was opened with a discussion of the first amendment, I will start out by taking a closer look at this text. The primary message of the amendment was an opposition to the government's initial suggestion that future parliaments should be arranged in two chambers. Against this, Christensen, Gleerup and Jacobsen argued for a "true representation of the people". The division of the legislature in two chambers was described as artificial and out of bounds with the unity of the Danish people.¹² The writers concluded that since the suggested two-

¹⁰ Claus Bjørn, *Kampen om Grundloven*, Forlaget Fremad 1999, pp. 38-41.

¹¹ Examples of this type of rhetoric: Carl de Neergaard, GR, 26/3 1849, p. 2209; F.C. von Haven, GR, 27/3 1849, p. 2233; Caspar Paludan-Müller, GR, 11/4 1849, p. 2509.

¹² Balthazar Christensen, Asmund Gleerup and J.R. Jacobsen., GR, c. 0, p. 21.



chamber system could not be a “natural, simple and true expression of the people and the will of the people”, this system could not meet the demands of the people and the King.¹³

The reference to a bond between King and people recurred in many speeches given by members of the peasant association, defending what they described as ‘already gained rights’. One example is seen in a speech given by Frederik Frølund, who in defence of universal suffrage used a reference to the bond between King and people, as he stated that the coming constitution had been introduced by the King and his ministers in a way that would lead the people to expect universal suffrage to be adopted by the constituent assembly and ratified by the King.¹⁴ The argument was supplemented with a reference to the election law passed by the assembly of the estates of the realm, from which the constituent assembly had been elected. It was argued that since a certain part of the people had already gained and used the right to vote, the constitutional assembly could not draw back this privilege without violating the rights of the people.¹⁵

By referring to the unique bond between King and people, members of the peasant association implied that since the King had already granted the people certain rights, it would not only be a violation of the people, but a violation of the King’s will as well if the assembly agreed on a more restrictive constitution.¹⁶ This could be described as a rhetorical strategy as the peasant politicians hereby tried to establish themselves as talking from the standpoint of both the King and the people. The application of the King as a legitimising figure for their democratic politics was also used outside parliament. At the time of the constituent assembly an opposition towards universal suffrage was growing among the bourgeoisie of Copenhagen and the cities. This resulted in a number of petitions directed at the constituent assembly against universal suffrage. This movement caused a counter-movement in favour of universal suffrage. Danish historian Niels Neergaard cites 29 workers of Copenhagen, who in a petition to the assembly declared that they wished to ‘hold on to the suffrage and eligibility, which by our merciful King Frederik VII is granted with free absolute power.’¹⁷

¹³ ”det naturlige, simple of sande Udtryk af Folket og Folkeviljen”. Balthazar Christensen, Asmund Gleerup and J.R. Jacobsen, GR, c. 0, p. 21.

¹⁴ Frederik Frølund, GR, 13/3 1849, pp. 1883-84.

¹⁵ Examples of this type of arguing is seen in Frederik Jespersen, GR, 21/3 1849, p. 2065 and Nikolaj Andresen, GR, pp. 1815-16.

¹⁶ What made up a restrictive constitution depended on the context as this type of argument was used in differing situations, usually in relation to limits on suffrage or criteria for eligibility.

¹⁷ ’at holde fast paa den Valgret og Valgbarhed, der af vor allernaadigste Konge Frederik VII af fri Magtfuldkommenhed er givet.’ Cited in Neergaard 1892, p. 405.

The people

‘People’ was a core concept in the rhetoric of the peasant politicians and it was generally used in two linked, but slightly differing meanings. Firstly, it was used as a reference to the lower classes, the poor and the peasantry. As the lower classes, apart from the poorer in the cities, largely consisted of small holders and rural labourers, ‘the poor’ and ‘the peasantry’ were to some extent overlapping categories. An example of this type of usage is seen in a speech by Frederik Jespersen, in which he used the terms ‘the people’, ‘the poor’, ‘the peasantry’ and ‘the poor on the countryside and in the cities’ as synonyms.¹⁸ To him, the people clearly meant the peasantry and the lower classes.

Secondly, ‘people’ could be a reference to the totality of classes (or ‘stænder’/’Stände’), that is, an inclusive term. Examples of this can be observed in speeches by leading members of the association, Balthazar Christensen and A.T. Tscherning, arguing that the object of their politics was to secure a representation that reflected the people as a whole.¹⁹

Returning to the first amendment, Christensen, Glerup and Jacobsen also used the concept of people as an inclusive term, when arguing against a two-chamber system with the argument that the representation should form a unity as the people did in itself.²⁰ In this text, ‘people’ functioned as the core concept around which the argument was built. Their suggestion of a one-chamber parliament was supported by the claim that “Following the relatively equal and democratic development of the Danish people, the state and the rule of the state should find its fundamental support in the body of the people or the peasantry.”²¹ Here, ‘the people’ united the different classes. The reference to a “body of the people” was, however, a reference to the peasantry, whereby the amendment signalled the significance of the peasantry, hereby assigning the peasantry political agency.

¹⁸ Frederik Jespersen, GR, 21/3 1849, pp. 2062-68.

¹⁹ Balthazar Christensen, GR, 9/3 1849, pp. 1811-14; Anton Frederik Tscherning, GR, 13/3 1849, pp. 1906-08. A similar view was expressed by Nikolai Andresen, GR, 9/3 1849, p. 1816.

²⁰ Balthazar Christensen, AsmundGlerup and J.R. Jacobsen, GR, c. 0, p. 21.

²¹ ”Efter det danske Folks forholdsvise, temmelig ligelige og gjennemgaaende demokratiske Udvikling maa Staten og Statsstyrelsen dog væsentlig støtte sig til Folkets Masse eller Almuen.” Balthazar Christensen, AsmundGlerup and J.R. Jacobsen., GR, c. 0, p. 21.

Popular sovereignty and democracy

When Christensen, Gleerup and Jacobsen argued that the state should find its basic support in the people, or as they specifically stated “the body of the people”, they were expressing a version of the principle of popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty or sovereignty of the people is the principle that all political power stems from the people, and that a rule of state is only legitimate if the people have bestowed its sovereignty to the ruler.²² Especially influential as it was developed in the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,²³ the principle of popular sovereignty has had widespread influence in the history of modern states as it was taken up by the revolutionaries during the French Revolution.²⁴

In the amendment, Christensen, Gleerup and Jacobsen explicitly stated the desirability and necessity of a new state, legitimized by the consent of its people. The amendment was, however, influenced by this principle on a more substantial level as well, as the authors repeatedly referred to the people as the bearer of political authority. In their words, the constitution should secure a “steady and equal”, but at the same time “progressive” development of “the people”. This could only be achieved if the constitution would be accepted by the “people” and if the constitution in form and matter expressed the true “reason and will of the people.”²⁵ Hence, with this, they established themselves as speaking on behalf of the people – and it was with this move that their own politics were legitimized.

This characterization generally applies to the speeches given by peasant politicians on the assemblies of 1848 and 1849. Frequent references to ‘the people’ gave them a platform from which

²² Mogens Herman Hansen, *Demokrati som styreform og som ideologi*, Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2010, pp. 170-173.

²³ In *The Social Contract* Rousseau presented his idea that the people was sovereign and that this power was inalienable and indivisible. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1762, Translated 1782 by G. D. H. Cole.

²⁴ The French Constitution of 1793, article 25: “La souveraineté reside dans le peuple. Elle est une Indivisible, imprescriptible et inalienable.” Quoted in Mogens Herman Hansen, *Demokrati som styreform og som ideologi*, Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2010, p. 178.

²⁵ “Med hensyn til vort Fædrelands indre og ydre Stilling maa vi formene, at en jevn og ligelig, men ogsaa kraftig fremadskridende Udvikling af Folket og det politiske Folkeliv betinger vor Fremtid, og vi troe, at vor ny Statsforfatning kun da vil kunne sikre os en saadan Udvikling, naar den er og af Folket i det Hele anerkjendes at være bygget paa en Repræsentation, der i Form og Indhold er et tro Udtryk af den sande Folkefornuft og Folkevillie til enhver givet Tidsperiode.” Balthazar Christensen, Asmund Gleerup and J.R. Jacobsen., GR, c. 0, p. 21.

they could articulate their opinions as well as confirming ‘the people’ as the source of political power. An example is seen in a speech given by A.F.Tscherning, former minister of war in the March Ministry and from November royally selected member²⁶ of the constitutional assembly, who on March 13th 1849 stated:

The honoured member [C.G.N. David] said, and I completely agree with this opinion, that you cannot jump in our development, and he said it would be an immense jump if we went from the complete absolutism to complete democratic freedom, but while I share this view, I refuse that the jump would be as big as it appears to be to him; an absolutism was an absolutism emanated from a battle with classes and privileges, it was a levelling absolutism that prepared the democracy, and whereof is it that we are all as democratic as we are? For in reality there is not one aristocrat among us – it is because the absolutism stood so tall above us that we were all levelled by it; and why is it that the king has to obtain his power, his full power in the depths of the people? – It is exactly because, while we have suffered, suffered deeply during this condition, we have gained a closeness between the king and the people, which, and only this, could be used.²⁷

This speech was a direct response to one of the leading figures on the conservative side of the assembly, Professor C.G.N. David, who prior to Tscherning had argued against universal suffrage. David had argued that turning towards history, it was evident that universal suffrage always resulted in an overthrow of the existing – that the people was not capable of using this power in a restrained manner and that universal suffrage certainly would mean the end of security and liberty. Using the development of history as an argument, he stated that no existing state had succeeded in jumping from the absolute sovereignty to a people’s representation in its most extreme form. If one wanted to secure the influence of the people, one had to walk forward with small, steady steps.²⁸ In response, Tscherning stated that he was not advocating universal suffrage; he was only defending the suffrage that was suggested in the original draft for the constitution. The quoted is part of this defence.

²⁶ As mentioned, the king and his ministry obtained right to select one quarter of the members. When Tscherning along with the other ministers of the March Ministry resigned in November 1848, he was supplemented to the constitutional assembly.

²⁷”Det ærede Medlem sagde, og det er en Mening, jeg atter fuldkommen deler med ham, at man ikke maa gjøre Spring i vor Udvikling, og han sagde, de vilde være et uhyre Spring, hvis vi fra den fuldstændigste Absolutisme gik over til den fuldstændigste, demokratiske Frihed; men, medens jeg deler denne Anskuelse, nægter jeg, at Springer er saa stort, som det forekommer ham; en Absolutisme var en Absolutisme, udgaet af en Kamp med Classer og Privilegier, det var en nivellerende Absolutisme, der forberedede Demokratiet, og hvoraf kommer det, at vi alle ere saa demokratiske som vi ere? Thi i Virkeligheden findes der ikke én Aristokrat iblandt os, - det er fordi Absolutismen stod nu saa høit over os, at vi Alle bleve nivellerede af den; og hvorfor er det, at Kongen maa hente sin Magt, sin fulde Magt i Folkets Dybde? – det er netop, fordi, mens vi have lidt, lidt dybt under denne Tilstand, have vi vundet en Nærhed mellem Kongen og Folket, der kan, og den ene kan benyttes.” A.F. Tscherning, GR, 13/3 1849, pp. 1907-08.

²⁸ C.G.N. David, GR, 13/3 1849, pp. 1903-05.



Tscherning's argument unfolds as a philosophy of history, where the present stage of society – the democratic – is presented as successor to a less developed stage: absolutism. Though described in negative terms, Tscherning emphasized that it was exactly the harshness of absolutism that prepared the democracy. His point being, that while his opponent, David, considered a democratic constitution to be a too drastic and dangerous leap forward, it was only a natural step in the development, as democracy was already there, in the equality among the people.

The principle of popular sovereignty is essential to Tscherning's argument. As a consequence of absolutism, the people had been levelled, Tscherning argued. As there was no longer inequality, it followed that there was no aristocracy on which the King would be able to support his power. Hence, the King would now have to obtain his power in the depths of the people. The beauty of this was, according to Tscherning, the intimacy gained between the King and the people, the exact relationship that members of the peasant association were referring to again and again. This relationship stood in contrast to the past – before absolutism had succeeded in levelling the citizens – when there were still aristocrats and when the majority of the people did not share intimacy with its King. Thus, when speaking of closeness between king and people – even though using 'people' in its inclusive meaning – the significant change was of course that the great mass of people from the lower classes now had the same claim to power as the upper classes.

Tscherning termed this step in the country's development 'democratic' – the stage in which equality reigned. To be democratic meant to be equal, though Tscherning did not use the term 'equality'. When Tscherning used the term 'democratic' in this speech, it meant equality among the citizens. In this line of thought, democracy was a prerequisite for popular sovereignty and a prerequisite for the close relationship between the King and the people as well.

To sum up, Tscherning linked the concept of democracy with equality and essentially with the concept of people as an inclusive term. Democracy was both the name of the stage of society, characterized by the equality among its people, and the name for the appropriate form of government made possible by the democratic equality, which required the future rule to be in accordance with the principle of popular sovereignty. Furthermore, the concept of democracy was placed opposite to the concepts of absolutism and aristocracy – the existence of democracy foreclosed the existence of aristocrats, and democracy and absolutism were presented as two essentially different forms of government.



With his argument Tscherning tried to twist David's description of democratic measures, related to revolution, revolt and anarchy, into a uniting, positive term, usable in his rhetoric for a constitution with far reaching political rights to the peasantry. Furthermore, he placed the concept of democracy in history. He used 'democracy' as a concept through which he could conceive history and use the history politically. The concept was thus embedded in a certain perception of history.

That this temporalization of the concept was an important part of the battle for the constitution is evident, as Tscherning's opponent, David, tried to perform the same maneuver only the other way around. The battle for the constitution became a battle over history as the opponents fought with their version of history on their side. And a crucial part of this battle was the battle for and with the concept of democracy.

A similar usage of historical argumentation is present in the aforementioned speech by Jespersen. In this, he supported his call for universal suffrage with a description of how Danish kings traditionally had constituted their power: "Christian the Fifth wanted to support the royal power on counts and barons; later kings supported it on standing armies, the latest kings on a well-instructed bureaucracy; but Frederik the Seventh shall not fail in supporting it on the entire people."²⁹ With this, Jespersen placed popular sovereignty in history, his argument being that the consent of the people could only truly be achieved via universal suffrage. Similar to Tscherning, he supported the argument – that the people was bearer of political power and that the king would have to legitimize his reign with the consent of the people – by placing the principle of popular sovereignty in history, as the culmination of the preceding regimes. Popular sovereignty was the present.

Returning to the amendment by Christensen, Glerup and Jacobsen, the fundament of argumentation was the same as Tscherning's - the idea that the democratic development leading up to the present demanded the coming constitution to be based on the principle of popular sovereignty, and that these circumstances originated in the bond between the king and the people. As in Tscherning's speech, the equality among the people constituted the democratic development.

Summing up, the concept of democracy was essentially connected to equality and the people in the rhetoric of the peasant association. 'The people' was used in a way that underlined the

²⁹ "Christian den Femte vilde støtte Kongemagten paa Grever og Baroner; de senere Konger støttede den paa staaende Hære; de sidste Konger endelig paa et velinstrueret Bureaokrati; men Frederik den Syvende vil ikke feile ved at støtte den paa det hele Folk." Frederik Jespersen, GR, 21/3 1849, p. 2064.

equality of all included in this category, and the existence of an equal people was termed democracy. The equality of the people – or the democracy – was caused and preserved by the bond between King and people, which on its end was intertwined with the principle of popular sovereignty. In this rhetoric, democracy was used to name a tendency; it was the name of an era characterized by equality. But democratic was something one could be as well.

We are all democrats

Taking another look at Tscherning's speech: When Tscherning claimed that "we are all" democrats, he essentially implied that "we" are all equal. In other words, we are all equally part of the people, from which all political power stems, hence we all have equal claim to political privileges. Who he was referring to with 'we' was not explicitly stated, but as the claim was directed against the former speaker, David, the 'we' seems to be referring to David and Tscherning himself; the 'we are *all*' expands the 'we' to all present in the room, including all sides of the assembly, which figuratively was a representation of the people – the people being the citizens, who had the right to vote at the time.

When members of the peasant association were using the term 'people' in the inclusive meaning of the term, as mentioned above, they were not only implying that the lower classes and the peasantry was an essential part of the basic political subject of the time – hereby giving these classes legitimate political subjectivity – they were also insinuating that the upper classes belonged to the people as well and that on equal terms with the lower classes. Their usage of the term 'people' was therefore constitutive for the ideology expressed in their rhetoric. In the logic of this line of thought, the usage of 'people' as an inclusive term was the natural consequence of the democratic development they were referring to.

Considering the relative radical claims that we are all equal, Tscherning was rather moderate when turning towards the reality of politics. The same goes for Christensen, who, as Tscherning, was a leading figure of the peasant association on parliament. Both Tscherning and Christensen stated that they were not arguing for universal suffrage, but that they considered the suffrage suggested in the government's draft to be sufficient. Christensen even expressed himself in a way



that could be read as if he actually found the suffrage to be too broad.³⁰ When speaking of the representation, he noted that he considered it to be the obligation of every citizen to contribute to the steady and peaceful transition the country was going through – even if it meant that the people's demands were not fully met.³¹ This characterization does not apply to all members of the peasant association. Mentioned in this article are Jespersen and Frølund, who both advocated universal suffrage. Contrasting Christensen, Jespersen expressed that in case the outcome of the assembly would not result in a constitution that met the demands of the King and the people, he hoped that King and people would take control, reject the suggested constitution and organise a new election for a new constituent assembly – concluding that, in that case, only true democrats would stand a chance of getting re-elected.³²

Concluding remarks

Despite the fact that the peasant politicians were the most progressive on parliament, enthusiastic about democracy and a far-reaching democratic constitution, they were mainly referring to the king and his authority as the head of state. The king was referred to and described as the one obtaining his power in the depths of the people, he – and not the government or the parliament – was the one who should now support his power on the people. One could wonder why members of the peasant association combined their call for democracy with a preservation of the monarchy – why were they not republican? As evident in the French case of 1848, a preservation of the monarchy was not necessarily part of a democratic program.³³

The explanation should, in my opinion, be sought in the ideology of the peasant politicians. The line of thought described in this article was essentially connected to their aim of establishing their own position as a political subject. Hence, having a King as head of state became a necessity to the democracy, the peasant politicians were speaking of, as the democracy and the bond between King and people were mutually dependent on each other. Therefore, the people's – or the peasant

³⁰ Balthazar Christensen, GR, 9/3 1849, p. 1812.

³¹ Balthazar Christensen, GR, 9/3 1849, p. 1812.

³² Frederik Jespersen, GR, 21/3 1849, p. 2066.

³³ Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Dieter Langewiesche, "The European Revolution of 1848", in Dieter Dowe et al, *Europe in 1848. Revolution and Reform*, Berghahn Books 2001, p. 4.



politicians' – status as political subject were dependent on the existence of a King. Without the King, there would be no democracy – no equality among the people, as the King's status as being alone privileged, positioned the people as a whole opposite to him. Before the King all were equal. Thus, it was not only the King, whose authority was dependent on the people's consent to his rule – the people as a political subject and the peasant politicians as legitimate representatives of the people, here in the meaning of the peasantry, were dependent on the existence of the King as head of state as well.

Interestingly, the usage of the King as a legitimizing figure might also indicate that 'people', when standing alone, was not a sufficient legitimizing term. This could indicate that the principle of popular sovereignty not only was something, which members of the peasant association were referring to. It was a principle they were only in the process of establishing; that one could in fact not count on the rule of state to be based on the principle of popular sovereignty, at least not in the understanding of the people, which the peasant association ascribed to.

The reference to the relation between King and people was probably used as a rhetorical strategy, which the discrepancy between the rhetoric of Tscherning and Christensen and their actions, as mentioned above, could indicate. One can only speculate on the degree of intentionality in the rhetorical patterns, but it was undoubtedly usable for the peasant association to refer to this idea of a historically generated relationship between the King and the people. In being all equal before the King, they could claim equal right to take part in the political for the peasants.

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