

Rhetoric in Scandinavia

Retoryka w Skandynawii

10 (4) 2023 ISSUE EDITORS: TOMMY BRUHN, LISA S. VILLADSEN, EWA MODRZEJEWSKA

SPRAWOZDANIE / REPORT

HANNE ROER

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8290-4845>

roer@hum.ku.dk

MARIE LUND

AARHUS UNIVERSITY, DENMARK

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8891-0946>

retml@cc.au.dk

Report/sprawozdanie: Forging Trusting Nordic Nations: an exploratory workshop at Aarhus University, Denmark, September 28-29, 2023

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Report/sprawozdanie: Forging Trusting Nordic Nations: an exploratory workshop at Aarhus University, Denmark, September 28-29, 2023

In September 2023 a group of Scandinavian rhetoric scholars met with scholars from adjacent disciplines at Aarhus University in Denmark to discuss and explore how rhetoric played a part in the creation of trust and trustworthiness in the history of the Nordics. The purpose of the workshop was to explore the rhetoric that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in which the modern, democratic Nordic nations were made. The relatively peaceful and egalitarian history of the Nordic countries is sometimes rendered as a central cause of the region's tendency towards trust, and trust is routinely used to explain the stability, prosperity, and even happiness of the citizens in the Nordic countries.

“Forging Trusting Nordic Nations” was the first of three exploratory workshops granted by Nordforsk, an organization under the Nordic Council of Ministers providing funding for Nordic cooperation on research and research infrastructure. The title of the workshop series is “Trustworthiness: The Rhetorical History of Trust in the Nordics.” Each workshop focuses on a particular key period forming a historical sequence which develops the overarching theme in three “deep dives” into history. While existing research generally downplays the importance of communication to the creation and maintenance of trust, this series of workshops offers an historical exploration of the rhetorical creation and reproduction of trust in the Nordics.

The first day of the seminar in Aarhus was open to a larger audience including scholars and students from across Aarhus University. The presentations and lively discussions revolved around questions such as: How were those that the public rhetors had previously thought of as “others” (workers, women) now rendered as “one of us”? How were Nordic citizens persuaded to trust not only each other,

but also the state? How did the new Nordic rhetors (such as women, peasants, members of the working class) establish themselves as competent citizens worthy of trust and responsibility? How did public communication ensure that previously opposed classes and groups came to see each other as citizens in the same public sphere?

Prof. Anders Johansen (professor emeritus at Bergen University, Norway) opened the seminar with his talk “Trust and distrust as conditions of communication in the liberalist doctrines of the 19th century”. Johansen focused on one of the crucial periods in the development of Norwegian political rhetoric in the 19th century, the subject of his groundbreaking work, *Komme til orde. Politisk kommunikasjon 1814-1913* [*Getting the Word. Political Communication 1814-1913*] (Universitetsforlaget 2019), showing how the notion of trust was at the center of class-divided discussions of credibility and political agency.

Prof. Jens Kjeldsen, also of Bergen University, similarly took his starting point in Norwegian political history, with a representative anecdote about an inexperienced member of the early days of the Norwegian parliament who never spoke a single word from the speaker’s seat. The anecdote spells out the importance of rhetorical competence for political agency, a competence that young people acquire in the long running national speech contest, *Ta’ ordet* [*Take the Word!*], in Norway.

Prof. Gert Thinggaard Svendsen (Aarhus University, Denmark) traced the roots of the Nordic trust culture back to the Viking age, emphasizing how long it takes to build up social trust, which on the other hand can be broken down in a few decades. The early state formation in Denmark took place in an oral culture, necessitating trust relations.

Assoc. Prof. Hanne Roer (University of Copenhagen, Denmark) presented a reading of an almost unknown political pamphlet: “Trust as rhetorical topos in 19th century Danish political culture: Sally B. Salomon’s satirical (fake) speech.” Salomon accused the political leaders of the emerging Danish democracy in 1848 of breaking down social trust, which shows that the topos of trust was at the center of political debate in the constitutional debate.

Postdoc Sascha Stopa (Aarhus University, Denmark), traced the religious and theological origins of the high level of social trust in Denmark, in her talk “Theological influence on the development of 19th and early 20th century Danish trust culture.” She pointed to Luther’s reformation as the foundation of Danish trust culture while Danish writer and theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig played an important role in the 19th century in coining a particular Danish vision of political agency for peasants.

Assoc. Prof. Marie Lund (Aarhus University, Denmark), and Sofie Kristiansen, CEO at dansketaler.dk (a publicly/privately funded online speech archive)

gave a talk on the first women orators in Denmark. In their speeches and writings, they established a new subject position and a new rhetorical identity for women speakers, thus constituting women as trustworthy political subjects. Assoc. Prof. Rolf Hugoson (Umeå University, Sweden) also spoke about a prominent female artist from Sweden in his talk “Trustworthy enough: Constructing realistic notions of politics in the Nordic countries.”

The final speaker, Assoc. Prof. Kristian Bjørkdahl (Oslo University, Norway) analyzed the political rhetoric of trust of the Norwegian politician Johan Castberg: “Sketching a Larger ‘We’. Johan Castberg’s Rhetoric of Solidarity”. As the leader of the Radical People’s Party, Castberg founded a political discourse built on trust and solidarity, paving the way for social reforms.

The second day was a closed session workshop for a smaller group of researchers devoted to taking the study of Trust in the Nordics further. The theoretical explorations on the rhetorical study of trust were initiated by Assoc. Prof. Elisabeth Hoff-Clausen (University of Copenhagen, Denmark) who presented a study of social trust that shapes collective character – applied on a sermon by Grundtvig, the founding father of a popular enlightenment movement in 19th century Denmark. At the basis of the discussions was the probing of neighboring concepts such as trust, trustworthiness, and ethos. We also strove to make trust operative as a rhetorical critical concept with a historical sensitivity. To that purpose, the concept “rhetorical cultures of trust” was coined. The outcome of the workshop series will be an edited volume, tentatively titled *The Rhetorical History of Trust in the Nordics*, and a special issue of the journal *Rhetoric Scandinavica*.

We now look forward to the second workshop in Uppsala in the beginning of June 2024 exploring the Nordic social democracy in the post-WWII era. The third workshop, planned to take place in Bergen in September 2024, explores the recent multicultural and neo-liberal stages of the Nordic welfare state.

News and calls for papers will be published here: <https://nordiskretorikk.no/exploratory-workshop-forging-trusting-nordic-nations/>

The organizing committee consists of Jens E. Kjeldsen, professor of rhetoric and media studies, Bergen University; Kristian Bjørkdahl, associate professor of rhetoric, University of Oslo; Hanne Roer, associate professor of rhetoric, University of Copenhagen; Otto Fischer, professor of rhetoric Uppsala; and Marie Lund, associate professor of rhetoric, Aarhus University.