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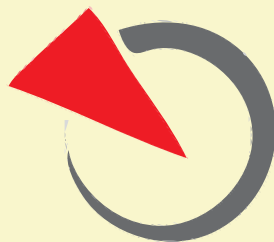
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Christian Gorm Hansen & Reinout Bosch



Danish Socialist Strategy Renewed: A New Hope or a Dead-End for the Left?

A Critique of Pelle Dragsted's *Nordic Socialism*

Christian Gorm Hansen & Reinout Bosch¹

Key words: Capitalism, Exploitation, Nordic Socialism, Pelle Dragsted, Hybrid society, Modes of production, Gradualism, Democracy.

Abstract: Pelle Dragsted's *Nordic Socialism. Towards a democratic economy* (published May 1st 2021) has reignited the discussion about socialism in 21st century Denmark. In the book, Dragsted presents a tactic of eroding capitalism from within based on the premises that a socialist mode of production is not a development to be sought in the future but already present in society. As a political strategy it thus relies on the development of the welfare state and different existing kinds of cooperative production.

In this article, the authors raise a critique of the fundamental premises on which Dragsted constructs his theory as well as the methodology he applies. Specifically, it focusses on central concepts in *Nordic Socialism* such as 'capitalism', 'hybrid society', and 'modes of production', and shows that these are conceptualized in a different sense than the common scientific usage. Such a reformulation enables Dragsted to put forward a theory of parallelism between different 'modes of production', where the central denominator for their definition is the principles by which they are governed.

Instead, the discursive reformulation of the concept of capitalism, which Dragsted restricts only to denote the direct relationship of exploitation, is rejected in favour of an understanding of capitalism, where the market is the central mechanism to be overcome.

Finally, the authors look at the implications Dragsted's premises have for his notions of who can actively be engaged in fighting for the visions he proposes. Here it is proposed that the vision presented in *Nordic Socialism* will not be able to engage a movement in the population, as its theory does not award the public an active role in the fight for (a Nordic) socialism.

¹ With thanks to Daniel Ankarloo and Karen Helveg Petersen for critical guidance and editorial assistance.

Introduction

On May 1st 2021, Pelle Dragsted, a high-profile Danish politician and former MP for the socialist party Red-Green Alliance (*Enhedslisten*), published a book with a title that can be translated into English as *Nordic Socialism. Towards a democratic economy*.² In spite of the fact that socialism is not exactly headline stuff neither in Denmark nor in the Nordic countries these days, the book was an instant success. Since Dragsted is elevated by the press as his party's chief strategist³ and is also fairly popular with the general public,⁴ the book sold out on the day it was released and was generally well received.

As the book sparked off immediate discussions on socialism and models of a just society not only within the Danish left but far into bourgeois political circles as well, it is not an exaggeration to say that the release of *Nordic Socialism* marks a pivotal moment in the contemporary politico-ideological debate in Denmark. Following its release, *Nordic Socialism* was widely debated in the press and by the left. The centre-left daily newspaper *Information* thus published a series of critiques and commentaries on the book and its subject, while the former mayor of education in Copenhagen Per Bregengaard – in a quick and preliminary follow-up to the debate – collected the different receptions of the book in an anthology named *Is Nordic Socialism a viable route?*⁵

After a decade of growing parliamentary success, Dragsted and his party now seems to be ready to move on to an actual debate about socialism and visions of alternatives to capitalism. As socialists, we wholeheartedly welcome this discussion while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of the appearance of *Nordic Socialism* has. Continuing this debate, we as authors of this article intend to take this one step further with the publication of a critical book on the subject this fall.⁶

At first glance, this seems to be mostly a Scandinavian discussion. But given the vanguard position that the Red-Green Alliance is thought to have among socialist parties in an international, or at least Scandinavian, context,⁷ and due to the generic nature of the strategic and theoretical discussions that Dragsted's as well as our book raise, we have nevertheless found it important to present some of the key points of our critique to an English reading audience as well.

Hence, this article will focus on the fundamental and theoretical problems that we have identified while working out our critique of Dragsted's book as well as the position he presents. In the following we will discuss key concepts used in *Nordic Socialism* such as

² Pelle Dragsted, *Nordisk socialisme. På vej mod en demokratisk økonomi* (København: Gyldendal, 2021).

³ Esben: Schørring, "Pelle Dragsted vil i folkettinget igen", *Altinget.dk*, 11. marts 2022.

⁴ In the latest municipal election (2021), Dragsted was thus the second highest scoring politician in his home municipality of Frederiksberg. <https://www.kmdvalg.dk/kv/2021/K84982147.htm> (17.08.2022)

⁵ Per Bregengaard, *Er nordisk socialisme farbar vej?* (København: Solidaritet, 2022).

⁶ Christian Gorm Hansen og Reinout Bosch, *Kritik af Nordisk socialisme. En aftegning af den gradualistiske position* (København: Solidaritet, 2022), forthcoming.

⁷ Fredrik V. Sand, *Den danske suksessen Enhedslisten: partiet som ga venstresida selvtiliten tilbake* (Oslo: Forlaget Manifest, 2017).

'capitalism', 'hybrid society', and 'modes of production', and by comparing these to each other and with a more general use of these terms in Marxist theory, we furthermore aim to draw some conclusions on the political and strategic implications of the methodology Dragsted has chosen for his book. By doing so, it is our hope that this overview will contribute to similar discussions outside of a Danish or Nordic context as well.

It is important for us to make it clear from the beginning that Dragsted is not (and does not claim to be) engaged in academic discussions and clearly writes his book from a politician's perspective. For example, Nordic socialism isn't a term which Dragsted has coined on his own. Rather, it is a term borrowed from the American debate, and more precisely from a heading in a report published by the Trump administration in 2018.⁸

Nonetheless, the clear use of Marxist terms and concepts in the analysis leaves *Nordic Socialism* standing halfway between a work of science and a work of political promotion. For this reason, and because Dragsted has reached an audience far beyond what is common for a politically motivated book like *Nordic Socialism* (the book was e.g. translated to Swedish only a few months after its release in Denmark⁹) we find it not only politically relevant but also strategically necessary to engage in the debate. Since Dragsted has (re)instigated an important debate on socialism for our time, it is of utmost importance to understand and especially outline the underlying theoretical premises of his position. If not, the debate could in a worst-case scenario lead to the propagation of erroneous concepts and assumptions and thus derail the debate even before it has begun.

In addition, with Denmark experiencing an increasing interest in Marxist theory – to the extent that philosopher Søren Mau recently has talked of a *Marxist turn*¹⁰ – the interest for the use and application of Marxist concepts can be expected to increase as well. It would be unfortunate if Dragsted's (as we shall see) problematic use of quite well-defined concepts should be the first experience to Marxism that newcomers get. The clarification as well as the operationalization of Marxist concepts is an urgent necessity – not for the sake of Marxist theory but for political practice. To this end, the need for the creation of a solid and scientifically grounded apparatus of theoretical concepts that can provide socialists with an analysis of society, from which they can develop a reliable socialist strategy, can hardly be overestimated.¹¹

For an international audience with interest not only in the ongoing political discussions in Denmark but first and foremost in deliberations as to what socialism is and can be in the 21st century, we therefore hope this article will provide some insights into the theoretical discussions taking place in Scandinavia at present.

All excerpts from the Danish original of Dragsted's book and other cited work and articles

are translated to English by us, and we are fully responsible for any errors or misrepresentations.

An outline of Nordic socialism

Nordic socialism takes off from the well-known quote from Slovenian philosopher and Marxist superstar Slavoj Žižek, claiming that nowadays it is far easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.¹² Thereafter Dragsted draws on the insights of cultural theoretician Mark Fisher¹³ and his concept of *capitalist realism* in order to come up with an answer to why the left has not been able to present an alternative to the prevailing order.¹⁴

The reason for this shortcoming lies in the conceptualization of capitalism as an all-encompassing system,¹⁵ following the line of argument presented by the author collective Gibson-Graham in their 1993 article *Waiting for the Revolution, or How to Smash Capitalism while Working from Home in your Spare Time*.¹⁶ Here, it is argued that the conceptualization of all elements in the current system as "capitalist", has meant that leftist progressives and anti-capitalists have been, and still are, unable to see any alternatives to the current (capitalist) system, as no viable alternative can possibly exist in the narrative created by this conceptualization.

Dragsted then attributes this narrative (or discursive) tendency both to the (reformist) social democratic and the revolutionary tendencies within socialism (taking here the history of the Danish left parties and movements as his point of departure). The first, he argues, only imagines reforms as a possible alternative while *inside* capitalism, the latter postpones an alternative to a time *after* capitalism.¹⁷ He therefore goes on to claim the existence of a *binary dualism* between two different modes of understanding capitalism on the political left (now also extending his argument to account for Scandinavia in general). Accordingly, this has led the left to either capitulate to the idea that there is in fact *no real alternative* to capitalism or, to *having recourse to utopian visions* of a future socialist society not to be realized until capitalism has disappeared.

Providing an answer to these problems with regards to the understanding of capitalism and how to change the present situation, Dragsted proposes "a new road forward", namely "a road bypassing the old binary contradiction between reform and revolution", as he formulates it.¹⁸ The remaining and by far the largest part of his book is thus about outlining the contents of this self-proclaimed new direction for the left. According to his own conceptualization, Dragsted's new road forward is thus an attempt to overcome the schism between a reformist and a revolutionary road to a socialist society that has hitherto haunted

¹² A quote often also attributed to his fellow Marxist theoretician Frederic Jameson.

¹³ Dragsted, 11, 23, 24.

¹⁴ Dragsted, 24.

¹⁵ Dragsted, 24.

¹⁶ J.K Gibson-Graham, "Waiting for the Revolution, or How to Smash Capitalism while Working from Home in your Spare Time", *Rethinking Marxism* (6), no. 2, 1993 pp. 10-24.

¹⁷ Dragsted, 21, 24, 79.

¹⁸ Dragsted, 79.

⁸ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "The Opportunity Cost of Socialism", 2018; Dragsted, 17.

⁹ Pelle Dragsted, *Nordisk socialism. På väg mot en demokratisk ekonomi* (Stockholm: Verbal Förlag, 2021).

¹⁰ Søren Mau, *Stum tvang. En marxistisk undersøgelse af kapitalismens økonomiske magt* (København: Klim, 2021). Description of the author at the back of the book.

¹¹ Cf. Birgitte Krogh & Ebbe Poulsen, "Produktionsmåde og samfundsformation – noter til en præcisering af begreberne." In: *Marxistisk Antropologi* (2), no. 2-3, 1976, p. 61.

the socialist movement for more than a century.

A gradualist solution

While Dragsted does not clearly label his new road to socialism theoretically, we have – following his own statement in an interview with the right-wing newspaper *Weekendavisen*¹⁹ – nevertheless decided to designate his position as *gradualism* in our forthcoming book, and we shall do the same here. In the interview he states, that: "If one was to imagine a revolution of political power, what would happen afterwards? Naturally a series of reforms of economic power in society. What I subscribe to is a gradualist approach more than a revolutionary one." Taking this statement and extending it to the general position presented in *Nordic Socialism* enables us to make an account of the overall contribution of Dragsted's position to the strategic and theoretical work of the contemporary European left. In dealing with all of Dragsted's arguments under one label, we seek to understand his thinking in its entirety. Here, however, we shall limit our focus to some selected aspects of Dragsted's gradualism, leaving out other aspects that are dealt with in our book.

'Gradualism' is in an English-speaking context of political debate a well-known term to describe positions that argue for gradual change. But gradualism is an uncommon position in the Danish debate does not lend itself to a clear parallel with other popular positions on the left. So, then, what is the content of this gradualist position as expressed through the many proposals and theoretical thoughts in *Nordic Socialism*?

In an interesting reflection of the binary political understanding on the left, which Dragsted criticizes, he proposes that we (socialists, that is) understand capitalism as divided between what he respectively calls the 'democratic' and 'oligarchic sector'. The 'oligarchic sector' (also denominated the capitalist 'mode of production') is characterized by its mode of capitalist exploitation, i.e., by the extraction of surplus labour spurred on by the profit motive. The 'democratic sector' (sometimes termed the democratic 'mode of production') is on the other hand characterized by being governed by different kinds of 'democratic' leadership. This sector consists of workers cooperatives (*Danish: Kooperativer*), farmers cooperatives (*Danish: Andelssektoren*), consumer cooperatives (*Danish: Brugsforeninger*), the public sector and family-based production. The two sectors, which are also called 'capitalism' on the one hand and 'socialism' on the other, exist, according to the author, side by side in our current society, interlocked in a battle taking contradictory forms.²⁰

A consequence of understanding society in this way, is that socialism is not something to be realized in the future, but rather something that *is already present* right now in our contemporary society:²¹ Following this premise, the task for socialists is logically to strengthen and expand the sectors of the economy, which are under forms of "democratic ownership", whereby capitalism will be forced to retreat.²² This for Dragsted then leads to the possibility of a strategy, where we (socialists again) through "gradual change" and "step

¹⁹ Arne Hardis og Hans Mortensen, "Sådan er socialismen", *Weekendavisen* 19. marts 2021.

²⁰ Dragsted, 15.

²¹ Dragsted, 24-25.

²² Dragsted, 29.

by step can make our society *more socialist* and *less capitalist* by enlarging the part of the economy that is democratically controlled."²³

Thus, after outlining his central *gradualist* project as described in the quote, and with his project firmly placed in the rather surprising pronouncement that *socialism is already present* "right in front of us",²⁴ Dragsted in *Nordic Socialism* moves on to discuss the history of the different parts of 'the democratic sector'. More specifically and along with Danish history (and the Nordic one as well), he continues the discussion of different strategies for expanding 'democratic ownership', ending up with ten concrete proposals of political reforms for this "new road forward" to (more of) socialism.

Selected critiques

As already mentioned, *Nordic Socialism*, and the position that the book outlines, has already been discussed and criticized from a number of different angles. In this article (as well as in our book), we will draw on a few of these critiques, and therefore it is useful to present the main positions briefly.

Generally, *Nordic socialism* has been met with approval, while at the same time being criticized with respect to important aspects such as its unambitious concept of democracy,²⁵ its lack of liberating potential,²⁶ as well as to the approach of gradual transition to name but a few.²⁷ Defending an explicit revolutionary stance, the Communist daily *Arbejderen* has sprung into the fray,²⁸ but the book has also – perhaps more interestingly – drawn criticism from a social democratic perspective. Here, the critique posits that Dragsted comes up with nothing new under the sun – that the ideas put forward in *Nordic Socialism* are in fact nothing but outdated social democratic proposals in a new disguise, and that these ideas have already been historically tried, tested and, more importantly, failed.

Most prominent in this line of arguing has been former Danish Finance Minister and Foreign Minister as well as ex-President of the UN General Assembly, Mogens Lykketoft. He has been, chief strategist in the Danish Social Democratic Party for many years and was a leading figure already during the 1970's, a crucial period where many of Dragsted's proposals were abandoned as viable policies. In a comment to Dragsted, Lykketoft objects that many of the proposals that were still conceivable, although not implemented, in the 1970's are now impossible due to the global development of capitalism since then. Far reaching political

²³ Dragsted, 26.

²⁴ Dragsted, 28.

²⁵ Morten Thing, "Nordisk socialisme", *Social Kritik*, nr. 163 (2021), pp.138–39.

²⁶ Mikkel Thorup, "Pelle Dragsteds socialisme er overbevisende, men den giver mig ikke lyst til at danse", *Information*, 22. maj 2021; Søren Mau, "Pelle Dragsteds socialisme er en tam politikerfantasi, som ikke tør tage de radikale opgør", *Information*, 29. maj 2021; Per Clausen, "Per Clausen: Dragsted har åbnet for en vigtig debat men demokrati på arbejdspladserne er ikke tilstrækkeligt", *Solidaritet.dk*, 5. juni 2021.

²⁷ Magnus Marsdal, "Dragsted vil liste pistolen ud af kapitalisternes hænder. Jeg tror, de vil opdage hans list", *Information*, 2. juni 2021; Clausen, "Per Clausen: Dragsted har åbnet for en vigtig debat men demokrati på arbejdspladserne er ikke tilstrækkeligt".

²⁸ Anders Sørensen, "Det revolutionære standpunkt er stadig aktuelt", *Arbejderen.dk*, 7. maj 2021; Allan Vokstrup, "En kritisk medlæsning af Nordisk Socialisme", *Arbejderen.dk*, 17. maj 2021.

change at the level of the nation state alone has become impossible, he further argues, and meaningful political change today necessarily has to take place on an intergovernmental level.²⁹ And as a teasing gesture, the incumbent minister of employment, the social democrat Peter Hummelgaard Thomsen, has even gone so far as to ask why Dragsted does not join the Social Democratic Party.³⁰ Still, a lot of this wriggling on the part of the social democratic leadership must be understood as springing from fear that Dragsted with *Nordic Socialism* could in fact convince a sizeable part of the left leaning social democrats to leave their once proud workers party, which today has abandoned many of its classical working class policies in favour of strict budgetary restraint and xenophobic policies in competition with the populist right.

Having outlined only a small piece of the debate on *Nordic Socialism*, the critique presented in this article aims to dig deeper than just dealing with the concrete proposals, with which *Nordic Socialism* ends, and query the more fundamental logic that has led Dragsted to his proposals, visions and analyses. Again, it is our sincere hope that we through this will be able to contribute to the emerging discussion about what socialism in our time might be, and how we through a collective effort can present a vision for the future, which breaks the hegemonic deadlock of capitalist realism.

Hybrids and societal change

In an already oft-quoted passage from his book, Dragsted dramatically sets the stage for his proposed new way of conceptualising current affairs:

“What if capitalism in reality is not as powerful and dominating? What if it has been possible, throughout the history of capitalism, for people to band together and create alternatives that function outside and in opposition to capitalisms narrow distribution of power and ownership? What if we have already gone some of the way towards a different and democratic economy? What if we are closer to socialism than we thought?”³¹

With these rhetorical questions, *Nordic Socialism* sets out to break with the presumed binary understanding of capitalism to which social democrats and the revolutionary left have fallen victim. An understanding, which, allegedly, has closed their eyes to the many pockets of the economy that are controlled democratically and also to what Dragsted calls other ‘modes of production’ that always exist in society (though without explaining further which ones might exist apart from the capitalist and social modes).³²

The theoretical premise for the new road forward, is an understanding of societies as *hybrids*

²⁹ Mogens Lykketoft, “Økonomisk demokrati kuldsejlede i 70’erne. I dag er der brug for internationale løsninger”, *Information*, 12. maj 2021.

³⁰ Peter Hummelgaard Thomsen, “Spændende bog Dragsted, men hvorfor melder du dig ikke ind i S?”, *Altinget.dk*, 30. april 2021.

³¹ Dragsted, 25; J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It). A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota press, 1996), 260.

³² Dragsted, 102-105.

consisting of these different modes of production.³³ The term ‘hybrid’ is probably borrowed from Erik Olin Wright,³⁴ even though Dragsted does not explicitly state this, but he claims that acknowledging the hybrid character of society would give us new and better possibilities to conceive and argue for societal change.³⁵ As such, the fundamental concept of *Nordic Socialism* is clearly an extended version of its other main premise, namely that capitalism is not all-encompassing, and therefore it follows that other modes of production can exist simultaneously within the dominating capitalist mode.

While Dragsted when outlining the theory talks about several ‘modes of production’, his further explanations focus only on the binary division: ‘democratic-oligarchic’, which he then equates with ‘socialist-capitalist’. It remains unclear which other ‘modes of production’ he believes to be in existence, or if he understands the different components of ‘the democratic sector’ to be ‘modes of production’ on their own.

Hybrids, then, necessarily means something different in *Nordic Socialism* than what one would normally assume, when one looks at the etymological origin of the word. For Dragsted, the concept is clearly not a new phenomenon created out of the merger between two (or more) mutually internally different phenomena.³⁶ Nordic socialism would be a hybrid in this sense had it been a new phenomenon emerging from the fusion between capitalism and socialism (or between these two and other ‘modes of production’). In *Nordic socialism*, however, this fusion has not happened. Instead, what we encounter in the book is two different competing societal sectors, where the advance of the one is at the behest of the other, and it rather seems that the concept of hybrids here denominates incongruencies in the economy, where different ‘modes of production’ must be understood to be existing *side by side* in present day society.

In this way, Dragsted thus uses his concept of hybrids as a premise for understanding the theoretical position he proposes – the contention that any society is a *hybrid of different* modes of production, not a ‘mode of production’, which therefore takes on an *exclusive dominating position* in society. Dragsted’s concept instead covers a form of parallelism, where different modes of production theoretically come to coexist next to each other, and where one can grow or shrink in competition with the other. However, it remains unclear how they affect each other in this process.

The problem with this hybrid concept, however, is that it closes the opportunity for seeing society as a *real* hybrid, whereby all societies – following a historical materialist line of reasoning – contain elements from earlier societies as historical leftover, while simultaneously modifying them under the influence of the dominating mode of production. It is clear that Dragsted acknowledges that capitalism is the dominating ‘mode of production’ in Denmark today, but it certainly remains unclear what this domination consists of other than the mere statistical observation that ‘the oligarchic sector’ is clearly larger and more economically powerful than ‘the democratic sector’ at this time. Economic domination is thus not a matter of *vertical-structural hierarchy* but one of a majority within a

³³ Dragsted, 109.

³⁴ Dragsted, 15.

³⁵ Dragsted, 34.

³⁶ *Hybrid*, Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hybrid>

horizontal-numerical constellation.

Following his take on societal hybrids, Dragsted stresses that no 'mode of production' can be understood as encompassing all of society – meaning that present day society contains other economic features than just pure capitalist ones. This is of course elemental, as the politico-scientific tradition of the left, contrary to Dragsted's claim,³⁷ has never understood modes of production as all-encompassing totalities with only one logic prevailing in society or the economy. Rather a 'mode of production' is a description of societies, bearing both historical traits of past modes and embryos of new ones in the future.³⁸

What seems to be the "new" in Dragsted's book is the rather dubious and unwarranted claim that this generally acknowledged fact can lead to the conclusion that societies can be designated as 'hybrids' of different modes of productions floating around within a non-hierarchical field of relations – with capitalism temporarily as the dominant mode. What further remains unclear, then, is the reason why – according to Dragsted – capitalism is in fact dominant in present-day society.

³⁷ Dragsted here (p. 105) uses as evidence a quote from Karl Marx in Grundrisse, where, if one is to allow one sentence more than Dragsted does, and does not exchange a comma for an end mark at the end, it reads: "It must be kept in mind that the new forces of production and relations of production do not develop out of nothing, nor drop from the sky, nor from the womb of the self-positing Idea; but from within and in antithesis to the existing development of production and the inherited, traditional relations of property. While in the completed bourgeois system every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with every organic system. This organic system itself, as a totality, has its presuppositions, and its development to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks." Marx, *Grundrisse*: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch05.htm> (17.08.2022) MEW 42 p. 203. Therefore it should be clear that Marx says the opposite of what Dragsted wants to use him for. In discussing landed property, Marx argues that it presupposes changes in a mode of production, before a new mode can unfold.

³⁸ Karl Marx thus writes: "Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft ist die entwickeltste und mannigfaltigste historische Organisation der Produktion. Die Kategorien, die ihre Verhältnisse ausdrücken, das Verständnis ihrer Gliederung, gewähren daher zugleich Einsicht in die Gliederung und die Produktionsverhältnisse aller der untergegangenen Gesellschaftsformen, mit deren Trümmern und Elementen sie sich aufgebaut, von denen teils noch unüberwundene Reste sich in ihr fortschleppen, bloße Andeutungen sich ausgebildeten Bedeutungen entwickelt haben usw." Marx, *Einleitung zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, MEW 13 p. 636; While Bukharin from a Stalinist perspective starting with a quote from Marx in *Capital* writes: "Epochs in the history of society are no more separated from each other by hard and fast lines of demarcation, than are geological periods." On the contrary, in actual reality we find that each new social type, each new social structure may present very great and decisive remnants of the old economic formations." Bukharin, *Historical Materialism. A System of Sociology*, 234; If we instead look at the Trotskyist tradition, Ernest Mandel – following the same argument – writes: "Die Übergangsgesellschaft ist charakterisiert durch spezifische Produktionsverhältnisse; diese sind nicht einfach eine Kombination der zu überwindenden und der sich allmählich entfaltenden großen historischen Produktionsweise. So waren die für die Übergangsgesellschaft vom Feudalismus zum Kapitalismus kennzeichnenden Produktionsverhältnisse keineswegs eine 'Kombination' feudaler und kapitalistischer Produktionsverhältnisse, sondern die dieser Epoche eigentümlichen der einfachen Warenproduktion. Die Masse der Produzenten bestand weder aus Fronbauern noch aus Lohnarbeitern, sondern aus freien Bauern und freien Handwerkern, die unmittelbar Verfügungsmacht über die eigenen Produktionsmittel besaßen. Die sind sowohl vom Feudalismus als auch vom Kapitalismus grundsätzlich verschiedene Produktionsverhältnisse; sie sind ein Ergebnis der Auflösung des Feudalismus, bevor sich der Kapitalismus voll in der Produktion entfalten kann (das Kapital 'herrscht' aber außerhalb der Produktion, als Bank- und Handelskapital)." Mandel, "Zehn Thesen zur sozialökonomischen Gesetzmäßigkeit der Übergangsgesellschaft zwischen Kapitalismus und Sozialismus", 16–17.

Modes of production

As the reader may have noticed, we have hitherto placed Dragsted's use of the concept mode of production in quotation marks in this text. The reason for this is, of course, that he uses this concept differently than the usual historical materialist tradition. In the following, we shall elaborate on how this is done and, more importantly, on what consequences this has for the development of a present-day socialist strategy.

In his book, Dragsted makes a distinct point out of discussing the ownership of the means of production, as the "fundamental problem with the capitalist mode of production".³⁹ It could therefore seem that he takes ownership of the means of production as a foundation for his understanding of modes of production. This, however, turns out not to be the case. At first glance, it seems that Dragsted adheres to a classic Marxist understanding of society. Dealing with the question of ownership, this leads him to a rough definition of two classes in society: "Those that primarily live by selling their labour power for a wage, and those that get the majority of their income from returns on capital and investments."⁴⁰ But these two types of classes – which in other scientific and Marxist literature are characterized as the *ideal types*⁴¹ 'labour' and 'capital' – are in Nordic socialism grounded in another ideal type introduced by Dragsted, namely 'democracy', whereby the definition of the two classes does not spring from their relationship to the economy but rather from their relationship to 'democracy'. As Dragsted writes: "My claim is, there are two competing sources of power in our society: Democratic power based on the decisions of the majority and oligarchic power based on the riches of a narrow elite."⁴²

Accordingly, this implies that it is in fact not the question of *ownership* that becomes the analytical line of demarcation, but the question of how production and distribution is *controlled*. A question not of *who* (owns the means of production), but of *how* (*decisions are made*).

All of this raises another question that needs to be further investigated: While it is clear that the 'oligarchic sector' and the capitalist mode of production are meant to be synonyms in Dragsted's book, it is less clear what 'the democratic sector' covers: Is it a mode of production sui generis, or is it an overarching term for multiple modes of production? And, if so, what do its different elements have in common? In any case, what we are faced with in Dragsted's 'democratic sector' are various forms of production covering:

- 1: Workers owning their own companies and producing for a market (cooperatives).
- 2: Publicly employed workers, who work under political direction rather than for a market (public sector).
- 3: Workers who do not own their (market-oriented) companies, that are owned by a group of customers (consumer cooperative).

³⁹ Dragsted, 74.

⁴⁰ Dragsted, 41–42.

⁴¹ Max Weber, *Methodology of Social Science* (New Brunswick NY: Transaction publishers, 2011), 90.

⁴² Dragsted, 60.

4: Employers owning their own companies through which they also own parts of connected companies or groups (agricultural cooperatives).

5: Family or individuals as the basic unit of production (small family businesses or farms).

What we see is thus a collection of different means of ownership, engaged in production in different areas such as care, agriculture, and service. But there is no common denominator between these different forms of production with respect to the mode of control. They are all supposed to be controlled democratically, but while some instances of this control are direct, in others control works through elected representatives and/or a bureaucratic system.

Therefore, Dragsted ultimately seems to reduce democracy to a 'mode of decision', based on the principle *one person/one vote*. A 'mode of decision' he then contrasts to the principles in 'the oligarchic sector', where voting rights are linked to the size of asset holding of the owners. Therefore, Dragsted is not concerned about *who* is holding the voting rights, within a system of one-person-one-vote in the 'democratic sector'; it can be the producers, the consumers, or the voters, who can continuously change roles.

Similarly, as we will show, Dragsted uses his term 'democratic sector' irrespectively of how the democracy *works*. Dragsted's own illustration of the cooperatively owned bank Nykredit can here serve as an example. This bank is in his theory seen as part of the 'democratic sector'⁴³ - which by this inclusion, as well as with the inclusion of the international dairy conglomerate Arla, grows to an impressive size. Nevertheless, the bank consisted until 2016 of a self-supplementing board that did not bother to inform members that they had the right to vote.⁴⁴ Such a 'mistake' is not unique, and, as Dragsted himself points out, the members' "democratic influence is far from optimal everywhere",⁴⁵ just as in "all kinds of institutions, including democratic companies, there is a risk that democracy is eroded and replaced by top management and bureaucracy".⁴⁶

Still, despite these objections, 'democracy' is in Dragsted's optics seen as an abstract 'good', as it is used synonymously with the enhancement of individual influence at the expense of the oligarchy.

Returning to the five examples of different 'democratic' organisations mentioned above, it is clear that no matter if they are all seen collectively to be one mode of production, or if each is seen as a mode of its own, it is bit of a stretch to conceive of the cashier in a private supermarket as working in one mode of production, while a cashier in a cooperatively owned supermarket as working in another – as a reviewer in the Danish daily *Information* has also noted.⁴⁷ Both work in services, both work in a market economy, handling goods – which they get paid for in wages – and both work within the capitalist system. Both are restrained by the market economy, selling their labour power as workers with minimum influence on their own working conditions.

⁴³ Dragsted, 123.

⁴⁴ Dragsted, 149.

⁴⁵ Dragsted, 149.

⁴⁶ Dragsted, 155.

⁴⁷ Åsa Linderborg, "Pelle Dragsteds nordiske socialisme bryder med vanetænkning og viser en ny vej for venstrefløj", *Information*, 29. april 2021.

Similar objections can be made regarding the relationship between the cooperatively owned agricultural sector and agricultural businesses owned by individuals or foundations, or worker-controlled cooperatives producing for the market. A common denominator for all of them is that in order to make money to survive, they are subjected to the capitalist mode of production driven by the need to accumulate. The only relationship separating them from 'the oligarchic sector' is the decision process.

Capitalocentrism?

As noted in the beginning, Dragsted places the entire premise for a reformulation of the concept of modes of production on Gibson-Graham's notion that the political left has conceptualized capitalism in such a way that it negates the possibilities inherent in its very mode of production to transcend its own limits.⁴⁸

This is the direct result of the left discourse equating society, the economy, the state, and the market in its totality with capitalism⁴⁹ without the possibility of imagining anything outside of it – what Fisher (though from an entirely different theoretical starting-point) calls capitalist realism. In Dragsted's view, capitalism is first and foremost a *discursive construction*, "an abstract sociological concept" as he puts it,⁵⁰ rather than a real existing system of socio-economic relations.

To understand more thoroughly Dragsted's concept of what capitalism is and isn't – how it operates and how it doesn't – we must delve into a footnote to the pages where this subject is discussed. The author writes:

"Systems do nothing on their own. This of course is also the case for capitalism. There is neither a capitalist body nor a capitalist brain that can make decisions. Capitalism has no life of its own. It is the result of a myriad of people repeating certain practices day after day, and the premises for these practices are the result of political choices [...] There is of course a dialectic, where our participation and repetition of certain practices affect our perception of society, which feeds back to our behaviour. But capitalism has no agency, and when we speak as if it does, we are bestowing this mode of production with an almost supernatural force."⁵¹

Thus, on the one hand, Dragsted here claims that capitalism does not possess any intrinsic attributes that could yield structural effects on the economy and social life, since it has "no agency" to do so in itself, and similar ideas are unfolded in subsequent pages of the book.⁵² On the other hand, he also writes that "the problems of society can be explained by inherent tendencies in the capitalist dominated part of the economy" and that "accumulation of capital is the engine of capitalism" which operates through "mechanisms that in the

⁴⁸ Dragsted, 103-4.

⁴⁹ Dragsted, 104.

⁵⁰ Dragsted, 103.

⁵¹ Dragsted, Footnote 79.

⁵² Dragsted, 282-83.

capitalist economy drive investment decisions.”⁵³ Yet, what Dragsted implies on these pages is that – echoing an almost Nietzschean concept of will as a fundamental driving force in human creation – it is merely a question of personal determination to conceive of capitalism in a discursively different way that would enable today’s humans (read: socialists) to change and reduce its dominant position in society and the entire economy.⁵⁴

It is thus unclear how the author suggests that the capitalist mode of production should be understood and, more importantly, dealt with as a socio-economic phenomenon; for while it is clear that capitalism possesses no agency, it is far from obvious that the circumstances ruling human practice is a question of decision-making from different ‘political wills’.⁵⁵

Instead, we would argue that with a historical materialist understanding we can conceive of modes of production – and specifically capitalism – as *structurally* producing effects that supersede the individual, and thereby the choices made by individuals (and therefore also politicians).⁵⁶ Modes of production have a much longer life-span than the lifetime of an individual and have coercive power through the relations of production, not only regarding the practices of individuals but also over their way of perceiving themselves in this world as well.

The economy is not, as Dragsted would have it, subsumed under the social relations; rather, these social relations are in fact its components (as Karl Marx himself put it, capital is first and foremost a *social* relation). It is thus a certain configuration or “collaboration” between human relations that constitutes the driving force in the capitalist mode of production with the end goal of accumulation of capital.

We therefore pose the question, why this regression regarding the concept of capitalism and how to deal with it? What we encounter in Dragsted’s book is – perhaps unwittingly – the ‘development’ of a different notion of modes of production that overlooks a long and scientifically founded tradition of theorizing about the functioning of modes of production, both generally and in the case of capitalism specifically.

This becomes even clearer when Dragsted, in an attempt to define the ‘oligarchic’ and ‘democratic’ sector (or in his own terms ‘capitalism’ and ‘socialism’), also redefines the concept of capitalism by using a linguistic trick so that it is no longer a mode of production in a historical materialist sense but, only a part of the economy. As he writes:

“What if, instead of equating capitalism with all of society and the economy it is limited to denote that part of the economy that is characterized by the relation of exploitation between owners of capital and wage labourers? If capitalism is limited to denote that part of the economy that is characterized by a small minority owning the means of production, whereby they can accumulate riches and power by acquiring a part of the value of the labour power

⁵³ Dragsted, 72; 67.

⁵⁴ For further elaboration on this point, see Bregengaard, “Anmeldelse: Dagens ret er socialisme”, *Solidaritets.dk*, 1. maj 2021.

⁵⁵ Dragsted, 283.

⁵⁶ Reinout Bosch, *Historisk materialisme. Materialistisk historieteori under postmodernismens hegemoni* (København: Frydenlund, 2020), 134.

on which the large majority lives by selling.”⁵⁷

This proposed “what-if”-definition clearly stands in opposition to more commonly used concept of capitalism, which – as Danish philosopher and Marxist theoretician Søren Mau has recently described in his book on capitalism’s *mute compulsion* – understand the capitalist mode of production as a process in which capitalist accumulation and competition subsume a broad range of practices under itself.⁵⁸ Here, both material life and social reproduction in capitalism is understood as being mediated by the market in such a way, that individuals are forced to engage with (capitalist) market relations in order to guarantee their livelihood.

In his analysis, Dragsted does take into consideration the fundamental societal transformation that the establishment of a market for labour power (i.e. capitalism) historically was;⁵⁹ nevertheless, he attempts to dismiss the above mentioned historical materialist argumentation – which places the domination by the market as the decisive mechanism through which exploitation happens, as Mau rightly points out – by positing the elementary insight that other modes of production have had markets as well.⁶⁰ This is of course true, but here an important distinction must be emphasized – namely the role that the market has played in other modes of production in contrast to the role it plays in capitalism. Or as the well-known Marxist theoretician Ellen Meiksins Wood eloquently puts it:

“The differentiation of the economic sphere in capitalism, [then] can be summed up like this: the social functions of production and distribution, surplus extraction and appropriation, and the allocation of social labour are, so to speak, privatized and they are achieved by non-authoritative, non-political means. In other words, the social allocation of resources and labour does not, on the whole, take place by means of political direction, communal deliberation, hereditary duty, customs, or religious obligation, but rather through the mechanisms of commodity exchange. The powers of surplus appropriation and exploitation do not rest directly on relations of juridical or political dependence but are based on a contractual relation between ‘free’ producers – juridically free and free from the means of production – and an appropriator who has absolute private property in the means of production.”⁶¹

This points to the fact that capitalist production, for the sake of capitalist appropriation, competition and accumulation, subjugates a large number of forms of practices under itself in such a way that the economy is *embedded* in society,⁶² whereby the market not only regulates economic transactions but social relations in a broad sense.⁶³

Restricting the notion of capitalism to be only the relationship of exploitation, as Dragsted does, prevents a range of other societal phenomena from being understood as part of capitalism. Here, among many other things, one could mention the cultural differences separating the different strata of society in the competition for certain positions, as brilliantly

⁵⁷ Dragsted, 106.

⁵⁸ Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (Odense: SDU, 2019), 50.

⁵⁹ Dragsted, 248.

⁶⁰ Dragsted, 248.

⁶¹ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism. Renewing Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2016), 29.

⁶² Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Capitalism the Longer View* (London: Verso, 2012), 23.

⁶³ Wood, 7.

described in French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's classical work *Distinctions*.⁶⁴ Or the role that innovative manipulation in the advertising industry plays in everyone's life, as described in Allan Curtis' award-winning BBC documentary *The Century of the Self*. Or how we are exploited through social media, as Shoshana Zuboff has described in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.⁶⁵ We could go on. But the reader has probably understood that these are all unavoidable aspects of the capitalist mode of production, which can be understood and analysed only if market management is made a decisive element of the understanding of capitalism; an understanding which *seeks to comprehend capitalism as a structural reality*, not as *a construct of discourse*. And more specifically, that it would be a construct of discourse to place these aspects *outside* the sphere of capitalism, based only on the fact that none of them concern the *direct* exploitative relationship between labour and capital.

Capitalism or not – that is the question

By limiting capitalism to only its most manifest relationship between capital and labour, Dragsted is able to reach his next point: If capitalism is not all-encompassing, the argument goes, other systems can take its place. Consequently, this opens for his subsequent proposal that the different 'modes of production' – which are, already existing in competition with each other – can compete for hegemony. The following quote will show how this competition is perceived by Dragsted:

"In an economy with both a democratic sector and a capitalist sector there will always be competition between the two modes of production. The owners of capital in the capitalist sector have strong interests in colonizing and taking over those parts of production that take place in the democratic sector, whether it is the public sector or the cooperative sector, as this expands that part of the economy from which they can extract surplus and profit. Therefore, as long as a substantial capitalist and non-democratic sector exists, the democratic sector will be under pressure. But it is not given nor a natural law that competition between the two sectors goes in the direction of less democracy. In a large part of the 20th century the exchange [...] went in the opposite direction, and the democratic sector spread into areas and sectors that were formerly capitalist."⁶⁶

Dragsted is here not only caught in the dilemma posed by seeing capitalism and socialism – now inconsistently denoted 'the capitalist sector' versus 'the democratic sector' – as parallels in his concept of 'hybrid society' in competition with each other; as concerns society's historical as well as future development, such a 'mode of competition' leaves socialism to be nothing more than 'democratic progress' vis-à-vis 'capitalist regress'. Here one might also note that Dragsted, in his attempt to overcome the traditional binary schism in leftist strategic thinking, actually reproduces it in a new variant by introducing the primary schism of supposed competition between these two main sectors. But, even more critically, what he

⁶⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁶⁵ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London, Profile books, 2019). A book that Dragsted mentions, but without drawing consequences from this. Dragsted, 47.

⁶⁶ Dragsted, 146–47.

fails to see is that what capitalism through its historical development has colonized has not primarily been socialist (nor democratic) areas or tendencies in the economy, but rather remnants of *earlier* modes of production which it supplanted.

Capitalist expansion in agriculture did *not* supplant a democratic production but patriarchally organized home production, which was mostly for household consumption and rarely for the market. In the cities, capitalist development did crush the guild organisations, which may have been democratic in the eyes of the masters; yet they were clearly *feudal* remains and *not* a tendency towards socialism in pre-modern society. Additionally, through its historical development capitalism has incorporated and changed earlier socio-economic relations and adjusted them to its own mode of production. Based on Meiksins Wood and Mau's theoretical concept, we will claim that few relationships in present-day capitalist society contain pure or independent non-capitalist attributes or features. Rather, any such 'non-capitalist' relationships have changed under the structure-transforming mute compulsion of capitalism, so they fit our current market dominated socio-economic system.

When the Nordic welfare state was created in the second half of the 20th century, this did not happen by way of the state 'winning over' control of child and eldercare from a capitalist system; these sectors were instead conjured up from the ground, existing previously as non-marketed parts of civil society formed by the working and peasant classes. After the emergence of the welfare state from the 1960's and onwards – as a result of the continuous fight by from Social Democrats and Communists – an actual welfare *statist* (see below) infrastructure was built.

Yet, the funding of welfare services and their state-based organisation was first and foremost extracted from taxes on capitalist enterprises and citizens, earning money in the capitalist market economy. Years later, capital through the state turned to austerity, New Public Management, and extensive privatization of public welfare services, aiming to expand areas of profit-making, and thereby it 'regained some lost territory' from non-profit pockets within the capitalist economy. It was, however, not areas *detached* from capitalism – funded, as they were, by capitalistically generated tax money – that were 'retaken' in some sort of competition between capitalism and 'pockets of socialism' (understood as non-capitalist phenomena); and if capital went into areas formerly administered along non-capitalist principles, it was the result of what capitalism was always about, namely generating profit. Capitalism is always expanding, whether into new 'non-capitalist' or formerly 'non-capitalised' areas. In fact, it is a necessity for its survival and therefore an absolute integral part of capitalism's *modus operandi* that is has non-capitalist sectors or areas to expand into, as Rosa Luxemburg so brilliantly pointed out only a few decades into the life of modern capitalism.⁶⁷

What all this points to is *not* that there is an ongoing competition between capitalist and non-capitalist (whether 'socialist' or 'democratic') sectors but that any action in the direction of non-capitalist (and especially socialist) change *takes capitalism itself as its necessary structural and strategic starting point*. To resort to the illusion that socialism (as democracy) already

⁶⁷ Rosa Luxemburg: *Kapitalens akkumulation. Et bidrag til den økonomiske forklaring på imperialismen* (København: Rhodos, 1976), 273.

exists as a platform potentially to be enlarged in its existing form, is to weaken any socialist strategy from its very outset. It is, and this cannot be emphasised enough, to overlook the fact that any socialist progress must come in the form of an *inherent contradiction within capitalism itself*⁶⁸ – that is, in the form of a struggle that necessarily transforms present-day society and its institutions – say, “democracy” or welfare – from what they are into something qualitatively different.

In short, democracy and welfare, as we know it, have obvious advantages and are indeed in many ways goods that need to be defended, but they are nevertheless phenomena born out of capitalism and must be treated accordingly. Hence the conceptual as well as strategic importance of a revolution – not only in terms of political power but also regarding the way we perceive of human nature, justice, democracy, freedom, societal organisation and so on.⁶⁹

A changed capitalism

Admittedly, a movement back and forth, like the one Dragsted points to, has in fact taken place in the course of modern Danish history, namely when capitalist elements have entered cooperative production and vice versa. During the last decades, this development has definitively gone in capital's favour, because of the ever larger amount of capital needed to start new businesses, but it is in no way impossible for the workers' movement and their pension funds to start competitive cooperatives.

The question is, however, if this example constitutes an affirmation that Dragsted's Nordic socialism can stand on its own as a new strategy for today's socialists within and outside of Denmark and the Nordic countries?

Dragsted is able to draw on statistics showing that worker owned companies are more productive than regular private companies, and he does in fact present valid international examples beyond the ones from Nordic countries.⁷⁰ Therefore, it is even more surprising that he does not enter into the discussion about what actually happened to the extensive cooperative sector that existed under social democratic leadership in Denmark, which today has been all but wiped out. As Mogens Lykketoft writes, the workers movement has tried:

“Workers' cooperatives, which together with the consumer cooperatives and non-profit housing associations could deliver all necessities throughout life, i.e. banking, insurance, dairy, brewery, sewing and funeral services. The battle was lost. What remains of the workers cooperatives is only The Workers' Bank [*Arbejdernes Landsbank*] and a few construction firms.”⁷¹

Surely, the concentration of capital that we have witnessed over the last 50 years has

⁶⁸ Cf. Lars-Henrik Schmidt, *Socialisation og politisk praksis*, (København: Rhodos 1978) s. 159.

⁶⁹ For further insight into this set of problems, see *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate. On Human Nature* (New York & London: The New Press, [1971]2006). (See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaLoLgtuINg>).

⁷⁰ Dragsted, 190.

⁷¹ Lykketoft, “Økonomisk demokrati kuldsejlede i 70'erne. I dag er der brug for internationale løsninger”.

worsened the chances of success for the cooperative strategy. The amount of capital needed to start a business is so large as to be a problem if the cooperative branch of ‘the democratic sector’ with state aid should outperform capitalism.⁷² And as Lykketoft continues: “Today the balance between democracy and capital is neither determined in a particular company, nor in a particular country.”⁷³

This rather cynical, yet clear statement by a former lead figure in the promotion of a socialist strategy of cooperative development permits our critique to focus on potential elements in this supposedly competitive battle between ‘the democratic’ and ‘the oligarchic’ sectors – that is to say, to elaborate on the elements in Dragsted's theory, where there might be possibilities for breaking with the current terms of capitalist realism. Having looked at the strategic aspects in Dragsted's Nordic socialism, we will turn to the question of *who* might potentially be carrying it out.

The collective subject

As the Norwegian author and journalist Magnus Marsdal writes in his review of Nordic socialism, Karl Marx' most important contribution to a socialist strategy was that he “shifted the question from the thinkers' *what* (is socialism?) to reality's *who* (is able to fight for it?).”⁷⁴ *Nordic socialism* is mostly concerned with the former question but answering this leads us to the second question. At the end of his book, Dragsted asks:

“Who is to fight for a new wave of democratizing of the economy – for a Nordic socialism? Who is the collective subject, as we say on the left?”⁷⁵

The answer to this is to be found in his definition of the two main groups of society, namely wage earners and capitalists as seen above. This definition is subsequently extended to encompass not only wage labourers in their quality as workers but also a multitude of people who relate to capital in capacities such as renters, debtors, consumers, and petty bourgeoisie.⁷⁶ While the question of *who* (will advance Nordic socialism) does not play a significant role in *Nordic Socialism*, the ten concrete proposals for political reforms, with which the book ends, nonetheless indicate some answers to the question of who the potential ‘collective subject’ is.

Before analysing this further, we must however digress in order to discuss the second theoretical work that has made its mark in Dragsted's book. *Nordic Socialism* is openly inspired by Erik Olin Wright's last work entitled *How to be anticapitalist in the 21st century* in which Marxist sociology's grand old man tries to break the deadlock of capitalism by prescribing what he called a *tactic of erosion*.⁷⁷ The idea is to find non-capitalist economic

⁷² A point also made by Rosa Luxemburg in *Social Reform and Revolution*, referred to by Dragsted, 189.

⁷³ Lykketoft, “Økonomisk demokrati kuldsejlede i 70'erne. I dag er der brug for internationale løsninger”.

⁷⁴ Marsdal, “Dragsted vil liste pistolen ud af kapitalisternes hænder. Jeg tror, de vil opdage hans list”.

⁷⁵ Dragsted, 336.

⁷⁶ Clearly echoing the concept of ‘the multitude’ from Hardt and Negri, although Dragsted does not explicitly refer to them.

activities, which should be strengthened when striving for another society – openly inspired by the historical development of capitalism in the womb of absolutism in the late 18th Century. The same kind of erosive tactic could, argues Dragsted, quoting Olin Wright, be the foundation of a socialist strategy for the 21st century. Taken together with his theoretical conceptualization of the two different yet competitive sectors in a hybrid society, this approach then becomes the gradualist strategy in Dragsted's book.

More specifically, and regarding this tactic of erosion, the concrete task Olin Wright sets for socialists is to find elements that can lead to the development of socialism. In his analysis, he distinguishes between three possible modern modes of production: A *capitalist*, where economic power rules. A state-based or *statist*, where state power dominates (the Soviet Union and the like). And a possible third, where *social power* constituted through democratic institutions rules. He thus concludes: "An economy is socialist to the extent that social power dominates state power and economic power."⁷⁸

In his own strategy, however, Dragsted has chosen not to follow Olin Wright in this triad of societal powers but – following his own conception of modes of production – chooses to combine state power and social power into what he calls 'the democratic sector'. This theoretical and practical choice thus analytically dilutes what actual power civil society has without the backing of state power – a situation further diluted as Dragsted does not distinguish between different sectors of the state that historically clearly do not fulfil the same roles: While it is plausible that a democratization social sectors such as health, care for the elderly and education could be part of a socialist strategy, it is hard to imagine what role the military, the police and the sprawling government bureaucracy have to play in this.

Socialism from above

The combination of state and civil society into the same concept holds yet another challenge. The implicit dependence of 'the democratic sector' on the government leads Dragsted to propose a strategy, where it is primarily elected politicians, working from within a state apparatus, who create the framework for social (and socialist) change. Obviously, such a stance stems from a perception of politicians as the ones who are responsible for creating the preconditions for the organization from the bottom up; in his book, however, the latter part of this strategy remains almost unexplored.

Evidently this *statist* (to use Olin Wright's term again) stance – *de facto* elevating politicians (socialists ones, that is) to the closest one gets to an actual 'collective subject' – is clearly reflected in the concrete proposals, with which the book finishes. Among them MPs should make laws to regulate certain types of business, create funds, nationalize critical infrastructure, reform the municipalities, create a common bank, change the pension law, break up financial conglomerates, create a public data bank, invest in welfare and plan more democratically.⁷⁹ And the rest of the population, the supposedly 'real' collective subject?

⁷⁷ Dragsted, 112.

⁷⁸ Eric Olin Wright, *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso, 2019), 70.

⁷⁹ Dragsted, 293–321.

They shall participate in a "comprehensive debate" about employee funds (*lønmodtagerfonde*), work towards having their union-controlled pension companies turn over half of its votes to worker-elected representatives in the companies,⁸⁰ strengthen the workplace committees (MED-udvalg),⁸¹ just as it must be presumed that they are to start new cooperatives.

Nordic Socialism thus promotes a notion of societal and political development, where politicians – since they act through legislation, by extension also have the power to bring about fundamental societal change. Even though Dragsted in several sections mentions the necessity (and historical experience) of socialism being supported from below, pointing to popular participation,⁸² the practical solutions suggested in his book leave no room for the broad majority of people to act. Leaving the actual questions of popular participation aside, Dragsted's notion of (Nordic) socialism rather disappointingly places itself in the long line of what the American socialist and Marxist theoretician Hal Draper has defined as *socialism from above*.⁸³

This is in fact a logical continuation of the role Dragsted himself has played on the Danish left for the last decade and a half, being first an advisor to the parliamentary group and later an MP for the *Enhedslisten*. It is, however, a rather disappointing conclusion for readers of the book, who might have wanted to discuss the question of *how* they can contribute to the struggle for a more just society themselves.

The early socialists of the 19th century strove to answer exactly this question but were faced with the problem that the emerging labour movement still lacked – and therefore had to work out – a comprehensive theory for its actions. Dragsted's problem is rather the opposite: He has a worked-out theory, but lacks a movement, which can bring about its realization; or rather, what he lacks is his 'collective subject'. Consequently, *Nordic Socialism* delivers a substitute theory replacing popular movement with enlightened politicians who must create the framework for popular democratic participation. His focus on the power of will (of the politicians) and erroneous definition of capitalism as only existing in the exploitative relationship, isolated from the rest of society, cuts us off from the insight that *capitalism itself creates the popular movement* for socialism, by enforcing its logic on the population.

It is in the understanding of this process of popular self-organization that the basis for effective political organization as well as the driving force for the struggle that ultimately can lead to the dominance of a socialist mode of production can be found.

And what about gradualism?

Before turning to our conclusion, it is worthwhile to notice that the critique and perspectives we have put forward in this article – and therefore even more so in our book, where we extend this critique to several other areas – could very well be regarded as the very problem that Dragsted wants to illuminate. In short, what we have done by criticizing Dragsted's

⁸⁰ Dragsted, 297.

⁸¹ Dragsted, 299.

⁸² Dragsted, 154, 155, 214, 215, 336.

⁸³ Cf. Hal Draper, "The Two Souls of Socialism", *New Politics* (5), no. 1, 1966, p. 57-84.

attempt to escape the widespread leftist belief in an omnipresent and all-embracing capitalism could *itself* be viewed as *capitalocentrism* and therefore part of the problem – not the solution.

While we completely agree with Dragsted – and therefore also with Gibson-Graham – that it is absolutely imperative for socialists, to pinpoint the various openings and areas within contemporary capitalist society from which socialism can develop, we nevertheless stand firm on the ground that this is *not* done by conceptualizing reality in a more appetizing way in view of potential strategic innovation.

Capitalism, however regrettable this may be, is a political, economic, cultural, and ideological structure that permeates society – not only in Denmark and the Nordic countries but in the rest of the world as well. To stigmatize any position that takes this sociological fact seriously as ‘capitalocentrism’ would be to take an otherwise interesting thesis a step too far. For while the term capitalocentrism surely points out that Marxists and other leftists may have neglected important areas of struggle, it is dangerous to undermine any socialist strategy *a priori*, by throwing away the historically founded structural pervasiveness of capitalism by naming it a ‘misconception’.

That is not to say that this is what Dragsted would argue against in a critique such as ours. However, his obscure fascination with the thesis of capitalocentrism has led him to look for a ‘solution’ to a ‘problem’ he (arguably in the footsteps of Gibson-Graham) has exaggerated.

To suggest that societies are ‘hybrids’ in the way that Dragsted does, is thus to attempt to use an already well-established historical fact (societies, as Marxists and other as mentioned have pointed to for a long time, always contained remnants of former as well as embryos of new societies in them) to create ‘a theory’ to solve a problem that does not exist, at least not in the way that Dragsted frames it. Fundamentally, the problem for the left never was that capitalism appears to be all too insurmountable; nor was it that the left was stuck between reformist and revolutionary thinking, which – especially since Rosa Luxemburg (as well as Lenin for that matter) – ever since the beginning of the 20th Century has been overcome by socialists and communists respectively.⁸⁴ The real problem is and always was to *actually locate and by way of scientific analysis further understand* the exact areas from where socialism can develop – as a contradictory movement within capitalism itself.

In *Nordic Socialism*, Dragsted locates such areas or ‘pockets’ within an actual, already-present socialist mode of production, *existing* in contemporary society, namely in its perpetual competition with a limited version of a capitalist mode of production. These two modes of

⁸⁴ As so clearly stated in the famous opening lines in Luxemburg’s *Social Reform or Revolution?* (noting, of course, that at the time she belonged to the Social Democratic Party and not yet the Communist Party, which she later founded): “At first view the title of this work may be found surprising. Can the Social-Democracy be against reforms? Can we contrapose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the Social-Democracy the only means of engaging in the proletarian class war and working in the direction of the final goal – the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labour. Between social reforms and revolution there exists for the Social Democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim.” Rosa Luxemburg, *Social Reform or Revolution?* (London: Militant Publications, 1986[1900]).

production – or sectors – are defined by the power logic that drives them, enabling Dragsted to speak of the ‘democratic’ and the ‘oligarchic sector’ as distinct and antagonistic sectors of the economy. Again, not only does he mistake remnants of former modes of production for the ‘democratic sector’; he also leads socialists (and others) into a dead-end, by normatively pointing to relics of the past as the sprouts of a future socialism and, arguing that this is where we should focus our political work.

By doing so, he redefines the concept of ‘mode of production’, which has hitherto meant the fundamental position of identifying one dominant – structurally hegemonic – logic of the mode of production. To Dragsted, however, such a concept would be an expression of the capitalocentrist line of reasoning that makes capitalism seem much more overwhelming than it is. Instead, he launches his gradualist strategy to fit the two-modes-of-production-perspective of society, where the best socialist strategy is to work for expanding the already present ‘democratic sector’. Relations between modes of production, he argues, not characterized by structural hierarchy, with the hegemonic one incorporating and subjugating the development of all other sectors according to its own inherent logic.

And the socialist’s tactics? For Dragsted this becomes one of eroding capitalism from within, which can best be achieved by means of the prevailing bourgeois parliamentary system, where he himself has worked for a good number of years. Playing the role of devil’s advocate, it is tempting to suggest that Dragsted has attempted to create a theoretical warrant for an already established parliamentary *practice within Enhedslisten*. In any case, his emphasis on state power, attributing supreme power to his ‘democratic sector’ leaves not much room for action to other than professional politicians. Gradualism, as he presents it, is an attempt to realize socialism without falling into the trap of either social democracy or utopian constructions of ‘socialism beyond capitalism’; but his middle way actually ends up in the old pitfall of parliamentary shortsightedness. A strategy he most likely pursues in order not to frighten the Danish public with revolutionary rhetoric – but which at the same time excludes any real possibility for ‘ordinary’ humans to participate in the movement towards a socialist society.

Socialism, in fact, is first and foremost *a movement in the literal sense*, meaning that it is not only an organizational movement but also an *emotional and a theoretical* one too. Socialism will have to *move* humans. Therefore, any vital socialist strategy cannot just be *socialism from above* – that is, the work well-meaning politicians (the road to hell is, as we very well know, paved with good intentions), but must be the work of the humans it moves. To this end, representative democracy as we know it can definitely play an important role, but as history have shown, it is not enough. After all, Denmark has been a representative democracy for many years now. But it is not a socialist society.

In its conception, socialism was always about reducing state power – not enlarging it. To resort to a strategy dependent on state power, topped up by the good intentions of socialist politicians, is to move away from socialism’s core – namely an active population. Active not by means of voting within capitalist democracy but by its own movement, aimed at transcending the limits of capitalism itself. Such a *socialism from below* would therefore presuppose the active participation of everybody from nurses to artists to workers as prime movers for socialism.

What needs to be done by socialists in order to reach such a point, then, is to develop a theory of reality, in which humans can actually see themselves, understand themselves, and thereby create the movement towards new ways of living. And this can *only* be done through a collective process in which socialism is not reduced to a digestible idea that seeks an 'electorate' in current society, and its well-known established political bodies, but is rather defined as the popular movement striving to come to grips with, where the real contradictions between human needs and capitalist needs lie⁸⁵ – not between extrapolated ideal types such as 'democracy' or 'oligarchy'.

All in all, and with reference to the theoretical flaws that we have here pointed to, *Nordic Socialism* – and with it Dragsted's gradualist position – ultimately appears as a failed, and rather outdated, attempt to reenact a modern socialist strategy. With this article, and with our forthcoming book, we have tried to show why we come to this conclusion. Our seemingly harsh judgment notwithstanding, we nevertheless warmly welcome Dragsted's book as a rare and therefore all the more important occasion to revive more ideological and strategic discussions among socialists in Europe.

For this, Dragsted surely should get credit. What remains for the rest of us is to contribute to its continuation.

⁸⁵ Cf. Étienne Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (London: Verso Books, 2011[1976]).

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