

## GLOBAL RHETORICS PODCAST

### Episode 2: Time & Truth with Frida Buhre and Erik Bengtson

Transcription by Jason Michalek

Erik: It's like in *The Matrix* you know like when you see the code. So you look around and see all this political temporalities everywhere and they're intersecting in different ways...

José: Welcome to Global Rhetorics. I'm José Quintero.

Collin: And I'm Collin Bjork. This is the podcast that aims to amplify that work and networks of rhetoricians around the globe.

José: Hey Collin.

Collin: Hey José.

José: What do you have for me today?

Collin: Today I've got a double interview for you.

José: How'd it happen. Did you double book?

Collin: Not quite. I had the great fortune of interviewing two scholars at the same time. Which by the way, is a theme for today's episode.

José: Double interviews?

Collin: {Laughing} No, time. Time and truth are our topics of conversation today.

José: Okay, no biggie. How many episodes is that gonna take?

Collin: Actually, it's going to take two episodes.

José: Yay! Our first double episode!

{Sound of party favors}

José: So where are we starting today?

Collin: We're starting in Uppsala [up sə /lah/], Sweden.

{Theme music}

Collin: Help me pronounce it. Say it.

Frida: {Laughing} Uppsala [up /sah/ /lah/]

Erik: Yeah.

Collin: Okay: Uppsala [up /sah/ /lah/]. So we're at Uppsala University. This is the oldest university in Scandinavia--is that correct? Not just in Sweden?

Erik: Correct. 1477.

Collin: 1477.

José: 1477! Talk about time!

Frida: Jag heter Frida Buhre och jag är forskare i retorik här på Uppsala universitet. Jag var också med och grundade IRW som är en internationell retorikworkshop. Ja, jag sysslar med retorik och filosofi mest, men också med ett starkt intresse för politik.

José: That... is Swedish.

Collin: It sure is! And here it is in English:

Frida: Hello, my name is Frida Buhre. I'm a researcher in rhetoric here at Uppsala University in Sweden. And yeah, my researcher interests are sort of mainly posed at the intersection of rhetoric and philosophy—but with a strong interest in politics. (I didn't say this in the Swedish one, but I've also written quite a bit on Hannah Arendt.)

Erik: Tack. Jag heter Erik Bengtson och jag är också forskare i retorik här i Uppsala, och har jobbat med Frida med IRW men just nu så jobbar jag mest med Ernst Cassirer och retorisk antropologi.

José: I'm... gonna need a little help with the Swedish again.

Collin: No problem! Here ya go:

Erik: And I'm Erik Bengtson. I'm also a scholar of rhetoric. My work as a Ph.D. student was about the epistemology of rhetoric. So I'd done a lot of work on that and historiography related to contemporary rhetorical scholarship. And currently I'm working on a project on the German philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, and rhetorical anthropology in relation to reason and contemporary politics.

José: Those are *fascinating... big* topics. How did Erik find his way into this research?

Collin: I wanted to know the same thing. So let's listen to his story from the beginning.

Erik: For me, my interest in rhetoric was kind of like an existential interest: How do we humans function? How do we construct our worlds? Who are we in this world? And also an interest in politics. But my thesis and what I worked with as a Ph.D. student was very much to grapple with the basic questions: "What does it mean to be a human being?" Something like that. So that's why my project ended up being about the epistemology of rhetoric. I wanted to work with argumentation and argumentation theory, but beyond the limited versions of it... related to logic and stuff like that. But as projects often do, it took a different turn than I had expected. So I kind of stuck with the epistemological questions. Because my presuppositions about how these dichotomies between true knowledge and false knowledge runs. Something like that. They were not as simple as I thought. So that's what I'd done a lot of work on .

José: *That* is some compelling research is going to make a great book.

Collin: Actually, in Sweden, dissertations are *printed* as books.

José: So it's already out? What's the title?

Erik: So it's called *The Epistemology of Rhetoric: Plato, Doxa and Post-Truth*. So what I'd done... I worked a lot with the concept of *doxa*, and trying to figure out what can *doxa* be and what have different scholars done with the concept of *doxa*. And the relationship to post-truth, which came kind of late in the project, but was an important piece of the puzzle for me. It's that rhetorical scholarship, to a large extent, has been based on what could be called like "postmodern intellectual paradigm." And now we're in a situation where post-modernism is becoming more and more criticized. And we have people like Trump... y'know, throwing away truths. And then we have people being really like, "Okay oh so we can't just dismiss truth? So let's take the truth back." So my work is to not dismiss truth, and not just take it back, but it's in the middle area. so Okay so we don't have the truth, but you can't just dismiss everything. So that's the epistemology of rhetoric: "How can we argue for knowledge in that gray area?" And my particular work is focused on, if we look at Plato: Can we find other versions of Plato than the traditionally repeated version of him as the founder of the conflict between *doxa* and the *episteme*, and criticizing *doxa* and having true knowledge on a pedestal.

José: Oh, he must be talking about the *Gorgias*, right?

Collin: That's right! Here's his take on it:

Erik: One of my results is that the often repeated sentence in like handbooks and encyclopedias is that rhetoric was born in Plato's *Gorgias* in a conflict between *doxa* and the *episteme*. And if you go to that text and you look at the Greek texts, you cannot find this concepts in opposition to each other. And then I try to look at a lot of other texts and see, "Okay, so what kind of dichotomies are there? And what kind of relationships does he form in these texts?" And it turns out that it's a lot more complex and but also interesting. But the text that I work more mostly with in a more productive fashion is *The Republic*. And I'm building on the work of James Kastely who's done a reading of *The Republic* where he argues that it's pedagogical theater where he exemplifies a sort of ideal rhetoric that is sort of epistemological in a way. And now I'm using my words to describe his work. So I'm building on Kastely and I'm looking at *The Republic* and what do the characters in *The Republic* do?

Collin: At this point, José, I stopped Erik and asked him, "Don't some people find it difficult to build rhetorical theory on someone like Plato?"

José: What? As opposed to someone like Isocrates?

Collin: Actually. Yeah.

Erik: It's also difficult to build a theory on Isocrates, who's the famous teacher of rhetoric. But he's not a theoretician in that way. But how do people construct a rhetorical theory of Isocrates? They look at his practice and they like draw the theory from his practice. And if you use the same method and look at Plato, you have your rhetorical theory. And also you should of course

not aim for a rhetorical theory à la Aristotle, because maybe that's not what you want. Let me tell you: that's not what you want. [laughter]

Frida: Well can I just jump in? Because when I read your book, it was a while ago now, but one of the things that I thought was interesting was the alternative dichotomies that you found. Because I mean, I think we've all been taught this idea of like: Okay, you have *doxa*, opinion, and then truth, *episteme*, placed on two opposing sides. But you had sort of reasoned opinion and unreasoned opinion; you had public opinion and private opinion. I mean, there are all these different dichotomies in Plato's texts. As we all do: we construct dichotomies when we speak and write. Perhaps without intending to, but we do. And one of the interesting results that I had not thought about was perhaps the problem with rhetoric was that rhetoric was public and not private that make Plato into a completely different person.

Erik: Thank you. Yeah, so that's right. You have positive uses of *doxa* in Plato's dialogues where it is connected to *episteme*. So *doxa* is something where you begin with and then you go to *episteme*, and it's a positive process, but that's always the individual *doxa*. You and me: *I* can have a *doxa* then *you* can have a *doxa* and we can have the dialogue and reach the *episteme*. Or we can have like some kind of insight and reach *episteme*. But as soon as the public *doxa* then it it's dismissed. So that's one of my arguments that the actual conflict is rather being the public and the private, and not *doxa* and truth or something like that.

José: So is his work primarily theoretical? Or is he also looking into practical applications?

Collin: Actually, his research has important political stakes for our contemporary moment.

Erik: I'm very much into the epistemological questions in this work, but I'm also interested in in politics. So one of my arguments is that if you want to bring *doxa* and rhetoric back as forces of reason, we cannot do it by focusing on individual *doxa* of this scholar or something like that because that's not to oppose the Platonic view because that was already his view. So we must look at the public *doxa* and how can public *doxa* function in a way that is reasonable.

So that's kind of like the challenge that I'm also addressing some in my in my work. Drafting how we can think about some kind of process of reasoning that works both to deconstruct but also to construct new knowledge.

Collin: And that, in a nutshell, is Erik's Research into truth and knowledge.

José: Does that mean it's {beat} *time* {beat} for Frida?

Collin: Yes, but before we get to Frida's research about time, let's begin with her foundational interest in rhetoric.

Frida: [What] made me interested in rhetoric was a concern with politics—and more specifically, I guess, with justice, and global justice. I was thinking I should study political science, but then I thought, Oh, *I'll do one year of literature before that just to get more knowledgeable in general*. And then, because the rhetoric field here at Uppsala is part of the literature department, I came into contact with rhetoric. And I was like, “Oh, great: this is perfect! So I can combine my interests in texts and language—which is very sort of literature. That's where I could develop

these types of interests and politics. Great. Wonderful. And so that was sort of the synthesis of those two. But yeah so... in a very early project, I decided to look into resistance movements and civil rights movements in Sweden—specifically about the Sámi resistance to colonization. The Sámi is a minority. It's an indigenous group in north of Scandinavia and Russia—Western Russia. And they had a civil rights movement in the early 20th century. And I wanted to look at their rhetoric: How did they make their case? What was the Swedish press and their response to this movement? It was a bit of a controversial issue at the time. And what I came to see very quickly was that these people—these protesters—we're not considered as such. They were not recognized as political subjects. They would always just be dismissed as romantic like... I mean the image of the authentic India. They would just like have this notion of what a Sámi identity looked like, and what it represented. And what it represented to the Swedish press was something ahistorical—something beyond time; something that did not develop; something that did not change; something that did not have a place in the modern Swedish states that was developing markets into resource extraction in the North. So it's mainly mining and the forest industry was coming in to the North and encountering these group. And in that encounter, they could not be recognized as political subject because they were temporal Others. I mean, they were placed in another time. So that got me interested in temporality as a feature of rhetoric. Like, as a powerful tool to be used to exercise power. To recognize some is political subjects and some is not. So yeah, that's sort of where went into the project that resulted in my Ph.D. thesis. And then I started reading Arendt—Hannah Arendt—and she was interesting because she had all of these descriptions of political situations—political cultures, political conditions—where she would explicitly name the temporal logics undergirding these situations. So she doesn't present like a comprehensive theory of temporality in rhetoric or in politics, but she does use various situations or example or historical periods or political thinkers, and then she works out the temporal logic and undergirding their argument, or that political situation.

José: That's brilliant! I imagine you're going to tell me this, too, is a book.

Collin: It is indeed! And I'll let Frida explain the title to us.

Frida: It's called *Speaking in Other Times: Hannah Arendt and the Temporality of Politics*. So Arendt has this notion of political speech and political action. Which in a very interesting way, aligns with a lot of like a rhetorical theories of performativity from Austin to Kenneth Burke to Butler. Where, when you name an event or say something, you also produce that event. And that is, for her, speech. An action is for her something that springs out of speech. It's connected to speech. It cannot... there's no action for Arendt that is not also speech. And that creates something new. Action is the human capacity to do—to begin—something new *or* to create permanence. Like to continue as we have before. Both of those are performative for Arendt, even though she doesn't quite use that word. But yeah, I wanted to have 'speaking' in there just to sort of hint at that sort of performative—that if you read Arendt, you will get a performative theory that centers political speech us as one of the key elements of her thinking, which I think is a good thing for a rhetorician to consider. And when we expand our cannon—when we think of alternative ways of approaching it an alternative thinkers and philosophers who can contribute to our understanding of politics and political speech—she is one very valid alternative, I would say.

She's right there, but she's not included in the rhetorical of canon to any extent I would say. There are very, very few articles and books addressing her as a person who can she can contribute to rhetorical theory. So that's one side: I wanted to highlight the sort of rhetorical aspects of Arendt. But then "other times"... I guess what I am trying to say with that title is that: in politics, perhaps if you have an imaginary of like, "Okay, so the future is going to be better." It's a sort of progressive narrative where we will educate our young. The market will grow. We will have hope. All of these things in a narrative like that—like in a progressive narrative or in a progressive rhetoric—there will always be like other elements of, like... there are other times—other temporalities—that sort of sneak their way into that rhetorical discourse. There's never simply one temporarily that is expressed.

Collin: That's a lot of complex stuff, José. Would it be helpful to hear an example?

José: You bet it would!

Frida: Okay, so I'll take a Swedish example—just because we're here. So we have the anti-immigration, neo-fascist, racist party that's called the Sweden Democrats. And they're in the government these days I think they have like...

Erik: They're in the parliament, not in the government.

Frida: They're in the parliament. They have like 14 percent... 18? I don't know, something like that and their slogan is "Safety and Tradition." Which is just three words. And within that, they managed to... I would say "Safety" sort of connotes a future that is unsafe, but where they can provide a future that is safe. And tradition is sort of backward-looking of course. That like, we want to preserve tradition. But these two words become aligned: you cannot understand the one without the other. That it's the tradition that is the solution to the future. So even like when you have a very—in that case a very conservative or nostalgic rhetoric, there's always a little bit of future in there, and always a little bit of the past in there.

Collin: So our temporalities are often working against or with each other? Or...

Frida: Actually, that's a good question. They can work both against and with each other. And can be undercurrents of one temporality in another temporality. There can be other temporalities that are not recognized as part of the feature of a particular temporal rhetoric, but nonetheless, they are there. But nonetheless, they are there. So yeah... there's a bunch of varieties.

Erik: Can I cut in? 'Cause I noticed that when you talk about something, you say, "Okay, this is one way to look at this temporality. But there's also this way, and this way..." and for me—I guess as a reader of your work—that's one of the most inspiring things. Because one of your arguments is, "Okay, we can go to Hannah Arendt to find all these temporalities." But what you do is to take them all and put them together, and then you put them to work. And as a reader of your work, I'm drowned in all these temporalities and all these aspects of temporalities. Which is the strength, because then I'm feeling like I'm trained in thinking in all these varieties of temporalities. So it's kind of like, sometimes you read research and you're like, "Okay, that's interesting." And then you go on. But when you read this, you're drowned in all these temporalities, and then you go on, and then you can—... It's like in *The Matrix*, you know?

When you see the code. So you look around and you see all these political temporalities everywhere and they're intersecting in different ways. [laughter]

José: Wow, Keanu is in everything these days.

Collin: He certainly gets around, doesn't he? But really, after that conversation, I'm beginning to see rhetorical temporalities everywhere now!

José: So Collin, something that's not yet clear to me is: How did they end up choosing Plato and Arendt to focus their research on?

Collin: Actually, they have a great way of describing how they chose which theorists to work with.

Erik: We talked about this at other times, how we both are like, really passionate about the globalization of rhetoric and about building connections with the scholars in... not in the US and not in, like, Europe, but our own scholarship is like focused on....

Frida: Two German philosophers.

Erik: Two German philosophers and Plato. It's not completely fair, but still... I think it's also... People, of course, are allowed to do their own research in their own way. But we are both like engaged in this process of not using these giants as textbooks for the present. But as a material that we can erode and then build something from, rather than saying that we should absolutely go to Germans. I think that process is the most interesting thing: that we take something from someplace and then build something with it.

Frida: Yeah. Yeah, I agree. And there's... I mean, for me it was so very much of a pragmatic decision to turn to that specific tradition. Because, it seems to me... I mean, we talked about that and... Me and Eric have also done a publication on sort of the growth of rhetoric and rhetorical research in Sweden, and we sort of... I mean, it came partly from a conflict where rhetoric is posed as a sort of... it's... I guess it's a at tension between like rhetoric as a pedagogical tool to... end a very short instrumental view of rhetoric as a sort of equipment that you can teach your students. And rhetoric as a sort of theory of knowledge—a way of approaching the world. And depending on sort of which side you take in this—and hopefully nobody takes sides anymore... {laughing} But traditionally, it has been sort of like a way of turning to continental philosophy if you wanted to go that way. Or you turn to other more pragmatic texts. If you want to go down a sort of mor instrumental view of rhetoric. And what I wanted to do and I think what you also wanted to do in your work was to... Well, there's a bridge: I mean, I can instrumentalize Arendt. I would love to! I mean, that's what I try to do. I try to make her very concrete. Like, okay she says this and this and this. And this is a persuasive, and this is not. In any way, that's perhaps not fair. But it's a way of introducing—to make Continental philosophy more pragmatic. But it's also a way I tried to include a very sort of rhetorical criticism that's very down-to-earth and oriented towards like proper rhetorical practices. And read them with her as a way of like showing where these two sides converge. And that's also partly what we did in our publication, right? Where we tried to like... discuss how that developed in the Swedish context.

Erik: Yeah, yeah and that's really interesting. 'Cause if you look at Scandinavia, you could talk about Scandinavian field of rhetorical studies. There is a conference that re-occurs, and a journal and stuff like that. But I would say that Uppsala University, within that context, is focused on... we're particularly strong in historical research in rhetoric, and in theoretically or philosophically grappling with rhetoric. Also other stuff, of course, but if you compare it to the other universities that would also do rhetoric. But from our point at least, there is absolutely no conflict with—between—those ways of looking at rhetoric, because I think you need both: the really practical (looking at speeches, looking at individual uses of symbols) and also this reflection. And that's one reason why I have recently turned to the philosophy of symbolic forms by Ernst Cassirer, another German-born, Jewish philosopher who had to flee during the Second World War. Because his philosophy of symbolic forms is really based on empirical research about how people use symbols. And then he read all that research, and then he builds a philosophy based on that. So that's kind of like how I envision the future philosophy of rhetoric: it's like in close collaboration with all scholars who do really focused empirical research. But that should be used as a basis for the philosophy of rhetoric: to work in collaboration; to study how people speak, and to reflect on that particular speech, but also to reflect on a lot of speeches.

José: So, the future of rhetoric, according to Erik, is a mixture of empirical work with a more classic theoretical thought.

Collin: Yeah, in fact they've co-edited a collection about the future of rhetoric, specifically in the Swedish context.

Frida: Okay, so it's called *Förledd och förtjus*.

Erik: Yeah, you had a beautiful translation of it.

Frida: Yeah. Did we end up with *Deceived and Delighted*?

Erik: Yeah.

Frida: Yeah, so we tried to capture the way that rhetoric has been conceived as an art of deception, and that we have all—like all the younger scholars or rhetoric—have been deceived into thinking that rhetoric is the best and most foremost subject to study, but also delighted that we have been deceived that way. That it is a very charming discipline. I actually read somewhere—a fragment—that said something along the lines of rhetoric is the daughter of Aphrodite, because it's the art of like seduction—that is a very passionate art. I don't know where I got that from, but don't quote me, but nonetheless I think there's an element rhetoric also moving the passions—being sort of formative on a deeper level. And that's what we wanted to catch with the title.

Erik: Yeah, and the starting point of the anthology was that we noticed that rhetoric in Scandinavia, or particularly in Sweden, seemed to be moving into a new phase. Where we had a lot of Ph.D. students who were finished, or were about to get finished, who had their first and second degree also in rhetoric. Because the senior scholars who we all admire a lot. But they came from different fields, so that is also really fruitful. But it's also different when rhetoric is

your core identity from the beginning. So we wanted to put some of these scholars together and just discuss, “So what is rhetoric for us? And what happens now?”

Frida: Yeah, with a background like that, “How do you conceive of rhetoric?” They sort of had that sort of interdisciplinary teaching or background. With all the teachers that we had, had interdisciplinary backgrounds. But then nonetheless, all of that sort of being framed within the umbrella term, rhetoric, and then what that did. And it was one of the things where we tried to talk about how to merge different traditions and how to borrow a productively from each other, and from these various strands of research. I mean it's always a bit dangerous to perhaps characterize other institutions, but rhetoric is posed in either in and the language departments—like in the part of the Nordic language, like in media and communication. Or for us it's literature but with close ties to philosophy.

Erik: And we also have scholars who are from like ancient Greek or from Latin within the Scandinavian field of rhetorical studies.

Frida: Right, right. And we also have more sort of empirically oriented—almost political science or sociology—oriented people as well...to grapple with that diversity in them in terms of different traditions.

Erik: But I think one of the things that we found in this process that was fruitful for us, was that we had separate articles, and then we had a discussion that we did on the web fora. And then we edited it and put it in a book where we discuss what rhetoric is for us, and stuff like that: pedagogical issues. And a fruitful way that we found to talk about rhetoric was as a collection of nodes. So it's not... rhetoric doesn't have a core. It's not like, Aristotle, that's the core. But Aristotle's rhetoric, or classical Greek rhetoric, could be one node that *could be* the reason for a scholar to connect to rhetoric. But for another scholars it could be something like political speeches in the limited sense—because that's really rhetorical. For another, it could a continental or philosophical reflection on rhetoric.

Frida: Or a rhetorical concept even, that sparks your interest.

Erik: Yeah, like *ethos*, or whatever.

Frida: Yeah, for me it was power more than anything else that sparked my interest in rhetoric.

Erik: Yeah, so rather than selecting a core: that this is what you need to do if you want to be a core rhetorician. Then just talk about different nodes that constitutes rhetoric as a network rather than something else.

Frida: Yeah, as a web of relationships between different fields.

Erik: And that's something that maybe we could like... I think it's also related to this podcast and the idea of like a global field of rhetorical studies/ It's impossible to find a core in something like that, but maybe we could talk about—or find, in the process of discussing with different scholars—various nodes that attract attention.

Collin: And amplify the connections between those nodes. Yeah. That's terrific. I like that. That is a great metaphor—a great way of thinking with and doing rhetoric—especially with this podcast.

{Outro music plays in the background}

José: Wait, so no advice about what to do in Uppsala?

Collin: Well, it's a double episode, remember? So you'll have to wait until the end of the next one.

José: You know I'll be there.

Collin: I'll see you there.

José: This has been *Global Rhetorics*. I'm José Quintero.

Collin: And I'm Collin Bjork. Thanks for listening!

{music continues}

Collin: If you like what you heard today, tell your rhetoric friends. You can also find more information about our podcast on our website, [www.globalrhetorics.com](http://www.globalrhetorics.com). If you're on social media, you can follow us on Twitter @GlobalRhet. That's @-g-l-o-b-a-l-r-h-e-t. And we encourage you to share a link to this episode on your favorite rhetoric Facebook page. A transcription of this episode was done by Jason Michálek and is available on our website.

Thanks to Frida and Erik for making the time for this interview. And stay tuned for the next episode, which discusses their work with the International Rhetoric Workshop, and a televised rhetoric gameshow.

{music continues}

Collin: And a big shoutout to the Global Rhetorics production team!

Anneli: Anneli Bowie at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa.

Collin: Collin Bjork at Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Jelte: Jelte Olthof at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

Beck: Beck Wise at the University of Queensland, Mianjin Brisbane, Australia.

Erik: Erik Bengtson, Uppsala University Sweden.

Joanna: Joanna Chromik at Indiana University in the United States.

Jason: Jason Michálek at Indiana University Bloomington.

Rebecca: Rebecca Ottman, Indiana University Bloomington.

José: And José Quintero at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. Our theme song is by my band, *1815*. {whispers} Check us out!