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Speaking through Petitions: Peasant Farmers in the Nascent Democracy, Denmark 1830s (accepted peer-reviewed postprint - though not published version)

Abstract

This article investigates the first generation of peasant farmers elected to modern representative assemblies in Denmark. I argue that the contributions of the first peasant farmer politicians are an important but overlooked part of the history of democratisation in Denmark. The peasant farmer members were uneducated and unable to speak in a way considered suitable for parliament. For that reason, they were deemed unfit for political participation by their contemporaries and have been similarly judged in most of the existing literature. The peasant farmer members were not as timidly passive as they have been described. Instead of speaking, they used petitions to gain a voice in parliament. The farmer members thus introduced petitioning as a form of political participation in parliamentary politics, a practice that remains central to popular politics today. The actions of the peasant farmer politicians challenged the existing boundaries of what was considered appropriate political practice and thereby expanded the repertoire of forms of political participation available to the uneducated majority of the population.

Keywords

Democratisation, Popular Politics, Peasant Politics, Petitioning, Political Culture, Assemblies of Estates.

On 29 September 1835, the parish bailiff and owner-occupier, Hans Christensen, embarked upon a journey to the town of Roskilde on Zealand. At his destination, he would enter the first representative body elected in the Danish monarchy, which was one of four regional assemblies of estates that had been granted a consultative function in the absolutist state. Absolute king Frederik VI instituted the assemblies of Estates in 1831 to curb possible revolutionary tendencies and fulfil his obligation to give Holstein an estate constitution according to The Final Act of the Congress of Vienna. There had been no representative assembly in the monarchy since 1660, and there were no representative elements in local government either. The assemblies of estates were elected in separate estate elections for large landowners (estate owners), burghers, the university, and the smaller landowners. The assembly counted ten members appointed by the king and 60

elected members, nine of whom belonged to the peasantry. Hans Christensen was one of them.¹

After sailing from Funen to Zealand, Hans Christensen decided to wait for other members from Funen, expecting to travel together with them. When a late boat with his new colleagues arrived, Christensen was disappointed as he was denied a seat on their carriage because he belonged to the peasantry. In a letter to his wife and family on 2 October 1835, Christensen describes how he had to continue his journey on foot, arriving late at night at the home of a fellow elected farmer member with whom he then continued his journey.²

The admittance of farmers to the new political scene was - as Christensen's letter reveals - not unproblematic. The letters that Christensen sent home are filled with fascination, pride, day-to-day details, and a fair amount of self-consciousness. The scanty education of the farmer members of the assembly contrasted with the predominant body of university-educated members; although Christensen had learned to read as a child,

¹ H. Jensen, 'Enevældens Afslutning 1814-1848', in: A. Friis / A. Lindvad / M. Mackeprang (eds.), *Det danske Folks historie* 6, Copenhagen 1928, 403.

² T. Dissing, 'Sognefoged Hans Christensen, Vejstrup, som Ständerdeputeret', in: *Svendborg Amt Aarsskrift* 27 (1934), 96-138, 96-97.

it was only when he was 46 (in 1827) that he taught himself to write.

The subject of this article is the participation of farmer members of parliament in the nascent phase of representative political culture in the Danish monarchy in the period of 1834-1840. The farmer members were simultaneously included and excluded from the political sphere of the estate diets. They were granted suffrage and eligibility for election but were often deemed unfit for parliamentary life - both by themselves and by their colleagues. 'I wish I had been more enlightened,' Christensen writes home.³ The farmer members kept mostly to themselves and can appear to be passive, intimidated and withdrawn from the lofty discussion. Furthermore, they have been described this way in the literature.

I argue that the farmer members were far from passive, and I analyse the strategies that they applied to advance their interests. I conclude that the farmer members used petitions from the peasantry to gain a voice in parliament, a practice that will be analysed here. Further, I will examine how the long-established practice of petitioning the king was introduced to parliamentary life and argue that diet members initiated this process. By doing so, the farmer members contributed significantly to the early developments of

³ Dissing, 'Sognefoged', 103.

democratic political culture as their actions gave rise to popular political participation on an unprecedented scale. Petitioning is considered one of the main forms of modern democratic popular participation, but it is a practice that pre-dates modern democracy. I argue that the farmer politicians of the 1830s pioneered the inclusion of petitioning as a main practice for modern parliamentary politics in Denmark. In the 1840s, their initiatives developed into larger, national petitioning campaigns that resulted in the establishment of a farmer's association, which became the first modern party-like organisation in the kingdom in 1848 and won more than a third of the votes in the first national election in Denmark in the same year. The association was an important parliamentary faction in the first few decades after Denmark's constitution of 1849.

Research on democratisation in the 19th century tends to emphasise the contributions of urban middle- and working-class actors, e.g. to the development of democratic political thought, an oppositional press, suffrage movements, political associations and as revolutionary and reformist leaders.⁴ The

⁴ A few central works are: J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free. The Story of Democracy*, London 2005; J. Innes / M. Philp, *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions*, Oxford 2013; J. Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind. Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Princeton 2010; H. te Velde, M. Janse,

rural lower and middle classes are less studied. This article shows that peasant farmer actors of the 1830s were pioneers in creating new forms of political participation available to the majority of the population.

There has been an increased international interest in the history of petitioning in recent years. Researchers have argued that the practice of petitioning changed fundamentally across Western Europe and North America between the late 18th and early 19th century and instituted a period of mass petitioning.⁵ Much of this research has focused on urban reformist, liberal, and radical movements as drivers of mass petition campaigns, such as anti-slave trade campaigns, chartist campaigns, women's suffrage campaigns, and the anti-

Organizing Democracy. Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the Nineteenth Century, Cham 2017.

⁵ D. Carpenter, D. Brossard, 'L'éruption patriote: The Revolt against Dalhousie and the Petitioning Explosion in Nineteenth-Century French Canada', in: *Social Science History* 43 (2019) 3, 453-485, 454; H. Miller, 'Petition! Petition!! Petition!!! Petitioning and Political Organization in Britain, c.1800-1850', in: te Velde, Janse (eds.), *Organizing Democracy*, 43-61, 46-48; H. Miller, 'Introduction: The Transformation of Petitioning in the Long Nineteenth Century (1780-1914)', in: *Social Science History*, 43 (2019) 3, 409-429, 413; R. Hussey / H. Miller, 'Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780-1918', in: *Past and Present* 248 (2020) 1, 123-164, 128-130.

corn law league campaign, to name a few.⁶ Instead, this article focuses on a petition movement initiated by the lower and middle-class rural population in the Danish monarchy and argues that peasant farmers started Denmark's first mass petition campaign.

Finally, the paper contributes to the literature on parliamentary politics in history, which often foregrounds the deliberation between well-educated elite actors.⁷ According to

⁶ M. Chase, 'What Did Chartism Petition For? Mass Petitions in the British Movement for Democracy', in: *Social Science History* 43 (2019) 3, 531-551; R. Huzzey, 'A Microhistory of British Antislavery Petitioning', in: *Social Science History* 43 (2019) 3, 599-623; Huzzey, Miller, 'Petitions', 130, 143. Studies that examine rural petitioning movements include: D. Carpenter, *Democracy by Petition. Popular Politics in Transformation, 1790-1870*, Cambridge, Mass. 2021.

⁷ See e.g.: P. Seaward / P. Ihalainen, 'Key Concepts for Parliament in Britain (1640-1800)', and T. Bouchet, 'French Parliamentary Discourse, 1789-1914', in: P. Ihalainen / C. Ilie / K. Palonen, *Parliament and Parliamentarism. A Comparative History of a European Concept*, New York 2016, 32-48 and 162-175; O. Pekonen, 'The Role of Professors in the Formation of Finnish Parliamentary Life: The Struggle between Two Conceptions of Parliament', in: *Redescriptions* 20 (2017) 1, 116-137; C. Reid, 'Whose Parliament? Political Oratory and Print Culture in the Later 18th Century,' *Language and Literature* 9 (2000) 2, 122-34; W. Steinmetz, '"Speaking is a Deed

Cornelia Ilie, the prerequisites for successful participation in parliament are members' 'outstanding rhetorical skills.'⁸ The farmer members analysed in this article lacked precisely those skills, and this disadvantage forced them to find other ways of participating rather than mastering the art of rhetoric. The article discusses different strategies that the farmer members employed to succeed as parliament members. By analysing the actions of the farmer politicians, I investigate one aspect of boundary-drawing in early political life in Denmark. I analyse the participation of farmer members and their actions in parliament as having essentially challenged the boundaries of what was considered to be political. The actions of farmer members came to be the subject of discussions about how one could act politically. These discussions shed light on the 1830s debates and ideas about what politics and the political sphere were, and what they were not.

The article begins with a discussion of previous research, with an emphasis on the concept of politics that has been

for you" - Words and Actions in the Revolution of 1848', in D. Dowe et. al. (eds.), *Europe in 1848. Revolution and Reform*, New York, Oxford 2001, 830-868.

⁸ C. Ilie, 'Parliamentary Discourse and Deliberative Rhetoric', in: Ihalainen / Ilie / Palonen, *Parliament and Parliamentarism*, 133-145, 139.

applied in the historiography. An analysis of the farmer members' participation in parliament is then developed on basis of published parliamentary minutes combined with the unpublished protocol for the diet, which, in contrast to the published minutes, gives a full account of the proceedings. In addition, I discuss the private letters of the farmer member, Hans Christensen.

1. Definitions

The words 'peasant farmer', 'farmer', and 'peasant' are used interchangeably throughout the paper. The Danish word *bonde* from the German *Bauer* is not easily translated into English. As defined in Mandix' manual for rural rights in 1813, *Bonde* distinguished the peasantry from estate owners. *Bonde* included all cultivators of up to 12 barrel *Hartkorn*,⁹ whether they were owners, users, renters, day-labourers, or rural craftsmen.¹⁰ However, *Bonde* could also be used as a term for a specific social group within the peasantry: the middle farmers

⁹ *Hartkorn* is a measuring unit that refers to the value of one barrel of 'hard grain', rye or barley.

¹⁰ J. Mandix, *Haandbog i den danske Landvæsensret* i-ii, (1813). Cited in V. Skovgaard-Christensen, *Tiden 1814-1864*, vol. 5 of *Danmarks historie*, Copenhagen 1985, 111.

that either cultivated or owned medium-sized farms of between 1 and 12 barrel *Hartkorn*.¹¹

In the source material for this article, *Bonde* was most commonly used as an inclusive term for the peasantry as a whole. This usage indicates that the central social conflict of the 1830s was one between the estate owners of privileged land on one side, and the cultivators and owners of unprivileged land on the other. When distinguishing the middle-sized farmers from the small cultivators, contemporaries used the words *gårdmand* and *husmand* instead - terms that directly translate into farm-man / farmer and house-man (I use smallholder).¹²

I use the term tenancy for the Danish *fæste*. *Fæste* was a type of hold granted by an estate owner to a plot of land on their manorial title in exchange of work. The size of the land held by the *fæster* or tenant could vary in size and tenancy was common among both middle farmers and smallholders. It accounted for approximately 50% of the land on Zealand and Funen in 1835, as well as 70% on the island of Langeland. The proportion was much lower in Jutland at 23%.¹³ In contrast to

¹¹ K. Erslew, 'Bonde', in *Salmonsens Konversationsleksikon*. 2nd edn., Copenhagen 1915-1930, 630-634.

¹² *Husmand* were those who owned or rented a plot of land of value up to 1 barrel *Hartkorn*.

¹³ Skovgaard-Christensen, *Tiden*, 116.

tenancy, we find the *selveje*, which directly translates into self-ownership. In the Danish context, self-ownership was closely tied to usage of the land, therefore I use the term 'owner-occupiers' for small and middle-sized farmers who owned the plot of land they cultivated.

Voting rights to the Assembly of Estates were granted on the basis of the size of land, although tenant farmers would have to hold 5 barrels of land in order to gain suffrage, which differed from the 4 barrels of land required for owner-occupiers. Smallholders, day-labourers and other members of the lower peasantry were thus neither represented nor included among members of the diets. However, they were allowed to petition their district's elected member, and smallholders used this right frequently.

2. Literature

Little work has been done on the political participation of non-intellectually-schooled peasant farmers in the early history of Danish democracy. In the literature that investigates the political history of the 19th century, the actions of farmers primarily function as a backdrop for the actions of political leaders. In recent years, there has been an increase of interest in early Danish democratisation,

particularly the history of the idea of 'democracy'.¹⁴ However, these works, as well as older works, have primarily focused on the development of political thought and political culture in and about the political elite of the *Ancien régime* and the rising liberal, predominantly urban, elite.¹⁵ When accounts of rural activities are included, they focus particularly on the period from 1840 and beyond, when the farmers' movement became organised under the leadership of educated middle-class actors.

¹⁴ Among others J. Nevers, *Fra skældsord til slagord*, Odense 2011; B. Nygaard, 'Demokratibegrebets gennembrud i Danmark 1848', in: *Historisk Tidsskrift* 111 (2011) 1, 37-73; A. Engelst Nørgaard, 'A Battle for Democracy. The Concept of Democracy in the Constitutional Struggle, Denmark 1848-49', in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 58 (2018), 69-84; A. Engelst Nørgaard, 'Times of Democracy. The Unavoidable Democracy in Mid-Nineteenth Century Denmark', in: *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 14 (2019) 2, 23-45; P. Svensson, 'Var vore forfatningsfædre demokratiske?', in: *temp* 5 (2012), 5-27.

¹⁵ See amongst others T. Knudsen *Fra enevælde til folkestyre*, Copenhagen 2006; C. Friisberg, *Orla Lehmann - Danmarks første moderne politiker*, Varde 2000; C. Friisberg, *Ideen om et frit Danmark*, Varde 2003; H. Vammen, *Den tomme stat. Angst og ansvar i dansk politik 1848-1864*, Copenhagen 2011; P. Bagge, 'Akademikerne i dansk politisk i det 19. århundrede', in: *Historisk Tidsskrift* 12 (1969), 4, 423-474.

I suggest that the apparent absence of farmer actors in the early political historiography may have to do with our concept of 'politics'. Danish scholarship investigating rural political participation in the early and mid-19th century typically operates with a distinction between *unrest* and *politics*,¹⁶ a tendency that can be observed in international scholarship as well.¹⁷ This distinction attempts to capture a

¹⁶ C. Bjørn, *Bonde Herremænd Konge. Bonden i 1700-tallets Danmark*, Copenhagen 1981, 73-74; C. Bjørn, 'Landbruget 1830-1860 - socialstruktur og landbopolitik,' in: C. Bjørn (ed.), *Det danske landbrugs historie III 1810-1914*, Odense 1988' 116-117; H. Jensen, *De danske Stænderforsamlings Historie 1830-1848 I*, Copenhagen 1931, 60; F. Skrubbeltrang, *Den danske Husmand. Husmænd og husmændsbevægelse gennem tiderne*, Copenhagen 1952, 111-112.

¹⁷ C. Dipper, 'Rural Revolutionary Movements: Germany, France, Italy', in: D. Dowe et al. (eds.), *Europe in 1848: Revolution and Reform*, New York, Oxford, 2001, 416-442, 416; M. Hildermeier / K. Catt, 'Agrarian Social Protest, Populism and Economic Development: Some Problems and Results from Recent Studies', in: *Social History* 4 (1979) 2, 319-332, 320; E. Hobsbawm, 'Peasants and Politics', in: *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1 (1973), 3-22; D. Langewiesche, 'Revolution in Germany', in: D. Dowe et al. (eds.), *Europe in 1848: Revolution and Reform*, New York, Oxford 2001, 120-144, 135-136; C. Tilly / L. Tilly / R. Tilly, *The Rebellious Century. 1830-1930* Cambridge, Mass. 1975, 289; E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France 1870-1914*, London 1979, 241 ff.

transition from early modern forms of protest to the modern phenomenon of 'politics'. This tendency is particularly evident in studies that question whether specific historical agents acted 'politically' or not, but it implicitly influences most studies.¹⁸

While this distinction may be helpful and perhaps even necessary to understand the transition towards modern societies, it also has the significant disadvantage of excluding from political history those practices that do not belong to the historian's concept of politics. In relation to our current subject matter, it seems that peasant farmers' participation in this period sits somewhere in between traditional forms of participation and modern participatory politics. While some peasant farmers acted as voters and some as members of the estate diets, the traditional practice of petitioning for the king was still popular. Fear of peasant revolt or even a peasant revolution was a pivotal concern of the politically dominant middle and upper classes.¹⁹ Moreover,

¹⁸ E. Weber, 'The Second Republic, Politics and the Peasant' in: *French Historical Studies* 11 (1980) 4, 521-550; N. Clemmensen, 'Peder Hansen, Lundby - tradition eller nybrud i bondepolitikken', in: *Historie* 14 (1983), 668-674.

¹⁹ N. Neergaard, *Under Junigrundloven. En Fremstilling af det danske Folks Politiske Historie fra 1848 til 1866 I*, Copenhagen 1892, 42-

as we will see, the non-farmer members continually questioned the farmers' abilities as diet members, the relevance of their proposals, and their ability to act appropriately as politicians, including speaking correctly.

The farmer members have been described similarly in the literature. In Hans Jensen's work, which is still the most thorough account on the estate diets, the farmer members are characterised as acting in a way 'typical for their estate': They mostly remained timidly passive.²⁰ Jensen judges the abilities of the farmer members on their success at speaking in parliament. Their performances, in this context, are described as often unfortunate. Peter Henningsen brings a similar assessment in a new study.²¹

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the participation of the rural population in the 19th Century Danish monarchy, with an emphasis on various forms of

46, 304; C. Bjørn, *Frygten fra 1848. Bonde- og husmandsuroen på Sjælland i foråret 1848*, Odense 1985.

²⁰ H. Jensen, *De danske Stænderforsamlingers Historie 1830-1848 II*, Copenhagen 1934, 672.

²¹ H. Jensen, *De danske*, 1931, 444, 516; H. Jensen, *De danske*, 1934, 245-248, 672; P. Henningsen, *Dengang vi var bønder*, Copenhagen 2019, 113-116.

protest.²² Participation via what was considered 'legal' channels remains for the most part unexamined.

I would argue that the concept of politics - while probably necessary for the historian - also tends to set limits on what we can write and how we write it. We cannot produce new texts without the use of concepts, but the meanings of concepts draw lines on what we consider relevant to our studies. As the concept of politics commonly includes some types of practices and exclude others, there is a risk of overlooking phenomena on the boundaries of the concept. In addition, I would argue that this may have contributed to a marginalisation of peasant farmer actors in Danish political history.

One way to confront this problem is presented in the Bielefeld approach to new political history. Rather than applying a specific normative definition of politics, the Bielefeld approach investigates political history as a continued communicative struggle on the boundaries of 'the political' - that is, over what is considered to be included in 'the political' or to belong to the sphere of 'politics' and what

²² R. Karpantschov / F. Mikkelsen, 'Folkelige protestbølger og demokrati i Danmark 1700-2000', in: *Historisk Tidsskrift* 113 (2013) 2, 393-444; R. Karpantschov, *De Stridbare danskere. Efter enevælden og før demokratiet 1848-1920*, Copenhagen 2019, 49-65.

is not.²³ In this article, I investigate the farmer members of the Roskilde diet as actors on the periphery of political conversation. The farmer members were perceived as – and understood themselves to be – participants who were unable to speak the language of parliament. Instead, they applied other strategies to advance the interests of the peasantry. In this way, they in fact challenged the boundaries of the political – more precisely, they challenged what was considered appropriate actions of diet members. By expanding the ‘room for manoeuvre’ of uneducated diet members, the farmer members pushed the boundaries of the political.²⁴

3. The assemblies of estates

In 1815, the Danish king was forced to accept the incorporation of the duchies of Holstein and Lauenburg into the German Confederation. The Danish king, Frederik VI, had participated in the Congress of Vienna, at which his primary

²³ W. Steinmetz / H. Haupt, ‘The Political as Communicative Space in History: The Bielefeld Approach’, in: W. Steinmetz / I. Gilcher-Holtey / H. Haupt (eds.), *Writing Political History Today*, Frankfurt, New York 2013, 11-33; W. Steinmetz, ‘Introduction’, in: *ibid.*, 37-43.

²⁴ W. Steinmetz, ‘A Code of Its Own: Rhetoric and Logic of Parliamentary Debate in Modern Britain’, in: *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 6 (2002) 1, 84-104, 88.

purpose was to secure the survival of the Danish Monarchy in light of the Kiel treaty that separated the kingdoms of Denmark and Norway and instead forced Norway into union with the Swedish Monarchy. In accordance with § 13 in the Act for the German Federation, the Danish king was obligated to introduce a regional constitution for the duchy of Holstein (*landesständische Verfassung*).²⁵ This obligation was not fulfilled until 1831, when the ministry initiated the establishment of an estates-constitution for the entire monarchy in an attempt to curb revolutionary tendencies. The ministry sought to follow a principle of equality for the different regions of the monarchy and, for that reason, initiated the establishment of four regional assemblies of the estates between them covering the kingdom. The foundation of assemblies of estates was not an attempt to accommodate the wishes of an opposition; there was no outspoken demand for assemblies of estates either in the kingdom proper or the duchies at the time.²⁶

The Assembly-of-Estates-constitution was issued on 15 May 1834 after lengthy deliberations in government. Although the constitution introduced a representative element to the absolute state, it was theoretically compatible with the *Lex Regia* of 1665. The assemblies were to be consultative, and the

²⁵ Jensen, *De Danske*, 1931, 44-58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

absolutist principle of the state remained intact.²⁷ Four regional assemblies were established; one for Zealand, Funen, the islands, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands, which met in Roskilde; one for northern Jutland, which met in Viborg; one for Schleswig, which met in the town Schleswig; and one for Holstein that met in Itzehoe. The purpose of the assemblies was to deliberate and advise the government in relation to possible future laws that were presented to them by the government.

The first Roskilde diet, on which I will focus in the rest of this essay, was elected for the years of 1835-1840 and consisted of 70 members, of which the king appointed ten. The assembly of 1835-36 included nine farmers, 20 estate owners, two clergymen, three professors, and a large group of civil servants, jurists and traders.²⁸ A few replacements occurred before the sessions in 1838 and 1840 because of illness and death, and only eight farmers were members from 1838.²⁹ The

²⁷ Ibid., 259-260.

²⁸ Roskilde Assembly of Estates, *Tidende for Forhandlingerne ved Provindsialstænderne for Sjællands, Fyens og Lolland-Falsters Stifter samt for Island og Færøerne 1835-36*, Copenhagen 1836, i. For future references, I will also note the speaker in the assembly, when applicable.

²⁹ Jensen, *De danske*, 1934, 28.

king's representative in the diet was the royal commissioner, Anders Sandoe Ørsted.

In 1841, a new diet was elected with only six farmer members.³⁰

In the 1840s, debates on rural questions in the diet were increasingly dominated by liberal middle-class members, while peasant farmer actors mainly focused on extra-parliamentary activities.³¹ Furthermore, from 1846, the participation of peasant farmers in political debate came to be dominated by the organisation, The Association of Friends of the Peasants. The association was a top-down organisation led by middle-class liberals and it became an early type of a political party, which influenced national politics until the 1860s. Studying the farmer members of the Assembly of Estates in the 1830s allows us to examine the farmer pioneers of the later peasant farmer movement.

4. The farmers and the educated

The barrier between the farmer members and the other members of the Assemblies of Estates was significant. That, as mentioned, Hans Christensen was denied a seat on a carriage to Roskilde because of his social rank is just one example of how

³⁰ Jensen, *De danske*, 1934, 28-32. As mentioned, the elections were divided by estates, but one could run for and be elected to represent other estates other than one's own.

³¹ Bjørn, 'Landbruget', 118.

this barrier influenced the relationship between the diet members.

The diet members from the middle and upper classes generally viewed the farmer members in a less-than-flattering way. In a private letter dated 5 October 1835 from manufacturer Johan Christian Drewsen, who was elected for the smaller property owners in Copenhagen, to his friend Jonas Collin, Drewsen tells in a humorous way the story of how the first farmer member had made a proposal in the assembly the other day but then forgot to vote for it. Two days later, he notes that the behaviour in the assembly has been most noble, even among the farmer members, 'I have not even seen any of them drink', he writes, revealing some prejudices about the farmer members.³²

In 1840, a debate was conducted on whether a library should be added to the assembly and how it should be funded. During this debate, Chamberlain Benzon of Lønborggaard Manor, who had been appointed by the king, suggested that unprivileged land should not be taxed to support the library, because one would assume that the farmer representatives could have no use for a library. The farmer members rejected his proposal.³³

³² Printed in: E. Nystrøm, 'Den første Stænderforsamling i Roskilde skildret i Breve af Joh. Chr. Drewsen til Jonas Collin', in: *Danske Magazin* 6 (1916) 2, 233-288, 239.

³³ Benzon, *Tidende for Forhandlingerne ved Provindsialstænderne for Sjællands, Fyens og Lolland-Falsters Stifter samt for Island og*

These barriers also weighed on the farmer members. The private letters home from farmer member Hans Christensen are the best source available showing how the farmer members experienced their participation in the diet. Sadly, the original letters have since been lost, but Thøger Dissing quotes them extensively.³⁴

It is clear from Christensen's letters to his family at home that he considered the farmer members as a distinct group. He continually speaks of a 'we' to refer to the farmer group. In one letter, he mentions a dinner where 'we peasants kept our distance and thought we would sit together'.³⁵

There is no doubt that the circumstances of Christensen and his peers were substantially different from the majority of the assembly members. Christensen was born under the adscription in 1781. The adscription meant that young men of the peasantry could not leave the estate on which they were

Færøerne, Copenhagen 1840, 2985-2986; Jensen, *De danske*, 1934, 68-69.

³⁴ Dissing, 'Sognefoged'; E. Stig Jørgensen, 'Hoverispørgsmålet i og omkring stænderforsamlingen i Roskilde 1835-36.', in: S. Gissel (ed.), *Landbohistoriske Studier tilegnede Fridlev Skrubbeltrang på halvfjerdsårsdagen den 5. august 1970*, Copenhagen 1970, 199-227, 199; C. Bjørn, 'Debat: Hvor er det blevet af?', in: *Fortid og Nutid* 28 (1979-1980), 94-95.

³⁵ Dissing, 'Sognefoged' 97-99, 127.

born without the estate owner's permission. The adscription was introduced in 1733 and abolished in 1788. As a child, Christensen participated in the corvée labour on the nearby estate. Later in his life, he would describe the abolishment of the adscription as his first childhood memory.³⁶ In the 1830s, he was an owner-occupier of a middle-sized farm of 8-9 barrel *hartkorn* at Vejstrup, Funen. He was appointed to the post of parish bailiff in 1827 after which he taught himself to write.

Christensen describes in his letters how the deliberations in the diet were dominated by the 'Copenhageners', so that he could never find the opportunity to speak. Among the farmer members, great anxiety was associated with speaking up in the assembly 'as every word is intercepted before it leaves the mouth' and 'every word will be printed in those horrible journals.'³⁷ Furthermore, speaking from a manuscript was not allowed.³⁸

Christensen did eventually speak up in parliament. While the farmer members were not comfortable speaking in the diet and rarely made proposals of their own, they did employ some

³⁶ D.E. Ruggaard, *Fremragende danske Bønder, før og nu*, Copenhagen 1871, 377-379.

³⁷ Dissing, 'Sognefoged', 100-104.

³⁸ H. Jensen, *De danske*, 1931, 209, 267.

strategies to gain a voice and advance the interests of the peasant-farmers whom they were representing.

One legitimate way to gain a voice in parliament was to read aloud a petition. The farmer members of the Roskilde diet continually made themselves heard by doing precisely that, even after this practice was challenged by the majority of their colleagues, who attempted to restrain it. Connected to the strategy of reading aloud petitions, the farmer members also used other devices; for example, they gathered petitions in their home district. By doing this, the farmer members in effect challenged the boundaries of appropriate political practice. Below, I will discuss some aspects of petition campaigns before commencing on a detailed analysis of how the farmer members acted in the assembly.

5. Petitions in the estate diets

Petitioning was a long-established right in the Danish Monarchy. The right to petition was included in the law book *Danske Lov* from 1683, which also contained a detailed description of how petitions should be administered.³⁹ Both

³⁹ T. Munck, 'Petitions and 'Legitimate' Engagement with Power in Absolutist Denmark 1660-1800', in: *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* 38 (2018) 3, 378-391, 380; M. Bregnsbo, *Folk skriver til kongen. Supplikkerne og deres function i den dansk-norske enevælde i 1700-tallet*, Copenhagen 1997, 38.

Thomas Munck's and Michael Bregnsbo's studies of petitioning in the early modern Danish-Norwegian monarchy find that the number of petitions grew steadily through the 18th Century. The number of petitions registered in 1799 at the Royal Chancellery was seven times higher than that of 1706, over a period in which the population no more than doubled.⁴⁰ All subjects of the Danish king had the right to petition. One could petition authorities at all levels of the state bureaucracy. Most petitions would be handled locally, with the local government functioning as an intermediary between the petitioner and the Chancellery, but if a petitioner wished to, they had the right to petition the king directly as well.⁴¹ The estates-constitution of 1834 continued the provisions of *Danske Lov* in granting all subjects the right to petition. Furthermore, §68 of the estates-constitution permitted all residents of any election district, not just electors, to send petitions to the assemblies, in addition to the established right to petition to the king. A petition would have to be addressed to the district representative, and the petitioners could demand that he present their petition to the assembly. The member was, however, not bound to support the petition

⁴⁰ Munck, 'Petitions', 383; Bregnsbo, *Folk skrivers*, 87-90.

⁴¹ Munck, 'Petitions', 380-381.

because he was legally bound only to his own conscience and convictions.⁴²

§68 of the estates-constitution testifies to the administration's ambition to create an estates-constitution that continued existing law. However, the estates-constitution introduced a new element: The principle of representation with which the right to petition was now combined. Interestingly, this shows how the principle of representation had come to be built into the policy-thinking of the central administration; it was not introduced as a result of popular demand. Hans Jensen's study of the process of writing the Estates-constitution shows that a right to petition was introduced at the beginning of the process by the central administration - although this is not a theme that Jensen emphasises.⁴³

The estates-constitution thus introduced a new representative institution associated with the possibility of petitioning in a new way. Now, petitions could be used politically by the diet members, and the petitioners could (but were not guaranteed to) find themselves with a representative who actively supported their cause.

⁴² Jensen, *De danske*, 1931, 266; Jørgensen, 'Hoverispørgsmålet', 205.

⁴³ Jensen, *De danske*, 1931, 139-270.

In the 18th Century, the most common petitioners had been civil servants.⁴⁴ Petitions from the peasantry only constituted a minority throughout the century. Bregnsbo identifies an increase of peasant farmer petitions from 2 to 7% of the total number of petitions between 1705 to 1795.⁴⁵ Claus Bjørn has argued that until 1760, the few petitions originating from the peasantry were a single person's request for financial help and similar individual issues. Bjørn identifies an increase in petitions from groups of peasants from 1760 onwards regarding general claims and wishes.⁴⁶

There is no data on the total number of petitions in the 19th century. From 1834 to 1848, both the traditional authorities and the Assembly of Estates received petitions. The Assembly of Estates did not have an effective bureaucracy, archival system, and library before 1840, so there are some uncertainties to the precise number of petitions received in the period of interest to us. There is, however, data on the number of signatures to petitions to the Assemblies of Estates. Between 1835 and 1849, the Assemblies of Estates and

⁴⁴ Civil servants would typically ask for a promotion or make policy proposals. Bregnsbo, *Folk skriver*, 95; Munck, 'Petitions', 383.

⁴⁵ Bregnsbo, *Folk skriver*, 96.

⁴⁶ C. Bjørn, "'De danske cahiers". Studier i bondereaktionerne på forordningen af 15. april 1768', in: *Landbohistorisk Tidsskrift: Bol og By*, 5 (1983), 145-170, 148.

the Constituent Assembly 1848-1849 received petitions with about 270,000 signatures. René Karpantschov and Flemming Mikkelsen have produced the only existing study of petitioning in the Danish Monarchy during the 19th century. This study examines petitioning from a quantitative perspective and seeks to identify developments in the issues that the population engaged with through petitions to representative bodies from 1835 to 1899. They conclude that the annual number of petitions continued to grow during the 19th century.⁴⁷

Although the data are not directly comparable, the numbers seem to indicate a vast increase in the petitioning from the rural population from late-18th century to the 1830s. In the period of 1835-39, the assemblies received petitions with a total of 12,299 signatures, of which 10,000 concerned rural reforms.⁴⁸ As I will discuss below, the initial sessions of the two assemblies of estates in the kingdom proper received more than 100 petitions each, which were collected in rural areas and concerned corvée labour. This is comparable to about 50 registered petitions from other social groups.⁴⁹ The petition campaign of 1835-36 was followed in the sessions of 1838 and 1840 with petition campaigns on corvée labour and the

⁴⁷ R, Karpantschov / F. Mikkelsen, 'Petitioner, adresser og demokrati i Danmark 1835-1899', in: *temp* 4 (2013) 4, 50-78.

⁴⁸ Karpantschov / Mikkelsen, 'Petitioner', 64.

⁴⁹ Roskilde Assembly of Estates, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1836, v-viii.

transition of tenancy to owner-occupation from the countryside. Peasant farmer campaigns constituted the majority of petitions in the 1830s. In the 1840s, peasant farmers continued to organise petitioning campaigns. The petitioning campaign of 1844 was particularly large. Mass petitions involving petitioners from other social groups began to appear in the 1840s and became a common form of action in the latter half of the 19th century.

As mentioned, recent research has shown that the long 19th century was 'an era of mass petitioning'. In contrast to early modern petitioning that according to David Zaret functioned as an instrument of state, mass petitions as a form of protest began to spread across Western Europe and North America between the late 18th and early 19th century.⁵⁰ Henry Miller has characterised the mass petition as a collective activity that addresses public or general issues and as a result of organised petition campaigns that mobilise potential signatories.⁵¹ The petitioning campaigns among the Danish peasantry in the 1830s and 1840s should be considered as part of this phenomenon.

⁵⁰ Miller, 'Introduction', 409-413, D. Zaret, 'Petition-and-Response and Liminal Petitioning in Comparative/Historical Perspective', in: *Social Science History*, 43 (2019) 3, 431-451, 431.

⁵¹ Miller, 'Introduction', 413-418.

6. The first petition campaign, 1835-36

The first petition campaign of 1835-36 focused on corvée labour. During its first session in the period between September 1835 and February 1836, the assembly in Roskilde received petitions from peasant farmers from more than 100 estates, villages, counties etc.⁵² The petitions were mostly concerned with the abolition of corvée labour and the substitution of a reasonable fee - that is, a fee at a lower price than the estate owners were willing to accept. Corvée labour was seen as a leftover from the feudal system, much of which had been dissolved in the Great Land Reforms of the late 18th century. Corvée labour was still common on Zealand and the islands. Among petitioners against corvée labour were owner-occupiers and tenant farmers, middle farmers and smallholders. This cause united the peasantry against the estate owners, who were the recipients of their labour.

Erik Stig Jørgensen has investigated the corvée labour question during the first session of the Assembly of Estates for Zealand and the Islands. He concludes that the petitioning movement of 1835-36 was triggered by certain elected members'

⁵² Jensen, *De danske*, 1931, 419, 491; Roskilde Assembly of Estates, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1836, 2186-87; Viborg Assembly of Estates, *Tidende for Forhandlingerne ved Provindsialstænderne for Nørre-Jylland*, Viborg 1840, 166-167.

energetic attempts to organise the peasantry on this cause.⁵³ One example is that of farmer and parish bailiff Frederik Jørgensen, who was elected for the island Lolland and who sent a circular letter to the parish bailiffs in his district asking for information on fees and duties paid by the peasantry as well as information on reforms that they wanted.⁵⁴ In one of his letters home dated 14 November 1835, Hans Christensen wrote - not without pride - that he had received a petition with 464 signatures against corvée labour, noting that 'no-one has collected as many' - meaning none of the other farmer members had achieved this feat.⁵⁵ Christensen used the verb *indsamlet* (translated to 'collected'), which suggests that he had taken an active part in the collection of signatures. This seems to support the argument that the farmer members were promoting the petition movement in 1835-36. The many petitions on corvée labour led the self-declared peasant-friendly member and the aforementioned manufacturer, Drewsen, to make a proposal for a solution to the conflict. His proposal resulted in the first large debate on the conditions of the peasantry in the assembly's history. This debate became a reference point for future sessions.

⁵³ Jørgensen, 'Hoverispørgsmålet', 213.

⁵⁴ Jørgensen, 'Hoverispørgsmålet', 207.

⁵⁵ Dissing, 'Sognefoged', 113.

Drewsen's proposal was very moderate and it was voted that it should be further treated in a committee. All incoming petitions on the subject were then delegated to the same committee. The committee, however, decided against considering these petitions by arguing that the Chancellery had previously rejected a similar petition. On the basis of that argument, the petition movement 1835-1836 was denied further consideration in the assembly.⁵⁶

During the debate, members of the estate owner group expressed considerable concern for their property rights and warned against any government intervention on this subject. This view gained majority support, and the assembly therefore concluded the debate with a petition to the king asking the government not to interfere in this 'private' affair between estate owners and farmers.⁵⁷ This position remained dominant in the sessions of 1835-1836, 1838 and 1840, during which the farmer members fought an uphill battle to reopen the question of the corvée labour and the conditions of the peasantry, while a

⁵⁶ The committee comprised manufacturer Joh. Chr. Drewsen, parish bailiff Hans Nielsen, estate owner Peter Adolph Tutein, prosecutor fiscal F.W. Treschow, count F.A. Holstein, baron Juul of Hverringe manor, and birk judge Haastrup.

⁵⁷ For Drewsen's proposal, committee reports and deliberation in the assembly, see: Roskilde Assembly of Estates, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1836, 76-77, 1056, 1181, 1183, 2169-2243; Jensen, *De danske*, 1934, 427.

majority of the assembly tried to shut down any such discussion.

The disappointment among the farmer members - especially towards Drewsen - was clear. In January 1836, after further humiliation from Drewsen, who suggested that per diem allowance for members should be reduced (with the poorly-concealed intention of limiting the number of farmer members in future diets), Christensen noted the following in his private letters home: 'Drewsen is a court jester. He has deceived us all [the farmer members].'⁵⁸

7. Restrictions on petitions in the diet

Overwhelmed by the large number of petitions during the 1835-1836 session, the majority of the assembly voted to set specific limits to the number of petitions read aloud in its session in 1838. The president of the assembly elected for the university, Professor of Botany Joakim Frederik Schouw, initiated this change in the rules of procedure.

J.F. Schouw suggested that the assembly should establish a petition committee to which all incoming petitions would be directed. Acknowledging the value of some petitions but concerned by the amount of time spent on 'insignificant' and 'immature' accounts, he suggested that, a petition should only

⁵⁸ Dissing, 'Sognefoged', 117, 125-126.

be read aloud if a majority of the assembly voted for it.⁵⁹ While the change in rules of procedure was introduced with the declared intention of saving time, it should also be read in the context of the majority of the assembly wishing to limit discussion on corvée labour and related social issues raised by peasant farmer petitioners.

Schouw's proposal passed in Roskilde after being tried in a committee.⁶⁰ Petitions that were supported by the district's elected member would be exempt. In other words, a member of the assembly could read petitions aloud from his election district without the express permission of the assembly. Whether a petition would be read aloud or not was thus dependent on whether the representative wished to support the petitioners from his constituency.⁶¹

The new rules of procedure meant that henceforth the diet would vote on whether most petitions should be read aloud or

⁵⁹ Viborg Assembly of Estates, *Tidende for Forhandlingerne ved Provindsialstænderne for Nørre-Jylland*, Viborg 1838, 60, 187-188.

⁶⁰ The register records some dispute on this issue but with no participation of the farmer members. This is only hinted at in the published minutes. Roskilde Assembly of Estates, *Tidende for Forhandlingerne ved Provindsialstænderne for Sjællands, Fyens og Lolland-Falsters Stifter samt for Island og Færøerne 1838*, Copenhagen 1838, 68-69.

⁶¹ Roskilde Assembly of Estates, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1838, 73-80.

not. At the opening of a meeting, a list of petitions received would be presented for consideration in the assembly. This process occasionally led to a discussion as to whether a petition should be read aloud or not, and the discussion was concluded by a vote.⁶²

8. Negotiations on the boundaries of the political

From 1838, the members were thus routinely debating whether petitions should be read aloud or not. These discussions are a great resource that illuminates continued negotiations on the boundaries of the field of responsibility of the assemblies, or what I - following Steinmetz - would term the boundaries of the political.⁶³ What could be treated by the assembly and what could not? What was considered to be a political issue, and what was not? Which challenges were considered impossible for the assemblies to influence?

The changed rules of procedure were established with the aim of saving valuable time for the assemblies. However, it also had the effect of distinguishing relevant from irrelevant issues and marking a boundary between issues that the assemblies should consider and those that were unfit for parliament. Arguments in debates about whether a petition was worth the assembly's time could determine or uphold existing

⁶² Roskilde Assembly of Estates, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1838, 893-900.

⁶³ W. Steinmetz, *Das Sagbare und das Machbare*, Stuttgart 1993, 34-41.

boundaries, while others challenged these boundaries.

Furthermore, we can ask in what respect members tried to use these discussions to enhance the assembly's field of responsibility granted by the king, and to enhance the assembly's influence.

The assembly members brought very different interests to these negotiations. Many belonging to the intellectual middle class used their membership to try to enhance the legal weight of the assemblies to move further towards a constitutional monarchy, which they were pushing for. The farmer members continually worked to reintroduce a debate on the corvée labour and to thematise other issues regarding the conditions of the peasantry, such as the transition from tenancy to owner-occupation.

The primary strategy of the farmer members to reintroduce debate on the conditions of the peasantry was to get as many petitions on the topic read aloud as possible. This practice dominated the farmer members' activity in the assemblies in 1838 and 1840.

The majority of the diet generally voted in favour of spending as little time as possible on the conditions of the peasantry. Members who tried to exclude debates on the peasantry's condition would typically argue against such petitions being read aloud or treated any further. Arguments used against any further treatment of these issues included the following: the incoming petition did not present a precise suggestion for the

assembly to take into consideration; the petition's suggestion conflicted with the principles adopted by the assemblies (which was often the inviolability of property);⁶⁴ a similar petition had been rejected previously;⁶⁵ the matter was beyond the jurisdiction of the assemblies;⁶⁶ it was too insignificant an issue for the assemblies to discuss;⁶⁷ it was not possible to change the conditions in question;⁶⁸ and the matter had not been addressed to the proper authorities.⁶⁹ Arguments like these appear continually throughout the minutes.⁷⁰

These arguments expose what the majority of members considered to be worth the assemblies' time, that is, petitions that were well-argued, well-written, well-composed with a clear suggestion or request, and in line with certain principles adopted by the assembly. This marked out some basic principles for what was considered appropriate political communication.

⁶⁴ A.S. Ørsted, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 610.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 612.

⁶⁷ J.F. de Neergaard, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1838, 523.

⁶⁸ P.G. Bang, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 312.

⁶⁹ J.P. Mynster, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1838, 526-527.

⁷⁰ Several speakers, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1835-36, 223-24, 364, 365, 511-512; Several speakers, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1838, 507-508, 511, 519, 524; Several speakers, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 627, and 1898, 2414.

Farmer members and the majority of the population were excluded from this type of communication. Although the petitioners typically sought help from a writer to compose the petition, they were not trained to create appropriate suggestions and present them in a 'readable' way.

The assembly members' rejection of these petitions presents many similarities with the way in which parliamentarians discussed the value of petitions in the Netherlands in the 19th century, according to a study by Maartje Janse. Janse identifies a pamphlet written by conservative jurist Cornelis van Assen, who, in the context of a massive petition wave in 1829, argued that the scale of petitions would hinder parliamentary efficiency. Other parliamentarians questioned the legitimacy of petition campaigns.⁷¹ Perspectives along these lines were not new. Joris Oddens has identified arguments in the Netherlands in the 1780s to the effect that in order to preserve the efficiency of parliament, petitions should be presented only when strictly necessary, and they should be phrased in the most humble manner.⁷²

⁷¹ M. Janse, "'What Value Should We Attach to All These Petitions?': Petition Campaigns and the Problem of Legitimacy in the Nineteenth-Century Netherlands', in: *Social Science History* 43 (2019) 3, 509-530, 513-514. See also Huzzey, Miller, 'Petitions', 138.

⁷² J. Oddens, 'The Greatest Right of Them All: The Debate on the Right to Petition in the Netherlands from the Dutch Republic to the

Unfortunately, the letters of Hans Christensen do not reveal how the farmer members perceived the resistance against the petitions. The minutes, however, show that they continued the practice of reading aloud petitions in 1838 and 1840.

9. Using petitions to gain a voice

The farmer members used petitions to gain a voice in parliament. In the following, I discuss examples of this practice, and the resistance this practice was met with in the diet. The farmer members continued to read petitions aloud when asked not to, and I discuss different strategies and aims applied to evade attempts to silence the petitions.

On 27 October 1838, Christensen read a petition to the Roskilde assembly from tenant farmers on the island of Langeland that begged the government to force a general transition of all tenancy to owner-occupancy. If that was impossible, then corvée labour should be abolished. The petition argued that the Danish peasant was not 'free' and that it would be untrue at present to claim that the great land reforms of the 1780s had been completed.⁷³

The petition was criticised for its harsh language in the assembly. The royal commissioner, Ørsted, immediately rejected

Kingdom (c. 1750-1830)', in: *European History Quarterly* 47 (2017) 4, 634-656, 637.

⁷³ H. Christensen, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1838, 499-507.

the petition with the argument that its suggestion would violate the estate owners' property rights. Professor of Law, P.G. Bang, who was elected for Copenhagen, suggested that the petition should not reach 'the people' via the published minutes and be distributed among the rural poor without being contradicted. He too argued that its suggestion would rob the estate owner of his rights and security.⁷⁴ Another member, the aforementioned Drewsen, argued that he would have advised against it being read aloud in parliament if his counsel had been sought, as he argued that its reading via the published minutes could perhaps affect the peasantry.

These arguments show an awareness among the members of the influence that the published minutes might gain, and a concern that certain types of rhetoric might reach the peasantry more easily if petitions were read aloud in the assembly. Drewsen continued that while 'we only receive such petitions from a few estates [in the sense of properties], we could soon be receiving such petitions from the entire peasantry.' On this basis, he encouraged people within and outside the assembly to forestall such complaints.⁷⁵ By 48 to seven votes, the assembly rejected further consideration of the petition.

Farmer members sometimes read aloud petitions when asked not to. On 25 July 1840, the parish bailiff and tenant farmer,

⁷⁴ P.G. Bang, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1838, 507-508.

⁷⁵ J.C. Drewsen, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1838, 511-512.

Hendrik Larsen, who was elected for Holbæk county, prepared to read a petition from tenant farmers. On this occasion, he was asked by the president whether he would consider withdrawing the petition, as it treated a similar subject to a proposal (not a petition) that had just been presented by parish bailiff and owner-occupier Mads Hansen. Since Larsen's petition was similar to this proposal, which after deliberation had been denied a hearing in a committee, the president argued 'that it was more than likely that a committee on this matter would not be constituted'. The minutes state that Larsen did not accept that he should withdraw the petition but instead started to read it aloud.⁷⁶ While we do not have much source material that allows us to investigate the motives shaping the farmer members' activity in the diet, it seems likely that the option of reading petitions aloud functioned as a way to speak in parliament that was more comfortable for them than giving speeches or participating in debate 'with their own words'. The self-consciousness and feelings of inadequacy expressed in Hans Christensen's letters suggest that this might have been the case. The continued reading of petitions may also reflect a sense of responsibility towards the member's electors. Although the petitions were continually rejected, the farmer

⁷⁶ The published minutes and the protocol are identical. J.F. Schouw, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 620; H. Larsen, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 620.

members showed a strong devotion to changing the conditions of the peasantry. As the minutes always stated whether a petition had been read aloud (even though they did not always print the actual petition), the farmer members might still have to consider the issue of their reputation in their election district.

Finally, the farmer members may have speculated that there was a chance that the petitions would be printed in the published minutes if they were read aloud, and therefore decided to read them aloud in the hope that the minutes would function as a channel of communication. The published minutes from 1838 and 1840 contain several printed petitions from the countryside expressing dissatisfaction with and complaints about the conditions of the peasantry. Only petitions that were read aloud in parliament were printed. The peasantry could thus potentially gain information about the conditions of the peasantry in other parts of the country and perhaps be inspired to organise themselves, just as Bang and Drewsen feared that they would. That the published minutes were considered a channel of communication to the peasantry is apparent in other cases as well.⁷⁷

There is no research on the distribution and readership of the published minutes among the rural population. However, some petitions suggest that there was awareness in rural districts

⁷⁷ M. Hansen, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 616.

of how petitions were received. One example can be found in a petition from the island of Langeland, which was read aloud by Hans Christensen in the Roskilde assembly in July 1840. This petition was from the same group of peasants whose aforementioned petition was read aloud by Hans Christensen in 1838.

The petition refers explicitly to the previous petition and notes that it did not win the assembly's approval on the grounds that it interfered with property rights. The petition then asked rhetorically if the tenancy system was the only arrangement in the state that could not be changed or improved. The petition concluded with an acknowledgement of the limited time available to the assembly, and that it could not investigate this important question within the given time frame. For that reason, the petitioners requested that the assembly would petition the king and ask him to appoint a commission to investigate how the tenancy system could be abolished without violating property rights.⁷⁸

This petition provides a remarkable example of how the petitioning peasants communicated with the assembly. It is almost as if they were having a conversation. The petition replies to the previous deliberations in the assembly, which were published in *Stændertidende* in 1838. The petitioners had now adjusted their request in the light of the arguments made

⁷⁸ H. Christensen, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 627-630.

in the previous assembly session. Instead, they would now ask for a commission to investigate the 'seemingly unsolvable' problem of the tenancy system. One cannot but notice a slight tone of disappointment in the petition about the fact that the majority of the assembly's members judged themselves unable to solve the tenancy problem. The request for the king to establish a commission can be read as a slightly masked accusation directed at the assembly members that they could not - or would not - change much.

The reading of this petition was among the most notable performances of the farmer members. After reading the petition aloud, Hans Christensen mentioned that a deputation of peasants had recently addressed the king during his stay in the town of Nyborg and presented him with a similar petition. On that occasion, he said, 'the king had asked the deputation to report to their brothers that the case would be taken under close consideration.' Christensen added that he 'trusted these words of the king', and after having read the petition in its entirety, he withdrew it.⁷⁹

Such an action was unprecedented in the assembly. If a member withdrew his petition, he would always refrain from reading it aloud. That was not the case here: Hans Christensen made this comment immediately after having read the petition, and no preceding deliberation is recorded in either the published

⁷⁹ H. Christensen, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 634.

minutes or the protocol. So why would he read the petition aloud, knowing that he would withdraw it and that it would not be discussed or treated?

He might have had several motives for this action and several things to gain by proceeding in this way. First, reading the petition aloud meant that it might be published in the minutes; it thus constitutes a means of communicating its message to potential sympathisers throughout the country. This approach not only communicated a particular analysis of the present state of the peasantry. It also suggested how future petitions could be composed to avoid rejection. Instead of submitting yet another request for the abandonment of the *corvée* labour, which would be invariably dismissed as falling outside of the assembly's sphere of influence, they could alternatively ask for a commission to be established.

Interestingly, the somewhat vague request for the establishment of a commission on the peasantry's condition did become one of the central demands of the organised peasant movement in the 1840s.⁸⁰

The reading of the petition could also have the function of sending the simple message to the petitioners of Christensen's election district that he had taken their complaints seriously. The action may further be interpreted as Christensen's private protest against the inability and/or

⁸⁰ H. Jensen, 'Enevældens', 471.

unwillingness of the assembly to act on the poor condition of the peasantry. By reading it aloud, declaring that the petition had now been delivered to the king, and then withdrawing it, Christensen highlighted the assembly's inability and incompetence to bring about change. Christensen recognised the king as the power that the peasantry would have to address in order to make any improvements. This message is, of course, a strong one to transmit to the readers of the published minutes; it was a message to the other members of the assembly as well: Christensen and the petitioners judged the king a more reliable power. Implicitly, Christensen may have meant to underscore that the assembly would have to alter its treatment of incoming petitions if it wanted to aspire to popular support. Without being able to conclude with certainty what Hans Christensen's motives were, it seems unlikely that he acted without deliberate intent, which alters the picture of passivity and timidity that Hans Jensen and others ascribe to the farmer members.

10. Questioning the legality of petitioning

The last case I will discuss here pertains to farmer Hendrik Larsen's reading aloud of a petition from 401 inhabitants of Holbæk county in Zealand. Through the petition, the inhabitants asked that their tenancy hold be converted to owner-occupancy. Hendrik Larsen's reading of this petition sparked a heated discussion in the diet, which thematised the

legality of petitioning and the code of conduct for assembly members. In this discussion, questions were raised regarding the authenticity of the signatures and whether a large part of the county's inhabitants had signed it or not. Furthermore, members asked if Larsen had received money from the petitioners, which, according to some members, would have been an abuse of his position. There were no rules regulating or prohibiting receiving money for petitions. Finally, members questioned whether Larsen's actions, regardless of the money issue, was proper.⁸¹

The discussion was initiated by Chamberlain J.E.S. Wegener, who had been elected to represent the smaller property owners in Holbæk country. He wished to emphasise that, while the petition had received many signatures, far from all inhabitants of the county had signed it. Other similar arguments were made against Larsen's petition.⁸²

During the debate, it became clear that the petitioners had paid a fee to participate in the petition. It further became clear that Hendrik Larsen had had a school teacher compose the petition after receiving a request from 'a large part of the county's inhabitants' (in his own words).⁸³ The fact that the petitioners had to pay a fee caused consternation among

⁸¹ Several speakers, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 639-643.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 639.

⁸³ H. Larsen, *Tidende Roskilde*, 1840, 639-640.

several assembly members, who continually asked Larsen for proof as to whether or not he had received payment for authoring the petition. For his part, Larsen emphasised that he had not received any money but said that a man had travelled around the county with the petition. The petitioners, on Larsen's suggestion, had paid a fee to cover the costs of this man's horse and carriage. The debate came to an end after some demanded that Larsen explain himself, while others argued that the examination of Larsen was offensive. This debate reveals several interesting facts. It supports the argument that the farmer members were involved in the creation of petitions for the assembly. While, according to Larsen, the initiative stemmed from inhabitants in his election district, he had nonetheless managed the composition of the petition. He had been involved in the organisation of the petition's circulation around the county to gather signatures, which meant that the petition had been read aloud and its message spread to anyone interested. We are further told that the petitioners were asked to pay a fee to support the costs associated with the petition. Larsen's case and the following debate in the assembly reveal how involved some farmer members were in the process of creating and organising petition campaigns.

Finally, the debate illuminates ideas of what appropriate behaviour on the part of a member of the diet was, and what he could and could not do. The discussion provides a concrete

example of how the boundaries of the political were drawn in the assembly. The practice of petitioning and the way in which Hendrik Larsen was involved in the process challenged the boundaries of what was considered appropriate political behaviour. It reveals that it was considered unacceptable behaviour for a diet member to receive money from the electors. Furthermore, the debate brought into question the legality of assembly members' involvement in the petitioning process. For those who opposed any governmental involvement in changing rural conditions, to question the practice of petitioning was one way of opposing the legitimacy of the mobilisation that was taking place among the peasantry.

11. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that peasant farmers have been neglected in the history of early Danish democratisation. This may be because the repertoire of forms of participation available to uneducated peasant farmers falls outside the concept of politics employed in the existing historiography. I argue that the peasant farmers elected to the first representative body in the Danish Monarchy used petitions to gain a voice in parliament. The peasant farmer members were simultaneously included in and excluded from the new political sphere created by the Assemblies of Estates from 1834. They could vote and be elected to the assemblies, but those who were elected did not speak the 'right language' in parliament.

They had not been trained to produce the long, well-argued speeches that characterised deliberations in parliament, and they mostly abstained from making proposals and taking part in discussions. The private letters sent home by farmer member Hans Christensen further show that farmer members kept to themselves and were possessed by feelings of inadequacy and self-consciousness.

Instead, the farmer members spoke through petitions. The Assembly of Estates introduced a new practice of petitioning that combined the traditional right to petition with the principle of representation. Moreover, farmer members took this opportunity to gather petitions among the peasantry before the first session in 1835. Their efforts resulted in the first of many petitioning campaigns from the countryside concerning the conditions of the peasantry.

Despite attempts to limit the number of petitions being read aloud in parliament, farmer members continued to read out petitions from the countryside through the 1830s. Reading petitions aloud functioned as one way of speaking in parliament. Reading aloud a petition further increased the possibility of getting the petition published in the minutes and could thus serve as a means of communicating accounts of the existing estate system as outdated and unjust.

This paper has discussed several aims and strategies associated with this practice. The anger and disappointment towards the assembly that one can observe in the petitions as

well as in the farmer members' statements in the assembly may be interpreted as a precursor to the anger and disappointment of the peasantry in the 1840s. In 1846, this disappointment culminated in the establishment of an alliance with leading liberal politicians in the form of the Association of Friends of the Peasant. This alliance was short-lived and ended in 1848 because of disagreements about suffrage in the new constitutional monarchy. In that context, the king came to function as a rhetorical figure in the communications of the peasant movement, as he was staged as the main patron of the movement.⁸⁴ One can trace this rhetorical figure adopted by the late-1840s peasant farmer movement back to the pronouncements made by farmer member Hans Christensen in the assembly in 1840.

The article adds new perspectives to the history of 19th-century political culture. As shown in this paper, the actions of peasant farmers initiated the first larger, organised petition campaign in Denmark and contributed to the development of a new democratic political culture from below. Further, the actions of the peasant farmers demonstrated other ways to participate in parliament than through the use of rhetoric.

⁸⁴ A. Engelst Nørgaard, 'Hvoraf kommer det, at vi alle ere saa demokratiske som vi ere?' Demokratisk-monarkiske bondevenner i den danske grundlovs-kamp', in: *Slagmark* 69 (2014), 71-88.

I also have argued that the peasant farmers' use of petitions in the assembly challenged the boundaries as to how one could act politically. Their actions broadened the available repertoire for political participation for the uneducated majority of the population. In that context, my approach is inspired by the Bielefeld approach to new political history. Aided by this approach, the paper thus provides new perspectives showing that peasant farmers contributed significantly to the early democratisation of the Danish monarchy, which typically has been overlooked in the existing historiography. While the existing literature describes the farmer members as passive members of the assembly, I have shown that they played an active part in the negotiations. In 1835, dissatisfaction with corvée labour sparked the first of many petition campaigns of the following decades. Several laws in the 1860s and the 1870s made it increasingly unattractive for estate owners to maintain the tenancy system and it gradually lost its importance. The transition of the last tenancy lands to owner-occupation was finally realised in 1919 by law.