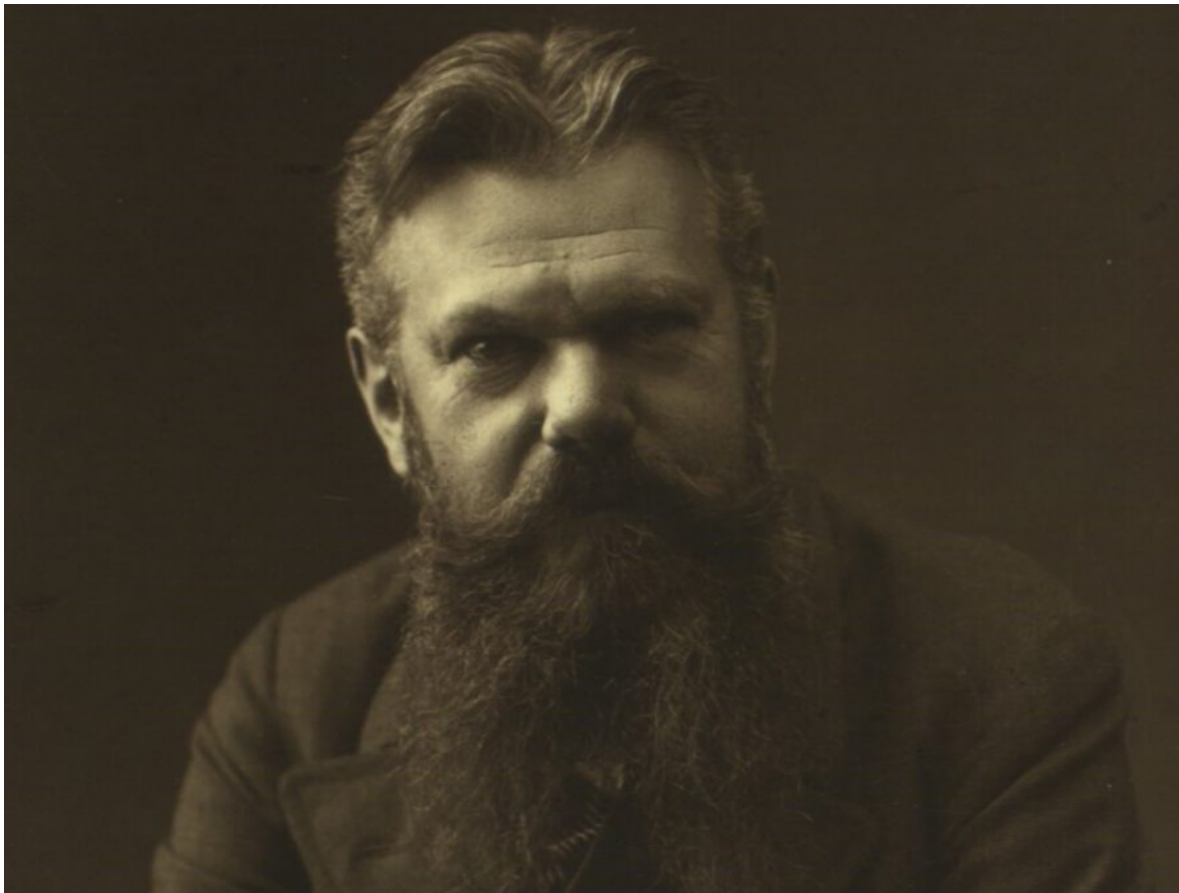


Denmark's Frederik Borgbjerg Wanted to Win Democratic Socialism, Not Just the Welfare State

The Nordic social democracies are rightly praised for their robust welfare states and worker protections. But the aspirations of early Social Democrats like Denmark's Frederik Borgbjerg went far beyond the welfare state: they wanted to liberate humanity from the shackles of capitalist domination.



Frederik Bjorgberg, circa 1910. (Royal Library, Copenhagen)

It is no wonder the Nordic model continues to inspire progressives around the world. While they haven't weathered the neoliberal era unscathed, the Scandinavian countries still boast robust welfare states that offer free health care and education and give workers a voice on the job. They're a [ready-made argument](#) against conservative myths about the dangers of big public sectors and high social spending.

Yet the original ambition of Scandinavian Social Democrats went far beyond the welfare state. Their goal was to liberate humanity from the shackles of both capitalist domination and state tyranny through the construction of democratic republics.

One of the key proponents of this democratic socialist vision was the Danish intellectual and politician Frederik Borgbjerg (1866–1936). Although largely forgotten today, he was immensely influential in the early twentieth century — one preeminent scholar [lists him](#) as the single most important individual for the emergence of democratic socialist thought in Denmark.

For Borgbjerg, the historical mission of social democracy was to extend democracy to all spheres of social life, including the economy and the state. Capitalism was not perceived as a pre-political given, but rather as an obstacle to be gradually overcome in the pursuit of liberty for all.

Borgbjerg as Intellectual and Politician

Frederik Borgbjerg was born in rural Zealand, the country's largest island, in 1866. His father, a progressive veterinarian, sent his gifted son to Copenhagen to attend a private school at the age of seven, but Borgbjerg returned home on all school holidays. From a young age, Borgbjerg thus experienced a rare mix of rural and urban life, which arguably shaped his worldview.

While he originally intended to become a priest, Borgbjerg's growing political awareness led him to drop out of university and join the ranks of the burgeoning social democratic labor movement by the late 1880s — one of the first intellectuals to do so.



Frederik Borgbjerg in the 1890s. (Royal Library, Copenhagen)

Over the succeeding decades, Borgbjerg left a sizable mark on Denmark's modern development as both intellectual and politician. From his early twenties until his death, he penned thousands of articles for the party newspaper *Social-Demokraten*, then among the largest daily newspapers in Scandinavia, and edited the publication from 1911 to 1924 and 1928 to 1929. He also mastered the spoken word, winning praise as one of the best political orators in the country in the pre-radio epoch. Borgbjerg's political career spanned several decades. His parliamentary career as a Social Democrat MP began in 1898 and lasted until 1936, with stints as parliamentary speaker (1901–1915), minister of social affairs (1924–26), and minister of education (1929–35). From 1898 to 1904 and 1905 to 1913, he simultaneously served as a city council member in Copenhagen.

The Cooperative State

Borgbjerg's vision of socialism was encapsulated in his concept of the “cooperative state” (*Andelsstaten*), which he used on his first agitational tour in the early 1890s.

The party had dispatched Borgbjerg to speak in dozens of villages across Eastern Denmark in an attempt to widen its base beyond the urban centers. In his pronouncements before cottagers and agricultural laborers, Borgbjerg used the “cooperative state” to defend socialism against red-baiting stories about the destruction of the family and the traditional way of life. If one wanted to know what socialism was *really* about, Borgbjerg argued, one only had to look at the cooperative movement of the Danish farmers, the so-called *Andelsbevægelse*.

The *Andelsbevægelse* had exploded in the preceding decade. Faced with an export crisis after grains from the United States and Ukraine surged into European markets, Danish farmers quickly pivoted to

livestock production and joined together in hundreds of cooperative dairies and slaughterhouses. All farmers had one vote at the general assembly, regardless of their share of the produce.

“The entire people must do as the farmers did: join together and run production and circulation according to the cooperative system.”

Through the cooperative, farmers were able to improve the quality of their goods while shielding themselves from the insidious spiral of internal competition. They were also able to fine-tune their democratic skills, as all participating farmers were given a voice and expected to take part in governing for the common good.

It is this experience that Borgbjerg sought to copy and scale up to society as a whole. In an 1894 pamphlet, he wrote:

The great Cooperative Idea, the one that includes all branches of production and all social classes, is called socialism. The entire people must do as the farmers did: join together and run production and circulation according to the cooperative system, so that no individual is allowed to “skim off the cream,” and so that every cooperative stakeholder, that is to say every member of society who participates in running society, will receive his full, just return . . . The difference between classes will disappear; there will not be buyers and sellers of labor; we will all become our own employers; we will all become free and equal citizens of the state.

Thus, rather than build an exclusive community only for property-holding farmers, the Social Democrats’ aim was to transform society into one big cooperative association, in which all individuals had an equal stake.

At first glance, this rurally tinged metaphor may appear idiosyncratically Danish. But if we take a closer look at Borgbjerg’s thought and praxis, it quickly becomes clear that we are dealing with an attempt to adapt the internationalist and republican-socialist vision of the Second International to a Danish context.

Republican Socialism

In recent years, scholars have drawn out the connections between republicanism and the emergence of socialism in the nineteenth century. Alex Gourevitch has excavated the tradition of [labor republicanism](#) among artisan workers in the United States, and William Clare Roberts has [used Capital to reread Karl Marx](#) as a radical republican. The burgeoning labor movements of Scandinavia of this time were also steeped in the language and imagery of “red” republicanism, harkening back to the French Revolution. And Borgbjerg is an exemplar of this tradition.

Borgbjerg’s notion of liberty was unmistakably republican. To him, freedom was not simply the absence of interference, as for liberals, but rather the ability to lead a life free of domination and unaccountable masters — be they capitalist employers, bankers, or landowners. Borgbjerg ends *The Cooperative State* by pointing out that socialism aims to “abolish the yoke of bondage not only of starvation wages but also of mortgage debts” in order to ensure “dignified human lives as free men on common soil.” *Freedom* implies material independence.

“Freedom was not simply mean the absence of interference, as for liberals, but rather the ability to lead a life free of domination and unaccountable masters.”

Borgbjerg’s emancipatory vision included not only the urban proletariat but all subordinate classes, including the oppressed in rural areas (smallholding cottagers as well as landless peasants and servants). Throughout his career, Borgbjerg insisted that social democracy was a project of building a “community of the people” (*Folkefællesskab*) to overcome capitalism by democratic means.

Finally, Borgbjerg followed the lead of Marx and Friedrich Engels in interpreting socialism as the project of democratic republicanism, updated for the epoch of industrial capitalism. This much is clear from his coauthorship of a two-volume work on the history of socialism since the French Revolution, *The Century of Social Democracy*, published by his party in 1904. As a frequent Danish representative to the congresses of the Second International, Borgbjerg also developed strong ties to like-minded colleagues and an admiration for the French republican socialist [Jean Jaurès](#).

Constitutionalist, Communalist, and Cooperativist

Borgbjerg’s republican socialism guided his praxis in several areas. Three are of particular interest as

examples of his brand of radical reformism.

Borgbjerg's key objective as a member of parliament in the early 1900s was to democratize the Danish state. Like Marx and Engels — who saw the democratic republic as the “[antechamber of socialism](#)” — Borgbjerg viewed political democracy not only as an end in itself but as a precondition for any subsequent step toward the Cooperative State. He played a pivotal role in the popular campaigns that won a new constitution in 1915, which granted suffrage to both women and servants. Borgbjerg's persistent drive to transform the Danish state into something more than a plaything of the elite made him well-liked among the country's popular classes. As a freshman parliamentarian, Borgbjerg defended the plight of Alma Bondesen, a young Copenhagen servant wrongly convicted for theft by a court system scandalously biased against workers. He attacked the Liberal Party's finance minister Peter Adler Alberti for his inability to separate his private economic interests from the public good. Alberti was later revealed to have defrauded the state and was sent to prison. When the Danish King Christian X dissolved the elected government in 1920, it was Borgbjerg who decided, in his position as editor of *Social-Demokraten*, to threaten a general strike. The king yielded, and new elections were called.

“Borgbjerg viewed political democracy not only as an end in itself but as a precondition for any subsequent step toward the Cooperative State.”

Second, as a member of Copenhagen City Council, Borgbjerg pioneered a form of municipal socialism. Rather than waiting to win power at the national level, he advocated turning cities with worker majorities into model communes, through practical experiments with welfare services under local democratic control. Borgbjerg insisted on the need for universal rather than class-specific services. In particular, he advocated a unitary public school system that would bring children from different social strata together, on the understanding that it would prepare them for the classless society to come. In the last phase of his political career, Borgbjerg returned to this project — although this time at the national scale — as minister of education (1929–35).

Third, Borgbjerg cast economic cooperativism as an essential aspect of the workers' movement. While many in the party considered cooperativism a distraction from class struggle, Borgbjerg believed that the positive effects of economic self-organization from below easily outweighed its potential drawbacks. “The task — not in the future but now,” Borgbjerg wrote in a 1909 pamphlet, “is to use economic organization of the population from the bottom up to counter and preempt the dangers that may arise through a too forceful development towards bureaucratism.”

The Welfare State and the Cooperative State

If Borgbjerg was so influential and innovative, why did Denmark's Social Democrats ultimately abandon his vision of the Cooperative State and replace it with the more moderate alternative of the welfare state?

At the individual level, it is clear that Borgbjerg's influence faded with the Social Democratic Party's transition to a state-governing organization. This wasn't just because he grew older (he was nearly sixty when the first Social Democratic government came to power in 1924), but also because his vision was tailor-made for oppositional mobilization. As long as political democracy had not been fully consolidated, Borgbjerg represented the powerful voice of progress. However, he never developed a state project, nor an economic model, that could match the ingenuity of his vision of a good society. It was never clear what the relationship between state planning and the cooperative market economy was supposed to be.

The Danish labor movement was also never geared toward realizing a radically democratic state project. Borgbjerg's warnings about bureaucratism notwithstanding, the Danish labor movement always emphasized the need for national-level coordination over workers' autonomy (and Borgbjerg was always in on this project, even if he represented its bottom-up consciousness).



Frederik Borgbjerg in the 1920s. (Royal Library, Copenhagen)

Finally, at the macro level, the fate of Danish social democracy is tangled up with world history. The Stalinist turn of the Russian Revolution (which Borgbjerg had initially celebrated in 1917) and the reform-revolution schism of the international labor movement pushed the Scandinavian social democrats — who were already on the brink of winning government power by the 1920s — further toward the path of class compromise and labor demobilization. After World War II, the animosity between Communists and Social Democrats resulted in the latter choosing to side entirely with the United States in the Cold War. H. C. Hansen, the Social Democratic prime minister from 1955 to 1960, was even revealed to have been a CIA informant around 1945.

In this geopolitical context, it was only logical that the ambition of democratizing the economy through constitutional radicalism (the original aspiration of social democracy) was taken off the agenda and supplanted by the welfarist “third way.” With the exception of an abortive attempt in the 1970s to establish “economic democracy” through wage-earner funds under union control, Borgbjerg’s vision became a distant dream.

Borgbjerg in the Twenty-First Century

So why bother reading Borgbjerg today? Perhaps because the further we get from the welfarist social order of the postwar era — and the more neoliberalism grows — the more relevant Borgbjerg’s democratic anti-capitalism becomes.

There are at least two ways Borgbjerg can serve as a source of inspiration for democratic socialists today. First, his radical republican notion of liberty as socioeconomic autonomy — coupled with his call for cooperative organization of economic life as the antidote to capitalist domination — is indispensable for any political project seeking to mobilize increasingly [debt-ridden workers](#) toiling in an increasingly precarious labor market.

And second, Borgbjerg’s optimism about the emancipatory potential of democratic republicanism — of universal suffrage and a state apparatus fully accountable to its citizens combined with internationalism in foreign relations — is as relevant as ever. It is not that these institutions are in any way perfect, or sure to lead to socialism.

Yet in a time when the climate emergency and race for resources is threatening to converge with mounting authoritarian nationalism, insisting on democratic solutions remains the Left’s best shot at keeping humanity from descending down the tunnel of barbarism.