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Envisioning a “real utopia” through dystopian lenses

Abstract

The review essay presents a critical perspective on the approach to the public policy debate presented in Daniel Dorling and Annika Koljonen’s book, *Finntopia. What can we learn from the world’s happiest country?* The monograph under scrutiny exemplifies a popular scientific narrative with an openly persuasive message. Grounded in the fascination with the achievements of the Finnish version of the Nordic welfare model, it constructs a simplified vision of the corporatist state as close to the ideal of the socio-economic equilibrium. It also presents the policymaking process as linear, consensual, and pragmatic, and at the same time, driven by the idea of universal equality. Such a vision, although aimed at sparking hope within societies living in neoliberal dystopias, seems problematic in many respects. First, in the way it constructs the image of “capitalism with the human face” and second, in the way it ignores the ongoing changes within it. The review essay is a critical reappraisal of the main lines of argumentation presented in the book and the specificity of the Anglo-Saxon perspective on the “Finnish miracle”.

Keywords: Finland, welfare state, Nordic welfare model, neoliberalism

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1. Introduction

They are the best in the world. They've just joined NATO (Grupa Wirtualna Polska, 2023). Writing this review essay overlapped with the acceleration of Finland's accession to NATO. Although the references to the Winter War were explicitly made by Finnish politicians, including Prime Minister Sanna Marin, the way the story of Finnish resistance against the Soviets in 1939–1940 was amplified in the Polish media seems indicative. The above quotation from one of the biggest Polish news portals gives a taste of the image of the Finnish state and society.

This kind of para-mythological narrative about Finland comes to mind when thinking about *Finntopia*. Published in 2020, it has not sparked much attention within the academic community. It seems understandable, as the book has been targeted at wider audiences rather than specialists. On the other hand, it still deserves a closer inspection as it represents the approach endorsing the “Nordic model” as the closest to equilibrium between the market forces and social solidarity.

Since the seminal monograph by Manuel Castells and Pekka Himanen (Castells & Himanen, 2002), Finland has become a trademark for a knowledge-based society and, more generally, as a living proof of the transformative power of socio-political agency and the ability to use global trends for the common good. The newest iteration of such discourse has been stimulated by the United Nations World Happiness Reports, published since 2012, with Finland being its leader seven times in a row (as of 2024). Thus, *Finntopia* was meant to respond to the question, “What can we learn from the world's happiest country?”. The naive utilitarianist perspective behind this question, as pointed out by Kananen (2022), seems fundamentally problematic, as well as the very notion of *Finntopia*. Also, the construction of “we” deserves a closer look, as the book by Dorling and Koljonen has been aimed at an international audience, mainly from the United Kingdom and the United States. The authors openly substantiated their motivations. The Finnish story was to showcase a working egalitarian state to those living in neoliberal dystopias. The whole argumentation has been built around the policy fields, which seem critical for sharpening this contrast.

Dorling and Koljonen painted a multi-faceted picture comprising statistical data and historical, sociological, and political commentary. The range of topics discussed in *Finntopia* is impressive, and the multitude of data is presented in a clear, accessible, and convincing way. The book is divided into three parts, with the first one comprising a historical introduction to the Finnish welfare state and its specificities. The second part deals with the selected aspects of the public policies. Interestingly, it is organised around the construction of life course and policies regulating its subsequent stages. It recalls the construction of the childcare and education system, higher education and organisation of the working life, and finally, policies central to securing well-being in the old age. In the third part, the authors discuss the future challenges for Finnish society, focusing on political populism, unfavourable demographic trends, and environmental threats. The narrative has been subordinated to the thesis that all the way, the ultimate goal and (mostly achieved) result of reforms has been the creation and sustention of social equilibrium based on equality. I agree that also from the Polish perspective, the “state that works” (Woźniak, 2022) can be a source of inspiration for

many reasons that have been well-substantiated in *Finntopia*. However, the general message of the book seems confusing.

This paper continues the critical discussion initialised by Teppo Eskellinen and Keijo Lakkala (2022) as well as Johannes Kananen (2022), pointing at ambiguities of the “Finntopic” discourses. The core points of doubt are threefold. First, an existing country cannot be seen in utopian terms (Eskellinen & Lakkala 2022), especially when “utopia” is constructed mostly through negation. Second, because it rather uncritically recalls a simplified and mythologised vision of the social processes behind the construction of the current state of affair. And third, because it refrains from acknowledging the signs of – wider than ever – convergence with the neoliberal logic of policy making.

2. Finland as impossible figure. Utopia seen from a dystopian perspective

The authors openly argue that they intended to inspire hope that “anything is possible”; thus, they reach for the concept of utopia as an ultimate triumph of socio-political imagination. But, as Eskellinen and Lakkala (2022) rightly pointed out, the fundamental fallacy of such reasoning follows from the fact that the existing countries cannot embody the new, desired social order, as they are part of the present *topos*. As such, they can only represent the longings for achieving social cohesion within the existing social order. Moreover, although unquestionably, throughout the 20th century Finland has become one of the best places to live, its contemporary history shows that at the end of the day, within the globalised capitalist system the options are limited.

A more specific problem with the utopian narratives follows from the difficulty in picturing the ideal society in detail. In his writing about the possibility of “real utopias”, Erik Olin Wright (2006) argued that Marx’s solution to the problem of specifying the alternative to capitalism turned out unsatisfactory. No comprehensive proposal of institutional arrangements followed elaboration on its normative pillars. This, in turn, favoured an explorative approach to the systemic changes. After many decades of operationalising and testing, the “just” social order proposals are still rooted in negating real capitalism and its temporal and geographic iterations. In Dorling’s and Koljonen’s “Finntopic” narrative, negation seems to play a similar role. While the authors put indicators of the Finnish socio-economic and political performance into the broader context of international statistics, they keep recalling the UK and USA as the most striking examples of capitalist dystopia across the developed world. The United Kingdom is the second most frequently mentioned country in the book. The picture of Finnish paradise is thus at least partially driven by the criticism about specific elements of the socio-economic and political performance in other countries. Although difficult to avoid, such a Manichean perspective may seriously limit the scope of interpretations of the past and presence but also possible and desired futures. So the paradox of *Finntopia* might be that, on the one hand, it frames Finland as an impossible figure – embodying the idea of “capitalism with a human face”, clearly against Marx’s concept of the long-term *impossibility of capitalism* as such. However, on the other hand, it is also a conservative vision of the “endangered species” that must be saved.

Constructing and keeping such an image unavoidably requires compromises when going into details. Especially when the intention is openly persuasive, as (imagined) Finland's mission is to carry the dream about social harmony through the dark times of neoliberal oppression. The Finns must be aware of the importance of their mission to maintain the "happiest" society not only for the sake of their well-being but also for the sake of global hope for a better future. Dorling and Koljonen (2020) urge them that:

Finns must not let the praise their country now receives go to their heads. Like the rest of the world, Finland must confront the climate emergency, manage the needs of an ageing population, and address the rising inequality within parts of its society. It must also grapple with the challenge of integrating immigrants into its society and the apparently concomitant (but surely not inevitable) rise of right-wing populism [...]. As an example of how much a single nation can get right, Finland's work toward ending inequality makes it too important to fail, and hopefully, it is now too far ahead to flounder.

Although the book offers a comprehensive introduction to the historical, political or geographic conditions facilitating the construction of the Finnish welfare state and society, it also reproduces their simplifying, linear, and teleological narratives. The authors seem to take the popular mythology of the "Nordic welfare model" at face value. As constructed by Dorling and Koljonen, *Finntopia* is rooted in the unique approach to policy debates, marked by future orientation, pragmatism, consensus, and depoliticisation of social problems. While all those elements have indeed been identified in the literature as crucial for the unprecedented improvement of both economic performance and the quality of life of the Finnish people, the "Finntopic" narrative reduces the role of social and political struggles as drivers of changes. The quotation below can serve as good examples of such reasoning:

Finland avoided the alternative that often arises when Social Democrats are dominant for a time, introducing a more wishy-washy welfare state that could have been more easily eroded. Instead, the left in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s managed to establish in the national mindset the idea of social investments and from there, the idea of investing in people entered the normal practice of the National Coalition Party, the country's moderate right. In this sense, Finland's practice of investing in universally good schooling, health insurance, and the only genuinely comprehensive safety-net housing system in Europe, were not conceived of as social transfers from rich to poor, but as sound macroeconomic policy. The Finns are, above all, pragmatic (Dorling & Koljonen, 2020).

From the perspective of profoundly and openly divided societies such as British or Polish, fascination with political consensus around future-oriented evidence-based policy, seems understandable. However, the reality behind such pictures is always much more complex. For example, the uniqueness of the state institutions designed to enable evidence-based long-term strategic investments and their role in facilitating the unprecedented advancement in the global world system stays unquestioned (Ojala et

al., 2006; Woźniak, 2021). Nevertheless, at the same time, according to Pauli Kettunen (Kettunen, 2019), the concepts of welfare state and welfare society, or welfare politics, never played a significant future-oriented role as “tools for steering historical movement”. They became key in Finnish national narratives, referring to the achievements of past politics that should be defended and rescued. Moreover, the myth of welfare state as subjected to political consensus has, paradoxically, been also eagerly used to undermine egalitarian and universalistic policies. Similarly, belief in pragmatism as core driver for policy design may lead both to constructing universalistic and egalitarian solutions and endorsing policies favouring flexibility and competition, which I will try to show in the next paragraph.

3. *Not seeing the wood for the trees*

Finally, the development of “Finntopic” discourses requires either ignoring or dismissing the symptoms of neoliberal transformation. As elsewhere in the Nordics, the acculturation of neoliberal ideas in Finland has been linked with criticisms of the old corporatist structures and the endorsement of the narratives of growth and competition. At the same time policy reforms have been framed as pragmatic adaptations to the global economic reality (Ahlqvist & Moisio, 2014). In the context of the Finnish spatial policies, Luukkonen and Sirviö (2019) recalled the notion of “sedimentation” (Jessop, 2010), in which the problematic origins of certain imaginary are forgotten which enables its acculturation as “objective”, “factual” and “rational”².

The authors of *Finntopia* acknowledge many symptoms of such changes in subsequent policy fields, yet refrain from more general interpretations. For example, they recall the story of “casino economy” of 1980s as the main trigger for overheating of the economy and then, deep economic recession, which has been compared to the “Great Depression” of the 1930s. The chapter discussed the introduction and partial reversal of the austerity measures enacted to eradicate the recession. Similarly, it debated the next severe economic downturn in 2008. Looking at the statistical data, the authors concluded that “Finland has weathered numerous economic crises, both in recent years and recent decades. This is not well understood outside of Finland. It is now clear that the ways in which its people have handled these crises have, ultimately, been successful” (Dorling & Koljonen, 2020). Several critical studies have shown that both crises have also become a “foot in the door” for ideational shifts which, so far, have not been reversed despite temporal changes in the ruling coalitions. Annu Kantola and Johannes Kananen (2013) described four elements of this process. In the “latent phase” (the 1980s) competitiveness and efficiency were framed as “technical” ideas for reforming the state, without any serious political debate. In turn, the recession of the early 1990s paved the way for the “creative destruction” phase. Thirdly, the central position that the Ministry of Finance gained during the crisis and reinforced by the subsequent multi-party coalition governments, paved the way to building the new

² As a result of the “sedimentation” some policy imaginaries might get surprisingly close to the openly market-oriented ones, such as Polish (Rek-Woźniak, 2023).

paradigm of budgetary discipline which, as Kananen (2016) put it, facilitated a gradual replacement of “emancipation” with “discipline” as the fundamentals of the welfare project. At least in some policy fields, those ideational shifts can be seen as exemplary cases of ideological convergence with the globally dominant ideas, with the most striking example of the labour market policies, sliding from the welfare to workfare model (Kananen, 2016; Kantola & Kananen, 2013).

The emergence of the local startup culture can serve as another good illustration of how *Finntopia* overlooks some troubling or ambiguous aspects of the phenomena under scrutiny. Sami Moisio and Ugo Rossi conceptualised the Finnish political economy of the post-2008 recession-era as “the startup state”, which they see as an “ideologically intricate neoliberal project [–] that brings together people, firms, technologies, organisations and governmental technologies in the name of economic growth, innovation and national success” (Moisio & Rossi, 2020, p. 3). Subsequently, the analyses by Henri Koskinen (2022) have shown how those ideas shaped the agendas of governments across the 2000s and 2010s. However, the authors of *Finntopia* painted a rather uncritical picture of the startup culture, as proof that “Finland has been able to build a globally competitive economy based on equality and investment in its people” (Dorling & Koljonen, 2020) and means to “spread Finnish innovation globally” (Dorling & Koljonen, 2020). The lack of detailed insight into the actual way startup culture has been domesticated in the Finnish economy and society seems to be problematic. So as the the very assumption that quick absorption of some particular innovation deserves praising as such.

Again, the Authors argue that “even the country’s most fiscally right-wing party, the National Coalition Party, shifted its position in the 1970s towards support for the welfare state and even collective bargaining (Malinen 2008: 6)” (Dorling & Koljonen, 2020). While at the rhetorical level, this might be true, and Finland never experienced the neoliberal revolution in its Anglo-American (or Eastern-European) version, we might argue, after Ilkka Kärriylä (2024), that the existence of an explicitly neoliberal programme is not the best indicator of ideational change. And, that “political parties of all colours have been responsible for the neo-liberalization of Finnish society and particularly for the retrenchment of the welfare state during and after the severe economic recession of the 1990s” (Kärriylä et al., 2023, p. 406). Financial liberalisation, as well as marketisation and privatisation of the public sector, began in the 1980s with conservative support, and the most significant cuts to welfare spending and tax exemptions for the rich took place during and after the economic crisis of the 1990s, with the liberal conservatives in office. However, the authors of *Finntopia* keep treating the political proposals to liberalise specific policy fields as exemptions or incidents. They claim that: “In Finland, market-absolutist thinking – that is, the idea that market forces can solve everything and nothing should ever hinder such forces – is mercifully rare. An exception, however, concerns the continued attempts of the National Coalition Party to increasingly privatize healthcare services” (Dorling & Koljonen, 2020). But the list of such exemptions has been longer and includes various political actors. For example, the reader can learn about the policy changes introduced by the most extensive Juha Sipilä’s government, including cutting on student support grants or the largest reform of the unemployment benefits, adopting rather a radical

version of the “activation model” with the level of support dependent on the algorithmically evaluated efforts of the unemployed. However, those critical remarks are not followed by a more general interpretation.

Another problem is that the authors’ starting position, rooted in the Anglo-American comparative context, made them see the effective lack of far-right think tanks in Finland as an indicator of relatively weak acculturation of the neoliberal ideas in the Finnish political field. However, they overlook the growing power of the private consulting sector and its ambiguous impact on the public administration. As Ylönen and Kuusela (2019) pointed out, the latter does not boil down to the technical issues, such as growing dependency on the external expertise exempted from public accountability or erosion of the tacit knowledge. Equally important is the promotion of instrumental rationality, which, on one hand, supports the idea of evidence-based policy, but on the other, narrows the scope of “debatability” of policy goals, by hiding their deeply political nature. Such an approach may be particularly welcome in a society valuing pragmatism and consensus.

Writing this review essay in the early 2024, I enjoy the advantage of time perspective. The elections of the 2023 brought to power a coalition of liberal-conservative National Coalition Party (Kokoomus) and right-wing populist Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset). Their programmes turned similar respects (see: “Kokoomuksen eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2023”, 2023; “Perussuomalaisen talouspoliittinen ohjelma 2023”, 2023)³, as the Finns Party moved from their initial welfare chauvinist positions towards more individual self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship narratives. Soon after the elections, the new government announced the reforms legitimised by the need to suppress the national debt and stimulate the economy. It has contained a very well-known austerity package: rejection of centralised work accords, limiting of the right to strike and cutting down of the unemployment benefits. In response, the turn of 2023 and 2024 has been marked by a wave of strikes of blue-collar and then also, white-collared workers. While the protest action was growing, the Minister of Economic Affairs Wille Rydman, commented via his social media: “The trade union mafia in Hakaniemi is not interested in keeping jobs in Finland, nor in the competitiveness of our country, nor in economic growth, nor in the interests of the motherland or employees. It is guided solely and exclusively by selfish assertion of one’s own position of power. Fortunately, there is finally a government that will not bow to bullying” (Yle Uutiset, 2023). Such a statement could be easily made by a liberal conservative politician in the UK or the United States.

Summary

Although processes of marketisation and individualisation have been penetrating Finnish society for decades, “the Finnish case” has been omitted in the comprehensive

³ Although the question of immigration seemed the main divergent point with National Coalition Party generally aligning to the ideas of free flow of the labour force, and Finns Party, calling for extremely restrictive immigration policy, in order to form the coalition, the former bowed to the anti-immigration agenda of the latter.

analyses of the neoliberal turn in the Nordics, focusing mostly on Sweden and Denmark. There might be many reasons for this oversight but one of the them could be the need to sustain the hope for the “capitalism with a human face”, proud of the effectiveness of its distributive and redistributing mechanisms, yet still unquestionably grounded in the principles of the constant competition and accumulation. However comforting, such a vision can be also seen as deeply regressive and suppressing social and political imagination (Eskelinen & Lakkala, 2022). Although the advantages of comparative studies are colossal, their usability in envisioning policy changes, has its limitations. Many authors, including Dorling and Koljonen, have pointed at the unique combination of internal and external forces that had facilitated the construction of the Finnish “success story” (however define the success). The problem lies not only in the limited transferability of particular policy solutions but in the idea to look for the inspiration in other societies’ past achievements while overlooking currently ongoing processes. The pragmatic rationale behind such approach is obvious – we need to see “what works and why”. But it also makes us assume that regulated capitalism is still the end of our horizon in a situation where intensification of economic, social, and political tensions encourages imagining more profound interventions in the status quo. Especially since Finland seems to conform to the liberal “business as usual” more that we would like to admit.

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