

Comments and Reviews

On the Explanation of Communist Voting

Sten Sparre Nilson, University of Oslo

In SPS No. 2, 1984, Per Selle has criticized what I wrote about his analysis of communist voting. Perhaps he has misunderstood me because I expressed myself very briefly. Let me try to be more specific.

Political divisions do not constitute passive reflections of social cleavages. However, the relation between such background factors and more particular circumstances is not easily analyzed. Selle has studied election data from 1945, when the Communist Party of Norway received comparatively strong support, some twelve percent of the total vote. To explain this phenomenon Selle mentions in the first instance two main causes. Conditions of work in forestry and in manufacturing industry made large parts of the population receptive to socialist ideas in areas where these occupations were dominant. And the Norwegian Labor Party, through its strong nationwide organization, had created a radical tradition by advocating such ideas for many years. These were two important influences which tended to make people cast their ballots in favor of the Communists at a time when there was a strong wave of sympathy for the Soviets in Norway because of their struggle against Hitler's forces during the war. A more particular factor emphasized by Selle was the organizational strength that the Communists rapidly managed to build up in 1945: their electoral success was greatest and most durable in communes where the party had a local organization functioning. And finally, Selle points out that in general they also succeeded best in communes where their electoral support had been greatest at the time when the party was launched, in 1924.

In Selle's view the latter fact presents a problem requiring a separate explanation. He is puzzled by the high correlations obtained between communist strength in 1924 and in the period after World War II:

Comments and Reviews

On the Explanation of Communist Voting

Sten Sparre Nilson, University of Oslo

In SPS No. 2, 1984, Per Selle has criticized what I wrote about his analysis of communist voting. Perhaps he has misunderstood me because I expressed myself very briefly. Let me try to be more specific.

Political divisions do not constitute passive reflections of social cleavages. However, the relation between such background factors and more particular circumstances is not easily analyzed. Selle has studied election data from 1945, when the Communist Party of Norway received comparatively strong support, some twelve percent of the total vote. To explain this phenomenon Selle mentions in the first instance two main causes. Conditions of work in forestry and in manufacturing industry made large parts of the population receptive to socialist ideas in areas where these occupations were dominant. And the Norwegian Labor Party, through its strong nationwide organization, had created a radical tradition by advocating such ideas for many years. These were two important influences which tended to make people cast their ballots in favor of the Communists at a time when there was a strong wave of sympathy for the Soviets in Norway because of their struggle against Hitler's forces during the war. A more particular factor emphasized by Selle was the organizational strength that the Communists rapidly managed to build up in 1945: their electoral success was greatest and most durable in communes where the party had a local organization functioning. And finally, Selle points out that in general they also succeeded best in communes where their electoral support had been greatest at the time when the party was launched, in 1924.

In Selle's view the latter fact presents a problem requiring a separate explanation. He is puzzled by the high correlations obtained between communist strength in 1924 and in the period after World War II:

The NKP had its renaissance mainly in areas where the party had been strong in its earlier heyday ... There is continuity, but separated by a wide gap of almost non-existence of the communist party in the thirties. This means that communist political traditions survived in the 1930s and stayed latent in spite of the absence of organizations to maintain them, and then displayed an almost incredible resurrection. (Selle 1982, 210).

It would indeed have been surprising if such were the case, but Selle exaggerates the extent to which tradition maintained, so to speak, an independent existence of its own. No doubt oral traditions may have played some part in keeping alive over the years the memory of an earlier period, when the Communist Party of Norway was an active political participant at the national level. But to a large extent it seems that such memories must have been maintained precisely through the influence of surviving party branches in key areas.

The contrast between the position of Norwegian communism in the middle of the nineteen-twenties and during the following decade was not as great as Selle makes it appear. He is right in saying that the party lacked 'any substantial support in most communes in the 1930s' (1984, 129). But so it did during the 1920s. Communists were influential then only in a few restricted geographical areas. On the national level they were in a rather weak position from the very beginning. The Communist Party of Norway obtained no more than 6.1 percent of the total vote in 1924, as against the 27.2 percent cast for the Labor Party and the Social Democrats. The national share of the Communists was reduced to 4 percent in 1927. After that they disappeared from the national scene and received only between 1½ and 2 percent of the total vote during the 1930s. In other words, the party preserved only between one fourth and one third of its original strength. But this it did maintain all through the inter-war period. It was not wiped out but hibernated in its local strongholds, generally the same places where it had had some strength from the beginning. These were to be found in the forestry areas of Eastern Norway and some industrial areas in the West and the extreme North.

At the last elections held before the war, the nationwide local contests of 1937, the Communists were strong enough to have a representative of their party elected mayor in one Eastern and two Northern communes. In the former it had behind it 32.8 percent of the locality's total vote, in the latter two 39 and 29 percent, respectively. This was actually more than the party had achieved thirteen years earlier. In most other places the position of the Communists had been considerably weakened by 1937, but nevertheless in a number of communities they still represented a local force to be reckoned with. In the city of Bergen, in its working-class suburb Laksevaag, and in the industrial site of Odda further South, the Communist Party received 10, 25 and 23 percent of the total vote, respectively. In the Trøndelag area it secured 10 percent of the vote in Trondheim, 13 and 18.5 percent in localities to the North of the town.

The Norwegian Communist Party presented its lists in fourteen urban and some forty rural communes at the local elections of 1937. Although in most of these places the party's share of the vote was small, it maintaining communist traditions by its presence and may have helped in maintaining them to some extent in adjacent districts as well. Only in a few of the localities where it had been strong in 1924 does the party seem to have given up its struggle by 1937. I maintain, therefore, that insofar as a communist tradition survived from the period when the party was launched, this seems to have been largely due to the survival of the party organization. Selle's strict separation of organization and tradition does not convince me.

However, this represents no more than a question of detail. Per Selle's main line of argument I find convincing, and I agree with his ideas about the direction that should be followed in future research. Like Pertti Laulajainen in the case of Finland (Laulajainen 1984), Selle has emphasized the importance of studying more closely the *origin* of communist traditions. With the aid of data from the first election in which communist lists were presented, it is possible to obtain more precise knowledge of the many factors that originally influenced working-class voters' behavior.

The outcome of inter- and intra-party struggles within the labor movement was by no means always the same in places which exhibited similar ecological characteristics. Selle refers in this respect to Knut Heidar, who has made a detailed study of two Norwegian industrial communities with much the same social and economic background (Selle 1983, 191; cf. Heidar 1976). At Rjukan in south-eastern Norway, the vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the Norwegian Labor Party in 1924 and the following years, while the Communists showed greater strength than the Labor Party in Odda on the western coast. The difference was due to the fact that Rjukan had strong organizational ties to the capital city, dominated by the Labor Party, while the Odda labor movement was linked with that in Bergen, the nation's second largest city, where Communists had the upper hand.

In fact Bergen was the strongest fortress of the Norwegian Communist Party. As William M. Lafferty remarks, this phenomenon is not to be explained with reference to the city's socio-economic background. No doubt Lafferty was right when he declared, simply and briefly, that the explanation must be sought in organizational and historical factors (Lafferty 1974, 325). A similar expression can be used in some other cases, such as that of Buskerud, which was termed in 1924 the second headquarters of the Norwegian Labor Party. And in Buskerud it is possible to make a rather clear distinction between the organizational factor on the one hand and the historical on the other (Nilson 1980, 105-110; 1981). On the *organizational* front the dynamic Socialist Youth Movement was particularly strong in this constituency, where its national leader had been resident for years and had seen to it that a dense network

of local associations was instituted; in addition there was also an older, regular party organization of considerable strength. A *historical* factor of great importance was the strategic skill displayed by local Labor Party leaders in the internal struggles which took place during the crucial period 1921-1923. As a result they were in control of the dominant local newspaper at the time of the 1924 election. This gave them an opportunity to influence voter opinion which proved decisive. In Bergen, on the other hand, it was the Communist leadership that scored a similar victory. They had gained control of the city's socialist daily, while Labor Party leaders found themselves practically cut off from access to the local mass media and obtained less than one thousand votes for their list in the 1924 election, as against more than twelve thousand cast for that of the Communists.

In some places particular factors of another nature seem to have played a role in giving the Communist Party a strong position at the start. Olav Larssen contends that the special relation existing between the trade unions and the party leadership in the early 1920s did much to strengthen the Communist faction in the forestry areas of the South-East (Larssen 1969, 143). Further study may give us more insight into the origin of the strength of local communist party branches. And the vigor of the latter, in my opinion, is the main factor which explains the survival of communist tradition.¹

NOTE

1. On the history of the local branch in Alta, see *Norsk Historisk Tidsskrift* No. 3/1984, pp. 344-348.

REFERENCES

- Heidar, K. 1976. 'Ökonomisk struktur og korporativ dominans: Arbeiderpolitikken i Rjukan og Odda ca. 1906-1924', *Tidsskrift for arbeiderbevegelsens historie*, No. 1. Oslo.
- Lafferty, W.M. 1974. *Industrialization, Community Structure, and Socialism: An Ecological Analysis of Norway, 1875-1924*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Larssen, O. 1969. *Sti gjennom ulendt terreng: Læretid, partistrid, ny vekst*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Laulajainen, P. 1984. 'The Communist Défeat in the 1948 Finnish Election: Notes on the Impact of Organization', *SPS*, vol. 7, New Series, No. 1.
- Nilson, S.S. 1980. 'Landemerker i en partihistorie: Om metoders styrke og svakhet', *Statsvetenskaplig Tidsskrift*, Vol. 83, No. 2.
- Nilson, S.S. 1981. 'Factional Strife in the Norwegian Labour Party 1918-1924', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 16, No. 4.
- Selle, P. 1982. 'The Norwegian Communist Party in the Immediate Postwar Period', *SPS*, Vol. 5, New Series, No. 3.
- Selle, P. 1983. *Norges Kommunistiske Parti 1945-1950*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.
- Selle, P. 1984. 'Explaining Communist Voting: Some Problems', *SPS*, Vol. 7, New Series, No. 2.

of local associations was instituted; in addition there was also an older, regular party organization of considerable strength. A *historical* factor of great importance was the strategic skill displayed by local Labor Party leaders in the internal struggles which took place during the crucial period 1921-1923. As a result they were in control of the dominant local newspaper at the time of the 1924 election. This gave them an opportunity to influence voter opinion which proved decisive. In Bergen, on the other hand, it was the Communist leadership that scored a similar victory. They had gained control of the city's socialist daily, while Labor Party leaders found themselves practically cut off from access to the local mass media and obtained less than one thousand votes for their list in the 1924 election, as against more than twelve thousand cast for that of the Communists.

In some places particular factors of another nature seem to have played a role in giving the Communist Party a strong position at the start. Olav Larssen contends that the special relation existing between the trade unions and the party leadership in the early 1920s did much to strengthen the Communist faction in the forestry areas of the South-East (Larssen 1969, 143). Further study may give us more insight into the origin of the strength of local communist party branches. And the vigor of the latter, in my opinion, is the main factor which explains the survival of communist tradition.¹

NOTE

1. On the history of the local branch in Alta, see *Norsk Historisk Tidsskrift* No. 3/1984, pp. 344-348.

REFERENCES

- Heidar, K. 1976. 'Ökonomisk struktur og korporativ dominans: Arbeiderpolitikken i Rjukan og Odda ca. 1906-1924', *Tidsskrift for arbeiderbevegelsens historie*, No. 1. Oslo.
- Lafferty, W.M. 1974. *Industrialization, Community Structure, and Socialism: An Ecological Analysis of Norway, 1875-1924*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Larssen, O. 1969. *Sti gjennom ulendt terreng: Læretid, partistrid, ny vekst*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Laulajainen, P. 1984. 'The Communist Défeat in the 1948 Finnish Election: Notes on the Impact of Organization', *SPS*, vol. 7, New Series, No. 1.
- Nilson, S.S. 1980. 'Landemerker i en partihistorie: Om metoders styrke og svakhet', *Statsvetenskaplig Tidsskrift*, Vol. 83, No. 2.
- Nilson, S.S. 1981. 'Factional Strife in the Norwegian Labour Party 1918-1924', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 16, No. 4.
- Selle, P. 1982. 'The Norwegian Communist Party in the Immediate Postwar Period', *SPS*, Vol. 5, New Series, No. 3.
- Selle, P. 1983. *Norges Kommunistiske Parti 1945-1950*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.
- Selle, P. 1984. 'Explaining Communist Voting: Some Problems', *SPS*, Vol. 7, New Series, No. 2.