

LARS K. CHRISTENSEN

BETWEEN DENMARK AND DETROIT

**Ford Motor Company A/S and
the Transformation of Fordism 1919–1966**

Aarhus University Press



BETWEEN DENMARK AND DETROIT

Dedicated to the memory of Knud Erik Christensen

**A breath of air from the USA
was clearly felt in the South Port
yesterday morning, when the solemn
inauguration of the Ford factory
was about to take place**

Social-Demokraten, 16 November 1924

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Between Denmark and Detroit

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Unknown photographer. *Ford Motor Company A/S gennem 25 Aar*

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During my research I came into contact with Ben Larsen, son of Orla Larsen who was employed at Ford Motor Company A/S almost from its start, and for more than forty years thereafter, as part of the management. Ben granted me access to his father's private collection of notes, clippings, and photographs, for which I am very grateful.

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me with very useful comments on the manuscript. Others, who have been kind enough to provide me with specific bits of information, have been mentioned in the notes where appropriate.

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When I grew up, my father worked as an industrial spray painter. He had done his apprenticeship as a house painter in the 1950s, but since there were no jobs to be found as such, he started spray painting at a local producer of farm equipment. On one occasion, he took me to see his workplace. I still have a vivid memory of him and his colleagues, standing in the paint both in their space suits, which were meant to protect them from inhaling paint fumes. It probably did

so—to an extent. But I also remember my mother complaining about how the bedsheets always had a slightly pink hue to them, due to my father sweating out residues of the red paint from the factory at night. This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Knud Erik Christensen (1930–2016), and to all the industrial workers around the world, who are still producing the goods the rest of us use or consume every day.

Introduction

This is the story about one of the first ever factories in Europe, making cars by modern methods of mass production, including the assembly line. The factory was located in Copenhagen, Denmark, and its name was Ford Motor Company A/S.

Not many foreign observers in general, or historians of business, labour, or technology in particular, would associate Denmark with any type of car industry. To Danes of the present generation, cars are something that we import from Asia or from much larger European countries, not least neighbouring Germany—or even from our close cousins in Sweden. But there was in fact a time, when a rudimentary German auto industry looked with envy upon the state of affairs in Denmark, and when Sweden was flooded with cars from Copenhagen.

To be honest, the golden age of our car industry cannot entirely be attributed to Danish ingenuity and resourcefulness. On the contrary, as the name Ford Motor Company suggests, it was brought to the country from outside, as the then-largest manufacturer of cars in the world decided to establish an assembly plant in Denmark in 1919. The immediate success of Ford attracted other foreign operators, most notably General Motors and Citroën, and for a period in the interwar years, Copenhagen was a Detroit in miniature.

Having passed through the Copenhagen South port area several times, noticing the iconic building that once housed the Ford assembly plant, I became interested in knowing more about its history. I was also vaguely aware that it had been the site of conflict between Fordist principles of management and Danish trade unions.

Then I became involved in setting up an exhibition on industrial culture at the National Museum of Denmark. I suggested that we

should exhibit a Ford Model T, assembled in Copenhagen, to represent this almost forgotten history. After some research I was able to obtain a car for the museum, which had papers to prove beyond reasonable doubt that it had been assembled in Denmark in 1924.

This was what prompted me to dig more deeply into the history of Ford Motor Company A/S. As I found more and more source material, the story unfolded, expanded, and became increasingly fascinating. Sadly, the remains of the Copenhagen Ford plant have since been demolished, despite attempts to have it listed as an industrial landmark. The National Museum has abandoned its commitment to industrial heritage and removed the Danish Ford T from its exhibitions. But at least the history of the company, which brought mass-produced automobiles to Denmark, the people who assembled them, and the impact it made may now be read on the following pages.

As the subtitle implies, this is a book not just about the Danish Ford factory, but also about the transformation of Fordism from Detroit to Denmark. It has the ambition of bringing the Danish experience into the international history of Fordism, and of using it as a case for better understanding that history. For that, and in order to be able to see the changes that took place over time and space, it starts out with a chapter on the historical creation of Fordism, starting with Detroit in the early 20th century. In this chapter, I also present my understanding of Fordism as made up of three aspects: as a form of production, as a regime of industrial relations between workers and management, and finally as a social vision.

The following five chapters, which form the main part of the book, present the history of Ford Motor Company A/S. To help the reader getting an overview of the narrative, it has been broken up into five chronological periods. Within each period, it is structured under five recurring themes: Production, Markets and models, Management, Industrial relations, and Presence. The reasons for choosing these themes and what they imply will be explained in more detail at the end of the first chapter.

Fordism may be seen as a special case of Americanism and its transfer to Europe as a form of Americanisation. In public debate, Americanism has often been understood as a one-way process, in which

American cultural, political, or economic power has simply been conquering other nations. But this simplistic picture has been challenged by research. Today, according to the prevailing notion, it is an active process, in which the nations, cultures, and economies being Americanised play an active role themselves, ranging from resistance to embrace—and that which is transferred from America to the receiving nations is also transformed, as part of this active process.¹

It is this process I refer to as the transformation of Fordism. Through the empirical narrative of the history of Ford Motor Company A/S, this process may be traced through time. Consequently, a prevailing theme throughout the narrative is how the orders, expectations, and impulses coming from Detroit were implemented, adapted, or ignored in Copenhagen.

The last part of the book ties together a theoretical understanding of Fordism with the previous narrative of the history of Ford in Denmark and tries to point out what we might learn from this narrative about the actual transformation of Fordism from its origin in Detroit in the early 20th century to post-war Europe.

When discussing this last topic, special attention will be given to the Social Democratic Party and the labour movement. The reason for this is that the social democrats became the leading political party and rose to power during the period in which Ford established itself in Denmark. At the same time, the party started on the political path which would lead to the welfare state. During the post-war years, when Denmark became firmly included in the “western camp”, the social democrats were also a leading political force. The Social Democratic Party was heading the government in roughly 35 out of the 47 years covered in this book. It is therefore of interest, if any influence or inspiration from Fordism can be identified in relation to this party.

My own academic background is in labour history, especially that of labour unions in industry, which has gradually expanded over the years, into the social and cultural history of industrial society in general. To write the story of Ford Motor Company A/S, I have had to reach out into disciplines with which I am not totally unfamiliar but in no way an expert, most notably business history and economic his-

tory. Grazing beyond one's usual academic pastures may enhance the risk of misstatement, but compared to the safe but tedious results of confining oneself to the same, small plot, it is a risk worth taking.

In a study like this, many topics arise, and many questions pose themselves, which may not always be answered. Just one example: a systematic comparison between Ford Motor Company A/S and one or more of Ford's other European assembly plants, especially in regard to management and industrial relations, would have been beneficial to our understanding of what was specific and what was general to the history of Ford in Denmark. Unfortunately, this would require work beyond the resources available. I have tried to strike a balance, which includes both relevant theoretical discussion of Fordism as well as parts of its European context, where it is needed most—but still allows for a detailed and vivid presentation of the actual history of Ford Motor Company A/S.

The text is generally British English. But several terms related to cars, such as specific parts and types are different in American English. And since the American terms of course are used by Ford, the same will be the case in this book to avoid confusion. For example, the cover of the engine is called the hood (not the bonnet), while conversely the part that can be raised to cover an open body is called the top (not the hood). Chassis can refer to the frame on which a car is built, as well as a complete car just without a body mounted. Similarly, a load-carrying motor vehicle is called a truck. If necessary, the meaning is specified in the text.

Inside the auto-industry, cars that are delivered for sales as pre-assembled, as opposed to being assembled locally, are known as built-ups. Pre-assembled and built-up are used interchangeably in the following.

Ford Motor Company A/S is always a reference to the Danish company. When only the name Ford or Ford Motor Company is used, it might be a reference to the global enterprise or to a specific, national subsidiary. If the meaning is not clear from the context, national subsidiaries will be identified with the name or abbreviation of the country in question, for instance Ford UK.

In colloquial Danish, the term for union might be used for both local branches as well as national associations. To avoid misunder-

standings, the term association is used in the following, when referring specifically to the national level of union organisations. An agreement is to be understood as the written result of collective bargaining between unions and employers, roughly similar to what is sometimes called a union contract in English. A shop steward is a union representative, elected by and among workers at shop floor level. A leading shop steward is the elected spokesperson of all workers at an enterprise. Further details about concepts and institutions in the Danish system of industrial relations are given at relevant points in the text.

The distinction between skilled and unskilled labour is important for understanding the conflicts caused by the transformation of Fordist industrial relations into a Danish context. In the following, a craftsman means a skilled worker, who has completed an apprenticeship, while a workman is a worker with no formal training.

Dates are generally given in the order of day, month, and year, except in quotations where the original format is retained. Danish quotations have been translated by the author, unless otherwise noted.

**Henry Ford had
no ideas on mass production**

Charles Sorensen

The Creation of Fordism

What is Fordism? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to that. In contemporary public debate, Fordism is often used to label a certain period in the history of the western economy, a period characterised by mass production, high productivity, and a social compromise between organised labour and capital, as well as a period of rising consumption and the establishment of some variation of welfare state in large parts of Western Europe. Fordism in this sense is an era of the post-war period, reaching its apex in the 1950s and 1960s, before it was challenged and maybe even defeated by other regimes of accumulation by the end of the 20th century.

But we may trace the historic roots of Fordism to a time long before that: the very beginning of the 20th century. It was then that Henry Ford entered onto a path towards a novel form of industrial mass production, based on the assembly line, taking place in a factory regime where intensive labour and strict discipline are remunerated by high wages. Fordism in this sense reached its apex around 1920, when Ford Motor Company had become the world's largest manufacturer of mass-produced automobiles. This was also the Fordism that was popularised, envied, but also criticised by many in Europe during the period between the two world wars.

Not only does the conceptual understanding of Fordism, prevalent today, focuses on a period several decades later than that in which Fordism came into being as an empirical reality. In fact, a strict interpretation of contemporary concepts will also lead to the paradoxical conclusion that what Henry Ford practised in Detroit in the 1920s was not really Fordism, the most obvious out of several reasons being that there was no welfare state in the USA in the 1920s and certainly no organised labour at Ford Motor Company in Detroit.

Fordism Made in Detroit

The historical development of Fordism is inseparably bound to the creation and success of the Ford Model T. Charles Sorensen was a Danish immigrant who started working for Ford in Detroit as a pattern maker and ended up being vice president of the company. Sorensen was deeply involved in the design and development of the Model T, and he would later claim that:

Henry Ford had no ideas on mass production. He wanted to build a lot of autos. He was determined but, like everyone else at that time, he didn't know how. In later years he was glorified as the originator of the mass production idea. Far from it; he just grew into it, like the rest of us.¹

While it might not be quite fair to say about a man who worked with Ford's determination that he "just grew into it", Sorensen's claim is to the point in the sense that the development of the Fordist Model of production did not follow a previously thought-out masterplan. It was a step-by-step process, based to a great extent on trial and error.²

Since the marketing of the first commercially available petrol-driven automobile by Carl Benz in 1886, most cars had been produced in limited quantities at high prices. Around the turn of the century serial production had gradually been introduced, especially in the USA, but the car was still considered a luxury product. It was Henry Ford's vision to make "a motor car for the great multitude", built by "the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise" and, consequently, "so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one".³

Ford Motor Company had already introduced serial production with the Model N, the predecessor to the Model T. For the Model N, Ford had applied the use of special purpose machines, jigs, and fixtures, making it possible to produce completely interchangeable parts, and thereby eliminating the time-consuming process of fitting by hand during final assembly. Already in the period of the Model N, Ford Motor Company proudly declared: "We are making 40,000