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Saving the American Farmer: The Impact of Danish Agricultural Practices on American Policy Direction

by Byron Rom-Jensen
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“We are not Denmark.”¹ This assertion by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a national debate in early 2016 as a retort to Senator Bernie Sanders’ calls to learn from Denmark evoked little surprise. The greater surprise was, in fact, that the discussions of Denmark had gone this far. It certainly seemed remarkable when Sanders, shortly after announcing his presidential candidacy, praised Scandinavian social programs in areas such as childcare and education, and encouraged Americans to learn from these policies. Such a pronouncement ran counter to traditional path-dependent explanations for American domestic policy, according to which government programs developed as solutions to national issues unique to the United States. By advocating the adoption of policies implemented abroad, Sanders was recognizing the commonality of American problems with global conditions. As his unlikely model, Bernie Sanders chose Denmark, even though the size and homogeneity of the nation radically demarcated it from the United States.² Press reports have made these distinctions even clearer, emphasizing the political distance of radical “socialist Scandinavia” from the orthodoxy of capitalist America.³

The wary public response to Sanders’ calls to study Denmark highlights the obstacles facing those who advocate transnational policy study and adoption, especially from the small Nordic countries. The distances—geographic, demographic, and ideological—between Scandinavia and the United States have often been held up as major impediments not only to successful implementation, but even to the very idea of looking abroad. That Sanders should choose to highlight Scandinavian social policy as a major plank in his reform message therefore seems unexpected under the traditional rules of national American politics.

Yet, if one reflects back on the early decades of the twentieth century, the popularity of Denmark as a policy model becomes less

unexpected and singular. The smallest Scandinavian nation has a historical precedent for exciting the American political imagination and encouraging discussions of transfer. Writers and scholars have previously explored instances where Danish cultural and social products entered the United States in a process of adaptation and transformation. *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish American Heritage Society* has contributed to this scholarship, furthering our understanding of Denmark's place in a transnational world. Kirstin Bouwsema's study, presented in *The Bridge* in 2010, of the efforts by Danish immigrants to transplant cooperative practices to the Alberta province of Canada demonstrates a particularly Danish contribution in a field that traditionally has received only broad treatments.⁴ Moreover, *The Bridge* has given the Danish folk high schools (*folkehøjskoler*) an even more expansive treatment, painting their history in the United States in both general and personal strokes.⁵ Such articles are invaluable for tracking the international spread of Danish sub-statist programs, understanding their successes and, more often, the obstacles that obstructed realization of their goals. However, in doing so, most accounts have glossed over why such programs were brought to America in the first place, assuming their practicality and desirability to be a universal phenomenon. What led Americans to look beyond their own borders to the small Scandinavian country of Denmark, the goals and purpose of studying successful Danish programs, are of equal importance in understanding transnational policy adoption. It was more than just the nostalgia of Danish Americans or the local success of Danish programs that motivated the transplantation process. Rather, the domestic agricultural conditions within the United States were critical in influencing Americans, especially during the 1920s, to seek out Danish examples in the first place.

In this article, I do not propose to look at the degree to which Danish programs were successful in the United States, but rather why Americans sought to learn lessons from Denmark in the first place. After all, understanding the results of Danish programs in America is impossible without first recognizing what Americans hoped to achieve through such programs. Domestic pull factors—linked with the economic, social, and political instability of rural populations—are just as important as the push factors of Danish agricultural recovery in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for understanding the willingness of Americans to transplant Danish institutions.⁶

Observing and learning from Danish practices was a response to the desperation of American intellectuals, who believed, not incorrectly, they were witnessing the passing of the independent farmer from the modern capitalist stage. Looking to Denmark was motivated by more than just the migration of Danish immigrants or the curiosity of a few intellectuals. In truth, for those Americans with both an international outlook and sympathy for agriculture, Danish innovations represented the best means of preserving, and even saving, American democracy in the new century.

The Postwar Depression

Victory in World War I seemed to signal the beginning of a new, prosperous future for the United States. The nation had avoided much of the destruction of economic infrastructure and human capital that stripped the European combatants bare, and wartime experience demonstrated the potentials for American production. While industry quickly turned towards civilian manufacture, thereby maintaining its capacity, agriculture faced reduced demand and structural inadequacies. Despite the economy hitting a general peak in January 1920, an economic downturn in 1918 followed by a dramatic drop in agricultural prices in June 1920 pushed the agricultural sector towards crisis.⁷

Wartime demand for American crops naturally inflated the value of agricultural products. New mechanical tools and fertilizers helped boost output in response to the artificially enlarged demand, and the farmers profited. By the end of the war, however, farmers were producing too much for markets to absorb. Both domestically and internationally, peacetime meant greatly reduced sales of American foodstuffs, in particular wheat, corn, pork, and beef.⁸ From their peak in January 1920, prices fell by almost half by the end of the year.⁹

In addition to reduced demand, the indebtedness of American farmers, including soldiers who had returned from the war and borrowed money to purchase land, exacerbated the deteriorating situation. The demand for land increased farm values, so those wanting to own their own small farm had to pay dearly for a piece of property. When crop prices fell in June 1920, the effect was dramatic. Interest payments on mortgage-backed loans used to buy land rose at the same time that property values fell by almost thirty percent, leaving

many farmers “upside down” on debt-to-value ratios, a situation not unlike the housing crisis of 2008-12. Selling the farm to pay the bank debt was not a viable solution if the property could not be sold for enough money to cover the debt.¹⁰ Desperate to pay off their creditors, farmers tried to produce even more, inadvertently depressing prices further.¹¹ As the crisis deepened, an alarming number of farms faced foreclosure and short sales, thereby turning the inhabitants into tenant farmers. The “curse” of tenancy clashed with the ideal of the individualistic American farmer,¹² and worried observers speculated that “landlordism and tenancy seem the inevitable companions of industrialized growth.”¹³ Thus, it seemed that the subjugation of the agricultural classes was inescapable under the grinding of the modern state and its industrial economy.

Concurrent with economic problems, the rural community also faced systemic deficiencies in its educational system. American social psychologist Orville Gilbert Brim lamented the “injustice to the rural child,” who left school immature and untrained.¹⁴ Among the numerous causes for this deficiency, most immediate was a lack of resources, especially in the American South. According to a *New York Times* graph using census data from 1932, ten states in the South, from Louisiana to Virginia, spent only \$31-\$51 per student over the course of their education. This contrasted sharply with more industrialized parts of the nation, where, for example, school systems in New York spent about three times as much as the Cotton Belt states, around \$127-\$158 per student.¹⁵

The lack of resources to support public education resulted in inexperienced and undertrained teachers using inadequate teaching materials. In 1931, Brim calculated that the average salary of teachers in one-room schools was only \$700 per year,¹⁶ although that number could be much lower. During a 1924 therapeutic sojourn to Warm Springs, Georgia, Franklin D. Roosevelt was approached by a nineteen-year old principal of a local school, who asked the future president to dedicate a schoolhouse. Roosevelt was shocked, both by the boy’s age and the fact that the principal earned only \$300 a year. Realizing that the three teachers also working at the schoolhouse must be earning even less, Roosevelt asked himself, “Why do they have to pay that low scale of wages?”¹⁷ He was not the only one voicing that question. According to academic observers like Brim, the result of such deficiencies was a rural population that had lost both a sense

of community and an individual incentive for improvement. This social stasis, described by Joseph Hart as “The Paralysis of the Social Mind,” threatened to displace the farmer economically, socially, and politically in the new United States.¹⁸

In order to rectify these problems and restore American farmers’ sense of initiative and value, intellectuals turned to a small nation at Europe’s northern edge, a nation with less than three percent of the United States’ population. Against each of these forms of displacement—economic, social, and political—Denmark became the model of the modern agricultural state.

Organizing the Producers

In 1922, in the wake of plummeting prices, increasing indebtedness, and numerous foreclosures that were already creating panic in the United States, policymakers scrambled for a solution. The resulting congressional legislation was Public Law 67-146, known as the Capper-Volstead Act. The act was a culmination of a long struggle that freed agriculture from antitrust laws, allowing farmers to pool their resources for the purpose of cooperative marketing, pricing, and selling.¹⁹ Prior to the Capper-Volstead Act, farmers acting cooperatively were liable for prosecution under illegal organization and price fixing laws.²⁰ This left farmers dependent on third-party middlemen to deliver their products to market, further undercutting agricultural profits. While cooperatives were already well established by the time the legislation was enacted, with more than one thousand active farmer cooperatives by 1890,²¹ such cooperatives had necessarily been small operations, which were not particularly successful in promoting greater prosperity or equitable treatment for farmers more generally. In 1922, with the Capper-Volstead Act, the tide seemed to finally turn and agricultural cooperatives had a federal mandate legitimizing their existence.

In contrast to the situation in the United States, agricultural cooperation in Denmark was not facing an uphill battle for recognition in 1920. Producer cooperatives, as Americans called such joint ventures among farmers, had already been a boon for the tens of thousands of small farmers across the country. While American cooperatives were small ventures with low growth rates, the Danish cooperatives transformed the economy of the nation.²² Based on Rochdale

principles from Britain, Danish cooperatives emphasized democratic membership, education, and independence. By the First World War, more than 1,200 dairy cooperatives existed in Denmark.²³ By 1936, more than ninety percent of Danish farmers belonged to cooperative dairies and seventy percent to cooperative slaughterhouses.²⁴

The success of Danish cooperatives attracted Americans in search of inspiration for their own movement. In 1916, *The Washington Post* called for Americans to learn from examples of cooperation in Denmark, where the system had found its “highest state of development.”²⁵ Two years later, *The Christian Science Monitor* linked cooperation to the successful production of wheat, which rested on a foundation of friendly credit associations where farmers could loan money for agricultural purposes.²⁶ Both aspects, wheat production and money lending, were becoming increasingly pressing issues for American farmers. Newspaper attention coincided with study trips to Denmark by academics eager to learn modern farming theory. Waldemar Westergaard, a UCLA history professor with Danish roots, found Denmark to be “perhaps the foremost agricultural country in the world.”²⁷ In contrast to the wasteful practices of the Midwest, Westergaard lauded the modern and “scientific” Danish agricultural practices, which had brought prosperity even to the humble farmers of Jutland. Along with these practices, Danish laws permitting and encouraging cooperation were at the heart of this new agricultural efficiency. In Westergaard’s opinion, the promise of rural “organization” to inspire a “cooperative, solidaristic consciousness in the countryside” would help it match the productivity of the industrialized cities.²⁸

Following the passage of Capper-Volstead, the stream of American visitors to Denmark became steadier, as the validation of cooperatives gave new impetus for the exploration of Danish models. Crowding into the small nation, American observers could not help tripping over each other. Professor E. C. Branson came across fellow traveler Olive Dame Campbell while touring Denmark, while also hearing news that an unnamed representative of the Department of Agriculture was in town.²⁹ This may have been Chris L. Christensen, a young agricultural economist, whose study tour of Denmark coincided with Branson’s visit. Christensen’s grandfather had first come to the United States in the 1880s, settling in Nebraska. Danish heritage remained strong in Christensen’s family, and, after attending Nebraska State

Agricultural College, Christensen left for Denmark to study at the University of Copenhagen before eventually completing his education at Harvard.³⁰ The findings from Christensen's tour of Denmark were published as a bulletin by the Department of Agriculture entitled "Agricultural Cooperation in Denmark." The popular pamphlet praised cooperatives for making Danish agriculture efficient, modern, and high quality.³¹ Furthermore, Christensen declared that "the great fundamental contribution" of Danish cooperatives was that they had "adjusted production to meet the two demands of the market—the established consumer's market demand as to quantity, and the standard market demand as to quality. A fundamental basis for efficient marketing, with costs reduced to the minimum, is thus provided."³² Such a system promised to rectify the overproduction that had destroyed the market for American agriculture and make farmers less dependent on price-gouging middlemen.

Christensen's role in promoting Danish cooperatives increased in 1926, when Congress passed the Cooperative Marketing Act, which expanded and further clarified Capper-Volstead. The legislation legalized the exchange of ideas and information among cooperative associations beyond simply pricing of goods, and further defined which agriculturalists qualified for exemptions from antitrust legislation as a "producer."³³ Experts in both Denmark and the United States had long viewed the exchange of information among cooperative members and through expert lectures as



Chris L. Christensen

an essential requisite for agricultural success.³⁴ The Act also created the Division of Cooperative Marketing within the Department of Agriculture, a unit dedicated to conducting and disseminating research among America's agricultural colleges and cooperatives. The Secretary of Agriculture approved Chris Christensen to head this division, with the explicit purpose of reviewing both domestic and foreign cooperative experiences.³⁵

A year into this post, Christensen published another complimentary account of the Danish cooperatives in the *American-Scandinavian Review*. More explicitly than in his previous pamphlet, Christensen

described the United States as fifty years behind the advancements of a reinvigorated Denmark. Christensen declared that cooperatives were not an end in themselves, but were primarily interested in increasing profits for farmers. He described the relationship between marketing and production as the cornerstone of Danish successes and its greatest lesson for America. Christensen insisted that American farmers needed a similar link between production and the market in order to become as dynamic and profitable as their Danish counterparts.³⁶ Cooperatives had value as a means of securing this connection.



Barrels of cooperatively-produced Lurpak Butter ready for transport.

Christensen would continue to champion cooperatives throughout his tenure in government. In 1929, Christensen became secretary of the newly formed Federal Farm Board, created to promote self-help among farmers.³⁷ At Christensen's request, the Division of Cooperative Marketing and its staff were integrated into the new Board. Christensen remained in this post for two years, giving regular radio talks regarding agricultural and farming topics. For his final radio message in 1931, Christensen chose to relate the experience of the agricultural cooperative movement, a story, he declared, "of progress." In his radio program, Christensen detailed how the American cooperative movement had entered a new stage in 1920, developing large-scale cooperative marketing associations. Now it was time for a final push: the creation of "a permanent and successful cooperative marketing system." "Nothing," Christensen urged, "is more fundamental to the welfare of the farmers."³⁸

Socializing the Farmer

The lack of economic unity among farmers was not the only threat that experts on the American rural situation were working to overcome. Intellectuals bemoaned the “ignorance and isolation” of the rural population, who were victims of a lack of resources and anti-literary customs.³⁹ Such criticisms turned the traditionally “sturdy, independent and rugged” values of the farmer and agricultural laborer,⁴⁰ so often cherished as marking the exceptionality of America, into something degenerate and obtuse. This image of backwardness revealed deep discord between the mostly middle- and upper-class reformers, the priorities of the government, and the farmers themselves. Wil Lou Gray, a crusading reformer from South Carolina, wrote to a friend about the cuts to public school appropriations, complaining, “I don’t feel that our State will ever progress very much until as a State we value education.”⁴¹ Gray’s testimony reveals a common diagnosis of the South as possessing particularly persistent troubles with rural schooling. Southern farm tenancy dragged down productivity and a lack of trained agricultural experts marred existing institutions.⁴² Thus, it was with the South in mind that many reform-minded intellectuals searched for answers.

However, no singular plan would universally increase the literacy and intellect of the often broadly defined “agricultural class;” therefore, a plethora of different solutions became necessary. Some experts and reformists took a long-sighted approach by seeking to increase the resources dedicated to rural schools to assist future generations. However, improving rural schools still left the majority of the rural population, long past the age of primary education, set in their ways. This situation was unacceptable to many reformers, as the cyclical nature of ignorance meant that “illiteracy begets illiteracy.”⁴³ Illiteracy limited the emergence of agricultural leaders capable of preserving “rural values” against cultural pressures of modern civilization.⁴⁴ Therefore, reformers also discussed and utilized measures for adult education—including agricultural vocational schools and night schools—to create a self-improving agrarian society. Yet, each of these institutions had to be fashioned anew in the context of the new century. To do so, Americans looked abroad.

For educational reformers struggling to resolve America’s illiteracy problem, Denmark presented an intriguing model. Since 1814, all

Danish children learned under compulsory education laws, with set standards for teaching across the nation. This led to an increase in the quality of rural teaching and school attendance. By 1921, 275,000 students attended village schools, out of a population of 3,267,831.⁴⁵ The result over the next century, according to American observers, was a decline in illiteracy and a “universal diffusion of intelligence.”⁴⁶ Agricultural schools meanwhile instilled a sense of “self-help,”⁴⁷ which, like the cooperative movement, taught farmers to figure and negotiate prices.⁴⁸ However, most attractive to American desires for enlightened, innovative, and industrious farming communities were the Danish folk high schools (*folkehøjskoler*).

Founded on the principles of Lutheran pastor Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, the Danish folk high schools combined a form of spiritual revivalism with cultural nationalism.⁴⁹ Thus, the Grundtvigian folk high schools opened up intellectual learning environments in the center of agrarian spaces, focusing more on the development of self-expression, curiosity, and innovation, rather than classical or technical learning.⁵⁰ Especially appealing was the emphasis on local and rural culture, which promised to bridge the historical disconnect between traditional teaching methods and agrarian communities. Americans visiting the folk high schools observed that these programs could “help to educate and organize the lower-class, ‘common man’ of Depression-era America”⁵¹ by inspiring a culture of cooperation and compromise among rural populations.

Although American interest in the Danish folk high schools seemed to surge in the 1920s with the failing agricultural economy, initial recognition of the program’s benefits actually began decades prior to the Great Depression, even before American entry into World War I. In 1896, Philander Claxton, a professor of pedagogy and German at the North Carolina State Normal and Industrial College, discovered the folk high schools on a trip to Denmark,⁵² and pursued this interest when he became the U.S. Commissioner of Education in 1911. Between 1914 and 1916, the Bureau of Education published four separate bulletins on education in Denmark, three of them written by Harold Waldstein Foght, who toured Scandinavia at Claxton’s request.

Born in Norway in 1869, Foght migrated to Ord, Nebraska with his family by the time he was in high school. His work with various midwestern colleges, distinguished him as an expert on rural education.⁵³ In 1912, Foght was serving as a specialist for the Bureau of

Education and was tapped by Claxton, along with two other experts, to participate in a research trip abroad.⁵⁴ Thus, in the winter of 1912, Foght found himself on a boat back to Scandinavia with a mission to report on Danish rural educational practices.

Upon arrival, the Americans met with Danish educational officials and toured school facilities across the country. Foght was impressed by Danish educational provisions to rejuvenate and motivate rural populations, as he made clear in his first report. The report described the Danish educational system's success at encouraging intelligence among the peasantry and instilling a "love of soil tilling as a life calling." There were moral benefits to be had too, through the "building of noble character and in stimulating to a loftier idealism."⁵⁵ Such idealism seemed to contrast with the individualistic and material focus of American society. The report further identified the high schools as a central part in the Danish agrarian enlightenment, thereby making their transfer to the United States a necessary counterweight to the educational deterioration of the "great industrial transition going on about us."⁵⁶ Foght repeated this conviction in his next bulletin, citing the folk high school, suitably modified, as an ideal solution for solving the exploitation, backwardness, and illiteracy of rural America. Even the failure of previous Danish folk high schools in America, created for Americans of Danish lineage, did not bother Foght, as he evaluated that non-ethnocentric schools would not be plagued by the same issues.⁵⁷ Instead, the folk high schools were the means to create "*a vision-giving breadth of culture*" that Foght found so lacking among American farmers.⁵⁸

The popularity of Foght's reports encouraged Claxton to release a supplemental report in 1916 written by Iowan pastor Martin Hegland, the fourth report released by the Bureau of Education on Danish folk high schools. Hegland, who had written his PhD thesis on "The Danish People's High School,"⁵⁹ was more conservative in his estimation of the viability of the folk high school in America, but still determined that "the raising of the entire cultural level of the plain people...is good for any country."⁶⁰

The declaration of war in 1917 put American interest in rural intelligence and culture on hold, but, as the fighting concluded and the largely untouched United States and Denmark settled into periods of prosperity, the movement toward reform slowly reemerged. The initial responses to the agricultural crisis of 1920 seemed to inspire

economic rather than social solutions, but by the end of the 1920s, the Danish folk high schools were again viewed as important educational models, among both theoretical and practical reformers. For the former, Danish folk high schools were institutions of progressive educational and democratic principles. Among its theoretical proponents, Edgar Wallace Knight and Joseph Kinmont Hart, both of whom published books on the subject in 1927, were particularly important for integrating folk high schools into American concepts of adult education.

Both Knight, a very productive historian of education at the University of North Carolina, and Branson, a controversial professor of education who had lost his previous position after calls for the democratization of the university, were optimistic about the potential for educational reform.⁶¹ Knight believed that the countryside surrounding Chapel Hill, North Carolina demonstrated that tenancy and economic conflict created mutual distrust and misdirected energies, a “handicap [on] spiritual and intellectual interests.”⁶² Hart concurred, arguing that only new modes of thinking could, “save the world from destruction.”⁶³ Both educators identified Danish educational practices, which inspired self-reliance and initiative for individuals and communities, as the solution. Their accounts idealized the Danish folk high school for decoupling education and schooling, leading to a process of lifelong learning and growth. Despite a shared belief that America could learn from Denmark, the pair differed on where the reform should be implemented first. Loyal to his native communities, Hart insisted that the benefits of Danish reforms could be felt in North Carolina in a matter of decades.⁶⁴ Knight, while not explicitly disagreeing with the choice of geography, insisted that a start in an already prosperous agricultural community would create a better chance for success.⁶⁵ Yet, both certainly would have agreed that there was “no longer any reason why Americans should be ignorant of what has been, in many ways, the most remarkable education development of the modern world.”⁶⁶

The work of Hart and Knight contributed to a growing American recognition of rural education and rural culture in Denmark, which, as Mildred H. McAfee acknowledged in reviewing Hart, “has attracted much attention.”⁶⁷ Another reviewer grouped the combined works of Hart, Knight, and E. C. Branson into a portrait of the Danish folk high schools that served as a lesson for America.⁶⁸ However, Hart and

Knight wrote primarily from a theoretical standpoint. It was up to others to implement their visions.

Although folk high schools had been sporadically established in America for decades, the most prominent symbol of their expansion into U.S. communities was the John C. Campbell School. Created in the image of the Danish folk high schools, the Campbell School scrapped grades and examinations for discussions and activities meant to enhance the “collective identity” of its students. John Campbell, a young scholar teaching in rural Alabama, determined this lack of community feeling, which had been replaced with a deep-rooted “extreme individualism,”

was the major impediment to the Southern Highlands.⁶⁹ New communication and transportation technologies had opened the region, also known as Appalachia, to the rest of the United States to an unprecedented degree, but also left it susceptible to outside capital and power. In October 1908, Philander Claxton alerted John Campbell and his new wife, Olive Dame Campbell, to a potential solution for promoting rural collective bonds, the Danish folk high school, but the outbreak of war prevented the Campbells from studying these schools in person. After John Campbell passed away in 1919, Olive Campbell visited Denmark in 1922 on an American-Scandinavian Foundation grant,⁷⁰ and became fascinated, like many educators before her, with the intelligence and cultural unity of the Danish farmers. Olive Campbell founded the John C. Campbell School in Brasstown, North Carolina in 1925.



Olive Dame Campbell at the John C. Campbell Folk School.

Campbell's choice of the “South Atlantic Highlands” to test run a Danish-styled folk high school was based on her assessment that the need for cultural education in this area was most acute.⁷¹ In a book of her travel experiences published in 1928, Campbell surmised that America's poor rural areas were stuck with “the failure of our ordinary educational methods to build up country life,”⁷² and that, without

immediate reform, its farmers would fall deeper into poverty and tenancy. The Danish folk high schools, with their focus on community spirit over grades, seemed perfectly suited for the traditionally competitive people of the Highlands.⁷³ The dual effect of such a spirit would be “to make a satisfying life, socially and economically, in the mountains.”⁷⁴ Campbell believed the economic life would resemble Denmark’s, since the school planned to foster Appalachian understanding of “the ideals and practice of cooperation.”⁷⁵

In practice, however, Appalachia proved more resistant to “enlightenment” than expected. When Danish ideas of modern cooperative farming practice and agriculture did not catch on as hoped, Campbell took the step of directly transporting Danish folk high school staff to run the school’s cooperative enterprises.⁷⁶ Eventually the Campbell School found some level of success, promoting and preserving Appalachian traditions and handicrafts like whittling, and fostering a people confident in their culture and society, thereby defining “the borders of Appalachia.”⁷⁷

Although the initiative to transplant Danish educational practices to America survived the Great Depression, later attempts, such as the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee or Chris L. Christensen’s Danish-style courses as Dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin, produced varying results.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, the idea of the Danish folk high school became ingrained in American thought as a solution to rural backwardness. Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, Americans would sporadically present Danish folk high schools as transferable solutions for domestic educational problems.⁷⁹ Yet it was only in these earliest attempts of the 1920s that reformers could dream of changing the very nature of American rural society.

Politicizing Agriculture

The economic and social problems connected with American agriculture posed a substantial obstacle that reformers had to overcome to improve the welfare of rural communities. Nonetheless, as important and intransigent as these problems were, most observers also recognized that they only represented symptoms of an even broader potential threat to the American farmer: his complete political evisceration. Industrialization, the introduction of new transportation technologies, and the centralization of political activity left small

farmers increasingly disenfranchised and unable to represent their interests in both local and national politics. Lacking the necessary tools for political participation in the twentieth century, in particular a “solid network of group identifications and easy access to mass-communications media,” turnout in rural voting districts decreased in the period 1920-32.⁸⁰ Descriptions of farmers as the “backbone of any national election” rang progressively hollower. The nadir of agricultural influence came in 1924, when Calvin Coolidge, who had largely dropped farmers from his platform even before vetoing the McNary-Haugen agriculture subsidies bill, defeated Robert La Follette’s farmer-oriented bid for the White House.⁸¹ Farmers became the “sick man of America,”⁸² no longer represented among the dominant voices in government. This political isolation rendered farmers’ protests of the deteriorating conditions of rural communities “spontaneous, informal, and short-lived.”⁸³ Such efforts as were made did little to reaffirm agrarian voices in national or even state policymaking, leaving agrarian communities disheartened and politically impotent.⁸⁴

A pervasive sense of agriculture’s political deterioration ran throughout the 1920s, and its mood factored into studies of Danish innovations. Cooperatives, rural education, land reform, and modern farming devices presented an ideal vision of how farmers could protect and express their political rights in a democracy. In Denmark, farmers were traditionally aligned with the Danish Liberal party (Venstre), where they maintained political capital in the central government despite increasing migration to urban areas. By 1923, many farmers became dissatisfied with their traditional alliance, so the Danish Farmer’s Union created the Farmer’s Party to demand lower taxes and higher social benefits.⁸⁵ Although too few farmers defected from Venstre for the Farmer’s Party to gain parliamentary representation in 1924, it demonstrated to Americans the ability of rural populations to define the terms of their political participation. The power of the agricultural coalition, represented by Venstre, would result in the 1933 “Kanslergade Settlement,” the “1930’s biggest political-economic settlement,” which guaranteed that the foundations for the modern welfare state would be built on substantial subsidies to farmers.⁸⁶ Harold Foght, having observed the Danish farmers’ political struggles, viewed Denmark as a nation where the farmers “now practically control the country both economically and politically.”⁸⁷

The American quest to imitate Danish agricultural strength began by borrowing from the Danes' toolbox of organizational and social innovations. Cooperatives provided protection for farmers and agricultural workers,⁸⁸ giving them the opportunity to experience firsthand the importance of "social solidarity and united action."⁸⁹ The folk high schools trained generations of practical and intelligent rural leaders,⁹⁰ reversing the disappearance of "rural folk from positions of influence."⁹¹ With the vision and tools for improving agrarian life, a new generation of leaders, raised with Danish methods, would be capable of recognizing fundamental injustices and reversing the "political stagnation" in their communities.⁹² These innovations, generally presented as part of an intertwining and mutually dependent "Danish model," promised rural populations the ability to rediscover their place as citizens. The theme of "possession," or more accurately "repossession," occurred often in these narratives, asserting that farmers must take responsibility for a nation that they had lost.⁹³ If the course of American economic and political history continued unabated, observers foresaw its dark consequence: a total and permanent displacement of the farmer in American democracy.⁹⁴

This was Frederic C. Howe's assessment in 1921, shortly after the agricultural crash. America was "in a bad way," Howe reflected, trapped by "a decaying political and social system."⁹⁵ Howe, a reformer with a long history of seeking solutions for American problems in Europe,⁹⁶ found American agriculture waiting "on a program that will make the farmer self-contained, that will enable him to control his own life, his politics, his banks, his markets, his means of distribution."⁹⁷ The program he observed in Denmark shared many similarities with the findings of other American observers. Cooperatives, folk high schools, and high rates of farm ownership all excited Howe as expressions of the power of the peasantry. Denmark represented the "fullest" potential of democracy, political and economic, where the people had bent the state to serve their purposes, rather than the interests of the privileged classes. The key, Howe reckoned, was to establish the prosperity of the farmer, since "economic power has brought with it political power."⁹⁸ The reverse was also true, as Howe lamented that the American farmer with "no political power...has lost his economic power."⁹⁹ It was not revolution that Howe urged, but a struggle nonetheless, a seizure of political power by agriculture. It was only by

popular control of state functions that the United States could thrive and “the people may be free.”¹⁰⁰

While Howe focused his efforts on the plight of the entire agricultural class, others recognized that certain ethnic groups remained especially vulnerable in modern America. In particular, black tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the South had long faced the most perilous fight to protect their rights. Caught in cycles of poverty and exploitation, these communities, many of them situated around southern cotton fields, were “without control of their own destinies.”¹⁰¹ Just like in other agricultural communities, political resistance by black sharecroppers against their condition was informal and individualized, targeted at specific landlords, rather than the system as a whole.¹⁰² A great hindrance to more organized political activity was the poor quality of black schools, which often lacked even the resources of rural schools for whites.¹⁰³ Deficiencies in education further retarded black political activity as states in the South, starting with Alabama in 1901, instituted literacy tests to keep blacks from voting.¹⁰⁴

The strongest voice in favor of black educational reform at the turn of the century was Booker T. Washington, a former slave and first headmaster of the Tuskegee Institute. Both at the institute and nationally, Washington urged a plan of education for southern blacks that emphasized “industrial arts, thrift, and Christian character to elevate the race.”¹⁰⁵ To uplift an entire people, a common culture and pride had to be created as a means of activating a black political consciousness. Travelling across Europe, Washington found vindication of such measures in the Danish folk high schools. In a report on his travels to Denmark, Washington reflected, “There is no country, I am certain, not even the United States or Canada, [where] the average farmer stands so high and exercises so large an influence upon political and social life as he does in Denmark at the present time.”¹⁰⁶ Besides encouraging satisfaction with farm life, this “cultural education” moved farmers towards a “class consciousness” and a realization of the interdependence of their actions and rights.¹⁰⁷ To Washington, the conception of a cultural identity was sorely lacking in the American South. Learning to “admire and respect their own type” would do more for American blacks than “all the Greek and Latin that have ever been studied by all Negroes in all the colleges in the country.”¹⁰⁸

The impression that the Danish folk high schools made on Washington was enduring, and it echoed in black intellectual circles long after Washington's death in 1915. In 1921, E. Franklin Frazier, a Tuskegee Institute professor, was awarded a scholarship by the American-Scandinavian Foundation to the University of Copenhagen.¹⁰⁹ Frazier's time in Denmark included a visit to the Roskilde Folk High School. Like Washington, Frazier viewed the folk high school as a model for addressing racial issues in America and ending a cycle of "poverty and dependence." Mirroring Foght's description of a "love of soil tilling as a life calling," Frazier longingly described the sensations of "activity and feeling" that the folk high schools added to agricultural employment. However, he also recognized that the difficulties of the "Negro Question" could not solely be blamed on deficiencies in education. Indeed, the prejudices and hostility of whites played as great a role in limiting the progress of blacks as a lack of resources. To demonstrate how these deep cultural biases may be eroded, Frazier reported that the folk high schools had dissipated Denmark's long-standing antagonism towards its historical rival Sweden. Similarly, the folk high school could do more than expand the cultural solidarity of black communities, as Washington had hoped; it could create a stronger America by promoting interracial understanding and harmony, in the same way that Danes had learned to respect the Swedes.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

The widespread American interest in Denmark of the 1920s withered following the stock market crash of 1929. As the Depression and a series of droughts in the Midwest deepened the crisis for farmers, Danish sub-statist agricultural solutions were set aside for more direct intervention, engineered through Henry Wallace's Department of Agriculture and Rexford Tugwell's Agricultural Adjustment Administration.¹¹¹ Besides changing philosophies, a new, unexpected competitor for American attention also diminished the shine of Danish rural programs. Starting in 1932 with an article by E. H. Markham, American interest turned from the producer-focused techniques of Denmark to the more consumer-friendly innovations of Sweden.¹¹² Particularly after the publication of journalist Marquis Childs' book *Sweden: The Middle Way*, Denmark was overshadowed

by its neighbor to the north. Neither a revision of Frederic Howe's book, this time with the opportunistic title *Denmark: The Cooperative Way*, nor an endorsement of Denmark by reformer and consumer-activist Josephine Goldmark changed the rising Swedish tide.¹¹³ Even a presidential commission to study the European cooperatives, beginning with Scandinavia, was couched by Franklin D. Roosevelt, now president, as an opportunity to learn from Sweden.¹¹⁴ In the glare of the "Swedish vogue,"¹¹⁵ Denmark played second fiddle, a side trip during visits to admire Sweden's consumer cooperatives and collective bargaining. Yet in some ways, this secondary role still made Denmark valuable to American observers abroad. In *Sweden: The Middle Way*, Childs felt it necessary to take a quick jaunt across the Øresund to describe agricultural cooperatives.¹¹⁶

Perhaps the ties forged between Denmark and the United States during the 1920s were simply too strong to be completely severed by the onset of a national economic crisis. After all, it had been during an economic crisis, albeit a far more localized one, that these links were forged and American interest secured. Fears about the backwardness and isolation of America's farming communities were the original catalysts that brought onlookers and admirers to Denmark, drawn by a belief that the Scandinavian nation held the secret to integrating agriculture into a modern society. In this context, early twentieth-century publications about Denmark offered more than economic or social lessons, but a blueprint to halt the regression of the small farmer as a commercial and political force in the United States. Through Danish policies building greater collectivity, economic autonomy, and leadership skills, Americans sought to enlighten and invigorate the farmer. The long-term goal was to create a chain of political activation that would allow rural communities to protect their own interests against the dangers of modern capitalism. Even Booker T. Washington and those interested in the plight of the black rural populations, people who had long suffered disenfranchisement and degradation, framed their interest in Denmark as integrating blacks into the established traditions of rural democracy through the creation of a cohesive culture. In 1936, looking wistfully back on lost opportunities, African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "If the Negro public school system had been sustained, guided and supported, the American Negro today would equal Denmark in literacy."¹¹⁷ Du Bois was certainly not alone in his longing to see American agricultural

communities benefit in the same manner as their foreign counterpart. The Danish lessons applied by Americans in the 1920s as remedies for forms of economic, social, and political displacement in rural communities often carried with them a much higher and loftier goal: the salvation of American democracy.

Endnotes

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⁵ Zizanie Bodene-Yost, "The Danish Folk High School and its Presence in the U.S.: The Failure of the Danish-American Folk High Schools vs. the Success of Highlander Folk School," *The Bridge* 36, no. 1 & 2 (2013); Joan McInnes, "Danish Folk High Schools: Their Influence in America," *The Bridge* 15, no. 1 (1992). These contributions supplement the work of the prominent adult education historian Harold W. Stubblefield. Harold W. Stubblefield and Patrick Keane, *Adult Education in the American Experience: From the Colonial Period to the Present* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994); Harold W. Stubblefield, "The Danish Folk High School and Its Reception in the United States: 1870s-1930s," *Breaking New Ground*, Syracuse University Kellogg Project, Syracuse, New York, November 1990, <http://roghiemstra.com/stubblefield.html>.

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⁹ Giovanni Federico, "Not Guilty? Agriculture in the 1920s and the Great Depression," *The Journal of Economic History* 65, no. 4 (2005): 953. Federico uses a chart created by Enzo Grilli and Maw Cheng Yang.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 965-6.

¹¹ *Major Problems in American History, 1920-1945: Documents and Essays*, ed. Gordon Colin, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2011), 246.

¹² Louis Graves, "Farm Tenancy is Declared Greatest Curse of South," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 30 January 1923. The problems faced elsewhere were even greater in the American South, which remained beholden to the sharecropping system, *Major Problems in American History*, 246.

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- ⁴² Paul Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008): 20.

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