



Marie-Theres Fojuth

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Ines Prodöhl

Førsteamanuensis i historie, Universitetet i Bergen

Ph.D., 2008

Ines.prodoehl@uib.no

From early on, railways have in many respects been inspiring projects. First as technological achievements and later as locomotives of globalization, railways have affected entire societies, from engineers to boilermen, businessmen to politicians, artists to writers, children to grandparents. They still keep us busy, as Marie-Theres Fojuth shows in a study of Norwegian railways and their «sovereignty over land and snow» (from the title) from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

Fojuth has written a history about the changing Norwegian geography by analyzing parliamentary disputes and discussions about various major railway construction projects. In her approach the term *geography* includes images and visions connected to a given landscape, and she understands geography as a category within the history of knowledge besides its well-established meaning as a scientific discipline. Her interest lies in how politicians, officials, engineers, geologists and businessmen became geographers in order to establish, shape, and change the image of Norway and its very nature by constructing railways throughout the country (p. 4). For both, the description of the earth and the cultural meaning attached to it, she uses the term *geography*.

Many scholars have written about the numerous large and small Norwegian railway projects, and Fojuth develops an elaborate scholarly exchange with the work upon which she relies. Her approach differs from previous studies insofar as she looks first and foremost at the Norwegian debates surrounding the planning of railway projects. Approaching the topic from methods of discourse analysis, she traces how a certain space was described and imagined by the various actors involved in planning and building the lines. She looks mainly at sources related to the possibility of opening Norway through nationwide railways, and her main source material stems from the published hearings of the Norwegian parliament (*Storthings Forhandlinger*). These hearings include all material available to the parliament from the first idea of planning a nationwide railway to the parliament's decision to realize

it. The first project began in 1845 and concerned what became known as the *Hovedbane* or *Eidsvoldsbane*, Norway's oldest railway line connecting Kristiania and Mjøsa, the country's largest lake, and thus two important hubs for economy and trade. 1909 marks the end of her study since parliamentary decisions regarding all significant railway-tracks were made by then, even though the tracks were partly completed at a later point (p. 43). Fojuth is less interested in the actual construction and later running of the railways and more in how the given geography was seen and discussed during the process of planning and building a railway. Her focus lies in the images various actors involved in the process developed of a certain space, and simultaneously shaped. While she uses contemporary schoolbooks and various scientific magazines and journals to enrich her study and the general understanding of her findings, she excludes newspapers as possible sources. Thus, her study doesn't necessarily reflect upon railways and how they were imagined, disputed and debated by the wider public, but by those concerned with legislation only and hence a somewhat small, male circle of Norwegian society.

The book is structured in three major parts, with each focusing on a significant discourse and possible sub-discourses related to railway geographies. In the first part, Fojuth analyzes debates under the umbrella of overcoming distances, water, and mountains. She explains how and why railways acquired ever-growing importance in a country of well-established waterways and shipbuilders (chapter 2). In chapter 3 she renders a discourse visible, which focuses on railways as means for foreign diplomacy and international recognition. The chapter reflects on how Norwegian railways were regarded as means of connecting Norway to the rest of the world by land, as illustrated by the *Ofofbane* and an envisioned trade connection from Narvik to Russia and its Trans-Siberian railway to Vladivostok, and from there further south to Dalian and eventually Beijing from 1903 (p. 119–123). However, the Storting was always well aware of the potential dangers that might be transported by rail and Fojuth carves out parliamentary debates focusing on security concerns and the role railways played in military considerations.

While the first part presents the Storting's considerations regarding Norwegian railways, the second part goes more into detail with the given topography and questions of how to master its challenges. Chapter 4 looks at how nature was made manageable in the period under consideration and is concerned with engineers as 'masters' of the environment. The discourses Fojuth opens here concern the ideal engineer, his profession and skills; the technocratic process of decision-making; and the recurring narrative of snow as an unpredictable challenge of nature. Chapter 5 focuses on the production and interpretation of knowledge surrounding a given area. Fojuth analyzes how maps, speeches, descriptions, and calculations were first produced and then used. She emphasizes that geographical knowledge was produced not in spite of, but because of political, economic, and individual interests. It was those interests that fostered the gathering of new knowledge (p. 205 onwards).

The third and final part covers the question of reviving certain, rather sparsely populated parts of the country through the railway as being a significant topic in the parliamentary debates. Chapter 6 describes how the railway was imagined as an engine of progress and modernization in more rural areas. Chapter 7 then analyzes how peripheral regions asked to participate in the nation's railway adventures and how their concerns were debated by parliament. A summary completes Fojuth's analyses.

Fojuth's narrative is driven by the various discourses she obtains from her sources and under which she has subsequently organized her writing: overcoming distances, mastering nature, and connecting peripheral areas and their economies with the center. The strength of the book is its systematic structure and the various discourses she opens on the basis of

her findings in the parliamentary debates. However, this strength comes with the disadvantage that the importance of various actors, and changes over time within major discourses, are difficult to grasp. To which degree did a certain discourse change, and why? What were the key moments of change in a discourse? Did a given discourse interfere with other events and processes relevant to the period under consideration? The answers to those and other questions are often hidden within the 430-page book, and are not easily retrieved.

Fojuth's book stems from her dissertation at the University in Berlin (2016) and addresses a German-speaking readership, including those less familiar with Norwegian history. She explains distinctions in both Norwegian society and its political system very well, and the large annex of maps and cartographic material helps readers literally find their way through the Norwegian geography. Thus, her study is pioneering in opening a distinctly Norwegian topic to a wider readership. Her discourse analytical approach might invite scholars to look for comparisons with other European railways and their standing in imagining a nation through railways. On the other hand, Norwegian scholars might feel excluded due to the language barrier. It may therefore be desirable to invite them in by publishing some well-chosen articles in international journals. In every respect, Fojuth's discourse analysis is worthy of being recognized in Norway as well.