
BETWEEN DENMARK AND DETROIT:
UNIONIZED LABOUR AT FORD
MOTOR COMPANY, COPENHAGEN,
1919-39

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BETWEEN DENMARK AND DETROIT: UNIONIZED LABOUR AT FORD MOTOR COMPANY, COPENHAGEN, 1919-39

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In 1919, Ford Motor Company established its first assembly plant on the European mainland in Copenhagen, Denmark. Based on a Fordist productive model, including technology and materials from Detroit, cars were manufactured and exported to most of Northern Europe.

It has been claimed, that Ford also transferred its principles of industrial relations to Europe, including a ban on trade unions. But as the article demonstrates, the Copenhagen factory was completely unionized, and the unions were able to establish collective bargaining for a period. On the other hand several factors, including internal splits among the workers caused by the Fordist production methods, worked against the unions over time.

The end result was a hybrid between Detroit methods and Danish traditions of industrial relations. The changing character of this hybrid is traced through the shifting relations of power between unions, local management and the Ford Motor Company.

Keywords: Auto industry; fordism; trade unions; collective bargaining;
Denmark

1919, the Ford Motor Company started assembling Ford T's in Copenhagen, Denmark. Ford had established its first European production unit in Manchester, England, in 1911, but this was effectively the first assembly plant on the European mainland,¹ and throughout the inter-war period most of the northeastern European market for Ford cars was supplied from Copenhagen. In 1924, a report in *Ford News* referred to the Copenhagen plant as the company's "second largest foreign factory".²

In 1964 Wilkins and Hill wrote about Ford's expansion in Europe in *American Business Abroad: Ford on Six Continents*. In this classic study – which has recently been republished – they describe how Ford successfully undermined union organization in Manchester, and concluded that workers at Ford were generally denied the right to negotiate with management in Europe, just as they were in Detroit. Wilkins and Hill specifically points to Denmark as a case of application of the American "open shop" principles.³

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Ford's European history has been dealt with in several other studies, but mostly with a focus on business and economic history.⁴ The conclusion in *American Business Abroad* as regards the transfer of the Detroit industrial relations principles to Europe seems largely uncontested.⁵

But in fact, workers at Ford's Danish plant were not only union members. They also successfully resisted some of Ford's core management principles, even to the point where collective bargaining and elected shop stewards were accepted – at least for a period.

FORDISM

As a system of industrial mass production, Fordism is closely associated with the development of the assembly line, as introduced in the Highland Park factory around 1913. But the assembly line was only a part of the technological innovations made by Henry Ford and his technicians and combined into a coherent system of production. Other important elements were the radical standardization of the end product, the widespread use of interchangeable parts and specialized machine tools, and an extensive division of labour.⁶

The production process was planned such that the control of the workflow was centralized. Productivity was determined – at least in principle – by the speed of the assembly line.⁷ Ford's highly qualified engineers were famous for their ability to construct specialized tools and to plan the optimal production process. On the other hand, those who operated the machines needed very little training.⁸ With its widespread use of unskilled labour, Ford Motor Company placed itself at the forefront of a general development of American industry in the early 20th century: The rapidly growing mass-producing industries, finding themselves unable to satisfy the need for labour power from the relatively limited number of skilled workers alone, had to find ways to utilize the much larger resource of unskilled labour power.

Fordism has been defined by Freyssenet and others as a specific model for production, characterized by a volume strategy of manufacturing a standard model at the lowest possible price for the largest possible market segment. Production is based on a highly centralised and standardised organization from design through manufacture to sale. Employment relationship is characterized by fixed and high wages, made possible by high productivity.⁹ This principle definition is very useful, and allows us to distinguish Fordism from other productive models, such as Taylorism and Sloanism, with which it is often confused.

However, as an empirical reality Fordism was the result of a process of trial and error, not a preconceived master plan. Ford's policy of paying high wages is an example. It was first introduced as an answer to a specific problem: workers at the Highland Park factory increasingly reacted to working conditions on the assembly line by simply leaving, culminating in 1913, when the number of workers who left the factory during that year was equivalent to 370% of the workforce.¹⁰ Furthermore, there were massive problems with absenteeism and lack of discipline.

The famous 5\$ daily wage – roughly double what was paid for similar jobs in other industries – and the simultaneous reduction of the daily working hours from 9 to 8, was introduced by Ford in January 1914 as a countermeasure to this problem. The \$5 was the sum of a basic wage plus a bonus, and those who left Ford but later returned had to work for six months on basic wages before getting the bonus back. As a result, labour turnover

was reduced to 33%.¹¹ It was only later, that Ford developed what was originally a specific solution to a specific problem, into a general principle of stimulating the demand for industrial products by paying high wages.

Furthermore, the practices of Fordism were of course influenced by changes in its broader economic and social context. Freyssenet finds that Fordism as a productive model relies on

*A company governance compromise that is mainly agreed by executives and unions, and which is based on access to mass consumption in exchange for an acceptance of the productive organisation.*¹²

This is correct as a general characteristic of the Fordist company-employer relationship, but as far as unions goes, it did not become true in American before 1941 when Ford finally signed an agreement with the United Auto Workers. Until then, it had been the practise of Ford to exclude unions from playing any part in the relationship between management and workers. This was done by methods ranging from ideological persuasion through surveillance to brute force.¹³

Ford Motor Company's most expansive years coincided with the period of the "Open Shop" movement, when American employers aggressively sought to keep organized labour out of their premises. The shift in employment in the emerging mass industries, away from skilled labour towards unskilled – many of whom were immigrants, with highly diverse cultural backgrounds – also undermined traditions of craft or class based solidarity.¹⁴ For these reasons, unions were mostly absent in these industries, including Ford Motor Company.

Ford's anti-union policy was further enhanced by Henry Ford's personal views on industrial relations. He resented any talk of social classes, claiming that the relationship between employer and employee was between individuals only.¹⁵ It was Ford's conviction, that capital and labour shared a common interest in high productivity – and that unions worked against this common interest.¹⁶ When the newly formed United Auto Workers started campaigning for collective bargaining in the late 1930's, resulting in agreements with General Motors and Chrysler, Ford Motor Company persevered in its anti-union policy, even against New Deal legislation on labour rights.

Henry Ford's ideas of common interests did not only include capital and labour, but also the consumers:

*The owner, the employees and the buying public are all one and the same, and unless an industry can so manage itself as to keep wages high and prices low, it destroys itself, for otherwise it limits the number of its customers.*¹⁷

The social utopia envisioned by Ford and advocated in several widely circulated books published in his name, was one in which mass production and high productivity would ensure an abundance of material wealth, thus making political and social conflicts superfluous.

Not only was there no positive role to be played by unions in Ford's vision, but also the role of politicians and government was inherently negative: the best any government could do was to refrain as much as possible from any interference in the economy.¹⁸ Ford's productivist utopia would be the result of the individual efforts of talented industrialists.

Henry Ford labelled his vision “the American way”, but thought it universally applicable: “The essential principles of Americanism are the goal toward which all civilization is striving”.¹⁹ In hindsight we might realize that while Fordist mass production was at the core of America’s rise to global power, there was of course more to it than that.²⁰ But most of Henry Ford’s European contemporaries, followers as well as critics, did in fact consider Fordism and Americanism as more or less one and the same thing.²¹ Consequently, in assessing the effect of Ford Motor Company’s expansion from Detroit into Europe, we also have to take this wider ideological aspect into account.

PRODUCING CARS IN COPENHAGEN

The decision to establish a Ford T assembly plant in Copenhagen was taken at a board meeting at the Ford Motor Company in Detroit in May 1919. It was based on a report by William S. Knudsen, a Danish-born American who had made his career with Ford.

Knudsen had been sent to Europe immediately after the war to evaluate the prospects for expansion. He proposed Denmark and Spain, two countries in the periphery but unharmed by the war, as starting points. Copenhagen was mainly selected because of its harbour facilities, and because the Danish Government was willing to offer tax exemption for imported car parts.²² According to Knudsen’s plan, Copenhagen would become the headquarters of the “North European Division”, comprising the Nordic Countries, the Baltic Countries, Poland, Germany and the Netherlands. The goal was to produce and sell 6,000 Ford T’s a year, double what was expected in Spain, making Denmark the primary bridgehead for Ford into the European mainland.²³

Facilities were rented in Heimdalsgade in the north of the city, and in October the first Ford T rolled off the assembly line. The workforce at the new factory was quite modest: 148 blue-collar and 12 white-collar workers. But the plant was an object of public interest, because of the technologies employed. The Danish Society of Engineers arranged a members’ tour of the facilities, and they were duly impressed, especially by a technology so new that it had not even been given a Danish name yet: the “conveyor”.²⁴ The labour movement newspaper *Social-Demokraten* paid a visit too, and noted the use of US-made specialized machinery that “carries out the work at exceptional speed and with great ease, in a fraction of the time needed at other places”.²⁵

Despite these technologies and the high productivity, the plant was too small to produce the number of cars that could be sold. It was therefore decided to build a completely new factory from the ground up.

A SMALL PART OF DETROIT

The new plant was designed by Albert Kahn, the architect known for designing Ford’s Highland Park and River Rouge factories in Detroit. It was built by Monberg & Thorsen, a major Danish construction company.²⁶

The factory was erected in the South Harbour area. From the outside, the building was easily recognizable from the rational layout of its facade, and the water tower, the emblematic feature of American urban architecture. Inside, the most modern production principles were applied. Car parts were loaded from ships directly into the plant, where they were assembled in a straight-line production process, using assembly lines and

specialized tools. It was as if a small part of Detroit had simply been pulled up by its roots and re-planted in Copenhagen.

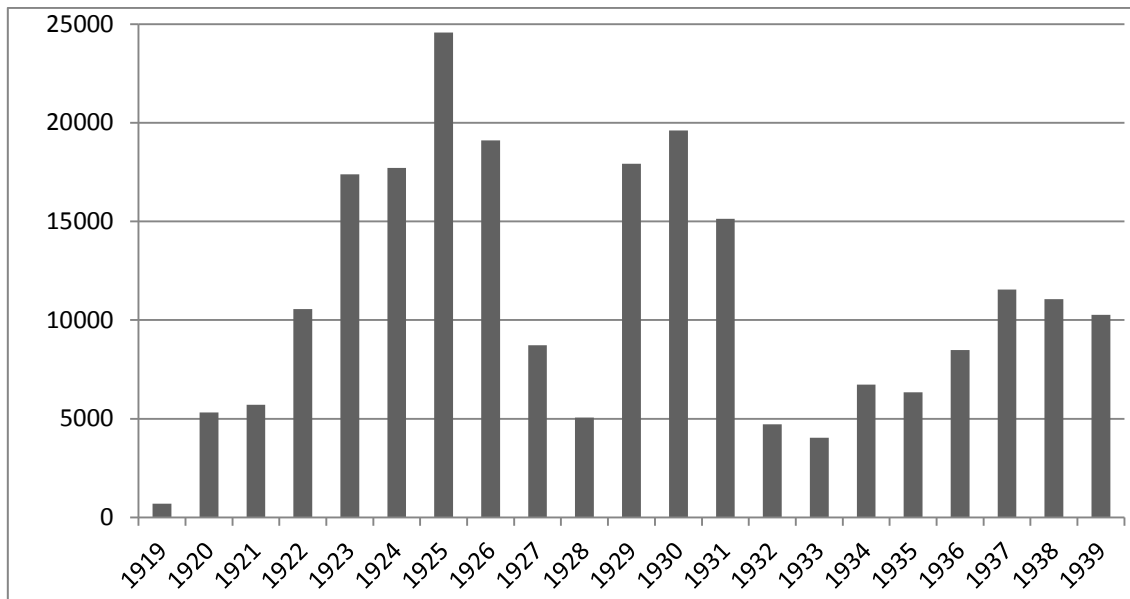


Figure 1: Number of Ford cars produced in Copenhagen, 1919-39²⁷

The workforce had now grown to about 600 blue-collar and 100 white-collar workers.²⁸

Production already reached its peak during 1925, the first full year of the new plant. During the rest of the inter-war period, it drifted up and down, as can be seen from Figure 1. The low figures for 1927-28 can be attributed to the changeover from the Ford T to the new Model A, when the factory had to be completely re-tooled, and production was terminated between August 1927 and July 1928.²⁹ The drop in the early 1930s is of course an effect of the general economic crisis. Nevertheless, the Copenhagen factory seems to have been a profitable business for Ford throughout the period.³⁰

OWNERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP

In legal terms, the Copenhagen Ford company was established as a Danish limited company. However, the only shareholder was the American Ford Motor Company, and in the words of Knudsen “the business can run without any other formality, than a yearly meeting through proxy from Detroit”.³¹

The first manager of the Copenhagen plant was the American J.J. Harrington. But he left for another assignment in early 1920 and George Carlson became the general manager. Carlson had originally been sent to Copenhagen because he was of Swedish descent and therefore understood the language.³² In 1925 Carlson moved on to Germany and H.C. Møller took over his position. Møller was a Danish-born engineer who had started working for Ford in the USA, but returned to Copenhagen in 1920.³³ With Carlson and especially Møller the management in Copenhagen differed from most of Ford’s early overseas operations, which were led by Americans with no particular knowledge of the local context.³⁴

From the start, all of Ford's operations in Europe were managed by Detroit, in principle in the same manner as the American subsidiaries. They all received the same instructions concerning production, sales and accounting. These instructions were kept in binders at each factory, and referred to internally as "The Ford Bible".³⁵

Consequently, in the business history of Ford in Europe, the period until 1928 has been characterized as the "years of Americanization".³⁶ But in reality, it was practically impossible for Detroit to have detailed knowledge of local economic, political and other intricacies in every foreign country. Perhaps the American management had the intention of controlling everything, but they did not necessarily have the means to do so. Regular inspections were carried out by auditors from Detroit, who visited Copenhagen nearly every year during the 1920s.³⁷ In principle, the auditors had extensive decision-making power, but as one of them, the later head of the Auditing Department H.L. Moekle, recalls:

*I don't believe the auditors assumed certain controls. Actually auditors never were really effective managers of the operations over there. [...] If I remember correctly, Mr. Harrington and later Mr. Carlson acted as sort of general representatives and exercised a sort of general control, working always under the advice of the Detroit offices.*³⁸

In 1928, the structure of Ford in Europe was completely changed, in terms of production as well as management. A major new production plant was established in Dagenham, England, which was supposed to replace Detroit as the primary manufacturer of components for the European assembly plants. The other European plants were no longer to be owned and controlled directly from Detroit, but indirectly via Ford in England. Percival Perry, chairman of the English company, was also made chairman of every other European company.³⁹

But partly as a result of the growing protectionism in the 1930s in the wake of the crisis, it became increasingly difficult for Dagenham and Perry to maintain the role of regional headquarters. Some European branches circumvented Dagenham when they needed specific problems solved, reporting directly to Detroit, and Perry's authority was undermined by a lack of support from Ford's central management.⁴⁰

Whether the management in Copenhagen had to answer to Detroit or Dagenham, it would seem that the chain of command was never as fixed and clear in reality as it was supposed to be in principle.

THE DANISH CONTEXT

In 1919, roughly three out of four urban blue-collar workers in Denmark were union members. 98% of the skilled workers in the metal industries were organized.⁴¹ As a result partly of tradition, partly of their strong unions, the skilled workers were generally self-confident, with the will and power to influence their own workplace.

There was a tendency to gradually replace skilled with unskilled labour, but not nearly as radically as in the American industry: two thirds of all workers in the metal industries were still considered skilled in 1925.⁴² Conflicts sometimes erupted between skilled and unskilled workers over the right to certain types of jobs. But as the unskilled workers also became increasingly organized, controversies were mostly manageable within the framework of the unions.

Practically all blue-collar unions were members of the national federation of unions, *De samvirkende Fagforbund* (DSF). Since 1899 a basic agreement had existed between the

DSF and the national federation of employers, providing a framework for industrial relations. The agreement stipulated that the workers had the right to organize and to bargain collectively. Each union would negotiate its own national and local agreement, typically every second or third year.

Most unions were ideologically oriented towards and closely allied with the Social Democratic Party, which from 1924 on was the largest party in parliament. The Social Democrats formed a minority government in 1924-26, and – together with the smaller social-liberal Radical party – a series of majority governments from 1929 onwards.⁴³

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Quoting a memo from 1920, Wilkins and Hill write:

*In Denmark, when employees sought to organize, the orders from Detroit were ‘that in case of labor troubles they should be met strictly on our American plan [the open shop] regardless of whether the plant keeps operating or not’.*⁴⁴

But the plant kept operating, which prompts Wilkins and Hill to conclude that the prospect of high wages at Ford made the workers abandon their demands for union rights.

That was actually not the case. On the contrary, several unions were present at the Copenhagen plant from the very start, including local branches of two of the largest and most powerful ones: the Metal Workers’ Union, *Dansk Smede- og Maskinarbejder Forbund* (DSMF), and the General Union of Unskilled Workers, *Dansk Arbejdsmands Forbund* (DAF). Other unions represented were the Joiners’ Union, the Painters’ Union, the Plumbers’ Union and the Upholsterers’ Union. In December 1919 a joint meeting was held by the unions present at the new Ford plant, in order to coordinate activities.⁴⁵

We have no sources for the precise number of union members. However, there is nothing to suggest that it was otherwise than in similar industries in Copenhagen at the time: very close to 100%. The management accepted the situation, and at least from the end of 1920 officially recognized the shop stewards elected by the union members.⁴⁶

If Wilkins and Hill are right, the Copenhagen management acted contrary to direct orders from Detroit when they accepted unions and negotiations. But such direct orders probably never existed. The memo quoted by Wilkins and Hill was the result of a conference held in June 1920, assembling all the managers of Ford’s operations overseas, including Harrington from Denmark. In it, there is a section called “Copenhagen”, and the precise wording is:

*Will continue running as at present, but in case of labor troubles, they should be met strictly on our American Plan regardless of whether the Plant keeps operating or not.*⁴⁷

The phrase “open shop” is added in Wilkins & Hill’s version of the text, as their own interpretation of the “American Plan”. But it is much more likely that the words “American Plan” referred to the elaborate scheme used by Ford Motor Company to divide all jobs into three categories: skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled.

The systematic attempt to replace skilled with unskilled labour was a core element of Fordism. In one of his books, Henry Ford proudly explained how he succeeded in lowering the number of skilled workers to only 5% of the workforce in some specific departments in Detroit.⁴⁸

When Ford Motor Company introduced their own explicit definitions of “skilled” and “unskilled” jobs, without regard to Danish customs, it was bound to provoke dispute in a workforce already alert to these issues. During the early months of 1920 there was a confrontation between the unskilled workers at Ford on one side, and the skilled ones on the other, over who had the right to fill certain job categories. Under pressure from the Union of Metal Workers, management agreed to let some unskilled workers go and hire skilled mechanics instead.⁴⁹ But the mechanics and the upholstery workers were not content with this and went on strike in February against what they saw as an attempt from unskilled workers to take over their jobs.⁵⁰ This was probably the “labor trouble”, referred to in the memorandum.

But the principle of management’s right to assign any worker to any category was indispensable to Ford. In *Today and Tomorrow* Henry Ford himself makes a remark about Denmark:

In Copenhagen [...] we met for the first time a labour government which regulated hours, wages, and conditions of work, and practically made union regulations a part of the law of the land. We hired barbers, preachers, blacksmiths, plumbers, unskilled labourers, and whoever applied, and put them to work, side by side, on the machines—as has been our custom everywhere. [...] Our plant [...] could not have served had it been forced into an academic classification.⁵¹

Even though this confusion of union agreements with legal regulations shows that Henry Ford may not have completely grasped the details, his overall point is clear: the company needs to allocate its workforce unhindered by any pre-existing procedures or regulations.

This substantiates the conclusion that it was the “American plan” for assigning workers to different job categories, and not the principle of the open shop, that was to be “met strictly”. And the company did in fact uphold the “American plan”, while at the same time making a number of other concessions to the unions.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AND AGREEMENTS

The most striking of these concessions was the acceptance of collective bargaining and agreements. The first agreement was reached in October 1922.⁵² In the first paragraph, it was stated that the agreement was “based on Detroit regulations”.⁵³ The three categories “Skilled”, “Semi-skilled” and “Unskilled” workers were laid out, and each job type assigned to them was stated with its English name, followed by the Danish name in brackets – for example “Body assembler (Karosserisaml.)”, etc.

The basic daily wage was the same for all three categories, but the number of bonus grades was different, resulting in different maximum wages, as detailed in Table 1. As can be seen, the wage level for any category of workers was considerably higher at Ford than it was in other, similar companies.

	Ford Motor Company A/S		Copenhagen metal industry	
	Basic	Maximum	On hourly pay	On piecework
Unskilled	18.75	22.50	10.56	14.16
Semi-skilled	18.75	24.00		
Skilled	18.75	25.50	13.76	16.00

Table 1: Daily wages in Danish Kroner, as stipulated in the agreement at Ford Motor Company A/S, compared to the average wages paid in the metal industry in Copenhagen, 1922.⁵⁴

As in Detroit, workers who left the Danish company but were later re-hired had to start over again from the basic wage level.

So far, the agreement reflected the practice already established in Detroit. However, other parts of the agreement deviated notably from the American practice. In relation to wages, it was agreed that overtime as well as work on late shifts should be paid extra. For overtime, 30% extra was paid for the first two hours, 50% for the third hour and 100% for subsequent hours.⁵⁵

Moreover, the company agreed to recognize the elected shop stewards as the workers' legitimate representatives, and the right of union officials to take part in negotiations over "issues of disagreement". But most important, of course, from the point of view of the workers, was the de facto recognition of their unions and of collective bargaining, as manifested in the agreement as a result of negotiation. This would of course have been completely out of the question in Detroit.

CONFLICTS

Collective bargaining and the existence of an agreement did not mean, however, that conflicts between labour and management ceased to exist. During the 1920s there were a number of confrontations, some of which can be ascribed to attempts to implement "Detroit principles".

At an early point, management declared it mandatory for the workers to wear a badge with a number on their jackets, so that they could be easily identified even from a distance. This caused the workers to protest against what they called "symbols of slavery", and they were allowed to keep the badges in their pockets.⁵⁶

Workers at Ford often had a beer with their lunch, as was customary in Denmark at the time. But in December 1924, complying with instructions from Detroit, management introduced a regulation banning any consumption of beer and alcohol on the premises of the company. The trade unions used the formal channels of complaint, and took the question before the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which ruled in favour of the workers: according to Danish principles of industrial relations, such regulations could not be declared unilaterally by management, but should be made the subject of negotiation. Later, a new regulation was agreed upon, allowing workers to bring their own beer for lunch.⁵⁷

The unions also contested the fines that the company claimed from workers for damaging or not returning their tools. And there were other disputes, a few of which even led to short strikes.⁵⁸ However, despite the conflicts, the output of the factory was steadily increasing. One reason for this was the widespread use of overtime: in 1922 three hours overtime a day was not unusual.⁵⁹ This of course accentuated the issue of overtime payment. Payment for overtime seems to have been an established practice, even before it was recognized in the agreement from October 1922. Earlier in 1922 the management had made an attempt to reduce overtime payment, but the unions had successfully resisted.⁶⁰ But overtime payment was not only an economic issue; it was also in conflict with the overall Fordist management principle of being able to deploy the workforce in the most flexible ways according to the needs of production.

Overtime payment was thus to become a recurrent issue. In 1926 the management terminated the 1922 agreement, with the explicit intent of having the extra payment for overtime and working in shifts removed or at least reduced. But the subsequent bargaining resulted in a new agreement that maintained the extra payment.⁶¹

UNIONS AGAINST UNIONS

The production process at Ford represented a challenge to the unions. As we have seen, almost from the beginning there were conflicts among the skilled and the unskilled unions over who had the right to which jobs. For a short period thereafter, internal conflicts seem to have been relatively scarce – perhaps because the overall number of jobs was increasing. In October 1924, a combined union club was even established.⁶² Nevertheless, the tensions were still there. In late 1924 the chairman of the unskilled workers complained that some of his members had been “driven back” by the skilled workers.⁶³

Painting was a special area of conflict, since the production process gradually shifted towards the newly invented methods of spray painting during the 1920s. Painting had traditionally been a highly skilled profession, but with the new technology much of the actual painting could be done by unskilled workers, confining the need for skilled workers to preparatory jobs such as sanding and filling.⁶⁴

In April 1927, the painters’ union at Ford made complaints about joiners and unskilled workers being put to work in the paint shop. They wanted these jobs exclusively for their own members. This led to the hitherto worst confrontation, as the painters went on strike. The unskilled workers, on the other hand, declared that they would take over any vacant jobs in the paint shop during the strike. Since the support for the painters from the other skilled workers’ unions was rather vague, they soon had to abandon their claim. Meanwhile there had been heated discussion among the unions, and the unskilled workers had been excluded from joint meetings by the skilled workers.⁶⁵ This resulted in the unskilled workers formally withdrawing from the combined union club.⁶⁶

Generally, the skilled workers saw the position of the unskilled workers as an unfair attempt to undermine their status, while the unskilled accused the skilled workers of “monopolizing” jobs that could just as easily be done by unskilled workers.⁶⁷

THE AGREEMENT IS TERMINATED

In September 1927 the agreement was once again terminated by Ford. And this time management declared that they could not enter into a new agreement, "since it has been required that certain principles inside our organization should be maintained".⁶⁸

According to H.C. Møller, the cancellation was the result of a direct order from Detroit. The Danish management was not thrilled and tried to appeal directly to Edsel Ford to have the decision revoked, but with no luck.⁶⁹ Møller summed up his view in a document called "Notes on The Labor Situation", probably as preparation for his discussions with Detroit.⁷⁰ Møller predicted that if the agreement was cancelled completely by 1 March 1927 (a date that must have been set from Detroit), this would lead to a strike.

As an alternative, he proposed a long-term strategy: the agreement should not be cancelled before September (at which time production would already be at a standstill, due to the planned retooling for model A production). He also suggested giving the impression that there would be no significant change in pay and other conditions, even if there was no longer a formal agreement. Later, when things had settled down, the payments for working in shifts and overtime could then gradually be done away with.

Following this strategy, the management stalled the negotiations for a new agreement. Finally, in July 1928, when normal production was resumed and workers were rehired, they were each individually handed a new set of work regulations. Like the previous agreement, this was based on Detroit regulations. But the modifications toward Danish practice found in the agreement had been omitted: there would be no more extra pay for overtime or working in shifts. There was no recognition of shop stewards; instead workers were obliged to take any grievances to the management on an individual basis. Furthermore, the regulations contained a large number of very detailed obligations and prohibitions regarding the work.⁷¹

The unions were unable to come up with a clear and united response. A strike had been discussed at least since November 1927, but most unions did not believe it was a feasible way to go. Two things argued against a strike: since the wages were still high at Ford, it would be difficult to prevent strike-breaking; and skilled and unskilled workers each feared that the other group would use a strike as an opportunity to take over parts of their jobs.⁷²

At a general meeting of the Metal Workers' Union, the chairman was against "closing the plant, since our own members out there are definitely not in favour of a strike, mainly because of the high wages". The local shop steward characterized the situation at Ford as "skewed, since the unskilled workers were acting against the others in all possible ways".⁷³

Only the relatively small Upholstery Workers' Union finally decided to go on strike on 15 November 1928.⁷⁴ Contrary to the social democratic orientation of the other unions, the upholsterers had a communist leadership. As a consequence, the conflict was inscribed in the overall conflict between social democrats and communists, and was politicized by both parties from the start. The strike was condemned by the chairman of the Trade Union Federation as a "dictatorship of the minority", and received no mention at all in *Social-Demokraten*, the dominant newspaper of the labour movement.⁷⁵ On the other hand the upholsterers were strongly supported by the communist paper *Arbejderbladet*, with an emphasis on the principles involved in the conflict:

It may well be that Ford is tempting [the workers] with wages that are not usual in this country, but that should not decide the matter. The crucial point is that the right to codetermination that the unions have achieved through a generation of struggle has been taken from them with the stroke of a pen.⁷⁶

The upholsterers were isolated and the strike ended with defeat. After twelve days it was called off, and for the rest of the inter-war period there would be no agreement between the unions and the Ford Motor Company in Copenhagen.

INFORMAL BARGAINING

The loss of a negotiated agreement was a principal defeat for the workers. But the unions were still very much functional at Ford. There is no sign of loss of membership.⁷⁷ The combined club was reorganized, formalized and probably even strengthened.⁷⁸

The unions continued electing shop stewards, but in accordance with the new regulation these were not formally recognized by the management.⁷⁹ Never the less, a sort of informal collective bargaining seems to have taken place. When management in 1931 saw a need to cut wages, they took up negotiations with the unions, offering them the benefit of paid vacation in exchange for lower pay rates. Prolonged negotiations resulted not in paid vacation, but a reduced cut in wages. Five years later an agreement on paid holiday was reached, two years before this became mandatory by law.⁸⁰

Other incidents seem to indicate, that despite not officially recognizing shop stewards, management were ready to accept elected spokespersons on an ad hoc basis⁸¹. During the 1930's industrial relations at Ford Copenhagen can be characterised as semi-official collective bargaining. It might be this practice H.C. Møller was hinting at, when he explained in retrospect: "We had to have a union. What happened was that unions in the Ford - Denmark plant were tacitly approved".⁸² In contrast, Ford intensified its anti-union policy in England at the same time, with an extensive spy system, arbitrary sackings and driving supervision, turning the new Dagenham plant into what has been called a "place of fear".⁸³

TRADE UNIONS AND FORDISM

In Germany, the labour movement in general and some trade unions, like the Union of Metal Workers (DMV) took a great deal of positive interest in Henry Ford and his ideas during the 1920s. In most of the German Social Democratic labour movement, *Amerikanismus* or *Fordismus* was seen as a source of inspiration for rebuilding German industry. According to Mary Nolan, there was an "infatuation" with Fordism in Germany.⁸⁴

Despite their traditional close cooperation, the Danish labour movement does not seem to have shared this infatuation with their German colleagues. They did not send any delegations to the USA, as the Germans did, and they did not write much about America or Henry Ford in their magazines. In 1927, one of the relatively few articles about Ford appeared in the magazine of the Metal Workers' Union, and it was not positive: The article claimed that workers in Ford's American plants "must degrade themselves to the status of slaves", and were "overheated and dirty from Monday morning to Friday night". The high wages were dismissed as "syrup for catching flies". And "any reflections on the work are considered superfluous and reduced to almost nothing".⁸⁵

Six months later a new article appeared which dealt more specifically with the Copenhagen Ford plant. The “Ford System” was presented as an invention from Detroit:

*Rationalization and economy were put in the driver's seat; work was brought to the man by the conveyor belt, and he only had to stand ready at his specific place [...] Moreover, the labourer simply had to speed up as much as possible.*⁸⁶

Several of the conflicts referred to above, primarily over labour discipline, were recaptured in the article. In other words, insofar as Fordism was not simply ignored during the 1920s, it was treated with a great deal of scepticism by the union magazine.

However, the controversy at Ford in 1927-28 was not really mentioned in any part of the union or party press. The strike by the upholstery workers was suppressed for political reasons. But the loss of collective bargaining rights – a key issue for the unions in general – was not mentioned either, and was not even a matter of discussion at the subsequent congress of the Metal Workers' Union.⁸⁷

This coincides with changing priorities of the labour movement in the late 1920s.

MODERN INDUSTRY AS A VEHICLE FOR PROGRESS

The last years of the 1920s and the early 1930s saw a change in social democratic economic policy and strategy. The long-term goals were still as outlined in the main programme adopted in 1913: the replacement of capitalism by public ownership of the means of production.⁸⁸

But after the first term of office of a social democratic government in 1924-26, party chairman Th. Stauning and other leaders became increasingly aware of the need to work out a short-term policy for the management of the current economy. The focus was on ways to strengthen and modernize industry, as the sector destined to take over from agriculture as the provider of jobs and income in the long term.

Dignitaries of the labour movement took part in the official opening of the new Ford plant in 1924, from which the newspaper *Social-Demokraten* reported enthusiastically.⁸⁹ At the party congress in 1927, while reflecting upon the problems of unemployment, Stauning included one of Henry Ford's catchphrases in his speech: “An unemployed man is an out-of-work customer”.⁹⁰ In 1929 Stauning declared: “I absolutely believe that industry can be the saviour of society”.⁹¹

Certainly, there were similarities between Henry Ford and the Social Democrats: they both believed in modern industry as the future of society, and they both focused on mass consumption as a prerequisite for mass production.

But there were also pronounced differences. After declaring his belief in industry, Stauning continued:

*... but I do not believe in industrial strength and great progress without the hastening of development by political measures.*⁹²

Unlike Ford, who was strongly against any interference with the free market, the Social Democrats were determined to use the state apparatus as an active instrument for industrial modernization, in ways beneficial to the working class. Ideologically, Stauning

maintained that industrial modernization and concentration were necessary steps in the process of making capitalism “ripe” for the transition to socialism.⁹³

The 1927 speech was actually the only time Stauning ever made an explicit reference to Henry Ford, and it was probably more of a rhetorical gambit than an endorsement in principle. Likewise, social democratic relations with the actual Ford plant in Copenhagen were primarily a matter of pragmatism: it represented a potential for creating jobs and income.

In 1929 the Social Democrats took office again. After about a year Denmark was struck by the Great Depression, and if job creation had been high on the agenda before, it now received absolute priority. In 1929, the International Labour Organization (ILO) had released an analysis of what was called “the high salaries” in the United States. The analysis claimed that in the past ten years there had been large increases in productivity in American industry, but even larger wage increases. The analysis highlighted Henry Ford as the first to realize that higher wages could be beneficial to the industry, in that they would lead to higher demand for industrial products.⁹⁴ And in the same year, the magazine of the Metal Workers’ Union reported that Ford had reduced working hours in Detroit in order to create more jobs, the reason allegedly being that reduced unemployment would create more purchasing power.⁹⁵

An editorial in the Metal Workers’ Magazine in the spring of 1930 referred to Percival Perry, head of Ford’s European operations, who had pointed to Denmark as the country where Ford’s relative cost of production was the lowest in Europe, even if the nominal wages were the highest.⁹⁶ At a time when Danish employers were arguing for the need to reduce wages in order to remain competitive, trade unions could use Ford as a counter-example: it was the lack of modernization, not the wages that was holding Danish industry back.

After 1930 there were no more critical articles in the Metal Workers’ Union’s magazine about working conditions at the Ford Motor Company. On the contrary, in 1932 the magazine wrote about Ford as part of the series “Our Companies”, and – as in the other articles in the series – the basic attitude was one of admiration: in the “large and beautiful facilities” there was “a system to everything and precision in both the execution and the planning of work, making sure that everything is done easily”.⁹⁷

HYBRID FORDISM

In 1919 the scene was set for Fordist production in Denmark. Behind its modest exterior, the assembly plant in Heimdalsgade was meant to work on the same basic principles as developed and applied in Detroit. Moreover, the 1924 South Harbour plant, with respect to its physical appearance, its layout and its production technology, was a scaled-down version of Highland Park.

But even if the stage was the same, the play was different. The Danish workers acted quite differently from those in Detroit. And the local management had to find a *modus vivendi*, balancing between their obligations towards the American leadership and the concessions they had to make to the workers and their unions, in order to keep the factory running smoothly and avoid conflicts.

Americanization is not a simple one-sided phenomenon, in which the economic, political and cultural system and values of the United States is forced upon other nations and

cultures. Concepts like assimilation and hybridization has been introduced, to underscore the complex nature of Americanization and the fact, that the receiving part plays an active role in the process.⁹⁸

Studies of the diffusion and transformation of different productive models, including Fordism, in the car industry over time and space suggests, that a direct transfer without any adaptation to local context, has been the exception rather than the rule.⁹⁹ And when attempted, as by Ford in England from 1911, it was generally unsuccessful.¹⁰⁰ Most transfers have led to some sort of hybrid, adapting the productive model to its new context through a process of trial and error. The need for such adaptations could be found in different traditions in production, different market situations, different industrial relations, etc.

According to Boyer, the outcome of this process is basically a result of the degree of flexibility of the original model versus the strength of the institutions of the receiving part.¹⁰¹ When Ford came to Denmark, the same path as in England was followed in principle: strict adherence to the American model. But as this study has shown, even though the Danish company in principle was run the same way as an American subsidiary until 1929, realities were different. In terms of market shares and revenue, Copenhagen seems to have been successful, not the least in comparison to Manchester, and it is plausible, that as long as economic expectations were met, local management was not scrutinized in details regarding such matters as industrial relations.

But despite this degree of pragmatism, in certain issues of principle character – most notably that of no collective agreement – Ford Motor Company displayed a high level of rigidity. Local management had to formally comply with this, partly against its own judgement. But at the same time, it seemed able to pursue its own policy for maintaining industrial relations, including tacit recognition of unions and semi-official collective bargaining.

What was then the character and strength of the national institutions, which limited Ford's ability to transfer its productive model? This is a complex question, which can be answered on at least three levels. The first level is the internal labour-management relation at the plant. We have seen how a relatively high proportion of the Danish workers were skilled, how both skilled and unskilled workers were completely organized and backed by strong unions. On the other hand, the Fordist model of production introduced new technologies, which changed traditional divisions of labour and, as a consequence, weakened the internal solidarity of the workers.

On another level, the Danish labour market in general was characterized by a high degree of union membership and established and widespread procedures for collective bargaining. And a strong Social Democratic party was hegemonic in the labour movement.

This brings us to the third level: that of the state and the general social structure. In the words of Antonio Gramsci "Americanisation requires a particular environment, a particular social structure [...] and a certain type of State".¹⁰² The state required is one based on economic liberalism and a free market. But in Denmark, political regulation of the economy was manifest and even increased during the period, as the labour movement gained political power. The Social Democrats had a wish to promote industry, but no intention of leaving it to private initiative alone.

The situation was not only complex, it was also dynamic: In the early 1920s, when sales and production were booming, workers and their unions were in a favourable position at

the factory. But in the later part of the 1920s, when Detroit decided to enforce the principle of banning collective agreements, they could exploit the internal divisions among the unions, created partly by the Fordist production process itself, as well as the fact that production was shut down for a period, and could thus gain the upper hand.

From the early 1930s, the narratives of Fordism, as formulated by the labour movement, changed from critical accounts of working conditions to praise for profitability and modernity. This was clearly a reflection of the economic crisis and rising unemployment, which made the unions – and the Social Democratic party – change their overall priorities. The labour movement did not endorse Fordism, but it downplayed its criticism for tactical reasons.

Referring to Boyers terminology, the Ford plant in Copenhagen may be characterized as a “functional hybrid” – meaning that some parts of the original productive model had been successfully replaced by elements from the receiving part, resulting in a hybrid which performed satisfactorily in this new context.¹⁰³ Focus in the analysis has been on industrial relations. It is possible, even plausible, that the hybridisation included other elements as well, such as the relationship to the state and the political system. That, however, is outside the scope of this article.

Finally, it should once again be noted that this hybrid model was not static. It was rather in a state of equilibrium, constantly re-calibrated by the power struggle between labour and management.

POSTSCRIPT

During the German Occupation in 1940-45 the Danish plant was reconfigured to produce wood-gas generators. Car assembly could not be resumed until 1950. From the late 1950s, however, as a result of the general shift towards more open markets in Europe, the Copenhagen factory gradually lost ground to the larger Ford plants in Cologne, Dagenham and elsewhere. In 1966 car production was given up, but for some years there was substantial production of farming equipment. Finally, despite efforts to have it listed as industrial heritage, the 1924 factory building was demolished in 2006.

NOTES

For unpublished archival material, the following abbreviations have been used:

ABA: Archive and library of the Danish labour movement [Arbejderbevægelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv], Copenhagen, Denmark.

BFRC: Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn (MI), USA.

DSMF14: Archive of the Copenhagen autoworkers' branch of the Union of Metal Workers [Fagforeningen for Automobil og Cyclemekanikere, DSMF afd. 14], ABA.

SF: Archive of the Upholsterers' Union [Sadelmagerens Fagforening af 1874], ABA.

SSMF: Archive of the Copenhagen industrial branch of the General union of unskilled workers [Støberi-, Special og Maskinfabrikarbejdernes Forbund], ABA.

1. From 1914 Ford delivered cars to the French market from Bordeaux. But even though some ad-hoc assembly took place, this facility was primarily a warehouse. In 1919 its activities were described as “unpacking; the assembly of fenders and wheels; and deliveries”. Loubet and Hatzfeld, “Ford in France”, 323–24.

2. *Ford News*, 15 September 1924, 5.

3. Wilkins and Hill, *American Business Abroad*, 101. I would like to acknowledge my debt to Professor Wilkins, who has deposited her original research notes at the BFRC. Her interviews with former managers of the Danish plant have been an invaluable source material for this article.

4. E.g. in Bonin, Lung, and Tolliday, *Ford, the European History*. Includes Sørensen et al., “Ford Denmark”.

5. One notable exception is the description of the 1928 conflict in Copenhagen in Knudsen, “Kampen om samlebandet”.

6. Nye, *America's Assembly Line*, 18–19.

7. Freyssenet, “Developing Analytical Tools,” 101–02.

8. Hughes, *American Genesis*, 207; Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America*, 119; Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, 78–80.

9. Freyssenet, “Developing Analytical Tools,” 55.

10. Rupert, *Producing Hegemony*, 111.

11. Ibid. 113ff.; Raushenbush, *Fordism*, 63.

12. Freyssenet, “Developing Analytical Tools,” 55.

13. Coopey and McKinlay, “Power Without Knowledge?”.

14. Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America*, 113ff.
15. Rupert, *Producing Hegemony*, 118.
16. Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, 117.
17. Ford and Crowther, *Today and Tomorrow*, 8.
18. Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, 184–85.
19. Ford and Crowther, *Today and Tomorrow*, 252.
20. See for instance the arguments in Rupert, *Producing Hegemony*, especially 102-03.
21. Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 31–32; Gramsci, *From the Prison Notebooks*, 279ff.
22. Carlson to Wilkins, BFRC, acc. 880, box 5
23. Report dealing with establishment of foreign Branches [...], as submitted by W.S. Knudsen, 1. Oct. 1919, BFRC, acc. 95, folder 21.
24. *Ingeniøren*, no. 38 (1920), 311–312.
25. *Social-Demokraten*, 25 November 1919. This and the following quotes from Danish sources have been translated by the author.
26. Sørensen et al., “Ford Denmark”, 273.
27. Based on numbers given in *ibid*, 310.
28. “Vor ny Fabrik i Sydhavnen” [Our new plant at the South Haurbor], *Ford Nyheder*, no. 4 (1924).
29. Thalbitzer, *Ford Motor Company A/S*, 30.
30. Tolliday, “Origins of Ford Europe” 170, table 3.
31. Sørensen et al., “Ford Denmark”, 271.
32. Carlson to Wilkins, BFRC, acc. 880, box 5. The Scandinavian languages are very similar.
33. Møller to Wilkins, BFRC, acc. 880, box 5.
34. Wilkins and Hill, *American Business Abroad*, 152–53.
35. *Ibid.*, 100.
36. Tolliday, “Transplanting the American Model?”, 81.
37. Møller to Wilkins, BFRC, acc. 880, box 5.
38. Reminiscences of Herman L. Moekle, Nevins & Hill notes, Ford Motor Company – foreign Agencies and Plants, BFRC, acc. 572, box. 16.

39. Sweden being the only exception. Wilkins and Hill, *American Business Abroad*, 193–96.
40. Tolliday, “Origins of Ford Europe,” 160–66.
41. Knudsen, *Dansk fagbevægelses historie*, 505 & 609.
42. Christensen, *Fabriksarbejdere og funktionærer*, 184, tabel 3.5.
43. Christensen, Hansen, and Kolstrup, *Arbejdernes Historie i Danmark*, 153pp.
44. Wilkins and Hill, *American Business Abroad*, 101.
45. The presence of the unskilled workers’ union can be documented from October 1919 and the metal workers’ and the upholsterers’ unions from January 1920. But the fact that a coordinating meeting was held in December 1919 suggests that most of the unions mentioned were already present from late 1919. They all signed the 1922 agreement. SSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol [Protocol], 17 December 1919; SF, Forhandlingsprotokol for Bestyrelsen [Protocol], 22 January 1920; DSMF14, Forhandlingsprotokol [Protocol], 28 January 1920.
46. DSMF14, Forhandlingsprotokol, 4 December 1920.
47. BFRC, acc. 6, box 2, folder H.
48. Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, 87.
49. SSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 3 & 18 February 1919.
50. DSMF14, Forhandlingsprotokol, 4/2 1920; SF, Forhandlingsprotokol for Bestyrelsen, 22 January – 16 March 1920.
51. Ford and Crowther, *Today and Tomorrow*, 260–61.
52. Jærn- og Metalarbejderen, no. 4 (1928), 62.
53. *Overenskomst med Ford Motor Company* [Agreement with Ford Motor Company], 18 October 1922. The Royal Library, Small Print Dept.
54. Ibid.; Archive of the DSMF, ABA, box 55 (Calculated on the basis of an 8-hour working day).
55. *Overenskomst med Ford Motor Company*, 18 October 1922. The Royal Library, Small Print Dept.
56. Jærn- og Metalarbejderen, no. 4 (1928), 62.
57. Carlson to Wilkins, part 2, BFRC, acc. 880, box 5; Steincke, *Den faste Voldgiftsrets Kendelser*, case no. 834, 1925.
58. SSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 18 February & 9 June 1925.

59. Telegram from Copenhagen, 20 April 1922, Charles E. Sorensen records series, BFRC, acc. 38, box 133.
60. SSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 19 April 1922.
61. *Jærn- og Metalarbejderen*, no. 4 (1928), 62; SF, Forhandlingsprotokol for Bestyrelsen, 26 October – 28 November 1920; *Overenskomst med Ford Motor Company*, 25 November 1926. The Royal Library, Small Print Dept.
62. DSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 16 October 1924.
63. SSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 7 October 1924.
64. Geertsen, *Vognmalerfaget i København*, 44 & 55.
65. SSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 20 October 1927.
66. Ibid. 3 May 1927.
67. Ibid. 23 October 1927.
68. Ibid.
69. Møller to Wilkins, BFRC, acc. 880, box 5.
70. Notes on The labor Situation, BRFC, acc. 572, box 30. The handwritten document is not dated, but judging from the content, it must have been written in late 1926 or very early 1927.
71. SSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 22 July 1928.
72. SSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 19 November 1927.
73. DSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 1 November 1928.
74. Knudsen, "Kampen Om Samlebåndet".
75. SF, Forhandlingsprotokol for Bestyrelsen, 14-20 November 1928.
76. *Arbejderbladet*, 7 September 1928.
77. In a few incidents unorganized workers are discovered by the unions, but promptly forced to join. E.g. DSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 21 August 1934.
78. A new set of rules for the club was adopted and published in print in november 1932: *Love for Fællesklubben paa Ford Motor Co., vedtaget på generalforsamlingen i november 1932*. The Royal Library, Small Print Dept..
79. DSMF, Forhandlingsprotokol, 7 May 1930.
80. Ibid. 10 December 1931, 18 January 1932 & 14 July 1936.
81. Ibid. 26 March 1935 & 31 March 1936.

82. Møller to Wilkins, BFRC, acc. 880, box 5.
83. Tolliday, "Diffusion and Transformation," 67.
84. Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 39pp.
85. *Jærn- og Metalarbejderen*, no. 11 (1927), 150.
86. Ibid. no. 4 (1928), 62.
87. *Protokol over 22. Kongres*.
88. "Program for Socialdemokratiet i Danmark" [Program of the Social Democracy in Denmark], 1913, reprinted in Bryld, *Den Socialdemokratiske Idéarv*, 318–22.
89. *Social-Demokraten*, 16 November 1924
90. Stauning, *Danmarks Fremtid*, 6.
91. *Social-Demokraten*, 6-7 February 1929
92. Ibid.
93. E.g. "Om Socialismen" [On Socialism], manuscript 1927, archive of Th. Stauning, ABA, box 5, file 19.
94. ILO: *De höga lönerna i Förenta Staterna*, Geneva, Oct. 1929. Archive of LO, ABA, box 616, file 6.
95. *Jærn- og Metalarbejderen*, no. 5 (1929), 73-74
96. Ibid. no. 5 (1930), 77-81 & no. 8 (1931), 155.
97. Ibid. no. 10 (1932), 211-13
98. Elteren, *Americanism and Americanization*, 115.
99. Boyer, "Hybridization and Models," 32.
100. Tolliday, "Diffusion and Transformation," 64.
101. Boyer, "Hybridization and Models," 38.
102. Gramsci, *From the Prison Notebooks*, 293.
103. Boyer, "Hybridization and Models," 35.

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