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Reform and Revolution

The French Revolution and the Case of Denmark

Henrik Horstbøll and Uffe Østergård

1789

On 31 July 1789 that section of the Danish population which read newspapers learnt of the storming of the Bastille – an event which had occurred on 14 July. The post took two to three weeks to reach Copenhagen from Paris. Accordingly, the readers of *Kjøbenhavns Post-Tidender* or *Berlingske Tidende* who anxiously waited for the reports in the Monday edition to be continued in the Friday edition sometimes found that the news which concerned them on Monday had been overtaken by quite different events on Friday. This time-lag created a fertile soil for word-of-mouth rumours and for gentlemen in clubs and inns offering “it-is-quite-certain-that” explanations to anyone who would listen. Today we can only guess at the extent to which this occurred. However, looking back with only the sober written word to guide us, we can say that the level of information about the French Revolution in Denmark was quite high. He who wanted information on the revolution was largely able to obtain it. The freedom of the press introduced in Denmark between 1770 and 1773 was the general reason for this state of affairs, and the existence of the monthly periodical *Minerva* was the particular reason.

Minerva became the forum where intellectuals, the broad reading public and the political authorities met during the French Revolution. The environment from which the periodical sprang was the fashionable *Drejers Klub* (Drejer’s Club) or *Klubben af November 1775* (The Club of November 1775) to which its editors, Knud Lyhne Rahbek and Cristian Pram, belonged. They edited the periodical jointly until 1789, and Pram was then the sole editor during the early stages of the revolution until the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793. During the revulsion of feeling prompted by this event he handed over the editorship to Rahbek. *Minerva* was dedicated to “Truth, Humanity and the Fatherland”, and contained

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a regular article headed "History". It was here that Pram, and later Jens Kragh Høst, reported and commented on events which had occurred on the international stage. Excerpts from constitutional debates and from the constitutions adopted in France were printed, and excerpts from the most important speeches, including those of Robespierre, were translated into Danish.

In December 1789 *Minerva* contained an article called "Thoughts about the current times" (*Tanker over Tidsløbet*) in which Pram asked "Is then a revolution possible in Denmark? Is it even imminent?". He answered his own question in reassuring terms.

Our fatherland is numbered among those few happy states whose citizens have almost never spilled each other's blood . . . Such a love of civic peace cannot possibly be fortuitous; it must arise out of the nation's character. And what is there to suggest that this character should have changed in our own times?

However, matters were different in states

where justice is neglected, protracted and corrupt; where courts are the object of public contempt; where the subject enjoys no security; where the peasant is abandoned by the young men he needs to work the plough and is weighed down by a heavy burden of taxes and dues; where the lack of competence and integrity among the servants of the state has caused the public finances to fall into complete disorder; where economic activity is limited and there is a shortage of the most necessary commodities. In such cases, the state is falling into decay, disturbances are possible and wisdom is required.¹

Pram's reassuring diagnosis naturally contained an implicit warning that *if* press freedom were restricted, *if* the independence of the courts, the personal security of the citizen and the legislative programme of economic reform initiated the previous year with the great agricultural reforms were tampered with, *if* the existing trends were reversed, *then* matters might take a different turn in Denmark.

Nonetheless, this was still no more than a warning. Pram provides us with an accurate picture of the political climate in Denmark. The example of the French Revolution did not produce a political movement against absolutism in Denmark, even though attitudes towards the revolution were overwhelmingly positive during its first year in those circles which shaped public opinion.

Loyalty towards the existing regime in Denmark and thus also towards the absolutist form of government both reflected general political conditions in Europe and was rooted in a specifically Danish political culture which in its turn was the result of developments over more than a hundred years.

If we adopt a short chronological perspective, the change of government which occurred in 1784 was of the greatest importance for attitudes among the Danish public towards absolutism. The King, Christian VII, was unable to govern and an intense struggle developed to fill the power vacuum created by his illness, that is to say to gain control of his signature. A reform-minded circle of landowners and officials had gained the confidence of the young crown prince, and this group

¹ *Minerva*, December, 1789.

came to power in 1784, while the crown prince, who later became Frederik VI, administered his father's signature. The tempo of agricultural reform was intensified, and a number of reforms conferring greater civic rights on the peasantry were introduced. Moreover, in contrast to France, there was no particular disorder, still less crisis, in the finances of the Danish state, and overseas trade was flourishing and contained to do so until the end of the century thanks to the revolutionary wars.

Such then was the immediate political background. However, it is necessary to include the "*longue durée*" of Danish absolutism if we are to understand the character of the reform process within the Danish state and the nature of the political consensus and the political conflicts which that process created. The background to the reception of "1789" and to the story of the French Revolution's effects in Denmark is to be sought in the evolution of a specific political culture under Danish absolutism.

Danish absolutism

After Denmark's catastrophic defeat at the hands of Sweden in 1660, an assembly of the estates of the realm (*stænderforsamling*) was summoned, above all in order to reorganize the kingdom's finances. The war with Sweden and the crisis it provoked had brought the privileges and rights of the nobility into question at the same time as they brought the demands of the burghers of Copenhagen for certain rights to the fore. The effect of these two factors together was to turn the question of state sovereignty into an immediate political problem. The crown was not slow to exploit the crisis to its own advantage. Under strong pressure from the burghers of Copenhagen and through an adroit use of the threat that force might be employed against the nobility, the estates were persuaded to "agree" to transfer absolute power to the crown. As a result, Denmark became an absolute monarchy in the continental style, but what was unique in European terms was that the sudden revolution led to the introduction of a constitution which enshrined the new form of government in law, *Kongeloven* (the royal law or *Lex Regia* of 14 November 1665, which was published in 1709).

The absolutist constitution derived its legitimatist inspiration from the theorists of natural law. In 1665, as secretary of the King's cabinet, Peter Schumacher, was entrusted with the task of drafting the *Kongelov*. In the course of a long study trip abroad, Schumacher – who was a commoner by birth, though he was later ennobled under the name of Griffenfeld – had studied Hugo Grotius's writings in Paris in 1660. He had come to Paris from England, where he had just been an eyewitness to the Restoration and become acquainted with the febrile political atmosphere that provided a background for the discussion of the works of Hobbes, Milton and Harrington.

The inspiration which Schumacher received from Grotius was reflected in the text of *Kongeloven*. It was emphasized on several occasions in *Kongeloven* that the assembled estates had *transferred* power to the crown and that consequently sovereignty now resided solely with the King, who was only subject to God's will, the *Lex Divina*. *Kongeloven* respected the property of individual citizens and justified the centralized form of government with the argument that it provided the subject

with the best basis to “build and live” in security and safety. Absolutism was the best defence against both external threat and internal disorder. The safety or *security* of the subject is central to the absolutist constitution, and it is also a concept which was linked to that of *justice* in the tradition of natural law. Danish absolutism thus legitimated itself by using the modern, international language of natural law.

The intellectual framework used to legitimate absolutism was of great importance for attitudes towards the absolutist form of government in the eighteenth century. The source of inspiration for Danish theories of the state was the continental tradition of natural law as expressed in Samuel Pufendorf’s *De Jure Naturæ et Gentium* (Lund, 1672 and 1694), which argued that civilization, civic society and civic freedom all depended on “justice”, that is to say the protection through law of the individual and the public good quite independently of the formal structure of government.

Ludvig Holberg “translated” and abridged Pufendorf’s natural law into pithy Danish in *Moralske Kierne, eller Introduction til Naturens og Folkerettens Kundskab* (The essence of moral law or an introduction to the study of natural and international law), which appeared in 1716. In Holberg’s work, secular popular legitimacy was conferred on absolutism and in return the crown was duty bound to safeguard the public good, that is to say a just *civil* society. This interpretation of absolutism on the basis of natural law was the nucleus of eighteenth-century political theory as it was developed over the course of time.

An official version of the theory concerning the connection between absolutism and civil freedom was put forward by Erik Pontoppidan, the Vice-Chancellor of Copenhagen University, when the first centenary of absolutism was celebrated. His speech was entitled *Patriotiske betragtninger over Danske og Norske Mænds Borgerlige Frihed, under et arveligt og faderligt Enevolds-Regimente* (Patriotic reflections on the civil freedom of Danish and Norwegian men under a hereditary and paternal absolutist system of government). The speech was printed in a French version too: *Discours sur la Liberté du Danne marc depuis l’établissement du pouvoir illimité . . . par un patriote* (1760). In Pontoppidan’s eyes the essential truth was that

the civil freedom of the Danish and Norwegian nation is as great, as good and as true a freedom as any other nation in Europe can boast at the present time.

This civil freedom consisted of equality before the law, the impartial administration of justice, government under the law, security, property, taxation levied at the same rate on all and limited freedom of the press. In other words, freedom was explained above all by the existence of “justice”.

A key figure in the development of this tradition was Jens Schielderup Sneedorff, a professor at the Sorø Academy, who advanced a systematic theory of the state in his book *Om den borgerlige Regiering* (On civil Government), which was published in 1757. The title was a reference to Locke’s ideas of civil society and civil freedom. Sneedorff combined the key words from the Pufendorf tradition – “justice” and “the common good” – with Montesquieu’s concepts of “honour” and “civic virtue”. These “mentalities” were each represented particularly by monarchy and the republic in *l’Esprit des Lois*, but Sneedorff argued that civic virtue became corrupted too easily under a republican form of government. On

the other hand, virtue often achieved its finest manifestation under monarchy (which meant absolutism, since Sneedorff equated limited monarchy with a republican form of government):

Civic virtue . . . consists on the monarch's side of love for the people, and on the part of the people of love for the monarch, but both must rest on love for the general good.²

Civic virtue was manifested in the "patriotism" of the people, while the public good was thrown into relief by public opinion, by the "advice" which public debate provided to the authorities. The combination of patriotism and public debate would ideally (that is to say, if there were freedom of the press) join civic virtue to the public good under the "security" and "justice" conferred by stable absolutism.

The tradition of *natural law* (Pufendorf and Holberg) and the Sorø tradition (J. S. Sneedorff) laid the foundations for the ideological political bulwark which so successfully prevented the collapse of the absolutist political culture under the pressure of revolutionary demands for freedom during the period of the French Revolution. However, the intellectual relationship between "freedom" and "absolutism" did not remain unchanged throughout the eighteenth century. Until 1784 the monarchy as a strongly centralized "legislator" was presented in political discussion as a guarantee of freedom, as creating a just civil society through the combination of knowledge and power. After 1784 the state ceased to have this theoretical perspective and the "freedom" of civil society now came to be located in the general public spirit in the public opinion.

However, this notion of "the general public spirit" was not synonymous with the concept of "political society" and "political freedom". It referred purely to a general public which created public opinion in the utopian, consensus-seeking sense of enlightened philosophy. In practice, this printed "public opinion" was dominated by officials who had real influence or even, in some cases, power. Consequently, there was no question during the period 1784–89 of a cleavage or schism between "government" and "public" in the sense of a cleavage between "state" and "society". The public which created opinion included and integrated modernizing landowners, wealthy burghers seeking entry to the aristocracy, officials and intellectuals (or *literati* as they were then called). Prevailing notions about the proper function of this group sustained a consensus-seeking political discussion about progress and improvement in which it was now argued that the King's subjects enjoyed "civil freedom" *despite* the form of government and *because* of the government's responsiveness to the King's subjects and *because* of its love of the general good.

Danish absolutism was reformed in conformity with French models in the course of the 1670s and 1680s. The all-embracing complex of law codes, the *Danske Lov* (Danish law) of 1683 and the *Norske Lov* (Norwegian law) of 1687, modernized, systematized and standardized the many different provincial codes dating back to the Middle Ages. A departmental system of administration on the European

² J. S. Sneedorff, "Om den borgerlige Regering" in *Samtlige Skrifter*, vol. 7 (København, 1776), p. 361.

model was introduced. A just system of taxation of all taxable landed property was made possible by the compilation of Christian V's land register (*matrikel*) in 1688. After a thorough survey of the country between 1681 and 1686, a land tax based on the productive capacity of the soil was established (this was the so-called *hartkorn* assessment, which set a value on land based on estimated productivity). The survey was so extensive and so little distorted by bribery that its results held good for over two hundred years and even today make it possible for us to estimate the number of farms, the size of farming units etc. in the 1680s. This modernization of the state made it possible for the Dano-Norwegian monarchy to cope with the expansionist Swedish tax state during the wars of the seventeenth century. These conflicts came to an end with the conclusion of the Great Northern War in 1720, which was followed in 1721 by a solution of the problem of the relationship between the duchies of Holstein and Schleswig and the unitary Dano-Norwegian state. Schleswig was finally incorporated into the Danish state in 1721. At this time, the Danish state was called *Kron zu Dennemarck*, a term which covered not only the kingdom of Denmark proper between Kolding and Skagen, but also all the King's other possessions: Norway, including the Norwegian dependencies, the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland, Schleswig and the so-called "royal" parts of the duchy of Holstein. This multinational state was a medium-sized European power on a level with Prussia, which possessed – thanks to Norway – one of the largest navies in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, especially if warships and merchant vessels are counted together.

The central administration was based on the collegial principle, following the Swedo-European model. The administration of the army and navy was the first to be modernized. The financial administration came next: in 1660 it was decided that the board of the finance college would consist of four noblemen and four burghers. One of the innovations which resulted from the changes of 1660 was that the road to a career in public administration was now also open to those who were born into burgher families. The old regional system of administering the territories of the state through the *Danske Kancelli* and the *Tyske Kancelli* (the Danish and German chancelleries) was gradually incorporated into the collegial system with these two bodies responsible for "domestic" and "foreign" affairs respectively. At the end of the seventeenth century the territorial demesne state was gradually replaced by the national tax state.

The administrative apex of the collegial system was the council of state (*statsrådet*) at whose meetings the heads of the individual colleges presented matters to the king for his final decision – a decision which had the force of law. However, outside or rather in parallel with this modern state system, the court and the interests it represented still retained power and importance. Members of the court or the armed forces were able to obtain direct access to influence on the King as "advisers" in his "cabinet" (*Kabinet*), bypassing the council of state. In the eighteenth century Danish absolutism oscillated between rule by the council of state and the rule by the king's cabinet. In this context, the change of regime in 1784 marked a shift from the latter to the former, and rule by the council of state remained the form of government in Denmark during the years of the French Revolution.

The weakest link in the administrative system of Danish absolutism was local government. Drawing on the example of French absolutism with its network of local *intendants*, a system of *amter* (counties) and *amtmand* (county governors) was introduced at the end of the seventeenth century, but no real change resulted from this innovation. Local government overwhelmingly remained in the hands of the great local landowners. During the period of absolutism the landowning estate altered in character as more and more landowners came to be burghers or members of the new aristocracy created by absolutism, but during the first hundred years of absolutism the local power of the landowning estate remained unshaken.

However, in the course of the eighteenth century the size of the rural population grew very rapidly, and the need for reform of agriculture and the rest of the economy gradually came to be recognized. The agrarian reform introduced by the state in the second half of the eighteenth century also paved the way for changes in local government which reduced the local power of the landowning estate. The agrarian reforms broadly fell into two categories: legislation which conferred civic rights on the peasant-farmers (*gårdmænd*) by ending their personal dependence on the landowners; and a reform of the farming system which ended the old village communities, created enclosed farmsteads and improved methods of cultivation.

This process of reform began in 1757, when the first state agricultural commission was appointed by the government. In the same year, Erik Pontoppidan, the Vice-Chancellor of Copenhagen University, began to publish *Danmarks og Norges oekonomiske Magazin* (The economic magazine of Denmark and Norway) – one of the first and largest of Europe's economical periodicals. This periodical received articles from many clergymen and officials in response to a request from the government in 1755 for "economic proposals in so far as they are designed to secure some kind of improvement". It was a quite new and unique development that a government commission discussed subjects which were simultaneously a topic of public debate. The risk involved was minimal, since this debate was prompted by and partly financed by the government itself and the editor of the journal in which contributions appeared was loyal to the regime. Nonetheless, the very fact the state supported a public debate demonstrates that from the beginning of the reform process the government regarded public opinion as essential. When society was being reformed, the government wanted to have modern, printed public opinion on its side. From the very outset, this new link between "economics" and "politics" had a dual objective: to obtain economic knowledge from informed opinion so that a more effective policy might be devised and to secure public legitimation for the policy introduced. The legislation concerning the ending of the village communities, the consolidation of farmsteads etc. was promulgated and put into effect during the 1760s and 1770s, but it was only after the change of regime in 1784 that the legislation conferring civic rights on the peasantry was introduced, culminating in the abolition of the *stavnband* (adscription) in 1788. The *stavnband* system forbade males between the age of 4 and 40 to leave the estate where they were born and registered for military service. Its purpose was to ensure that the large estates had a stable supply of cheap labour and those hardest hit by the system were landless labourers. However, it was of greater political significance that the *stavnband* increasingly caused offence to

modern, intellectual notions of personal freedom. Even at the time, the abolition of the *stavnshånd* was seen as a political defeat for the landowning estate as a whole and as a victory for supporters of "civil liberty". The reform in the farming system also began to be put into effect more vigorously in the countryside during the 1780s.

It can be said that the Danish government succeeded in doing during the 1780s what Turgot failed to do in France during the 1770s, namely to carry out a reform of society which in many respects was in line with the most modern economic and political ideas and ideals of the age, as expressed in physiocracy.

The reform of society under absolutism extended beyond the agrarian sphere. Many important, modern reforms date to the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. This applies to reforms of the road system, the poor relief system, the midwifery system, the school system, the prison system and not least local government, where the legal system was made more efficient, for example by the introduction of conciliation boards (*forligskommissioner*) on the French model in 1795 and 1797. Nonetheless, in Danish rural society it was the agrarian reforms which were the essential, dynamic element. The reforms in the farming system immediately left highly visible traces on the countryside, while the conferment of civic rights on the peasantry stabilized an agricultural structure based on medium-sized, freehold family farmsteads for many generations to come. The reforms discouraged the concentration of land ownership in a few hands and the practice, inspired by liberalistic ideas, of leasing the land on a fixed-term contract. In short, the reforms militated against large-scale farming of peasant land. In this sphere, the modern reforms upheld the old ideal of Danish absolutism of a numerically strong "peasant estate" capable of paying the taxes which provided the foundations for the existence of the state.

Taken together, the many different reforms and the agrarian laws led to a reform of society which was anti-aristocratic in tendency. The reforms attacked the landowner in his capacity as an aristocratic, privileged lord of the manor. On the other hand, the reforms supported him as a *landowning producer*, i.e., as a proprietor and a producer. Did then the reforms amount to a "bourgeois revolution" in the Marxist sense? Were they a direct Danish counterpart to the French Revolution? Not quite. Not only did the absolutist state survive the first essential phases of the reform of society, but it also played a central role in shaping the reforms. Moreover, the landowners obtained the capital they required for the necessary investments in their manorial estates and also, in the course of the nineteenth century, in local industries.

From the point of view of the state, the great landed estates were now pushed into the background as administrators of the local tax, military, legal, welfare, health and education systems. The reforms gradually removed the aristocratic intermediary between the state and the population. The absolutist reforms at the centre of the state in the late seventeenth century were thus led to their logical conclusion through the social reforms of the late eighteenth century. The state's *amt* system finally began to play a more important role, and at the local level a system of parish self-government representing the new distribution of property and power between the great landowners and the peasant-farmers came into being. The reforms liberated the landowner from the obligations and limitations of the

old system of landed estates, at the same time as it deprived him of some of the privileges of power. Landowners unable to keep up with market developments had to sell their property to middlemen who divided the nanorial land into family farming units, but on the whole the reforms enhanced the opportunities open to the great landowners for agricultural modernization.

The reforms created three possible outcomes for the peasant-farmers – to continue as tenants, to buy the freehold on their farms or to decline into the ranks of the rural proletariat. As early as within twenty years of the agrarian reforms – at the time of the outbreak of the war with Britain in 1807 – about 60% of peasant farmsteads had become freehold. Many of the new freeholders would come to find the market and interest payments a harsh taskmaster. The freeholder – regardless of whether he was a great landowner or a peasant-farmer – still retained the right of inflicting corporal punishment on cottars (*husmænd*) and farm labourers, but in other respects the reforms indirectly but completely changed the conditions of life for cottars and labourers. The peasant-farmers were able to have their obligations to perform labour-service (*hoveri*) fixed once and for all and often commuted them through a monetary payment, but cottars enjoyed no such advantage. Their obligations to work for their landlord could still be adjusted each time their lease was renewed, and their holdings were still leased under a fixed-term contract. The amount of labour-service which a smallholding “cost” a cottar was completely out of line with the labour-service obligations of the peasant-farmers. The latter naturally had larger outgoings, to be sure, but in practice the difference meant that, while cottar families largely had no opportunities for social advancement, the peasant-farmer class as a whole climbed up the social ladder in the course of the nineteenth century.

The political crisis in Denmark, 1788–91

The abolition of the *stavnsbånd* in 1788 greatly inflamed political divisions inside Denmark. The minority of landowners on the council of state who were critical of the reform process resigned from that body in protest at the decision to confer civic rights on the peasantry. They had no objection to the reforms in the farming system, which would increase production and revenue from agriculture, but they were apprehensive as to what might come next after the abolition of the *stavnsbånd*. Perhaps there would be compulsory restrictions on labour-service? By their resignation, the conservative landowners demonstrated that the reforms had gone too far by challenging the right of landowners to dispose over the peasantry's labour. They also demonstrated that they regarded this right as a part of their broader property rights.

Their protest had no effect on the crown prince's policies. The nominees he appointed to replace those who had resigned merely confirmed the power of the reformers, and in 1789 all key posts in the central administration were occupied by reformers. This created uncertainty and anxiety in traditional landowning circles, and in Jutland led a group of landowners to take action. They sought to bypass the administrative colleges and the council of state by making a direct appeal to the crown prince with the object of securing a reversal of that part of the reforms which conferred civic rights on the peasantry. In order to lend weight to

this declaration of no confidence in the government, no less than 103 landowners – representing about half of all the landed property in Jutland – were stated to have subscribed to the document, which was described, most inappropriately, as a “declaration of confidence”. The address was presented at the time of the crown prince’s wedding, which took place in Schleswig-Holstein, far away from the government and the popular masses in Copenhagen, in the summer of 1790. The address, which was organized and presented by Lüttichau, a chamberlain at court, aimed at frightening the crown prince into withdrawing support from his reforming government, by sowing doubts about both the loyalty of the landowners to the regime and about the loyalty of the peasantry to the existing order. The document did not recoil from exploiting fears about “French conditions”, and contained the following passage.

The great clamour in support of freedom had led the peasants and common people to believe that the authority of the lord of the manor has been entirely abandoned and that obedience is no longer required . . . It is not enough that the peasants are bringing a legal action against almost each of us, . . . but insubordination among the peasantry towards us, as their lords of the manor, is now so great that we and our agents virtually go in the greatest uncertainty for our lives and property when we require of our inferiors the labour which they owe us . . . Nothing is easier, Gracious Prince, than to stir up a peasant against his lord . . . This disease, which prevails almost everywhere, will not cease so long as there are rich and poor, masters and servants. If these monstrous passions are strengthened by receiving approval and support, what then will the consequences be? The peasantry’s disrespect for authority is growing steadily and has already brought the proper authority of the amtmænd into disregard. God grant that this disrespect may never become so great as the dreadful example provided by France may lead us to fear.³

The peasant uprising associated with the French Revolution is used in this document as a bugbear to support the views of conservative landowners, precisely in the same way as occurred in Austria-Hungary at the same time. However, there was one great difference: in Denmark, the opponents of reform had no formal power base either within or outside the modern governing structure of Danish absolutism. The crown prince did not turn against the government he had himself appointed. Nor can anyone have really expected that he would do so *immediately*. However, what was more important was that the “revolt” of the great landowners failed to spread. It was immediately crushed by the government’s legal “spokesman”, the Procurator-General (*Generalprokurator*). The secretary of the reform commission, Christian Colbiørnsen, had been given this post in 1789, and now he used it. The means he employed against the landowners’ revolt was to make their address public. Colbiørnsen boldly held up this manifestation of private interests to public derision at the same time as he defended the policy of reform. One by one the 103 supporters of the address fell away under the pressure of that modern instrument of power, public opinion, until Lüttichau stood alone and isolated.

³ Quoted from *Betragtninger i Anledning af endeel jyske Jorddrotters Klage til Hans Kongelige Høiæd Kronprindsen . . . af Christian Colbiørnsen* (København, 1790), pp. 34–40. Colbiørnsen printed the complaint accompanied by his own sharp comments. The italics are in the original text.

The government's representative thus used the authority derived from public opinion against Denmark's "aristocratic revolt", and it was not long before this same public opinion backed Colbiørnsen and the government by raising an obelisk dedicated to "liberty".

Liberty by royal command – the freedom monument

Minerva declared in 1788 that the King had raised a monument to himself by issuing the ordinance of 20 June 1788 abolishing the *stavnsbånd*. Was that enough, though? A group of Copenhagen burghers decided that they would collect funds for the erection of a monument celebrating the abolition of the *stavnsbånd*. Their motive was to hold the crown prince to the promises implicit in the agrarian reforms of civic freedom and resistance to aristocratic revolt and to support him against the reactionary landowners of Jutland. Such support might well be useful. It is true that the crown – in part because it had learnt from the successful aristocratic revolt of 1788 in France which unleashed the chain of events that led to the revolution – had struck back rapidly and decisively at the 103 signatories of the so-called "declaration of confidence". However, in connection with the investigation into the circumstances surrounding its composition, Lüttichau had indulged in some violent diatribes against Colbiørnsen, so violent in fact that the latter had initiated a slander action against him.

The atmosphere was tense in Copenhagen during the winter of 1790–91. Many landowners had, as usual, taken up residence in the capital for the winter, and they exploited this opportunity to intrigue against the party of reform. For example, Joachim Schack-Rathlou, who had resigned from the council of state in 1788 in protest at the agrarian reforms, helped Lüttichau to compose a pamphlet attacking Colbiørnsen – without, however, compromising his own name. The case was heard early in April 1791. Formally, it merely concerned two private individuals, but in reality what was involved was a trial of strength between the burghers of Copenhagen and the great landowners of Jutland over the survival and continuance of the policy of reform. Colbiørnsen won the case – to the delight of the supporters of reform. Moreover, shortly afterwards the commission appointed to investigate the "declaration of confidence" completed its labour. The commission reached the conclusion that, although the petition was not in itself unlawful, the behaviour of the signatories was improper and impudent, because the commission had found no evidence whatsoever to confirm their charge that the agrarian reforms were encroaching on property rights. The commission's report was hardest on Lüttichau, who was disgraced and ridiculed. As a result, he sold his estates and withdrew to Brunswick.

It was in these circumstances that plans were put forward to erect a physical monument setting out the regime's official ideology of freedom in clear symbols. The details and the whole neo-classical concept were the responsibility of the painter and architect Nikolaj Abildgaard, working in cooperation with three sculptors, Nikolaj Dajon, Andreas Weidenhaupt and Johannes Weidewelt. Abildgaard had been trained in Rome (like David and other French painters) and was the official artist of the absolutist regime because of his position as director of the Royal Academy of Art (*Det Kongelige Kunstakademi*). Nonetheless, he retained

throughout his life a strong sympathy for the French Revolution and for the principle of republicanism, as is clear from his large collection of books.

The obelisk was chosen as the form for the monument, since it symbolized power and eternity. It was this demonstration of power that was important to the Copenhagen burghers who collected the money to pay for the monument. The latter was dedicated to the crown prince, but the barely disguised intention was to celebrate the new reforms and to keep the crown prince loyal to the reform programme. This could best be done by demonstrating in a physical form that the law was eternal, that it applied to all and that it was sustained by power. The four figures on the pedestal are allegories in the best neo-classical style. Loyalty is represented by a dog, Courage by a fasces and Hercule's lion skin, Agricultural Labour by a plough and Civic Virtue by a wreath of oak leaves. The two reliefs depict the genius of Justice holding the scales of justice in balance and Denmark in the form of a woman liberating the slave or, as it was put on this occasion, "thralldom is abolished".

The official name of the monument was "Monument honouring the king's benefactions to the honest peasant estate", but one looks in vain for any visual representation of either the king or the honest peasant. As in the case of the French Revolution's political symbols, the themes are derived from classical Rome and Greece and from ancient Egypt. The two inscriptions on the monument read as follows.

(on the east side) The king found that civic freedom, created through just laws, produces love of the fatherland, courage in its defence, thirst for knowledge, desire for work and hope for the future. (on the west side) The king commanded that the *stavnslånder* should be abolished and the agrarian laws put into effect so that the free peasant might become cheerful and educated, industrious and good, an honest citizen and happy⁴.

The freedom monument expresses the whole programme of the anti-aristocratic, popular absolutist ideology which had reformed the traditional landowner-dominated society from within. The monument was erected by burghers acting as representatives of the people and addressed to its prince and symbolizes the ideal relationship between state and citizen. It pays homage to civic virtues in an artistic language derived from the classical world, which was the source of inspiration providing models for the ideal ordering of state and society for both Danish absolutism and French revolutionaries. However, this apparently limitless faith in the prince's efforts on behalf of civic freedoms and virtues concealed an undertone of scepticism, which was clearly expressed in a *pièce d'occasion* written by J. Smidth and printed in 1795, a year after the inauguration of the monument, in *Lommebog for Historie og Selskabelighed* (Historical and social notebook). Verse four reads as follows.

But if a tyrant ever sought to violate the right to freedom of the Danes, he would be led to the freedom monument and ordered to think about you [i.e. the monument]. And if he forgets his duty, we will vow to bring about the tyrant's fall⁵.

⁴ The text was written by the poet Thomas Thaarup. The text is quoted and our account is derived from Karin Kryger, *Frihedsstøtten* (1986), pp. 9–11.

⁵ Quoted from Karin Kryger, *Frihedsstøtten* (1986), p. 7.

This passage proclaims the classical right of rebellion against tyrants who abuse the limits set on their exercise of power by the social contract. This was the real, barely disguised purpose of the freedom monument given *by* the citizens *to* their king. However, in reality events took a different turn and the monument along with the political programme it implied rapidly disappeared from public consciousness because of events in France. They were not resurrected again until 1838, when the politician A. F. Tscherning used the monument's fiftieth anniversary as a basis for formulating the programme of what later, in 1846, was to become a political party, *Bondevennernes Selskab* (The association of friends of the peasantry).

The traditional self-image of Danish political culture normally interprets the construction of the freedom monument as a manifestation of the enormous difference between the Danish and the French political systems. The following passage is a typical example.

In 1797, four years after the king and queen of France were executed in Paris, condemned to death by French citizens, a memorial to the mentally-ill king of Denmark from the Danish people was erected outside the western gate (*Vesterport*) of Copenhagen.⁶

As we shall see, this myth about the peaceful nature of the Danes was only partly true. The balance between reform and revolution was considerably more precarious than this view suggests.

The monument's foundation stone was laid amid great festivities on the crown prince's wedding anniversary, 31 July 1792, but the monument was finally completed without ceremony of any kind in 1797. The difference reflects the political developments which had occurred in Denmark and France in the interval. The condemnation and especially the execution of Louis XVI on 21 January 1793 deeply shook the reformist elite that was behind the construction of the freedom monument. The news of the execution reached Copenhagen on 2 February 1793, the very same day as the town witnessed quite serious street riots in connection with the so-called *Posthusfejde* (post office riot). A student inadvertently happened to shove an officer, who had then drawn his sword. As a result, there were scuffles between students, seamen and workmen on one side and the armed forces and the police on the other. No one was killed, but the disturbances were a reminder that the situation could easily get out of hand and that it was difficult to control an agitated mass of people, even if they were Danish. Only rather a few Danish intellectuals reacted with enthusiasm to the news of the French king's execution. The poet Adam Oehlenschläger relates in his memoirs that his teacher at *Borgerdydskolen* (the school of civic virtue) remarked rather coolly one February morning that Louis Capet was now Louis Caput, but this was not a typical reaction.

The following year, in September 1794, Copenhagen once again witnessed a tense and inflamed situation, when the apprentice carpenters went on strike on a hitherto unparalleled scale. The crown prince received a note that the apprentices had assembled at Blegdammen and were preparing to march to Frederiksberg

⁶ Torben Holck Colding, in Colding A. O. *Dansk Guldalderkunst 1750-1850* (1979), p. 212.

Palace, which lay outside the walls of the city. (Their route would also have taken them past the freedom monument, which was already standing in the countryside outside the city's west gate.) Remembering what had happened when the citizens of Paris marched to Versailles in 1789, Crown Prince Frederik quickly mobilized the army, placed a ring of troops around the city and prepared to depart, with the rest of the royal family, for Kronborg Castle at Elsinore. While all these measures were being taken, the apprentices were in fact at home in their beds sleeping innocently.⁷ However, despite the peaceful and highly "Danish" nature of the episode, it provides eloquent testimony to the fact that the confidence of the crown prince and the government in the general population was not all that great – regardless of all the talk about the love they bore one another.

The pace of reform gradually slowed, even though many reforms that were already planned were put into law in the late 1790s and the first years of the nineteenth century. Above all, freedom of the press was curtailed – as we shall see in the section of this article dealing with the radical republican opposition grouped around P. A. Heiberg.

The summoning of an Estates General in Denmark?

It was the summoning of the Estates General in order to solve France's problems which created a forum and a rallying point for the idea of a French "nation". Crisis within the Estates General became a crisis within the nation, and it was the summoning of this late medieval institution which enabled the "third estate" to proclaim itself the "national assembly" and to secure acceptance for this idea from both supporters and opponents.

The summoning of a meeting of the estates of the realm would not *in itself* have violated the constitutional principles of Danish absolutism, provided that sovereignty continued to reside indivisibly in the hands of the king. It was therefore possible to whisper about summoning the estates of the realm in Denmark without as a result forfeiting one's "life, honour and property" – the penalty for treason contained in the *Kongelov*. Moreover, Danish absolutism derived its political legitimacy from the meeting of the estates in 1660, when – as was repeated again and again in the political debate – power was *transferred* to the crown from the people. The idea of a new meeting of the estates was a "grey" area for absolutist ideology, and it is natural to assume that this was an idea which would have been taken up by any political opposition.

The proposal that the estates (including, as was not the case in 1660, representatives of the peasantry) should be "recalled" was the result, not of the French Revolution, but of the period between 1770 and 1772 when Denmark was governed by the court physician Johann Friedrich Struensee. In response to the crisis created by Christian VII's illness and Struensee's rule, the historian Peter Frederik Suhm drew up a complete proposal for the election of local representatives of the estates in 16 electoral districts. These representatives would form a 48-man *Parlament* and would administer the state's finances and taxes and fill public offices in conjunction with the king. Fresh elections would be held every

⁷ Manniche, J. C., "Den københavnske tømmerstrejke 1794", *Historie*, vol. 10 (1972–74).

three years. Under Suhm's proposals, a majority of the electorate would have been made up of non-noble officials and clergymen.

Suhm presented this plan in person to the new central figure at court, Ove Hoegh Guldberg, on 17 January 1772, the day after the coup which had overthrown Struensee. Suhm recorded in his diary that "I gave Guldberg my plan for changes in the system of government, but he is accustomed to slavery and rejected it".⁸ Guldberg did not want to hear any talk about reforms to the structure of government. Struensee's reforms had been quite enough! Nonetheless, Suhm's ideas did not remain unknown, since he published them in his *roman à clef*, *Euphron* (1774 and 1779). His plan for a reform of the system of government was financially published after his death, in 1799,⁹ the same year as freedom of the press was curtailed. Suhm's historical studies had again given him an argument justifying the summoning of the estates. He found that at the meeting in 1660 which led to the introduction of absolutism, many of the burgher representatives were of the view "that *Rigsdage* (Diets) could still be held after absolutism had been introduced".¹⁰

The idea of a meeting of the estates cropped up again under the impact of events in France in 1789. It was now the turn of another historian, N. D. Riegels, to put forward the proposal that a "*Rigsdag*" should be called. On the occasion of the entry into Copenhagen of the newly-married crown prince and his bride in 1790, Riegels published a pamphlet called *Julemærker fra Landet og Byen* (Christmas greetings from country and town), in which he wrote that

The people and the king have not assembled together since 18 October 1660. On that occasion a constitution was established, and Frederik III was firmly of the view that he was a king who ruled over free estates and that it might indeed be useful for him to deliberate with them from time to time. Let us dream about such a *Rigsdag*. Would not the king and the estates have many things to ask each other about if one were held?¹¹

Riegels's proposal for a *Rigsdag* was very astute. He had brought to light Frederik III's character which conferred privileges on Copenhagen in 1661 as a reward for its role in the war against Sweden. In Riegel's presentation of Denmark's political history, Copenhagen's privileges as a free city of the realm (*rigsstad*) and estate of the realm (*rigsstand*) opened up the prospect that the estates might be summoned to a meeting at which the burghers had double representation with Copenhagen as one separate estate and the burghers of the realm as another. This would have amounted to a doubling of the "third estate", as occurred in France! The pamphlet cost Riegels and his publisher a fine of 200 *Rigsdaler*. This was a lot of money, but it was still only money. The encouragement of rebellion and violations of the *Kongelov* were punished with a quite different degree of severity.

⁸ P. Fr. Suhm: *Hemmelige Efterretninger om de danske Konger efter Souveraineteten meddelte ved Julius Clausen* (Kbh., 1918), p. 72.

⁹ P. F. Suhm, *Samlede Skrifter*, vol. 16 ("Suhmiana" edited by Rasmus Nyerup) (København, 1799), pp. 29–36.

¹⁰ P. F. Suhm, *op. cit.*, p. 349.

¹¹ N. D. Riegels, *Julemærker fra Landet og Byen. Samlede i tvende Breve* (København, 1790).

Guldberg, who had been dismissed from his role in the central government and who was now *amtmand* in Aarhus, became nervous when he saw the resurrection of the proposal for a *Rigsdag* – and in a radicalized form to boot. He described Riegel's proposal in a letter to his friend Johann von Bülow on 19 October 1790 in the following terms.

All royal authority will then have disappeared and French democracy, with all its calamities, will have been introduced. When this mischief struck France, the source of the trouble was Paris, and in our case it may well come from Copenhagen. The author has therefore chosen to state that Frederik III promised that Copenhagen would, when a *Rigsdag* was summoned, be an estate of the realm. This is what Necker most unfortunately managed to achieve in France, namely *double représentation* for *le tiers état*, which subsequently became the main source of all France's calamities . . . My friend now likes to imagine that the Copenhagen clubs will discuss Copenhagen as an estate of the realm by itself and to think about what a commotion this idea will cause among the excitable young members of the clubs.¹²

However, Guldberg's fears were misplaced. The clubs were more preoccupied by a song by Heiberg which contained the audacious line, "Orders are for hanging on idiots"; by the festivities surrounding the crown prince's entry into Copenhagen in 1790; and not least by rumours that the landowners of Jutland were attacking the agrarian laws and "peasant liberty".

The years 1790–91 were a decisive phase in the French revolutionary process, but while a constitution was being drawn up in Paris, the dominant group within Copenhagen public opinion was preoccupied with preserving the gains of the 1780s. The holding of a *Rigsdag* was not on the programme. The freedom monument was the only Danish "tree of liberty" or symbolic monument from the revolutionary years. Nonetheless, Riegel's proposal demonstrates that it was possible, on the basis of Danish history and Danish political tradition, to devise a strategy for establishing a representative political body in Denmark – at any rate during the first phase of the French Revolution, before the revolution was compromised in broader, middle-class circles. Guldberg, Suhm and Riegels were undoubtedly not alone in seeing the political potential of the idea of calling a *Rigsdag*, but the idea did not gain much ground. Clearly, it did not correspond to a political need.

Absolutism by public opinion: the government's point of view

The theory that Danish absolutism was the best guarantor of civil society and civic freedom was sometimes expressed in quite extreme terms. An example is provided by Christian Colbiørnsen, the secretary of the Great Agricultural Commission (*Den store Landvaæsenkommission*), who was promoted in 1789 to the job of legal coordinator of the administration, as Procurator-General. In February 1794

¹² "Breve fra Ove Hoegh-Guldberg til Johan v. Bülow", edited by J. H. Bang in *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 4th. Series, vol. 1 (1869), pp. 293–95.

Minerva printed the speech Colbiørnsen delivered on the occasion of the presentation of the Agricultural Society's (*Landhusholdningsselskabet*) prizes to industrious farmers. Colbiørnsen's speech was primarily addressed, not to the crown prince, who was present, or to the recipients of the prizes, but to the readers of *Minerva*. He began by saying that "it is a noble struggle to compete over promoting the general good", and he went on to define "the general good" and its enemies.

Let us hastily avert our eyes from those melancholy days when human rights were unknown, when the people groaned beneath a feudal tyranny that also defied the authority of the crown, when the hierarchy had spread an Egyptian darkness over the whole of Europe... What we mean by the general good is the whole of civil society and (linked to that) the greatest possible happiness of each of its members. It was in order to enjoy the benefits of such a society, for common defence and common security, that human beings combined to form that holy bond which we call the state.

However, the state needs to be governed, and Colbiørnsen declared as self-evident that the government and the law were the expression of the general will.

The government, in the true sense of the word, is the expression of the general will from which the whole state is administered in pursuit of its main purpose, namely the greatest possible happiness of civil society.

The whole point of Colbiørnsen's speech was that this definition of government, which was so clearly inspired by Rousseau's thought, was an entirely suitable description for the government and regime he represented, Danish absolutism. This was the time, after the execution of Louis XVI, of the French Revolution's Jacobin phase, and Colbiørnsen quite deliberately chose to apply the youthful rhetoric of Jacobinism to Danish conditions when he went on to say that

"We could, with perfect truth, apply to our happy fatherland the words of Agesilaus, when he described Sparta's civic freedom in the following laconic terms, 'It is the law that rules in Sparta'."

After the crown prince had distributed the medals to the happy but doubtless puzzled prize-winners, Colbiørnsen concluded his speech by addressing the crown prince directly. "Beloved country! It is your glorious destiny to be ruled with Order and to be strengthened by Peace, while anarchy rages and rivers of blood flow around us".¹³

Colbiørnsen's speech demonstrated how far it was possible to go rhetorically in linking absolutism with civil society, absolutism with civic freedom. Like the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus, Crown Prince Frederik lent flesh and blood to "the general will". Absolutism combined the republican virtues with security, justice and order. The speech was a provocative one at a time when the front line was being drawn in Denmark, as in the rest of Europe, between royalist opponents of revolutionary developments in France and republican supporters of the revolution.

¹³ *Minerva*, January-February 1794, pp. 121-31.

Was there no opposition in Denmark to this view that absolutism and its government "represented" the general good, general opinion and the like? Was there not an opposition which regarded absolutism as a hindrance to civic freedom?

The point of view of the liberal intellectual

In the autumn of 1791 Frederick Sneedorff arrived in Paris from Copenhagen, having travelled via Göttingen. Sneedorff was an historian and had a personal chair at Copenhagen University. He was quite literally a son of the Sorø enlightenment in that it was his father who had written *Om den Borgerlige Regiering* in 1757 while a professor at Sorø Academy. Shortly before his departure for Paris, Sneedorff had concluded a long series of lectures at the university on recent European history. In his lectures, he had not attempted to conceal his belief that in European political terms Britain carried the baton of progress and freedom, but in the Danish context, he had expressed no criticism of absolutism and its government.

Frederik Sneedorff was a supporter of reform with an intellectual predilection for the British system of parliamentary government. In other words, he was a not untypical intellectual. It is exciting to observe how he reacted to the revolutionary challenges in Paris during the period after the introduction of the 1791 constitution. This is his account of a visit to the Jacobin Club.

I had that very day obtained a ticket, valid for 14 days, for entry to the Jacobin Club, and I now went there. I entered an old abbey church whose pulpit had been turned into a lectern and the altar into a table for the chairman and several secretaries with a bust of Mirabeau above them. Rows of benches rose on every side from a narrow aisle as in an amphitheatre and were occupied by 6–700 club members. There were separate galleries at both ends of the room to which members of the public were freely admitted. My guide found me a good place, just above the lectern, on one of the higher benches, which enabled me both to see and to hear well. My guide told me it was one of the club's more unruly evenings and I had no trouble in believing him. Camille-Desmoulins – he who went to the Palais Royal and with a fiery speech persuaded the mob to demand Necker's return after he had been banished, he who was the first Frenchman to stick the national cockade on his hat; he who was the author of one of the most audacious and shameless of newspapers, *Les Révolutions de France & de Brabant* – this ardent patriot ascended to the lectern and read a paper that, from beginning to end, was a satire on the former national assembly in which even Fayette, Bailly and several others were named and ridiculed. Some smiled; others cried, "à bas, à bas!"; others again, "mon Monsieur!"; and others still, "à l'Ordre, à l'Ordre!". The chairman rang his bell and here and there members jumped up to cry, "Monsieur le President! Je demande la parole." Here and there certain thunderous voices made themselves heard through the frightful din, which finally became so violent that I feared a massacre might occur. Some demanded that he should not be allowed to continue; others that freedom

consisted of being able to speak one's opinions; others again that they could not understand him and that someone else should finish reading his paper for him. The majority decided in favour of this last course. When I left the room, I overheard several groups of members violently arguing about the speech in the entrance-hall. Some said that it combined Voltaire's wit with Rousseau's eloquence, others cried that he had been bought by the court to divide and subvert the club. None of the following evenings when I was there was as stormy as this, but nor was any of them entirely untroubled.¹⁴

Sneedorff was overwhelmed. It was exciting, but not merely exciting in the same way as a night at the theatre. It was also dangerous, and Sneedorff felt like a traveller among the natives on a new political continent. Was this anarchy the consequence of unlimited freedom of speech and the introduction of a constitution? Sneedorff studied the new political geography more closely, and on 15 December he wrote of the new National Assembly that "There are *right* and *left* sides of the assembly, as in the case of its predecessor, and they can more precisely be distinguished from each other by the names *Jacobins* and *Feuillants*." Sneedorff went on to describe the *Club des Feuillants*.

The aim of this club is to maintain the majesty of the king and the standing of the whole executive branch, as the constitution decrees . . . I have been here several times as a member, and I can say this much. As a foreigner who merely seeks to make himself acquainted with the constitution, I visit the Jacobin Club out of curiosity, but the Feuillant Club out of pleasure. If I were a French citizen, I would never go to the former and would consider it my duty to do such work as I could at the latter.¹⁵

In the new political geography, Sneedorff thus found his proper political place on the constitutional, monarchical "right wing", and this political message was conveyed to the reading public in Copenhagen, where his assessment carried great weight. The fundamentally pessimistic tone of Sneedorff's reports from Paris was more important than his overt political views. As early as late 1791 he thought France was headed for internal conflict and he could see no clear way out of France's state of permanent revolution. In the spring of 1792, now established in London, he summarized his impressions of France. He thought France was moving away from a balanced constitution:

Your legislators constantly confuse the two different concepts of the mob and the people, different because just as it is in the nature of the people to be everything, so it is in the nature of the mob to be nothing.

But how was the political idea of the *peuple* to be protected from the mob which actually existed? Sneedorff was alarmed by the question. The merchants of Copenhagen doubtless understood what he meant by his parting shot at France:

¹⁴ Sneedorff wrote letters describing his travels which were printed in *Minerva*. This letter is dated Paris, 7 Nov. 1791 and is quoted from Frederik Sneedorff, *Samlede Skrifter*, vol. 1 (København, 1794), pp. 293–294.

¹⁵ This letter was printed in *Minerva*, January 1792.

“The haughty Briton smiles as he watches your trade flee across the sea to his island”.¹⁶

The last republican

The existence of an ongoing public debate in which disrespectful views were sometimes expressed was due to the relative freedom of the press allowed in absolutist Denmark, where – in the words of the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft – the absolutist monarch permitted the inhabitants to “enjoy all the blessings of freedom”.¹⁷ Freedom of the press was originally introduced at Struensee’s initiative through an ordinance of 14 September 1770. However, the liability to criminal proceedings of those who published printed material was emphasized as early as the following year. The conservative government of Ove Hoegh-Guldberg which followed Struensee’s regime made the provisions concerning criminal liability more severe in an ordinance of 20 October 1773, but did not reintroduce censorship. It was left to the head of the police to take legal proceedings against those who broke the law, and there was no appeal against his decision. The change of government in 1784 which brought a liberal government under A. P. Bernstorff to power led to no formal changes in the ordinance concerning freedom of the press, but the ordinance was now administered in a far more liberal spirit in practice. The new government adopted this policy on the basis that conditions were calmer in a country like Britain where there was freedom of the press than in countries like France and the Netherlands where the opposition had difficulty in having its voice heard.

This was one of the reasons why it was not difficult for Denmark’s intellectual elite to applaud the ideals of the French Revolution at the same time as it showed respect for Danish absolutism. This was initially true even of such a radical and independent writer as Peter Andreas Heiberg.

In the longer run, his name came to be associated with the view that the absolutist regime was oppressive and illiberal, but in 1790 he was writing high-flown hymns of praise on the occasion of the entry of the newly-married crown prince and his bride into the capital and was also the author of many royalist slogans which adorned the decorations put up to mark the occasion. However, he had at the same time written for recitation at a private party the satirical poem which began with the words quoted earlier.

Orders are for hanging on idiots; medals and sashes are only given to the nobility. But we never see a word in the newspapers about the Mallings, Suhms and Rothes [three prominent intellectuals]. And indeed, if one has a brain, one can easily avoid orders and medals.¹⁸

Although these words in no way attacked the royal family and exclusively attacked the privileges of the predominantly German-born nobility (which the

¹⁶ Sneedorff, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 420.

¹⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters written during a short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796/Nebraska, 1976), p. 74.

¹⁸ Printed in *Morgens-Post*, 1 Oct. 1790.

government's policy was seeking to curtail) and although the satire was directed at the nobility as a whole without criticizing any particular individual, Heiberg was fined 150 *rigsdaler* and his printer 50 *rigsdaler*. This sentence attracted a lot of attention and was regarded as unreasonable by the whole educated population – which is hardly surprising since it was this group that Heiberg had implicitly praised at the expense of the nobility. The head of the police's right to impose fines at his own discretion was criticized. It was therefore regarded as an improvement when Colbiørnsen proposed a revision of the existing regulations, which resulted in a new ordinance of 3 December 1790. This ordinance stipulated that “all cases which arise from an abuse of the freedom of the press ought in future to be prosecuted in the ordinary courts . . . and be judged accordingly to the stipulations of the law”.¹⁹ The judgement on Heiberg came just after another in which his printer had been fined 200 *rigsdaler* for insulting remarks about the navy. This was the beginning of a process of radicalization which proved fateful both for Heiberg himself and his associate Malthe Conrad Bruun (who, paradoxically enough, was the son of one of the disaffected landowners from Jutland) and for the notion of absolutism governed by public opinion. Heiberg became more and more openly republican in outlook in direct proportion to the degree that he quite rightly felt he had been passed over when a number of posts were filled. In the winter of 1793 he translated the *Marseillaise* into Danish, and led the singing of this bloodthirsty battle-song in the clubs of Copenhagen. Despite the crown prince's anxiety about “the increase in impertinent writings”, both Colbiørnsen and A. P. Bernstorff thought it unnecessary to tighten the law relating to freedom of the press, and nothing was done until after Bernstorff's death in the summer of 1797. A new ordinance was issued on 27 September 1799 after pressure from Tsar Paul of Russia, who regarded the Danish government as being too “jacobinical”.

The new ordinance set narrow limits on what might be permitted in the press. Anonymous writings were completely forbidden, and – worst of all – censorship was introduced for everyone who had previously been found guilty in a freedom of the press case, even if he had only been fined. Heiberg and Bruun were hard hit by the new ordinance. They had wanted a confrontation with a regime which they regarded as increasingly conservative and anti-republican, and now they got it. As always, Heiberg was in the middle of a court case in which he stood accused under the terms of the old ordinance. He was now found guilty under the new ordinance and was sentenced on 24 December 1799 to banishment for life. Heiberg chose not to appeal and left the country (and his wife) on 7 February 1800 in order to join Bruun in Paris. Bruun had earlier foreseen the likely course of developments in Denmark and had already started out on a new career in Paris as a geographer and literary critic. Heiberg experienced some hard years until he was appointed to a translator's post in Talleyrand's foreign ministry in 1807. He remained interested in Danish affairs and sometimes wrote about them in French newspapers and periodicals. He also kept in touch with many Danes, including the painter mentioned earlier, Abildgaard. Heiberg played quite an important role in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, as is clear from his

¹⁹ Quoted from Else Kai Seas, *Lykkens Tempel* (1986), p. 136. See also the account in Harald Jørgensen, *Trykkefrihedsspørgsmaalet i Danmark 1799–1848* (København, 1944), pp. 15–28.

surviving correspondence, in providing some continuity in Danish liberal political thought. In particular, he was of considerable importance to A. F. Tscherning, an artillery officer who later became leader of the political peasants' movement. Tscherning visited France with the Danish military corps between 1815 and 1818 (a military activity which, incidentally, was quite important for the transmission of French culture to Denmark) and again on a study trip in 1820. The connection between Heiberg and Tscherning, which can be documented from the letters they exchanged in the 1820s, provided a link between the republican student radicalism of the 1790s and the breakthrough for organized political parties which occurred in the 1830s. However, before we discuss this continuity, it is necessary to look a little more closely at events in Denmark during the 1790s.

The end of absolutism governed by public opinion

Political divisions intensified in Denmark after the years 1793–94. When the jurist and political scientist C. U. D. Eggers published *Mærkværdigheder ved den franske Revolution med særdeles Hensyn paa Statsretten og Politikken* (3 volumes, 1795–98) (Remarkable features of the French Revolution with special reference to constitutional law and politics) in Copenhagen, he expressed a fear in his introduction that because of the experience of Jacobin rule, many would prefer to accept the old despotic yoke rather than attempt to find ways which avoided both the indiscipline of freedom and Europe's relapse into barbarism. His fears were well-founded. The new ways of which he spoke were blocked by extreme "for or against" attitudes to the French Revolution.

When the jurist Peter Collett in 1797 asserted the right of citizens to criticize sovereign authority itself, he was dismissed from his official post. This caused discontent, but no crisis. When Heiberg and Bruun continued to satirize the absence of popular influence on and knowledge about the government of the state – for example, in the periodical *For Sandhed* (For Truth) – they did provoke a crisis, which led to the curtailment of freedom of the press in 1799. The crisis failed to undermine absolutism, but it did paralyze the opposition.

An example of the way the ordinance of 27 September 1799 was received is provided by the reaction of the young Danish historian Laurids Engelstoft, who was staying in Paris at the time. In a letter on 17 October 1799 to a friend in Copenhagen, he enthusiastically described "the republicanization" of manners in France and Citoyenne Labrosse's air voyage by balloon and parachute, at the same time as he gave an account of how the new ordinance, which in Denmark finally put an end to surviving middle-class hopes about the absolutist regime, had been received in France.

Not only all the Danes here, with a few exceptions, but also the French are *frappés d'étonnement* over the press law from which you sent us extracts. I can assure you that I had to read your letter through twice before I would believe that it really was a law and not some satirical piece from among the flow of pamphlets being published in Denmark. I and several others are still of the opinion that the government intends no more than a *pro forma* measure designed to placate Russia. Can it be possible that a government which has

hitherto placed its honour behind encouraging freedom of the press should all at once adopt the contrary principle? The main contents of the ordinance are printed in all the French journals, always accompanied by pointed comments . . . Heaven forbid that retroactive force should be given to this miserable law. *Die Götter* know that I have never thought of writing anything against either the king or religion, but I could point to 100 or more places in my modest literary output for which I could be banished or incarcerated without violating the terms of the ordinance depending on the degree to which the head of the police and other good people were ill-disposed towards me . . . I intend no joke when I say that, as the loyal subject of His Danish Majesty, I would be distressed if foreigners are obliged to withdraw a part of their favourable ideas about the philosophy of the Danish government.²⁰

Developments were alarming, but they still did not produce a crisis. Absolutism had neither exhausted its reservoir of loyalty nor provoked an alternative. Heiberg and Bruun could be exiled without any trouble being caused. Moreover, the military defeats of 1801, 1807 and 1814, the loss of Norway in 1814 and the economic crisis of the following decade gave the whole population something else to think about.

The fall of absolutism

The first consultative assemblies of the estates for the unified state of Denmark, Schleswig and Holstein did not meet until 1834. This created for the first time a real political stage in Denmark, a stage which came to play a large role in the development of a political public in Denmark during the period leading up to the peaceful revolution of 1848 and the summoning that same year of the parliamentary assembly which drew up a new constitution.

The crown prince became king as Frederik VI in 1808. He lived to a very great age (until 1839) and incarnated in his person the principle of continuing absolutist government. He insisted on personal involvement in administration, down to the smallest detail. Indeed, he was criticized for preferring to immerse himself in details and to play the beneficent *pater patriae* instead of maintaining a broader strategic outlook. Nonetheless, despite his earlier statements that he would never do so, in 1831 he issued the decree concerning elections to the consultative assemblies of the estates. In doing so, he came close to accepting the proposals and demands which Suhm and Riegels had put forward a half century earlier, while he was crown prince. In the 1830s the old estates of the realm were, as an institution, even more anachronistic, if possible, than had been the case in France in 1789, and the political consequences for absolutism were even more predictable. What was the background to this decision and to these political developments which the absolutist regime had hitherto feared, quite rightly, as an "attack on sovereignty"?

Consultative assemblies of the estates were the only kind of representative political body which the absolutist regime could formally accept. However, the decision in 1831 to hold preparatory elections to the "Consultative Provincial Estates" (*Rådgivende Provinsialstænder*), as they were called was not prompted by the

²⁰ *Udvalg af L. Engelstofts Skrifter* edited by C. F. Allen, vol. 3, pp. 256–57.

religious and political opposition to the state and its institutions, which was manifested both in the countryside and the towns in the 1820s. Nor was it prompted by the general eighteenth-century demand for "popular scrutiny" or popular sovereignty. Instead, the government's decision was necessitated by a question of national affiliation and by the demand of Schleswig-Holstein for national self-determination. Holstein belonged to the German Confederation and because of this was able to demand a local assembly of the estates. The July Revolution in Paris in 1830 brought the constitutional question to the fore throughout "Restoration Europe", including Schleswig-Holstein. An official on the island of Sild (Sylt), Uwe Jens Lornsen, created a political storm at the end of 1830 by demanding a joint constitution for Schleswig and Holstein. The reaction of the absolutist government to this separatist demand was – apart from imprisoning the presumptuous Lornsen – to establish consultative provincial estates throughout the *whole* Danish state. Four small provincial towns – Itzehoe, Schleswig, Roskilde and Viborg – were chosen as the meeting-places for these assemblies. It was still regarded as important that political assemblies should be kept away from Copenhagen and the dreaded "mob".

The government had been obliged to choose between two different forms of collapse: between, on the one side, the immediate dissolution of the state which would result from the establishment of an assembly for Schleswig-Holstein, and, on the other side, the gradual dissolution of the absolutist regime. After 1789 no one could be in any doubt that the gradual dissolution of the absolutist regime had to be the consequence of setting up representative assemblies, even if there were no question of a single assembly of the estates for the whole state. And, indeed, the consultative provincial estates *did* become national political laboratories which played an important role in training a political class. What the opposition to absolutism had been unable to achieve either before or during the French Revolution was now introduced by the state itself after the revolution – and in the reactionary, restored Europe of the *Vormärz* period to boot! From first to last, the political effects of the French Revolution on Danish absolutism were very indirect and the differences between the course of political events in France and Denmark were very great.

With only slight exaggeration, it is possible to say that the relationship between the general development of the society and political forms of government was reversed in the two countries. The long-term result of the French Revolution was, in addition to increasing the centralization of the state, the creation of an independent peasant class which in the long run became the socially-conservative pillar of the republic. In Denmark, the absolutist regime (which for this reason it is not very meaningful to describe as *l'ancien régime*) devised and carried out a cohesive plan of agrarian reforms which in the course of the first half of the nineteenth century undermined absolutism. This was not, of course, the government's intention. It was the unintended effect of the reforms introduced after extensive public debate under a form of government sometimes described by modern scholars as "absolutism governed by public opinion"²¹. The ideology

²¹ J. A. Seip, "Teorien om det opinionsstyrte enevælde", *Historisk Tidsskrift* (Norway), vol. 38 (1958), pp. 397–464.

which flourished under the absolutist regime and which was quite unique in historical terms may be characterized by the words "freedom" and "justice", and the monarchy was seen as the guarantor, not the enemy, of both. This notion enjoyed its heyday between 1785 and 1789, but still sometimes enunciated during the 1830s in connection with the summoning of the consultative provincial estates.

The class of independent peasant-freeholders created by the Danish agrarian reforms demanded – after a lengthy process of religious, political, economic and cultural organization in the nineteenth century – a share of political power, and in 1901 it was even able to achieve absolute political hegemony, albeit only for a relatively short time. However, in the 1830s and 1840s the primary agents of political change were a small group of burghers, officials and intellectuals, who began to call themselves *national* liberals after 1842 in order to distinguish themselves from their counterparts in Holstein. They did this in order to acquire a social base which could justify their assumption of power. The point of departure for and the final result of the overriding process of "social change" in France and Denmark between 1750 and 1850 is thus comparable, though Danish society ought to be described as less "blocked" than French society in the second half of the nineteenth century, but the process during the intervening period was completely different. This is the main conclusion to be drawn from a systematic comparison of the histories of two states which to all appearances cannot be compared.