



One Word to Rule Them All

'Civic-Mindedness' and Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen's Nationalist Covid-19 Rhetoric

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One word to rule them all: 'Civic-mindedness' and Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen's Nationalist Covid-19 rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

The essay is a case study critically engaging the Danish Prime Minister's rhetorical leadership during the early phase of the COVID-19 crisis. Through conceptually oriented rhetorical criticism of a series of press conference speeches given by the PM, the essay demonstrates how her rhetorical leadership in the early stages of the corona crisis relied on communitarian appeals couched in nationalistic terms whereby contributing to stopping the spread of the virus gradually became inscribed in a Social Democratic narrative about community and solidarity and which eventually was presented as part and parcel of an essential 'Danishness.' The argument is that the PM's speeches successfully framed the national response to the epidemic as just that, a national or even nationalistic response. Analysis of the salient phrases 'standing together by keeping apart', 'civic-mindedness,' and 'taking care of Denmark' inform the characterization of the PM's rhetorical strategy and its ideological underpinnings. The term 'civic-mindedness,' specifically, was used as a short-hand referent for all the government's instructions, advice, and admonitions to change the public's behavior, and functioned as a guideline for the people in Denmark regarding their understanding of and reactions to the corona epidemic. One word to capture many words, and one word to guide, even rule, a people.

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1. Introduction

At the end of the summer of 2020, the corona pandemic seemed to be under control, and Danish public life had resumed a semblance of normalcy after the spring lockdown. It was with good reason, then, that Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen opened the Danish Parliament, on October 6, with a triumphant note to her opening remarks:

They say that crises show the material one is made of. The spring of 2020 was a test of strength for Denmark. A common enemy. A global epidemic. And what material! Togetherness. Civic-mindedness. Ability to act. Denmark demonstrated what we can. We were reminded of how vulnerable we are when we are alone. And also how strong we are when we stand together. [...] We do not allow a virus to destroy the trust in our societal model. (Frederiksen 2020i)¹

Besides capturing the good-will of the audience by praising the country (and by implication the members of Parliament) for its determination, perseverance, and ability to work together, these remarks were thinly veiled self-congratulatory as they summed up the essence of Frederiksen's corona policy. This had consistently underscored the joint responsibility to protect the most vulnerable members of society (the elderly) and appealed to 'civic-mindedness' – i.e., a shared sense of obligation to the community – to justify and offset the limitations on social activities, changed working conditions, loss of income and jobs, bankruptcies, etc. caused by corona restrictions. And most significantly, this opening passage illustrates Frederiksen's framing of the COVID-19 crisis as a uniquely Danish problem with a particularly Danish solution. The saying quoted in Frederiksen's opening – that a crisis will show the material one is made of – allowed her to essentialize the national response to the corona crisis. Danes, she suggested, are made of particularly strong material. They have a unique ability to act driven by a sense of solidarity with other Danes and commit to the welfare state.

Interestingly, in the ensuing debate, Frederiksen's description of the Danish people's unique character and the Danish social model as the key explanation for the country's relatively moderate losses due to COVID-19 went unmentioned. One expects that such praise would be positively received. Still, it is remarkable that Frederiksen's nationalist narrative of a unified people following their true calling by working together did not spark any comments from Parliament members, not even the opposition.

The article argues that Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's early corona crisis speeches successfully framed the national response to the epidemic as just that, a national or even nationalistic response. The Danish guidelines for containing the coronavirus infection were similar to those in many other countries (including social dis-

¹ All translations from the Danish are the author's own.

tancing, hand hygiene, and not going out if feeling sick). However, the PM's public appeals during the early stage were, I suggest, increasingly ideologically laden and overlaid with a nationalistic tone. In effect, Frederiksen's corona rhetoric framed the efforts against the virus as an essentially national calling. Frederiksen's rhetorical leadership in the early stages of the corona crisis relied on communitarian appeals couched in nationalistic terms where contributing to stopping the spread of the virus gradually became inscribed in a Social Democratic narrative about community and solidarity, which eventually was presented as an expression of an essential 'Danishness.'

Before examining the PM's rhetoric's constitutive and ideological functions, a brief overview of the context and the material chosen for analysis is in order. I lay out the theoretical and methodical basis for my reading of Frederiksen's early corona speeches before showing how they participate in a constitutive, nationalistically tinged rhetoric. The article ends with a brief discussion of the analytical results and their implications.

2. Denmark's 'corona commander in chief'

Early in 2020, the coronavirus spread became the most pressing societal problem, first in China, then Italy, and soon globally. The threats posed by the pandemic to public health and national and global economies called for effective crisis leadership, all the while raising a daunting communication challenge to political leaders and public and health authorities. Strategies varied significantly from country to country in terms of who communicated what, how, and when. The Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, a Social Democrat heading a one-party government supported by two center and left-wing parties, so conspicuously placed herself at the front of the response efforts that already by March 14, a political reporter called her "Denmark's corona commander in chief," alluding to the power invested to the US presidency to command the armed forces (Mogensen 2020). The military allusion notwithstanding, the official Danish response to corona was rarely framed in terms of war. Still, the reporter had spotted a key characteristic in the Prime Minister's reaction to the corona crisis. Namely, that she emphatically took the helm and framed the efforts to avoid the epidemic's potentially devastating consequences.

3. Frederiksen's press conference introductions, a hybrid genre

This study focuses on Frederiksen's public statements during the first month of the corona crisis. The combination of uncertainty and urgency in the early stages of the crisis makes this a fascinating period for the study of rhetorical crisis communication. At this

stage, the PM not only launched the official response to the epidemic but framed it in a way that lent it a particular social psychological valance meant to boost popular support and compliance. Between March 6 and April 6, 2020, Frederiksen headed eight press conferences dedicated to the corona outbreak.²

Held in the State Department, the press conferences typically lasted about one hour. Using personal and appropriately spaced out lecterns, the PM was accompanied by varying cabinet members, spokespersons from the health services, the police, and other authorities, depending on the meeting's focus, and two deaf interpreters. The PM opened each press conference with a comprehensive statement, up to twenty minutes long, with an update on the situation and announcements of the government's decisions and the public authorities' guidelines. She then passed the word to the other participants who made statements on their competence field before allowing the press questions. In this way, the setting for Frederiksen's statements resembled other press conferences, but they were clearly addressed directly to the Danish public and not to the press. Whereas press conferences rarely attract the public's attention, these events were announced in 'breaking yellow' on online newspapers and the hourly radio news. TV stations had live coverage leading up to and following each press conference, and they were broadcast live on national television. Content-wise the PM's statements had rhetorical traits (such as extended arguments justifying various sanctions and emotional appeals to the audience) that would not be seen in a regular press conference briefing. On this basis, I refer to this genre hybrid as the PM's *corona speeches*. Frederiksen herself thought of these events as opportunities to speak directly to the population. In the March 6 speech, for example, her intention to address a broader public was evident when she made a direct appeal, "Today, I once again would like to call for solidarity [fællesskab], and that everyone does everything possible to contain and prevent [the spread of the virus, LSV]" (Frederiksen 2020a). She generally addressed the public in the first person plural, 'we,' e.g., "We must take care of each other." Still, on occasion, also in the second person plural, 'you,' e.g., "you have taken on a huge responsibility." A few times, she addressed particular groups directly, e.g., health personnel, the elderly, and young people, expressing special appreciation and concern.

4. Theoretical and methodological approach

My reading is a conceptually oriented rhetorical criticism. James Jasinski describes this as proceeding "through a process of *abduction* that can be thought of as a back-and-forth movement between the critical object (e.g., text, message) and the concept(s) that is being

² Full manuscripts of the some of her introductory statements and video recordings and transcriptions of the rest have been obtained from the PM's website.

investigated simultaneously” and thus through a “constant interaction of careful reading and conceptual reflection” (Jasinski 2001: 135). The featured concept is *nationalist communication*, and the guiding question is how Frederiksen's corona speeches in spring 2020 rested on nationalist appeals. George Lakoff's work on *framing* provides another basis for my reading, which draws primarily on Edwin Black's notion of the *second persona*, Michael McGee's notion of the *ideograph*, Maurice Charland's theory of *constitutive rhetoric*, and Michael Billig's concept of *banal nationalism*. Taken together, this constitutes a framework that combines rhetorical theory, drawing primarily on Kenneth Burke's work, with critical theory. It also rests on linguistics and semiotics – the latter informing both Charland's and McGee's work – and basic nationalism theory. Collectively this theoretical framework is chosen for its ability to critically interrogate discourse for its underlying ideology and ability to project particular values to an audience.

Although George Lakoff's primary focus was on metaphor (Lakoff 1980), a stylistic element not prominently featured in Frederiksen's speeches and therefore not a primary concern here, his more general attention to the power of framing to activate certain expectations and valances in the audience fundamentally informs this study (Lakoff and Wehling 2016, Musolff 2019). Thus, when I talk of Frederiksen's *framing* of the COVID-19 crisis, I refer to a conceptual framework that, following Lakoff, provides “a larger interpretive template” for her message to become meaningful (Lakoff and Wehling 2016: 75). My claim is that Frederiksen's portrayal of Denmark as something to be taken care of and of the Danes as uniquely caring and collectively oriented prepares her auditors to accept and follow the corona restrictions with pride and without questions since this would mean questioning their commitment to their country.

Edwin Black's concept of the *second persona* seeks to theorize what he calls ‘moral’ evaluation of rhetorical discourse, which might more appropriately be labeled ideological criticism. Black broke away from a hitherto strong tradition in rhetorical studies of evaluating public discourse by standards of effect. He was among the first theorists to call on rhetorical critics not merely to think in instrumental terms but instead consider rhetorical utterances as symbolic actions with ethical and ideological significance. Rhetorical critics have since argued convincingly for a ‘critical rhetoric’ that “examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a relativized world” to “unmask or demystify the discourse of power” (McKerrow 1989: 92) and claimed its necessity because “rhetorical critics would be oppressors or liberators as they ignored or engaged the linkage between social order and language” (Klumpp & Hollihan 1989: 84).

Black's approach to such critical rhetoric is using the notion of an *implied audience*. Rather than looking to the actual, physical audience for a given rhetorical text, Black suggests looking for the audience implied by the text, in other words, a hypothetical construct to evaluate the discourse. According to him, “It seems a useful methodological assumption to hold that rhetorical discourses, either singly or cumulatively in a

persuasive movement, will imply an auditor, and that in most cases the implication will be sufficiently suggestive as to enable the critic to link this implied auditor to an ideology" (Black 1970: 112). This assumption, he claims, allows the critic to "see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditors become" (Black 1970: 113). In other words, by carefully studying how a text seeks to persuade, the critic can discern the text's underlying ideologically informed presumptions and values, and on that basis, deduce the nature of the worldview the rhetor would ascribe to the 'ideal' auditor/reader of the discourse. Evidence for ideological underpinnings, Black suggests, is best found in substantive claims, but will "most likely...be in the form of stylistic tokens" (Black 1970: 112) because even when discourse makes apparently neutral and innocuous claims, a closer examination of lexicon and style will reveal a general attitude that is morally or ideologically inscribed (Black 1970: 113). Hence, careful analysis of the kind of mindset invoked through either direct or more subtle appeals in a text does, Black argues, "make moral judgment possible" (Black 1970: 113).

The impetus of studying word choice, not as a matter of style, but as an indication and carrier of ideological content that Black initiated saw a renewed interest in Michael McGee's work on the *ideograph*. Ideographs, McGee explains, are words that, "like Chinese symbols, ... signify and 'contain' a unique ideological commitment;" they are "one-term sums of an orientation," and members of a culture are not permitted to question the fundamental logic of ideographs' (McGee 1989: 7). Ideographs are essential to study, McGee suggests, because they function as "agents of political consciousness" (*ibid.*). They are intimately bound up with the culture they define, and their significance lies "in their concrete history as usages, not in their idea-content" (McGee 1989: 10). Examples of ideographs in McGee's own, North American culture are 'people,' 'liberty,' and 'religion.' These words have particular legal and common language meanings. Simultaneously, they are terms often used to carry significant but not explicitly stated ideological meaning. They are thus ambiguous and, according to Jasinski, provide "advocates with considerable, but not absolute, degree of latitude" (Jasinski 2001: 310). He gives the example that Americans "might not have considered the ability to choose any doctor they wanted as an indispensable prerequisite for the good life prior to the organized campaign of Bill Clinton's administration in 1993. But that campaign articulated, or connected, doctor choice and personal 'freedom.' The meaning of freedom was subtly modified as the ideograph was extended to a new topic" (Jasinski 2001: 310). To Condit and Lucaites ideographs "represent in condensed form the normative, collective commitments of the members of a public, and they typically appear in public argumentation as the necessary motivations or justifications for action performed in the name of the public" (quoted in Jasinski 2001: 309). The ideograph concept is useful in explaining the particular rhetorical power in Frederiksen's use of the word 'civic-mindedness' [*samfundssind*]. As I will argue, it serves precisely the functions described

by Condit and Lucaites; namely, providing motivation and justification for various corona-related restrictions and especially self-regulated changes in behavior. In this connection, Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of the *empty signifier* (Lévi-Strauss 1950) is also relevant, especially as it has been taken up by Ernesto Laclau (1996). An empty or 'floating' signifier is a word that points to no actual object or has no agreed-upon meaning but can be used to hegemonic ends due to their vagueness and malleability. Because it can mean different things to different people, an empty signifier potentially has significant rhetorical force because it appeals to listeners in ways that obscure the fact that they attribute different meanings to it, making it difficult to keep a critical distance. In this sense, it has significant ideological power.

Maurice Charland's concept of *constitutive rhetoric* focuses on language's ability to perform an ideological function. It thus recommends itself to identify the nationalistic ideology underlying Frederiksen's corona speeches. Charland's work partakes in the general project of theorizing the ideological work performed by public discourse, as pursued by McGee and McKerrow. Moreover, Charland shares Laclau's fundamentally skeptical approach to what is posited as given, namely national identity and the presumed unity of purpose accompanying it. The concept of *constitutive rhetoric* applies both to a genre and a more general theory for understanding rhetorical processes. In an encyclopedia article, Charland provides this brief explanation: "constitutive rhetoric accounts for the process of identity formation ... where audiences are called upon to materialize through their actions an identity ascribed to them" (Charland 2001: 616). In conceptualizing how some rhetorical audiences are not given but instead emerge as a discourse's function, Charland draws on Louis Althusser's concept of *interpellation* and Kenneth Burke's identification concept. Linking the rhetorical effects of identity formation with narrative theory, Charland posits constitutive rhetoric as constructing "political subjects through effects of identification that 1) provide a collective identity for an addressed audience; 2) construct the audience as a subject in history, and 3) demand that subjects act in accordance with their identity as enacted in history" (Charland 2001: 617). In other words, rhetors call forth an audience by offering them a collective narrative identity that serves as a template for present action. In effect, they provide individuals "with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to experience" and inserts such subjects-as-agents into the world (Charland 1987: 143).

The element of nationalism I wish to draw attention to in Frederiksen's corona speeches mainly relates to Michael Billig's notion of *banal nationalism*. This concerns nationalism as experienced in long-established national states where it is as prevalent as it is typically overlooked. The 'banality' does not suggest harmlessness but instead that such nationalism is so ingrained and normalized that it goes unnoticed. By this seeming innocuousness, it succeeds in exerting a subtle yet shaping influence on our mindset. Far from ostentatious pathos-laden patriotism, the concept of banal nationalism provides a lens for spotting the everyday performance of nationality. In Billig's oft-cited

words, “the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (Billig 1995: 8). We must pay attention to it is because this constant flagging of nationhood has far-reaching implications for our understanding of collective identity and as priming for political action pursuing nationalist aims.

5. Crisis communication calling for collective action

The following reading of Frederiksen’s corona speeches focuses on the element of ideological nationalism at play in her rhetoric. A few general observations will serve to introduce the analysis: While each of Frederiksen’s early corona speeches responded to a particular conjuncture – typically a new development of the epidemic and the government’s response – they share a common theme: the problem’s seriousness and significance to everyone. Common to the PM’s early corona speeches was a format which loosely followed the standard argumentative development of moving through the stages of first stating facts (number of persons infected, hospitalized, and in intensive care), then defining them (a ‘serious’ situation), and eventually, advocating some action (admonishment and appeals to follow instructions from health authorities, announcements of new regulations). Across the eight speeches during the first stage of the corona crisis, there is a similar development. Whereas the first speeches were dedicated primarily to establishing a common understanding of the epidemic, including responding to doubts about its seriousness, the later speeches focused on advocating and admonishing the public to follow official guidelines for safe behavior. From the very beginning, Frederiksen framed the corona-crisis as a societal issue calling on citizens to act on an individual basis and collectively for the most vulnerable members of society and the Danish society’s sake as a whole.

The emphasis on motivational appeal in the speeches is clear: Throughout the corona crisis, the PM’s primary message to the population was that for all the restrictions and mandated obligations introduced by authorities, it came down to each person, together as well as individually, to protect themselves and help protect others. Since much of the really effective contagion preventive behavior was beyond the reach of what could be lawfully enforced, rhetorical strategies fit to change behavior were crucial. Thus, on March 6, the PM admonished the population, “I hope that everyone, also in specific instances, will rise above and regard this from a societal perspective [*med samfundsbriller*, literally: ‘with society glasses’]” (Frederiksen 2020a). Also, on March 10, she twice reiterated that “everyone’s behavior” needed to change and that “everyone must take on a large individual responsibility” (Frederiksen 2020b). Were Frederiksen able to appeal to the population in a way that would make them acknowledge the relevance of the problem and their potential role in mitigating the risk to themselves and

others, the prospects of avoiding overstressing hospital capacity would vastly improve. In the beginning, the PM's approach to this was to clarify that the epidemic was a threat to everyone and thus a collective exigence. Later, it encouraged and urged the population to follow official recommendations for safe behavior. By March 11, this dual-purpose call had found a pithy formulation which soon gained an almost slogan-like status: "We must stand together by keeping apart" [Vi skal stå sammen ved at holde afstand] (Frederiksen 2020c). Such an appeal to the population's better selves might seem at once too vague and too sentimental. Not so, however, for a country proud of its high level of education and public trust. Appealing to a sense of connectedness was PM's choice to reflect an attitude of positive expectations toward a literate and conscientious population, competent and trusted to understand and follow the authorities' guidelines. Still, as I will suggest, what was presented as general and inconspicuous appeals had ideological underpinnings that served to cement the PM's political position and left political opponents in the awkward position of having little space for dissent.

A quote from the March 11 speech is especially telling for the communitarian and nationalist undertone in the PM's corona speeches. This was the day when Frederiksen announced a national lock-down and when the reach of personal, social, and economic consequences of the restrictions was beginning to dawn on the population. Frederiksen appealed to the public, "Now is the time for us to show what we can when it counts. The Danes are at it. We are showing civic-mindedness [samfundssind]. This is what works. Much of the solution to what we face rests on the Danes' shoulders" (Frederiksen 2020c). In the following section, we shall consider in more detail how Frederiksen framed Denmark's response to COVID-19 as an effort deeply rooted in a particular national ethos.

6. Covid-19 as a Danish problem to be solved in a Danish way

Three phrases, in particular, characterized Frederiksen's corona speeches: the spacious and encompassing term 'civic-mindedness' [samfundssind] (used eleven times across the eight speeches); the catchy 'standing together by keeping a distance' [stå sammen ved at holde afstand] (used six times), and the more pathos-laden 'taking care of' (the most vulnerable/society/each other/the Danes/yourselves) [passe på (de mest sårbare/samfundet/hinanden/danskerne/jer selv)] (used 17 times). Together, these three phrases represent three abstraction levels and make up the core of Frederiksen's appeals to the Danish population. Let's consider them one by one and in reverse order, beginning with the least abstract appeal, that of 'taking care' of the most vulnerable, each other, Denmark, etc.

'Taking care'

In the Danish, the phrase connotes a protective, nurturing attention as one would give a child (keeping it out of harm's way) or a fragile or sick person (seeing to their well-being). While not strictly metaphorical, Frederiksen's use of the phrase "taking care of" clearly places the auditor in a caring and responsible position, a framing fit to activate compliance rather than contestation. It was first and foremost used as an appeal to follow the general safety guidelines regarding hygiene and social distance and the work of health and social care personnel. However, soon, the phrase started to appear in a more abstract sense, with the 'we' –i.e., the care-taking agency – referring as much to the government as to the population's members. At times the phrase functioned as a warrant for the government's strict measures, as when Frederiksen stated, "We must all do all we can to take care of the Danes. Of Denmark. Of each other" (Frederiksen 2020c). Here, as in many other instances, the government's restrictions on commercial, social, cultural, and private life in the country were justified with reference to the apparently universally held value that taking care of Denmark is both a worthwhile and unequivocal goal to be obtained.

The phrase "taking care of Denmark" [passe på Danmark] is not uncommon in contemporary Danish political discourse. It has been used for several issues, including anti-terror legislation, anti-immigration measures, and austerity measures. Frederiksen's favorite phrase has also been a catch-all goal for her Social Democratic political agenda (Jørgensen 2020). Its prior use in some political contexts has seemed somewhat odd, due to its protective and nurturing meaning – rather than defensive, resistant, or even pro-active wording, which at times would seem to correlate better with the subject matter), it seemed particularly apt in connection with the corona crisis. The phrase worked well due to its protective overtones casting all Danes in the role of potential COVID-19 patients. The whole population needed to be shielded from infection, not just by authorities but mutually, and for the sake of the greater context. In the first corona speech, Frederiksen said, "We must take care of the most vulnerable in our society. We must take care of each other because that is the prerequisite for taking care of all of society in this situation" (Frederiksen 2020a). Here, she links the wellbeing of the individual to the health of the entire country, presenting them as two sides of the same coin: mutual responsibility will save both the individual and the collective. Two weeks later, the link Frederiksen sought to establish between the protective approach, and a civic mindset was evident as she said, "And we are doing it [securing that the economy not come to a standstill and minimizing adverse economic consequences, LSV] together. We are demonstrating civic-mindedness in Denmark. And we stand together to take care of those most vulnerable and exposed. Yes, in fact we stand together in taking care of our society" (Frederiksen 2020f).

'Standing together by keeping a distance'

The phrase "standing together by keeping a distance" was first used by Frederiksen in her third corona speech on March 11. The oxymoronic nature of this slogan-like phrase not only made it both memorable and easily repeatable but also effectively merged the core health safety advice in a time of virus spread with Frederiksen's framing of the effort to limit the epidemic as not just a collective but a culturally inflected civic calling. Frederiksen introduced it as intimately linked to Danish identity and culture, "As Danes, we seek togetherness [fællesskabet] by being close together. Now we must stand together by keeping a distance" (Frederiksen 2020c). The unifying idea between the two sentences is a commitment to the community held together by solidarity (standing together). Here, the values invoked echo a Social Democratic imaginary, for which 'standing together' is a phrase typically associated with labor conflicts and union solidarity. Much like the 'taking care' phrase, the 'standing together by keeping a distance' slogan originally referred to individuals' behavior but soon took on a more civically oriented meaning, making it both a matter of national character and national survival. Frederiksen's March 23 is one example of this:

Denmark stands together by keeping a distance, and we must continue doing so. [...] We stand together in something we have not tried before. We are writing history, and we all choose – both individually and collectively – what kind of history we really want to write. It is my belief, it is my hope, and my expectation that we will emerge unscathed from this on the other side because we have the capability of standing together and because the civic-mindedness is as strong as it is. (Frederiksen 2020f)

Another example is from the March 30 speech: 'Denmark stands together – by keeping a distance [...] That is the Danish strategy. All the parties in Parliament stand behind it. We are doing it together' (Frederiksen 2020g).

'Civic-mindedness'

Together with repeated language about 'taking care of each other' and 'standing together by keeping a distance,' the term 'civic-mindedness' [samfundssind] soon became a common denominator, or super-warrant, for the government's COVID-19 initiatives. The PM herself used the term in all her speeches since the crucial March 11 lockdown speech, in which she mentioned it three times. It was also adopted by cabinet members and state and health authority persons interviewed at the press conferences.

An early analysis of the public use of the term civic-mindedness described it as an empty signifier in Ernesto Laclau's sense of a word with a meaning so broad that it really has no meaning and yet can be used to fulfill a hegemonic role (Marker 2020). Among the nodal points making up the chain of equivalences, Marker identifies 'duties'

(stay at home, abide by the advice of the health authorities, etc.), ‘prohibitions’ (don’t visit elderly or sick people, don’t gather in large crowds, etc.), and ‘extra-obligations’ (help each other, consumers should support local businesses, businesses should not lay off employees, newspapers should provide free access to virus-related information, etc.). Marker’s analysis is useful in pointing to the spaciousness of the term and relevant by pointing to the potential for a hegemonic function of empty signifiers.

Samfundssind translates literally to ‘societal mindset.’ A dictionary definition has it as “an attitude that bears witness to someone’s putting society above their own interest,” and here I translate it to *civic-mindedness*. The word dates back to around 1939 and is often used in argumentation concerning economy, e.g., for workers to moderate their wage demands, about tax evasion as destructive for the welfare society, or for businesses to own up to their social responsibilities, e.g., by taking on apprentices and thus participating in educational programs, but also in appeals to politicians to compromise to finalize legislation for the common good. Carsten Jensen, a Danish author and public intellectual, defines *samfundssind* as “the feeling of belonging to a community and the ensuing experience of having a responsibility to others than oneself and one’s nearest of kin.” He distinguishes *samfundssind* from the Christian notion of love for one’s neighbor because, although it shares the concern for others, “[it] requires the mobilization of all one’s intellectual resources and a healthy dose of self-control to realize the necessity of giving away one’s money to a community which seems very distant and of no personal concern.” *Samfundssind*, he concludes, comprises both spontaneous care for others and plain obligation (Jensen 2001: 17).

As mentioned, the word first appeared in Frederiksen’s game-changing March 11 speech, where she declared the country’s lockdown. Said Frederiksen, “We will need civic-mindedness. We will need helpfulness. I would like to thank citizens, businesses, organizers, voluntary organizations – all who up to now have shown that this is precisely what we have in Denmark – civic-mindedness” and later, “The Danes are at it. We are showing civic-mindedness. This is what works” (Frederiksen 2020c). In the following speeches, Frederiksen thanked the population directly for the civic-mindedness they were showing and explained that civic-mindedness was a “very, very great part of the solution” to getting through the crisis. On March 17, she praised “many, many Danes” for “showing an amazing civic-mindedness, even though it is hard” (Frederiksen 2020e), and on March 23, she declared, “We are doing it together. We are showing civic-mindedness in Denmark. And we are standing together to take care of the most vulnerable and exposed. Yes, we are, in fact, standing together to take care of our society” (Frederiksen 2020f).

While most of the examples mentioned seem to focus on individual citizens’ actions and attitudes, presumably showing civic-mindedness by adhering to the government’s and authorities’ recommendations and being helpful and showing consideration to

others, a different aspect of civic-mindedness was in focus in the March 30 speech. Referring to agreements between the government, employers, and labor unions regarding help packages designed to keep companies afloat and limit a rise in unemployment rates, the PM linked civic-mindedness to taking economic responsibility, "I am incredibly proud to live in a country where businesses, as something completely natural, show enormous civic-mindedness. Danish businesses are taking your responsibility and more so. You are, along with your employees, part of carrying Denmark through a historic crisis. It is quite unique." Drawing on this observation, she concluded, "We have a society that builds on togetherness, solidarity, and trust" (Frederiksen 2020g). On April 6, Frederiksen again linked civic-mindedness to economic responsibility as she appealed to large housing companies to show civic-mindedness by deferring due housing rent (Frederiksen 2020h). These two aspects, mutual social and economic responsibility for the sake of the common good, are central to Frederiksen's use of the word civic-mindedness; solidarity must undergird society both economically and interpersonally. This is a different way of expressing classic Social Democratic principles of solidarity and the welfare state's vision where "the widest shoulders carry the heaviest burdens." In addition to these aspects, that evoke citizens' moral commitment to protect and uphold the welfare society, Frederiksen lends the term an almost metaphysical quality when she declares: "We share a power that cannot be put in a formula. But which has proven indispensable. Civic-mindedness" (Frederiksen 2020g).

7. Word of the year

Fast forward nine months. In December 2020, the Danish Language Council (a governmental research institution under the Danish Ministry of Culture), in collaboration with a nationally broadcast radio program dedicated to matters of language, selected the word *samfundssind* ('civic-mindedness') as the word of the year 2020 (Dansk Sprognævn [Danish Language Council] 2020). From a pool of 291 words nominated by the public (including 'corona,' 'herd immunity,' 'face mask,' and 'elbow greeting'), *samfundssind* won. The decision was based on the fact that its use increased significantly during 2020, that it has a fluid but potentially positive meaning, and that it represents a 'particularly Danish' twist to public discourse about the coronavirus (Danish Broadcasting Corporation 2020). One jury member, a foreign editor on a conservative newspaper and former candidate for Parliament for the moderate libertarian party Venstre, expressed some reservations regarding the word's overbearing use. Still, she ended up voting for it in the spirit of positivity.

The fact that *samfundssind* was chosen as the Danish word of the year 2020 may not prove much. However, it demonstrates that the PM had successfully framed the country's corona response as a matter of civic-mindedness and successfully implied that this

word aptly described a particular Danish reaction to the crisis, thereby rendering it difficult to reject as a motivational frame for corona-safe behavior. In what follows, I will develop this argument by interpreting the analytical observations made regarding the PM's use of the phrases 'taking care of each other,' 'standing together by keeping a distance,' and 'civic-mindedness.' In doing so, I will link them to the claim that Frederiksen's corona speeches not only reflected a Social Democratic vision of a welfare society but framed the country's anti-Corona efforts in terms of banal nationalism.

8. Frederiksen's nationalist corona rhetoric

To demonstrate how Frederiksen's constituted Denmark's population as united in spirit and a purpose, Black's notion of the *second persona* can help characterize the inscribed audience for Frederiksen's corona speeches. Black suggests looking to substantive claims and stylistic tokens to get a sense of the underlying ideology driving an utterance. Examples of substantive claims in which auditors get a sense of what Frederiksen's ideal audience would be like include: "We must, as a country, look each other in the eye and acknowledge that this situation may develop seriously, very seriously," "everyone must take on a large individual responsibility," "a very clear underscoring from our side, that everyone must contribute to handling this situation in the best manner" (Frederiksen 2020b). In the following days, these appeals to solidarity among the population that is both assumed and encouraged continued: "This will only succeed if everyone does it together," "We must help each other. Show care for others – think of others. Especially those who are vulnerable" (Frederiksen 2020c); "And therefore all Danes must continue doing what we are already doing: Keeping a distance from each other, helping each other and showing consideration, not least to the most vulnerable;" "It is a common responsibility, and no one can excuse themselves from it. Everyone must shoulder the responsibility" (Frederiksen 2020d). In other words, Frederiksen clearly stated the expectation that Danes would share and respond to calls for thinking of themselves as part of a larger whole for which they carried an individual responsibility.

Black also suggests considering stylistic tokens. Frederiksen's corona speeches have little verbal flourish but are instead characterized by a simple oral style with very short, even clipped, parataxic sentences and a lexicon of everyday words. There are few metaphors, few stylistic figures. The three phrases discussed above, 'taking care,' 'standing together by keeping a distance,' and 'civic-mindedness' thus stand out as the most noticeable wordings together with the heavy use of the first person plural 'we,' which sometimes refers to the government ('and this we will not do to the Danes') (Frederiksen 2020e), sometimes to the population as a whole ('we must continue to help each other') (ibid.), and sometimes a mix of the two ("In Denmark, we have chosen our route.

We find common solutions to common problems.... We are fighting for our entire societal contract. For the Denmark we are and want to be") (Frederiksen 2020g).

In other words, Frederiksen's style is extremely accessible, and her key appeals and admonishments to the population are easily understood and remembered. This rhetorical style puts clarity before nuance and simplicity before adornment – a very democratic style that would leave few listeners in doubt of the message. It is also a rhetorical style that insistently calls listeners to self-identify as Danes. Frederiksen uses the words 'Danish,' 'Denmark' and 'the Danes' [dansk, Danmark, danskerne] remarkably frequently; they appear more than 60 times in the eight speeches.

Some of those uses are necessary for clarity, e.g., when comparing other countries, mentioning the closing of (the Danish) borders, or talking about help to Danish nationals stranded abroad. In some other cases, the PM mentions 'Danes' when she might as well have said 'people,' 'citizens,' 'each other' or 'our' (e.g., "many, many Danes who use public transport every day," "we must help each other, and this is what the Danes are doing," "The biggest mistake we can make is to hesitate, and this we will not do to the Danes") and in others still, the use of such words seems to unnecessarily and without purpose underscore nationality, as when Frederiksen mentions "Danish businesses" and "Danish wage earners," that "Danes can go shopping," and how concerned she is for "Danes in critical condition" and how proud she is of "Danish children and young people." The latter two types of flagging nationhood partake in what I see as a deliberate strategy to build a community based on nationality and inscribe this collective with a particular ideology. One part of this relies on the use of *deixis*, the grammatical act of pointing by using the definite article: 'the' Danes. It could be argued that talking about 'the Danes' in the third person is odd when Frederiksen addresses them. Nevertheless, Frederiksen uses this phrase multiple times, presumably because the definite article suggests a more specific and defined group than an undefined reference to 'Danes' or even 'citizens' and perhaps thereby signals that they collectively have her particular attention. The fact that the Prime Minister is focused on the country she heads and the population in it and mentions them repeatedly is, of course, hardly surprising, and the frequent use of these words most likely goes unnoticed. Still, I suggest that this heavy use of words expressing national identity exemplifies Billig's notion of banal nationalism: they systematically and most often unnecessarily flag nationality without calling attention to it. In Black's terms, the second persona in Frederiksen's corona speeches is someone whose self-understanding entails the Social-Democratic ideology of solidarity as the highest civic value and whose self-identification as a Dane implies an element of national exceptionalism.

With Maurice Charland, we can further describe the ideological function at play here. To Charland, constitutive rhetoric creates political subjects through identification, which offers a collective identity to an addressed audience, posits the audience as a

transhistorical subject, and inscribes it in a narrative that demands that subjects act in accordance with their role in history. They convey a particular view of what the audience has in common, their role in history, and how they ought to act accordingly. As seen above, Frederiksen systematically calls her auditors into a collective 'we' and as *Danish*, underscoring their commonality and, simultaneously, obfuscating individual, socio-economic, geographical, ethnic, or political differences. While this might seem of little significance since she addresses the Danish population, the following two elements of Charland's theory help clarify the ideological work at play. Charland explains how narrative can associate an audience with an ideology when it presents the present as an extension of the past. This results in what he calls *the transhistorical subject*, where people of the present are one with people of the past. Frederiksen's corona speeches contain several examples of this: "We Danes have dealt with great challenges before, and we must do it again" (Frederiksen 2020e), "In Denmark, we have chosen our path. We find common solutions to common problems. We have a long tradition of doing this. We are fighting for a generation that laid the first stones for our welfare society. We are fighting for our entire societal contract. For the Denmark we are and want to be. We all know that we stand in a historical time" (Frederiksen 2020g).

In these excerpts, Frederiksen links the present to the past – including the Nazi occupation's hardships of 1940-1945 and the building of the welfare society in the 1960s and 70s – and underscoring the transhistorical identity between generations. The way for auditors to assume this identity is, of course, by acting in accordance with the mantras of 'taking care', 'standing together', and exhibiting civic-mindedness. Charland points out that, to the extent auditors allow themselves to be interpellated by the collective identity offered, they are less moved by the discourse's explicit appeals than brought to act in specific ways, according to the subject position inscribed in constitutive rhetoric. Thus, the question is if, for all Frederiksen's appeals to the population to 'take care' of each other by keeping their distance and practicing good hand hygiene, the most effective strategy was presenting them with a collective identity as Danes characterized by showing civic-mindedness. Thus constituted Danes could think of themselves as helpful, considerate, responsible, community-oriented, respectful of older generations' contribution to the wealth of the society, and crucial to the continuance of the country's democratic tradition, and best of all, united with other Danes in this communitarian ethos. To Charland, the ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric springs from narrative use because it presents the acting subjects in ways that obfuscate the fact that they are but textual constructs and presents a "naturalized representation of cultural categories that legitimate institutions of power" (Charland 2001: 618). Interestingly, in the last speech in the material for this study, the eighth speech dedicated to the topic of corona, Frederiksen herself acknowledged what Charland would call the ideological trick performed by her rhetoric:

Everything I have said today exists only on paper. It is still only an option. It will be up to each one of us – you and me and everyone else – if what has been said today will come true at all. It will only come true if we all continue taking good care of each other and ourselves in these corona times. (Frederiksen 2020h)

Frederiksen's comments here, however inadvertently confirming Charland's point, speak eloquently to the ideographic nature of the term civic-mindedness. As we have seen in the PM's corona speeches, this word served to present in a condensed form a normative, collective commitment among members of the public to motivate and justify action and rule compliance for the sake of the common good. It became a short-hand referent for all the government's instructions, advice, and admonitions to change the public's behavior. It functioned as a guideline for the Danish people regarding their understanding of and reactions to the corona epidemic. One word to capture many words; one word to guide, even rule, many people.

9. Conclusion

From an effect-oriented perspective, Frederiksen's strategy for the early corona speeches seemed well-chosen: the Danish population generally abided by the official guidelines for corona-safe behavior and thus contributed to curbing the spread of the virus, and her personal approval ratings, as well as those of the Social Democratic government, went up during the corona crisis. From the perspective of an ideological critique, Frederiksen's strategy may, however, call for a more nuanced evaluation. The call for civic-mindedness likely was a way for many Danes to make various personal and societal challenges and deprivations meaningful and served as a motivating mantra for continued self-control. However, its overbearing nature would have been felt by others as it increasingly identified the 'proper' approach to the epidemic with an essentially Social Democratic vision of the welfare state where the wellbeing of the weakest became the test of the effort's success. Moreover, and perhaps more problematic, was the essentializing nature of Frederiksen's corona rhetoric. With proper corona safe behavior presented as an instantiation of a truly Danish ethos, this left non-native inhabitants of the country ignored and conceptualized the national reaction to the pandemic as that, a national, issue with a nationalist solution, rather than a local, political instantiation of international medical expertise of epidemiology. Framing the crisis in nationalist terms risked de-incentivizing a more collective, international effort and left the difficulties of affected countries less materially and organizationally privileged than Denmark out of sight. Finally, the ideographic nature of civic-mindedness tied up with conceptualizing what being Danish is, made it difficult to challenge political principle without appearing to be somehow in opposition to the alleged essential Danishness in-

herent in Frederiksen's version of civic-mindedness. With the word civic-mindedness, Frederiksen seemingly hit upon effective rhetorical crisis management to stay in control at the cost of alienating political opponents whose differing views, just by differing from Frederiksen's, were cast as somehow un-Danish or even unpatriotic. Further, while the nationalist appeal secured Frederiksen high approval ratings, this framing of the COVID-19 did little to prepare the country to enter discussions about international vaccine distribution programs and other border-crossing initiatives to combat the pandemic. This case study from Denmark raises questions about how the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced political discourse in this and other countries and particularly how the health and economic crisis may have spurred nationalist and populist political discourse in different settings.

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