How to Criticize Governmental Policy without Freedom of the Press in Late Eighteenth-Century Denmark–Norway

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During the Napoleonic Wars, the monarchy of Denmark–Norway strove to maintain its neutrality and also to keep the liberal thinking of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution at arm’s length. After a period in which its citizens had engaged in free, revolutionary speech, the Danish government reverted to its policies of strictly limiting press freedom through a censorship rescript in 1799. Freedom of the press, along with other liberal themes (such as free trade), had been a popular subject in periodicals in the decades before the Napoleonic Wars: how, then, did authors relate to this changing policy of censorship?

Writers in late eighteenth-century Denmark–Norway did not shy away from political debates. Ideas for reform appeared in the many periodicals of the time. As Dag Michalsen shows in the next chapter, some of these discussions focused on legal and constitutional matters, but projects relating to the economy were another important topic of debate. On the one hand, this accorded with state policy, since economic growth and general well-being were a patriotic concern. However, the economy was also potentially controversial because it involved both social and political issues, including law, health, education, monopolies, and the system of privilege. Economic debates led to discussions of policy questions, such as the regime’s efforts to centralize trade and institutions in Copenhagen. Since many of the authors contributing articles and essays to the periodicals were civil servants and members of patriotic societies, they had to present their proposals and criticisms in a way that would avoid offending royal autocratic authority. Appointed by the king and therefore acting as his presumably loyal hands, they were unlikely critics. In fact, one might ask to what degree they could even contribute as men of opinions. Could they in any way act as private persons, as one of Habermas’s criteria for a critical public sphere would have demanded?

A closer look at one of the most important Norwegian periodicals for economic issues—Topographisk Journal for Norge (Topographisk Journal for Norway)—will provide insights into what conditions, restrictions, and political considerations writers faced when presenting proposals and criticism on
economic issues in late eighteenth-century Denmark–Norway. The focal point for this analysis will be three articles from 1793—the year when the shocking news reached the monarchy that revolutionaries in Paris had executed Louis XVI. These events created an increasingly tense political climate in the 1790s and early 1800s and brought the question of patriotic loyalty in autocratic Denmark–Norway front and centre. Topographisk Journal for Norge offers a template for how writers and publishers calling for patriotic reform initiatives negotiated this climate.

The Politics of Print under Autocracy

As Malik demonstrates in his chapter, censorship laws in the autocratic monarchy of Denmark–Norway were harsh. At the same time, the regime regarded literature and the press as useful and allowed several printing presses and book shops to operate, mainly in the capital, Copenhagen. In 1755 King Frederik V invited submissions of 'theses of general use in economic and physical matters' and welcomed periodicals and publications dealing with economic development. Economic literature in a wide sense became a favoured genre that was not subject to heavy censorship.¹ One important result of the royal invitation was the annual journal Danmark og Norges Oeconomiske Magazin (1757–64), and another was an increasing amount of topographical literature, which included descriptions of economic and social conditions in counties or parishes, often with recommendations for improvements in agriculture, commerce, and education. After the brief flirtation with freedom of the press under Struensee (1770–1772), which had opened the floodgates to the public expression of diverse opinions on many topics (see Kjell Lars Berge’s chapter), the police and courts resumed their previous course of prosecuting offences against king and government. However, the professors of the University of Copenhagen did not resume the practice of pre-censorship. When in 1784 the Crown Prince Frederik took power and governed in his father's name, censorship policy again changed. Autocracy continued, but the coup d'état brought a new, liberal elite into government. Freedom of the press increased once more, and pamphlets and periodicals praised the liberal regime and press freedom. The Danish press was in fact relatively free during the time of the French Revolution, but in 1799 the royal