

The Sovereign Consumer in Denmark

BY
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Niklas Olsen's book is an exemplary case of conceptual and intellectual history.¹ It follows the ideational figure 'the sovereign consumer' from 1700 to the present. With great skill and conviction, it hereby contextualizes the many applications of the concept (and the major ideational structures of which it was part). In the following pages, I will first focus on the fundamental problematic of tracing and identifying a key idea through highly inconstant historical contexts. Second, I will discuss Olsen's analysis of major transformations in Danish political culture since the 1980s.

The Sovereign Consumer is, in general, very transparent in its reasoning. It leaves readers in no doubt about the main argument and about where it leads the analysis. Its sources are most of all literary, as the bibliography covers an impressive 37 pages and includes 'books, articles, reviews, interviews, newspaper articles and memory pieces' (p. 15). A mix of primary and secondary texts, in which the author traces variable manifestations of the sovereign consumer.

Three of the six main chapters are organized according to temporal and thematic stages in the development of the concept, whereas the three others are country-specific. This analytical and presentational framework is far from rigid and the analysis contains many convincingly relevant digressions from the main track. Still, I cannot help to wonder how Olsen decided where to look – and to stop looking – for 'the sovereign consumer'. This, I think, may have something to do with his reflexive application of conceptual history.

It is the book's main contention that 'the sovereign consumer' was an integral part of the dissemination and implementation of neoliberal ideas in the 20th century. However, we meet many other kinds of 'consumers' on its pages. They are qualified as 'citizen', 'purchaser', 'efficient', 'civic-minded', 'racist', 'mechanical', 'productive', 'free', 'average', 'rational', 'vulnerable', 'utility-maximizing', and 'ultimate'. Further, there are marked differences to whether these figures were considered by their originators to be actual or ideal, individual or systemic.

While reading it soon turns out that despite the title, the author's interest is not 'the sovereign consumer' in general but more specifi-

¹ This article is a revised version of my contribution as second official opponent at Niklas Olsen's doctoral defense, June 3rd 2019.

cally ‘the neoliberal sovereign consumer’. Here, I must admit, it can be difficult to be absolutely certain when we are dealing with exactly which consumer image because, naturally, the categorization used (as all categorizations) simplifies matters that are far from simple.

In exemplary fashion and with much thoughtfulness and analytical finesse, Olsen presents ‘the ways in which the sovereign consumer has [...] been assigned different meanings and has served many different purposes’ (p. 2). And there certainly are many nuances in the use of this key concept. Not only the exact expression ‘sovereign consumer’ but a ‘much broader field of semantic constructions related and referring to the figure of the sovereign consumer’ (p. 8) is analysed.

In the introduction (p. 7), the author – I think rightly – describes the main contribution of the book as ‘the understanding of the history of neoliberalism as an ongoing shaping, negotiation, and contestation of the figure of the sovereign consumer’. But when one of three defining features of the neoliberalism from which the investigation sets of is mobilization of ‘the idea of the sovereign consumer for this purpose’ (pp. 6f), it tends to be a circularism.

What about plausible neoliberalisms that could exist without sovereign consumers, and sovereign consumers outside of a neoliberal context? To give just one example: according to the thesis, early German neoliberalism did *not* have the ‘free consumer’ as a ‘central and integrating figure’ (p. 74), but apparently it was still neoliberalism! It is not perfectly obvious how this search for the neoliberal, sovereign consumer has been targeted and delineated when the two are defined *in tandem*.

‘The sovereign consumer’ is the analytical subject, but it is hard not to wonder if Olsen could not just as well have chosen its mirror image – ‘consumer sovereignty’ – which is not an apparently tangible actor in the singular but clearly an abstract concept, and it appears to have had a far wider use. In the *GoogleBooks* corpus, it has at its maximum in 1974 a more than 20 times higher frequency than ‘sovereign consumer’. Still, the semantics underlying consumer sovereignty are *also* far from unambiguous.

In ‘The Political Economy of Growth’ (1957), the prominent American, Marxist economist Paul Baran writes that ‘[n]either I nor any other Marxist writers with whose works I am familiar, have ever advocated for the abolition of consumer sovereignty and its replacement by the orders of a commissar’.² Consumer sovereignty also emerged in collec-

² Paul Baran: *The Political Economy of Growth*, Monthly Review Press 1957, p. xvii.

tive forms, and Charles Gide's efforts to advance consumer interests through collective action in co-operatives are mentioned (p. 23 and 31): '[C]ollective identities, purposes, and practices remained the central features of the dominant consumer-languages until the interwar period' (p. 25).

In the 1930s, Henry Simons (among others) advocated for the establishment of consumer co-operations (p. 115). In his book *Wanting and working* from 1947, the later General Secretary of the British Co-operative Party, Harold Campbell, writes that 'the specific role of the Co-operative movement in politics is the advocacy of a libertarian socialism, based on the classlessness of consumer sovereignty [...] it may [...] be regarded as the possible middle way between laissez faire liberalism and rigid planning' – a third way, if you wish.³

Later on, Olsen mentions that 'none of the Danish co-operatives [...] was closely associated with the social-political category of the consumer'.⁴ That is hardly correct. Today, the co-operative chain of shops (called Coop) has 1.7 million members, and Danish Coop was founded in 1866 (22 years after Rochdale). The bylaws of a random, local co-operative, Fredensborg, Asminderød og Omegns Brugsforening, from 1892 states that '[i]t is the purpose of the association through purchase of large supplies of vital necessities, utility products, etc. to obtain for its members as cheap and good commodities as possible'. That is, in my view, at least consumer power (if not sovereignty). So, a quest for consumer sovereignty appears to have a long history within the co-operative movement. This kind of consumer sovereignty, however, is different from the one examined by Olsen.

Naturally, due reference is given to some of the many existing interpretations of neoliberalism. One of them is David Harvey's. We are told that he understands it as 'the outcome of intended and planned structural changes in the global economy' (p. 4). But there is no further expansion on how this restoration of capitalist class power, according to Harvey, was established. He writes that '[b]y capturing ideals of individual freedom and turning them against the interventionist and regulatory practices of the state, capitalist class interests could hope to protect and even restore their position. [...] Neoliberalization required both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism'.⁵

³ Robert A. Brady: *Crisis in Britain. Plans and Achievements of the Labour Government*, University of California Press 1950, p. 31.

⁴ Note 41, p. 203

⁵ David Harvey: *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press 2005,

To repeat: ‘differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism’. A reference (p. 41) to Stefan Schwartzkopf has it that the ideological development of sovereignty went ‘from deity to monarch, to state, to the people and, finally, to the individual as subject.’ Olsen, therefore, concludes (p. 41) that ‘endowed with a freedom to choice, which was unrestrained by the will of the majority, the sovereign consumer personified an essentially individualist society’. Together, this inclines one to believe that the snark the author is really hunting is a specific kind of ‘sovereign consumer’ namely the ‘*individual* sovereign consumer’. The question, then, remains whether collective or even systemic consumer sovereignty should be considered as a kind outside of neo-liberalism.

I find the analysis of the part played by the political party Venstre in redefining liberalism in a Danish context extremely enlightening. Of course, this insidious neoliberalization took place in a wider transnational context. Already in 1977, for instance, the Herman Kahn-founded Hudson Institute issued a country report on Denmark that projected its expectations for the country in 1990. Regarding the evident pressure on welfare state financing, the report concludes that ‘a possible solution could be to combine privatization of services with an increase of transfer payments’.⁶

Naturally, a reader rather inexperienced in these matters like me finds an element of surprise in the role of the Social Democratic Party in making ‘consumer sovereignty’ part of public-sector administration in general. On page 101, it is described how ‘consumer culture began to be viewed in a more positive light across ideological divides from the 1960s onwards’. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the 1970s also experienced a forceful reinvigoration of anti-consumerism for completely new reasons, namely the double movement of environmental concerns and a widespread Marxist critique of the reification of social relations, dialogues that are amply represented in the whole range of stable state economy (or even de-growth) literature originating from ‘Limits to growth’ and the Stockholm summit of 1972, such as E.F. Schumacher’s ‘Small is beautiful’ from 1973 and Paul and Anne Ehrlich’s ‘The End of Affluence’ from the following year.

These and similarly harsh critiques of existing market mechanisms that also were prominently present in the Social Democratic Party in the 1970s are not really addressed. In ‘Lavvækstsamfundet’ from 1976, former minister Jens Kampmann writes that ‘we ought to let popularly elected consumer bodies take part in the determination of the use val-

p. 42.

⁶ *Denmark in Europe 1990*, Børsen 1977, p. 301.

ue of different commodities [...] To a start, this could be done by banning new articles that totally or partly meet needs that are already met by existing products'.⁷ So, it remains a puzzle: what happened to this kind of strong anti-consumerist current of the 1970s, which characterized parts of exactly those European centre-left parties that in the end embraced marketization of the public sector?

When both liberal and centre-left political forces from the 1980s wanted to introduce market-like management of the public sector, it did – obviously – frequently take the form of individual consumer choice. This was, however, not all individualistic. The Social Democratic policy paper *New Directions in Municipal Politics* from 1989 proposed e.g., councils of *users* (not customers or consumers) in all public institutions.⁸ This sounds to me more like consumer co-operatives, and it happened in the exact same year when the clearly neoliberal Bertel Haarder, as Minister of Education, introduced parents' boards in primary schools. Is this perhaps not so much an expression of neoliberal marketization but rather an experiment with libertarian direct democracy? That, at least, was what the conservative pundit Henning Fonsmark believed (and criticized).⁹

The book has a very fine account of how countries with strong welfare states in the 1990s moved in a neoliberal direction, but it under-exposes the fact that political parties increasingly incorporated market mechanisms into their interactions with the electorate: demand-driven policymaking facilitated by focus groups and extensive polling became prevalent. This very decisive development in post-modern parliamentary democracy promotes inconstancy and short-termism. 'Ideology is trash' as conservative prime minister, Poul Schlüter, said in 1983 (maybe echoing a certain 'bell').¹⁰ Again, as voter 'the sovereign consumer' is also first considered an *individual* disengaged from ide-

⁷ Jens Kampmann: *Lavvækstsamfundet. Muligheder og konsekvenser*, Fremads Fokusbøger 1976, p. 37: 'Langt snarere burde man lade folkevalgte forbrugerorganer medvirke ved bestemmelsen af varers nytteværdi [...] Dette kunne til at begynde med ske ved at fastsætte forbud mod nye varer, som helt eller delvis dækker det samme behov, som allerede dækkes af eksisterende varer på markedet'.

⁸ Nye veje i kommunalpolitik. Temaer, 1989 (<http://www.kb.dk/e-mat/cop/pamphlets/dasmaa//pamphlets-dasmaa-2008-feb-partiprogrammer-object75327.pdf>): 'brugerråd'.

⁹ Henning Fonsmark: *Den suveræne dansker – et idépolitisk essay om det optimale demokrati*, Lindhardt og Ringhof 1991, s. 98ff.

¹⁰ Niels Wium Olesen: *Poul Schlüters tid 1982-1993*, Gads Forlag 2018, s. 233f; Daniel Bell: *End of Ideology. On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, Free Press of Glencoe 1960.

ological foundations and party membership. The aforementioned liberal politician Bertel Haarder forestalled in 1978 that in the future '[p]ersons rather than parties will influence Danish politics'.¹¹ It is unintelligible to me why this vital change in political culture, so closely linked to the ideology of 'free consumer choice', is nearly left out, when the declared goal of the analysis is to 'portray neoliberalism as a new political economy of consumer choice that aims to marketize the political' (p. 2).

When dealing with the collaboration between social democratic parties of the Nordic countries resulting in the SAMAK report of 1988, we are told (p. 221) that 'during most of the 1980s, the Danish Social Democratic Party pursued a less clear reform agenda than the ones outlined by its Swedish counterpart and in SAMAK'. This, I think, downplays the fact that the Danish party was a part of SAMAK. In fact, the Danish members of the working group writing the 1988 report were Henrik Bjerre-Nielsen from the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (later CEO of the Danish Financial Supervisory Authority), later Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen and – as chair - Mogens Lykketoft. As is pointed out (p. 222), much SAMAK-thinking was infused into the 1989 program of the Danish Social Democratic Party, which was also conceived by Lykketoft who later (as minister of finance) implemented large parts of it. Maybe, the apparent reluctance to implement the new ideas had to do with the (downplayed) anti-consumerist currents of the time.

On p. 204 we learn that 'free consumer choice' had since the 1950s been a nodal point in Social Democrat political discourse. The 1966 Policy Programme, for instance, says that the goal of cultural politics is 'still freer opportunities for the many sides of cultural life. First, liberty of choice so that the individual can choose between more options as a stimulus for activity or independence'.¹² But the support of free choice may have been even older than this. The most left-wing policy programme *ever* to originate from the Social Democratic Party, *Denmark in the Future* from 1945, was written during the German occupation, and its first political demand is – not surprisingly – 'freedom'.

But what, then, *is* freedom in this context? It is 'religious liberty, freedom of speech, freedom to write, read and teach, freedom for arts

¹¹ Bertel Haarder: *Danskerne år 2000 – en begrundet vision*, Stig Vendelkærs Forlag 1978, s. 106: "'Personerne vil i højere grad end partierne komme til at præge dansk politik'.

¹² <http://www.kb.dk/pamphlets/dasmaa/2008/feb/partiprogrammer/object73415/da/>, s. 7: 'stadig friere udfoldelsesmuligheder for kulturlivets mange sider. Først og fremmest valgfrihed, så den enkelte selv kan vælge mellem flere muligheder som en stimulans til aktivitet og selvstændighed'.

and sciences, freedom of assembly and association, freedom to criticize parliament, government and authorities, freedom to work for political ideas' and finally 'free choice of occupation and free choice of consumption'.¹³ This sounds pretty much like 'consumer sovereignty' to me. But is it neoliberal? Certainly not, and I suspect that is why it is not mentioned.

The policy programme of 1974 *Social Democrats are Forming the Future* has a section about consumer protection that, in many ways fits perfectly with the general trends of state protection of consumers against producer and trader interests that Olsen so adequately describes. Among other things, the programme announcement says that 'according to consumer needs service options should be made more flexible'. But then it has a surprising addition: '... also including public offices and other service functions'. Maybe, the idea of 'free citizen choice' in the public sector that was promoted in the 1990s was not unknown to more traditional social democratic ideology. This could be a forerunner for the modernization programmes of the 1990s. And it might lend strength to an empirical claim: perhaps, 'marketization' is not necessarily neoliberal.

The Social Democratic Party is said (on p. 187) to have gradually developed 'a new ideology that had strong similarities to the neoliberal agenda outlined by Venstre in the 1970s'. But did the party really turn neoliberal? On the one hand, Olsen writes that '[t]he embrace of the sovereign consumer by the center-left thus ultimately continued and reinforced its neoliberal features' (p. 230). But then on the other, drawing from Stephanie Mudge, he concludes (p. 255) that the party became 'bearer of a neoliberal ethic' – that is, basically, the understanding that the market (to quote from Mudge) 'like gravity or the sun [is] beyond the reach of politics, policy-makers, and economists alike'.¹⁴

On page 261, Olsen says that 'decoupling of economics and ethics is a trademark of the neoliberal hegemony that has been established since the 1980s'. So, it is difficult to grasp how this neoliberal ethic could be compared to the 'ideological product of processes in which self-identified liberals, from the interwar period onwards, have

¹³ <http://www.kb.dk/pamphlets/dasmaa/2008/feb/partiprogrammer/object75583/da/>, s. 12: 'Trosfrihed. Talefrihed. Frihed til at skrive, læse og undervise. Frihed for Kunst og Videnskab. Forsamlingsfrihed og Foreningsfrihed. Frihed til et kritiskere Rigsdag, Regering og Myndigheder. Frihed til at arbejde for politiske Tanker – nye som gamle (det vil sige frihed til at danne Opposition). Frit Valg af Beskæftigelse. Frit Valg af Forbrug'.

¹⁴ Stephanie L. Mudge: *Leftism Reinvented. Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism*, Harvard University Press 2018, p. 239.

attempted to renew liberalism as an ideology that claims to promote societal orders based on free markets and individual freedom' that defines neoliberalism on page 6.

From my perspective, the most intriguing question posed by Niklas Olsen's capable analysis is whether neoliberalism invaded Social Democratic thinking or if, contrarily, the adaptation of 'the sovereign consumer' in the restructuring of Scandinavian welfare states during the 1990s transformed this ideational figure into something *not* neoliberal. This is not perfectly clear. Some kind of ideological infection through discourse, however, appears not to be totally unthinkable (p. 9): 'As interpretations of these key actors become more widely diffused in geographical and institutional settings and deeply integrated in our languages and practices, we forget that they are discursive constructions that have been embedded in legal and political institutions and serve particular societal purposes.'