

Asser Amdisen. *Til nytte og fornøjelse: Johann Friedrich Struensee (1737-1772).* København: Akademisk, 2002. 223 pp. ISBN 978-87-500-3730-9.

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The story about the German-born doctor Johann Friedrich Struensee is often-told and well-known: he got into the service of the mentally ill Danish king Christian VII, got the power over the king, became the lover of Queen Caroline Mathilde and the almighty dictator of the Danish monarchy from 1770 till 1772 and thus introduced a series of sweeping and radical, however ill-prepared enlightened reforms. But in 1772, he was overthrown by a coup d'état and was imprisoned, tried, convicted for lese-majesté and beheaded and afterwards broken on the wheel. The marriage between king Christian VII and Queen Caroline Mathilde was dissolved and the Queen was banished.

This story has traditionally had strong interest also outside Denmark, partly because it is fascinating in itself, partly because it has strong international connections as Caroline Mathilde was the daughter of Prince Frederick of Wales and Princess Augusta and thus she was the sister of king George III of Great Britain. To basic narratives of Struensee can be seen, namely Struensee as a superficial and foolhardy soldier of fortune or as a tragic hero.

Most of the research in the period of Struensee has been concentrated on his relationship with the Queen and the subsequently sad fate of both of them and many but certainly not all of the accounts in other languages than Danish have been characterized by bias and ignorance of Dan-

ish history and of Danish politics and society at the age. Struensee's many political and social reforms have more or less been dismissed as superficial and ill-prepared. The strength of Amdisen's book is that all Struensee's reforms are here given thorough analysis and are being placed within a wider European context.

Certainly, the structure of the book is the one of a traditional biography starting with Struensee's birth and ending with the trial, conviction and execution and at last the reputation he left behind him. But unlike most other accounts, his political and social reforms are being given close attention. And according to Amdisen, the reforms of Struensee were coherent and consistent and cannot simply be dismissed as superficial and ill-prepared. Struensee was a strong believer in freedom of the individual, that the state should not interfere in the affairs of the individuals as long as these were of no harm to anybody else or to society. Thus, his abolition of censorship and of the right of the authorities to make search of houses without any further ado can be seen in this light. Struensee was indeed influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, certainly, the Enlightenment was a very complex, ambiguous and often contradictory phenomenon and it is possible to be inspired in many different ways. However, after all, the phenomenon of the Enlightenment can indeed be seen as a whole and Struensee was according to Amdisen inspired from this. Wealth, order and

peace are the central concepts of Struensee's enlightened ideas. Many of Struensee's reform should be seen as inspired from cameralism which was about modernizing the governmental systems and making them effective by reforms both internally but also within society in general in order to increase fiscal revenues and manpower but not first and foremost to improve society itself or the lot of the citizens for their own sake. These were the motives behind Struensee's cuts on governmental expenditure such as on wages and pensions of the civil servants, his cuts of governmental industrial subsidies and his deregulating measures for trade and industry. Agriculture was, however, the main sector of Danish economy in that age and here the reform measures during the dictatorship of Struensee were more modest, only an ordinance to set the level of villeinage once and for all. Struensee did not take any initiative to abolish the adscription ("stavnsbånd") which forbade young men of the peasant population to move away from the estate at which they were born without the permission of their landlord. Amdisen discusses the reasons for the poor record on agricultural reforms and suggests that such reforms might not have played such a central role to Struensee as they have done to posterity and supposes that more reforms in that area might have come about if Struensee's time in power had lasted longer than it actually did (p. 94f.).

As for foreign policy, Struensee was indeed influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment about universal peace and opposition to aggressive foreign policies even if he too had to be realistic. However, according to Amdisen, Struensee did try to carry out a foreign policy aiming at reducing Denmark's strong dependence of Russia but at the same time remaining a loyal ally. The question is, however, how original this foreign policy actually was in comparison with that of former and later Danish power-holders, e.g. that of Andreas Peter Bernstorff (minister of foreign affairs 1773-1780 and 1784 till 1797).

Even if Struensee's reform cannot be dismissed as superficial and ill-prepared, he was certainly no political tactician still less a cynic and this was to be his fate. By his cuts on wages and pensions he managed to alienate the civil service the cooperation and willingness of which was crucial in order to implement his reform program. When a plot (which included the minister of foreign affairs) against him was disclosed in 1771 he did not do more than giving the plotters a rebuke but did not sack still less imprison anyone or use the occasion to make a comprehensive purge. However humane this behaviour may seem, politically it was digging his own grave. Struensee considered state and government a machine that should which should certainly be initiated but was then supposed to work by itself through clear chains of command. Having this point of view he was bound to be opposed to making personal political connections and forming networks, e.g. with high-ranking military officers which might have meant that support from such circles might have secured Struensee staying in power. And by forbidding arbitrary searches of houses, however sympathetic and enlightened this measure might seem, he signed away the possibility of watching, controlling and harassing his many enemies. Worst of all, when he announced cuts on military expenditures he antagonized the armed forces.

Struensee's ideas are seen as part of a general European trend, his reform program was well considered and consistent, but he disastrously lacked political flair and cynicism which was necessary to stay in power and implement his reforms and was thus an easy victim for a plot.

Also in other respects, Amdisen presents reappraisals. Traditionally, Queen Caroline Mathilde has been seen as a passive victim of political intrigue and as having no part still less interest in Struensee's reforms. Amdisen, however, suggests that this attitude derives from the 19th century and the prevailing view of women's place and role then. Amdisen argues that the world of

the court did not fit with this ideal of women's passive role and places Caroline Mathilde within a number of politically outstanding and active women of the 18th century such as Catharine II of Russia and Maria Theresia of the Habsburg Monarchy. Certainly, during the interrogations of Struensee after his fall he categorically refused that the Queen had had any part in his reform policies and later historians have taken him at his word but his motive for saying this was to avoid implicating the Queen as much as at all possible (p.42). However likely as it may seem, it remains a hypothesis as Amdisen does not present convincing evidence of the Queen's active involvement in Struensee's specific reform projects.

It would be incorrect to say that Struensee seized power from the king, as the king was glad of being freed of the burden of power and thus willingly handed over political power to Struensee.

It has been more or less an enigma why Struensee confessed a crime which would with all probability imply capital punishment. According to Amdisen there is circumstantial evidence (but no more than that) that suggests that Struensee was subject to torture during his imprisonment. (p. 148).

Struensee's reforms were certainly radical and rash, however, in a European context they were by no means unique and Struensee's reforms are compared with those of Frederick II of Prussia, Maria Theresia and Joseph II of the Habsburg Lands and of Catherine II of Russia.

All in all, by reviewing the traditional Struensee narratives, by clearing up in the often very distorted and glossy picture of Struensee (not least to be found in much international literature) and by taking his reform measures seriously and placing them within a general European context Amdisen gives a long-needed nuanced picture of Struensee and his age. The contents of Struensee's many reform has since long been available through the following source edition: Holger

Hansen (ed.): Kabinettsstyrelsen I Danmark 1768-1772, vol. I-III, Copenhagen 1916-1923. Here, his many orders in the name of the king including his many reforms can be read and as German was Struensee's native language almost all of them are in German and thus also available for non-Danish speakers. Due to the many merits of Amdisen's book, it would be highly desirable if it could be translated into English so that his many results can be read by an international audience. Both book and audience deserve it.

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