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From Pre-Disciplinary to Institutionalised Sociology

Abstract: This chapter provides an overview of Danish sociology from around 1870 to 1960. The chapter analyses the many unsuccessful attempts to institutionalise sociology in Denmark in the early period. It shows how early sociologists pursued academic careers in the intersection between academia, civic society organisation and state bureaucracy, but despite relative success and academic recognition, sociologists were not able to establish continued sociological institutions often due to opposition from dominating disciplines like economics and philosophy.

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Pre-professional sociological attempts

Who was the first Danish sociologist? When was sociology founded in Denmark? Questions like these are often asked by members of the national communities of sociologists, and the different answers provided are used to justify specific forms of research, institutionalised traditions and relations to other societal actors in the struggle for recognition (Larsson and Wisselgren 2006). The answers that I will provide here are less clear. As in the general history of sociology and social sciences, different national traditions and institutional setups, schools of thought, political ambitions and demands for knowledge about society have shaped the social sciences – both their cognitive and institutional forms. Thus, we find the early Danish sociological research juxtaposed between different scholarly traditions, ambitions and institutional constraints and possibilities. In the following account of the early Danish sociology, I tell the story of the dominant forms of sociological research in the long period before the first professorship in sociology was established in 1938. It is thus a story of some two generations of scholars and bureaucrats interested in sociological issues, theories and questions, and their struggles to gain positions, build intuitions and receive recognition within an academic space. The two main currents in this early history are on the one hand a philosophically educated cluster of scholars and on the other hand a more statistical or empirical cluster, also associated with a strong interest in social issues. In this way early Danish sociology resembles the early formations of sociological research we find in other Western nation states (Bannister 2003, 1987; Mohan and Wilke 1994; Patel 2010).

When and how did a specific set of practices, theories and methods become a coherent academic entity called sociology? And what properties characterised this field? These underlying questions are central for the following chapter, and in the attempt to answer them I will take several detours in order to show and understand the variety of practices, agents and institutions that were involved in the struggles of defining the position and contents of sociology in Denmark – alongside the other social sciences disciplines emerging and institutionalising from around 1850 and the following hundred years. In the following account I thus not only include the men who defined themselves as sociologists, but I also include academics who defined themselves as economists, statisticians or philosophers. This is because the theories, methods and institutions that became sociology grew out of these already established