

Cooperation and Democracy in Denmark*

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THE world looks with amazement upon the progress Denmark has made towards attaining Economic Democracy. Students come from all parts of the world to marvel and learn what secrets lie behind the efficiency and success of her cultural and economic undertakings.

In agriculture particularly has cooperative democracy been achieved. The Danish farmer is above all a thorough cooperator. He functions in harmony with other economic units more successfully than do agricultural workers in any other part of the world. He is linked in a net-work of cooperative organizations. It has been truly said of Denmark that "the threads by which a modern agricultural undertaking is linked economically with the world around are almost all spun by a cooperative organization".

The store from which the farmer buys his goods, the credit association from which he borrows his money, the organizations from which he purchases his seed, fodder, fertilizer and cement, the company from which his electricity is supplied—all are cooperative associations. Likewise, when he wants to sell his produce, he is serviced by various cooperative produce exchange associations. He deposits his savings in a cooperative bank. Even his farm education is made available through cooperative agencies. Information on breeding and well-bred stock is offered by cooperative breeding associations, and he has at his command the most up-to-date theories on agriculture, through consultants appointed by the agricultural control unions.

This cooperative work and control is the factor which gives to the produce from many small farms a uniformity and stability of quality which make it so desirable and well fitted to secure a place in the open world market.

Perhaps the greatest satisfaction to be derived from the success of this cooperative movement lies in the fact that no paternalistic ruler was instrumental in bringing it about. Farmers, teachers and artisans have been the leaders in both local and national associations. The leaders grew with the movement. It has paid so well and worked so smoothly that we find here a country, not only of contented cows, but of contented men and women as well—which is equally important!

Agriculture has not been the only occupation to adopt the system. In Copenhagen, the Danish capital, we also find the movement strong. There are cooperative building associations and many consumer clubs.

*As we go to press, we learn of Denmark's invasion. May God protect her!

The student will naturally inquire into the inception of this movement.

Let us go back to the early part of the nineteenth century. What do we find? A nation almost in ruins from the effects of the Napoleonic wars, in which she had become involved with England, Russia, Sweden and Prussia. She had lost Norway to Sweden and Helgoland to England. And she was ruined economically as well as politically. The peasants were poverty-stricken, and oppressed by the unmerciful landlords. Under such conditions the people became morose, sullen and suspicious, and hardly capable of associated enterprise. There was no such thing as getting together for cultural purposes. In short, "association in equality" did not exist. So when we now find these people so progressive, cheerful, scientifically-minded and resourceful, we ask: What are the causes of such a remarkable change in the make-up of this people?

Goethe said, "Character makes Character". This, I think, must have had much to do with the change.

A number of great-hearted men arose to inspire their fellowmen by their teachings and their lives. The teachings of these men were such that their precepts were instilled into the life of the whole nation. The results of their work have proven the truth of the epigram, "Educational bonds make the strongest ties".

In 1783 a man was born who was destined for a great work. This man was N. G. Grundtvig, liberal theologian, poet, philosopher and educational reformer. In 1832 he declared his ambition of establishing schools in all parts of Denmark, accessible to all men and women, where they might become better acquainted with life in general and with themselves in particular; where they might receive guidance in civic affairs and in their social relations. He had studied the old Norse cultures and had become familiar with such educational reformers as Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel, and was greatly influenced by their emphasis on the participation of the individual in his education. In Grundtvig's proposed schools, personal growth was to be stimulated. He envisioned a new social life born in freedom, and a new nation brought forth from a new education.

Grundtvig began his work with a series of outdoor meetings, the first being held on Hymelberget, the highest hill in Denmark, with beautiful surroundings. These meetings were arranged somewhat on the order of the old Greek festivities.

The first school was established in 1844. It failed, but seven years later another school was opened which proved successful. However, it was not until after 1864 that the movement took on a definite form. By 1885 a hundred of these Folk Schools were spread throughout Denmark.

The immediate effect of these schools (which we

might say were the birthplaces of modern adult education) was the establishment of a vast number of meeting houses, or community centers, throughout the land. These might be termed the continuation schools, where leaders or teachers usually led the discussions.

Grundtvig conceived of each nation as having a Spirit of its own which expressed itself in the life and ideals of the people. According to this view, it was necessary that much of education be of a historical nature if the students were to better understand themselves as a people. Before Grundtvig's time, art and science were available only to the small so-called cultured class. But Grundtvig wished these higher pursuits to reach all his countrymen. He sought to use his poetic gifts to create art, not only for the few who had esthetic tastes, but for all the people, high-born and lowly, rich and poor. Much of his poetry has been put to music. A good deal of modern Danish culture can be attributed to this great man.

One of Grundtvig's chief educational aims was to reach the soul of the student, to teach him that he can be noble in mind even though he may be engaged in such a lowly pursuit as milking cows or cleaning stables.

At the present time the Folk Schools serve as a constructive and uplifting element in the life of the Danish people. The schools are in reality small communities. The larger buildings serve as lecture halls, gymnasium and dormitory. These are surrounded by a dozen or so cottages for the teachers, usually in a beautiful setting.

The schools are privately owned. The state gives aid either by grants toward teacher's salaries, or by subsidizing needy students without attempts at political control.

The accomplishments of these schools are distinctly related to the intensive development of farmers' cooperatives. It is here that men learn to trust one another. In the cooperative enterprises that trust is translated into terms of associated credit.

The Folk Schools gave the people a new vision, a new mental outlook on the world. In the students a yearning for knowledge was aroused with the added desire to apply their learning, to put it into practice. With the culture and faith imparted by this education, the young men and women have saved not only agriculture but the whole nation. As the feeding upon knowledge begets hunger for more knowledge, and as with the increasing complexities that arise with an advancing civilization new problems are to be met, we find this alert people grappling with bigger and more fundamental problems.

In 1886, Henry George—who had been making an exhaustive study of world conditions, and who only a few years previously had written "Progress and Poverty" which was gaining world attention—was lecturing in England. Jakob Lange, a botany teacher in one of the

Danish agricultural schools at that time, who at an earlier time had attended Oxford, went to England to meet George, and to better acquaint himself with his theories. He was deeply impressed, and two years later he wrote his first article on George's teachings. It appeared in *Hojskole Bladet*, the journal read by practically all Folk School students and teachers. This article, entitled "Freedom and Equality", brought forth much discussion, which culminated in the founding of the first Henry George Society in Denmark, in 1889. This group edited their own publication, and flourished for a while, but expired in 1894. However, the seed thus sown seems to have been re-germinating, for new shoots sprang forth in 1902, when the Henry George Society which now flourishes all over Denmark came into being.

I will not now endeavor to give a history of the accomplishments of this movement. There is an excellent work on the subject by Signe Bjorner, entitled "The Growth of World Thought among our People". I hope that this valuable work will some day be translated into English. Suffice it to say for the present that the Georgeist philosophy is now taught almost universally in the Folk Schools; that Henry George's picture hangs on the walls of most of the small farmers' homes; that there is no section of the country that has not been affected by the many efficient campaigns which the leaders of this movement have waged for true economic emancipation. One of the outgrowths of the Georgist movement has been the organization *Retsforbundet* (The Society for Social Justice), the aim of which is to bring about "The State of Social Justice".

The results of the movement can best be seen in the many legislative reforms, conforming to Henry George's ideas, which have been made during the past twenty-five years. The first step was the revaluation of land separate from improvements. Another step was the granting of home rule to communities for taxation purposes. As a result, many communities have decreased the improvement tax and increased the land value tax. While we in America are faced with the growing problem of farm tenancy, in Denmark 95 per cent of the farmers own and operate their own farms.

In recent years the Georgeist groups have felt themselves strong enough to enter politics with a party of their own, and now have four members in the *Rigsdag*.

So the result of a liberal education which never ceases with age, and which reaches the hearts of a whole people, is the nation of which Frederic C. Howe spoke when he said: "Denmark is a State that is conscientiously planned. It is an exhibit of agricultural efficiency. In no country in Europe is education and culture so widely diffused. In no country is landlordism so nearly extinguished, and in no State in Europe has Economic Democracy evolved with so much intelligence as in Denmark."