Living Culture: The Trust Society

This is an English translation of the Danish text about trust on the Danish UNESCO list: https://levendekultur.kb.dk/index.php?title=Tillidssamfundet

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In the *Trust Society*, people trust that others are trustworthy and willing to cooperate. Denmark is one of the countries in the world where trust in society and in the state is most widespread. Although trust is regularly challenged, it can be understood as Denmark's invisible resource, providing social cohesion while simultaneously enhancing competitiveness.

How it is practiced today

"Getting to Denmark" has in recent years become a metaphor for the goal of achieving well-functioning and non-corrupt states with high levels of trust. Contemporary studies show that Denmark – followed by the other Nordic countries – has the highest level of trust in the world.

This unique reservoir of trust functions as an invisible resource that lubricates the social and economic gears of society. In the Trust Society, people fundamentally trust that most other people, as well as public authorities, are trustworthy and cooperative. The system works remarkably well and generates substantial social and economic benefits, such as high life satisfaction, equality, and economic efficiency.

Trust can be defined as an assessment of the risk of being cheated – the higher the trust, the lower the level of cheating. In Denmark, many agreements are still concluded with a handshake because "a word is a word." Resources otherwise spent on control and monitoring are saved, making trust a genuine competitive advantage.

In the welfare state, citizens trust that everyone who is able contributes to the common good, while public authorities deliver services in return. The system functions as a collective insurance arrangement in which the "fortunate" help the "less fortunate." Citizens contribute according to their abilities and receive according to their needs. When citizens feel that they receive value for their taxes, trust is further strengthened.

In everyday life, trust is visible everywhere: parents leave baby strollers outside cafés, children cycle to school alone, and goods are left freely available in roadside stalls and markets. The famous case from New York in 1997, where a Danish mother was arrested for leaving her baby stroller outside a restaurant, illustrates how culturally embedded trust is – something entirely natural in Denmark, but incomprehensible in many other places.

Foreign visitors are likewise surprised by Danish roadside stalls. The seller trusts that the customer will pay and can therefore spend time on other activities rather than guarding the stall all day. It is a win–win situation for both parties.

At the same time, trust can be a double-edged sword. If too many people cheat or free ride, the system breaks down. Cynical exploitation of the welfare system, tax regulations, or the financial sector reminds us that blind trust must be avoided.

Most Danes can be described as hard-riders: they do not cheat, but instead contribute and cooperate, thereby sustaining trust in society. Yet there are also easy-riders – individuals who deliberately seek advantages without contributing themselves. For the system to function, mechanisms are needed whereby hard-riders take on the additional role of becoming tough-riders who are willing to intervene and uphold shared rules.

If, for example, an easy-rider jumps the queue, a hard-rider must step in as a tough-rider and remind the person where the queue begins. Otherwise, cheating may quickly become a successful strategy, thereby undermining trust. This tough-rider dynamic is crucial for preserving trust and ensuring that hard-riders continue to serve as positive role models in the Trust Society.

History and background

Why does Denmark have the highest level of trust in the world? Many refer to this as a "Nobel Prize question." If we can identify the formula behind Danish trust culture, it may not only benefit Denmark itself but also inspire other countries seeking to strengthen trust within their societies.

Trust in Denmark has deep historical roots. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, large popular movements emerged during what may be called the "association era": the cooperative movement, folk high schools, consumer cooperatives, trade unions, and voluntary associations. These physical meeting places became breeding grounds for cooperation and community. Those who kept their promises and contributed were praised and recognized, while those who violated shared rules were met with social sanctions.

In this way, trust was built and maintained as a common resource – a form of both positive and negative social control in which some hard-riders assumed the role of tough-riders by rewarding cooperation and punishing cheating. If, for example, someone forgot to reimburse another club member for a pair of football boots, they would quickly be reminded.

The Danish historian Palle Lauring once remarked that "Denmark is a cooperative store." By this he meant that the country is built on cooperation, shared decision-making, and mutual trust. Just as in a cooperative society, the community functions only when everyone contributes and trusts that rules and agreements will be respected. Participation in cooperative dairies or consumer cooperatives depended on members paying their share and refraining

from cheating. At the same time, the state evolved into an institution perceived as fair and relatively free of corruption. The combination of strong institutions and a vibrant civil society made trust a distinctive cultural feature.

The Trust Society can therefore be understood as rooted in cultural norms shaped over many generations. Culture is, as the saying goes, "sticky" – people stand where their grandparents once stood. For example, Scandinavian immigrants in the United States exhibit significantly higher levels of trust than the American average.

Many of these basic practices continue today. Danes trust that supermarket queues are respected, that business can be concluded with a handshake, and that children can safely play in the homes of others. This everyday practice of trust is a legacy from small local communities where "a word is a word" was a prerequisite for cooperation.

At the same time, both the practice and purpose of trust have changed. In the past, trust was based primarily on personal relationships in villages and associations. Today, trust operates on a much larger scale involving strangers and public institutions – we shop online, interact with public authorities through digital systems, and entrust banks and government agencies with large parts of our lives.

Transmission and preservation

Trust is not self-sustaining but a living cultural heritage that must continuously be renewed and passed on. Today this occurs in several ways.

First, through education, where children and young people learn the value of cooperation, responsibility, and keeping one's word. Danish public schools emphasize group work, project-based learning, and student councils, where pupils practice trusting one another and collective decision-making. Folk high schools – a uniquely Danish institution – continue this tradition through civic education, communal singing, and dialogue based on respect and openness.

Second, voluntary associations play a central role. Denmark has one of the world's strongest civil societies, where hundreds of thousands of people engage voluntarily in sports clubs, scout organizations, choirs, and local boards. A popular saying states: "If two Danes meet, they shake hands – if three Danes meet, they form an association!" Here people learn that communities function only when everyone contributes, whereas cheating and easy-riding undermine the collective. Trust thus becomes a practical experience carried throughout life.

Third, trust is transmitted through traditions and recurring public events in which it is both celebrated and practiced. Large civic gatherings such as public democracy festivals, music festivals, and sporting events can function only because thousands of participants and volunteers demonstrate mutual trust.

Historically, trust was likely transmitted in similar ways. Already during the Viking Age, social control and cooperation played decisive roles in oral culture. In trading towns such as Hedeby, agreements were confirmed with a handshake ("handsal" in Old Norse), and reputation was of utmost importance. Those who cheated – easy-riders – risked social exclusion and a damaged reputation, whereas honor was granted to those who cooperated and

kept their word. This mechanism may have laid the foundation for the social cohesion that still characterizes the Danish Trust Society today.

Over time, trust has been transmitted through institutions, traditions, and social norms – from the Vikings to the welfare state. In many respects, the handshake of Viking trading settlements survives in modern society, where trust continues to function as a fundamental cornerstone.

At the same time, there are forces that may undermine trust. Trust can be weakened by fraud, abuse of power, misinformation, corruption, crime, or political failures. Excessive control may also damage trust because it signals suspicion and risks moving society from a Trust Society toward a Control Society characterized by New Public Management, surveillance, and increasing demands for documentation.

New technology also plays a role. Artificial intelligence should be used carefully – not to replace human interaction, but to support meeting places and strengthen social relations. The future therefore requires continued investment in physical meeting places where trust can still be transmitted.

Future developments

The Trust Society is not static but evolves over time. From the cooperative movements of the nineteenth century to today's digital platforms, trust has developed from a local survival mechanism into a national and global competitive advantage. What once held small communities together now fuels Denmark's welfare and economy.

However, we cannot assume that the Trust Society will continue indefinitely. Several developments may threaten Danish trust.

For example, the growth of the control society and increasing documentation requirements represent a challenge. Trust and control exist in an inverse relationship: the more people are controlled, the less trust is expressed. One hundred percent control corresponds to zero percent trust. A control society risks treating citizens as if they were easy-riders – but why devote extensive resources to controlling hard-riders who are already trustworthy? Such overcontrol may appear meaningless and can undermine both core tasks and job satisfaction.

When nurses, teachers, and other professionals are constantly required to document their activities, their "warm hands" become cold. The future of Danish trust culture therefore depends on actively choosing the "trust button" rather than the "control button." Schools, folk high schools, and civil society also play a key role in strengthening children's and young people's understanding of cooperation and digital literacy so they can navigate a world increasingly shaped by fake news and misinformation.

Practitioners and those who know it well

The Trust Society and its living culture are not confined to particular groups, but constitute a shared daily practice in Denmark in which virtually all citizens participate. Even the best-designed welfare system functions only because most people choose every day to act honestly and take responsibility. These individuals are society's hard-riders – the people who

make the system work not because they are controlled, but because they feel a personal responsibility toward the community.

They are found everywhere: in the nurse who works extra hours under difficult conditions; in the teacher who spends free time supporting students; and in the volunteer football coach who helps maintain local communities for children and young people. They are also found in the farmer who takes pride in work and pays taxes honestly; in the priest who is always available for the congregation; and in the pensioner who visits lonely elderly people or volunteers in local associations.

These people constitute the backbone of the Trust Society. They demonstrate that responsibility and solidarity are not merely abstract values, but living practices. It is precisely this everyday morality – the willingness to do the right thing even when nobody is watching – that enables Denmark and the other Nordic countries to function effectively with relatively little control.

Trust is therefore not an abstract ideal, but a concrete interaction between citizens who believe in one another and institutions that prove worthy of trust. This invisible trust-based cooperation enables society's complex machinery to function smoothly – from schools and hospitals to libraries, kindergartens, and nursing homes.

The Trust Society represents a distinctive model from which other countries may draw inspiration, just as Denmark itself can learn from others in many respects. In this particular area, however, Denmark possesses a comparative advantage that can be exported. As one director of a machinery factory in Western Jutland expressed it: "This is a machinery factory – not a paper factory!" Excessive control suppresses motivation, innovation, and productivity. Trust is good business – control is expensive.

Whereas the twentieth century gave us Lenin's famous phrase, "Trust is good, but control is better," the twenty-first century calls for a reformulation: "Control is good, but trust is cheaper." In a world where trust is increasingly under pressure, Danish experience demonstrates that the Trust Society generates both social cohesion and economic competitiveness.

PHOTOS

1. **Roadside stall, 2025.** The roadside stall is based on self-service and trust in strangers who happen to pass by. Photo: Gert Tinggaard Svendsen.

2. **Rødding Folk High School, 1855.** Rødding – the first folk high school – an example of a breeding ground for trust. Painting/graphic: Ferdinand Richardt (1819–1895). Image Collection, The Royal Danish Library. The material is in the public domain.

3. **Trust.** We trust that we help one another. Drawing: Poul Holck (1939–2002). Article illustration from *Sygeplejersken* (“The Nurse”). Collection of the Museum of Danish Editorial Cartoon Art / The Royal Danish Library. The material is protected by copyright.

4. **Parents trust that others will not steal the child and/or the baby stroller left outside.** Photo: Private collection.

5. **Horse traders, 1915–1954.** A handshake is a low-cost way of trading horses, where a word is a word. Photo: Sven Türck (1897–1954). Image Collection, The Royal Danish Library. The material is in the public domain.

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