Valtteri Vähä-Savo

Decoupling spheres of belonging in the Nordic welfare states

Like most of the welfare states in the Western world, the Nordic welfare states were built in the decades following the Second World War. Their “golden age” ranged roughly from the late 1940s to the end of 1970s (Christiansen and Markkola, 2005; Edling, 2019a; Kuisma, 2007). According to the famous typology concerning regimes of welfare capitalism by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990), these countries embody the social democratic welfare model, characterised by universalism, strong interventionist state, equality of the highest standards and de-commodification of social rights. Along the way, the idea of a specific Nordic model guided by a distinct ethos and principles has been important in constructing national identities and in nation branding, with some proponents even considering the model as exceptional and superior to all others (Browning, 2007; Edling, 2019b; Keskinen, 2016; Kuisma, 2007; Petersen, 2005).

It has become more challenging to hold on to the image of exceptional Nordic welfare states since the early 1980s. That can be considered a turning point after which the political discussions concerning Nordic welfare states seem to be more about handling a constant state of crisis than paving the way for a society with all-encompassing equality and full employment (Edling, 2019a; Korpi, 2003). The dream of a gradual progress towards a society of shared wealth and happiness has given way to a steady stream of austerity policies. The crisis and restructuring of welfare states after 1970s has also led to the exclusion of large groups of people from social rights of citizenship (Schierup, Hansen and Castles, 2006, p.1).

The age of crisis for Nordic welfare utopias has coincided with three larger international trends that have been gaining ground since the 1980s. Firstly, neoliberal ideas began to gather wide support among politicians in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1980s with the other Western countries soon following suit (Keskinen, Norocel and Jørgensen, 2016; Simmons, Dobbin and Garrett, 2008). Secondly, the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 saw European political leaders, like a school of fish, resorting to austerity measures in their efforts to fix the situation (Schierup, Ålund and Neergaard, 2017). These were typical cases of policymakers following each other’s moves and domesticating fashionable policy models and catch-words to local contexts resulting in synchronization of national policies (Alasuutari, 2015). Thirdly, the turn of 1980s and 1990s gave rise to a general concern regarding Europe’s “migration crisis” (Schierup et al., 2006). While many have blamed the popular neoliberal trends for the challenges faced by welfare states at this period, the right-wing populists in many countries rather pointed their fingers at the growing number of migrants (Jørgensen and Thomsen, 2016; Schierup et al., 2006, p.21; Schierup et al., 2017). Migration became an increasingly politicized issue throughout Europe and the burgeoning populist parties were happy to fan the flames of discontent. Across Europe racist-populist movements gained a large following, making issues of common identity, citizenship, social solidarity, and political legitimacy topics that every welfare state has to tackle in one way or another (De Koster, Achterberg and Van der Waal, 2013; Keskinen, 2016; Schierup et al., 2006, pp.1-19).

One result of the popularity of the right-wing campaigns was the dual crisis of the welfare state and the nation that persists to this day (Schierup et al., 2006). Questions of belonging and deservingness have become central to debates concerning the future of welfare systems.

Deliberation on welfare provisions is deeply entwined with conceptions of who is a member of the community and is thus considered entitled to benefits and services (Jørgensen and Thomsen, 2016; Keskinen et al., 2016; Reeskens and Van Oorschot, 2012). Welfare chauvinism (Andersen and Bjørklund, 1990) has gained ground in Nordic countries and it has become more acceptable to suggest limiting welfare benefits to only those people regarded part of the nation or who are otherwise seen to have earned the right to welfare services (Jørgensen and Thomsen, 2016; Keskinen et al., 2016). At the same time perceptions of national belonging have become increasingly problematized (Keskinen et al., 2016). This means that definitions of national identity are being renegotiated and debated while the importance of a widely recognized image of “the nation” is carrying more and more weight in legitimating welfare policies.

In the Nordic countries the nation has been traditionally imagined as an ethnically and religiously homogenous community (Christiansen and Markkola, 2005; Edling, 2019b; Keskinen, 2016; Reeskens and Van Oorschot, 2012), which has helped to legitimate the shared burden of high taxes in the spirit of solidarity while pulling together for the “national team”. This image of ethnically homogenous nations can be considered a myth since most of the Nordic countries have had several minority groups, such as the Roma and Jewish people and indigenous communities such as the Sami, living within their borders for a long time (Edling, 2019b; Schierup et al., 2006, p.198). In many cases constructing national identities has involved ignoring the existence of these minorities and other immigrants (Schierup et al., 2006, p.39). However, it has become increasingly difficult to uphold an image of an ethnically unified nation and justify policies on that basis since the 1990s, due to the increasing number of migrants and refugees moving to the Nordic countries from different parts of the world at the turn of the millennium (Reeskens and Van Oorschot, 2012; Schierup et al., 2006, p.23).

This chapter approaches the three major spheres of belonging within a nation-state from the viewpoint of epistemic governance. It looks at how these spheres are constructed and how they differ from the viewpoint of belonging. It also discusses how these spheres have become increasingly decoupled in the Nordic countries due to the movement of people across national borders. While the decoupling between these spheres can be seen as a major cause behind the political legitimization crisis of universalist welfare states, this chapter argues that it is analytically important to hold on to the distinction between all of these spheres in order to understand the complex aspects of belonging in a modern nation-state. It is especially important that studies concerning belonging take into account population as one way of grouping people that can also be tied to people’s experiences of identity and belonging, instead of just focusing on the relationship between citizenship and the nation. The main challenge facing the Nordic countries is whether it is possible to reimagine new ways of belonging beyond old ideas of citizenship-nation-population coupling, and whether people can find meaningful ways to enact citizenship in the spaces left for individuals.

Epistemic governance and the question of belonging

As Benedict Anderson (1991) famously noted, nations are imagined communities as the members are unlikely to know or meet most of their fellow members and yet they sign up to the idea of national unity. If one considers communities from the viewpoint of belonging and shared identity, every community – no matter how big or small – is to some extent imagined (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Whether one thinks of families, fan clubs, or nations, belonging is

based both on conceptions of shared identities and interests that are never self-evident. Sense of belonging involves building conceptual borders that distinguish “us” from “them”. Following Nira Yuval-Davis, this battlefield of constructing competing categorizations of people, persuading actors to embrace certain identities, and mobilizing individuals based on these conceptions can be called politics of belonging.

When studying the struggle over defining communities and identities, one should consider the politics of belonging as the field of study and analytics of epistemic governance as the study of the moves and tactics utilized on that field. Epistemic governance (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2014; 2016) refers to governing people’s understanding and behaviour by influencing their perceptions of the world. Actors’ conceptions and desires are key components of government. The epistemic work involved is as much about people’s aspirations and anxieties as it is about official records and scientific knowledge. Affecting people’s understanding of the world involves manipulating the three objects of epistemic work: ontology of the environment, actor identifications, and norms and ideals (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2014). Basically, these refer to definitions of what is happening in the world, how people should identify themselves and others, and what should be considered good and desirable. Imagining communities in this sense should not be seen as something less than real – as ‘just’ imagining. It is about constructing the ontology of everyday life in a way that can have far reaching and sometimes even brutal effects. Imagined communities like the nation turn into lived reality and create a conceptual grid through which people see and experience the world.

The support for equality and universalist welfare systems has become increasingly challenged while questions of national and cultural belonging have become heated political topics in the Nordic countries (Jørgensen and Thomsen, 2016; Keskinen, 2016; Keskinen et al., 2016). This chapter argues that the legitimation base of universalist welfare systems in the Nordic countries has rested on the assumption of a confluence between the three major spheres of belonging among individuals and state institutions: citizenship, nation, and population. It has become harder to assume that the citizens of a country are the same people that are included in the idea of the nation and that permanently inhabit the territory of the nation-state. The fabric tying together these forms of membership within a nation-state seems to be becoming undone. The Nordic countries may never really have been the ethnically homogenous enclosed communities they are sometimes presented as, but as Carl-Ulrik Schierup, Peo Hansen and Stephen Castles (2006, p.23) have noted, at the beginning of the new millennium the image of “ethnically homogenous national populations and monocultural identities” has become even harder to uphold.

The three major spheres of belonging in nation-states

The concepts of citizenship, nation, and population have emerged at different periods of history and have distinct ways of associating individuals with communities and collective identities within nation-states. Analytically these three spheres of belonging can be considered as separate dimensions, but in political rhetoric and research they are often intermingled. While it is important to recognize their interconnections, it is also crucial to respect the differences between these ways of grouping people.

Citizenship

The origin of the concept of citizenship can be found in the city-states of ancient Greece, which is also the reason for the etymological connection in many languages between citizenship and cities (Heater, 1990, pp.3-8, 21; Smith, 2002). According to Derek Heater (1990) in Greek thought citizenship was considered to pertain only to a restricted group of people inhabiting the polis. Citizenship was a privilege that was typically inherited. While the restrictions on citizenship in Western countries were somewhat loosened in the following centuries, foreign residents, women and slaves were typically excluded from gaining citizenship. The American and French revolutions at the end of the 18th century widened the scope of citizenship, but it took harsh political battles during the 20th century before citizenship and civil rights became something that most women and men within democratic countries could lay a claim to. While some aspects of the concept of citizenship remained similar throughout the centuries, the content of citizenship was continuously reinvented and redefined (Heater, 1990). Through all these periods, citizens were people who were considered valuable participants in a political community and whose voice should be heard in political decision-making. However, the criteria for who should be counted among these people kept changing.

Many of the early ideas attached to citizenship remain the same to this day. Citizens have the right to vote and to participate in governing their political community. They carry passports that verify their membership, and being a member entails certain formal rights and responsibilities. Citizenship is a formal status that is granted by the officials of the state. It is acquired either via formal applications or as a birthright. Even today, citizenship is mostly passed on like inherited property from parents, with only about three percent of world's population gaining citizenship after immigration and naturalization (Shachar, 2009; Shachar and Hirschl, 2007). Nonetheless, one can enjoy and gain citizenship without identifying strongly with the prevailing culture in the country. While some countries have introduced tests for migrants that measure familiarity with "national values" (Joppke, 2010), birthright citizens need not prove themselves in this regard. The formal status of citizenship makes it relatively easy to determine one's citizenship. It may not be easy to become a member, but it is easy to determine whether one has gained this status or not.

Nation

Except for Antarctica, the whole surface of the earth is carved up into territorial units called nation-states. The image of a world comprised of competing nation-teams is one of the most prominent ways of constructing identities and social groups around the world (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2016; Brubaker, 1989; Meyer et al., 1997). The nation is a fundamental concept not only due to its global reach. It also has tremendous strength and depth. People around the world think of themselves as belonging to a nation and they are heavily encouraged to do so by various institutions. As Anderson (1991, pp.163-185) has noted, the knowledge produced and displayed through maps, museums, and censuses builds into the idea of nations being a natural part of the world. They all contribute to dividing the world into a collection of separate nations and to constructing unique traditions for those units (Hobsbawm, 1983). However, following Michael Billig (1995), one could argue that it is not so much the huge spectacles celebrating nations that ensure the strength of the nationalist worldview as it is the elusive banal nationalism that constantly flags people and events as inherently national in the media.

The idea of a nation as we understand it today is only about 300 years old and the worldwide popularity of the nation-state model for government is even younger (Heater, 1990, pp.50-62;

Hobsbawm, 1990, pp.3, 101-130; Soysal, 1994, pp.16-17). In fact, for a long time “nation” used to be a derogatory term, which referred to groups of people that were geographically and culturally united but were not politically organized in a state form (Habermas, 2003). This seemingly essential feature of the world is actually a very novel idea in the scope human history. It has been only since the 18th and 19th centuries that most people have been able to feel belonging in connection to a modern nation and to feel hatred towards outsiders.

The concept of a nation is notoriously hard to define. According to Eric Hobsbawm (1990, pp.1-45) most definitions have relied to one or other of the following unifying features: common language, united territory, mutual history and shared cultural traits. As difficult as it is to find unproblematic criteria for defining a nation, even the most promising criterion to do so are themselves ambiguous and historically changing. However, these conceptual difficulties have not stopped people from using nationality as a way to construct feelings of solidarity and to fuel political movements.

The nation as a community is exclusionary by definition but it is also open for reinterpretation. It is an imagined community that can be imagined by everyone, but not every vision is taken seriously by the wider audience. Nonetheless, there is a lot more room for renegotiation than with the more formal and administrative category of citizenship. Whether a reimagined view of a nation manages to persuade the audience depends on the quality of the epistemic work carried out by the speakers.

Population

According to Michel Foucault (2000a; 2000b), the population emerged as an object of knowledge and governance in the 17th century through demographic studies. It became a key concern for those contemplating how the new centralized states in Europe should be governed. The population was not made up of legal subjects with rights and responsibilities within a polity. Nor was it a cultural collective that was realizing its shared essence in the form of a nation-state. The population became visible through quantitative knowledge, which could draw out an organic whole with several discernible variables and regularities. Experts could provide quantifiable figures that showed the fertility, health, longevity, and productivity of a population. The individuals belonging to a population were living and breathing individuals with biological traits.

When population became an object of governance it made the bodies, behaviour, and strength of individuals a significant issue for state officials and gave rise to what can be called biopolitics (Desrosières, 2002, pp.21-27; Foucault, 2000c; 2007, pp.366-367; Johannisson, 1990; Porter, 1986, pp.17-20). The population became regarded as the main resource of the state. The objective of government was no longer to keep down the masses but to make them more able and productive. This meant improving the living conditions and general health of the people. It became important to know how people were living their lives and how those lives could be made more vigorous. Quantitative studies of societies began during the 17th century (Porter, 1986, pp.23-25) with the aims of helping taxation and making the population more manageable. Statistics did not only produce knowledge, they also constructed new objects: it became possible to speak about objects such as crime rate and unemployment rate that could be conceived as collective issues that concerned the whole society (Porter, 1996, p.37).

There are no official procedures for applying to become a member of a population. It is a community that is mostly imagined through statistical tables and vital records. One does not have to fill forms for approval by state officials and one does not have to embody the cultural characteristics of a specific nation to be included. Nor does one gain any political or juridical rights just by belonging to this specific unit. To become a member, basically one has to exist and be noticed and counted by those who crunch the numbers and keep the books. However, in some countries, like Finland, population statistics are produced by relying on official records that only count people that have a right of residence (Homanen and Alastalo, 2018), which makes the definition of a population in some cases directly tied to definitions of citizenship.

Population is a collection of individuals that inhabit a defined territory at any given time. However, in official consideration this territory is typically the nation-state. This ties the population together with the categories of citizenship and nation. Based on these connections, distinctions can be made within the population, for example, between regular inhabitants, visitors, and migrants. These distinctions can be used to justify who should be protected as members of a population and who should be considered outsiders.

Reweaving the fabric?

Nation-states are both territorial organizations and membership associations, which is why migration tends to engender internal and external politics of belonging (Brubaker, 2010, pp.77-78; Joppke, 2010). The movement of people across national borders and the complex transnational cultural and social connections they generate problematize any simple notion of a nation made up of a homogenous population that takes part in a polity through citizenship rights. An increasing flow of people has given rise to contradictory responses in Western countries (Schierup et al., 2006, pp.12-13). Citizenship has been caught between a crossfire of de- and re-ethnicizing forces (Joppke, 2003) while nation-states struggle between the competing global scripts of national sovereignty and universal human rights (Soysal, 1994, p.7).

It is today typical that people with citizenship or people making up the population are not necessarily considered part of the “national team” and vice versa. Firstly, people may be part of the population as migrants without having a citizenship status, which would grant them rights and safety. They may be working and getting married within the boundaries of a country, while not having the right to vote and being exposed to the risk of deportation (Anderson, Gibney and Paoletti, 2011b; Brubaker, 1989; Schierup et al., 2006, p.3; Soysal, 1994, p.2). Furthermore, many people do not have any citizenship. According to UNHCR (2010) statelessness affects millions of people globally, making their lives enormously difficult. Secondly, people with citizenship status may not be considered part of the “nation” as they are not considered to be of the right ethnicity (Keskinen et al., 2016; Schierup et al., 2006). There are emigrants that are officially citizens and considered part of the nation even though they do not live in that country permanently. Finally, people whose families are spread across different nation-states may have feelings of scattered belonging that do not fall neatly into the “national order of things” (Malkki, 1995).

Questions of citizenship and belonging have become increasingly complex. Some scholars have tried to capture this phenomenon with concepts such as cosmopolitan (Linklater, 1998), global (Armstrong, 2006; Dower, 2000), and post-national (Soysal, 1994) citizenship. It can

be argued that some accounts of these concepts appear utopian in the midst of the backlash of nationalist rhetoric in the early 2000s. Ideas of a world-society, where national borders lose their dividing strength as more inclusive conceptions of citizenship emerge, do not seem to fit well with what is happening in Western countries today (Brubaker, 2010, pp.76-77).

However, these concepts should not be dismissed that easily. Some of them do not necessarily presuppose the disappearance of the nation as a significant category for grouping people and for constructing their identities, but the relationship between a nation, citizenship, and population becomes less self-apparent. For example, according to Yasemin Soysal (2001, p.339) the post-national era nation-states “and their boundaries persist as reasserted by restrictive immigration practices and sovereignty narratives, while universalistic personhood rights transcend the same boundaries, giving rise to new models and understandings of membership”.

What these concepts highlight is the decoupling of the three major spheres of belonging in a state. It is increasingly clear that one cannot expect that the concepts of nation, population, and citizenship within a country will group together the same people and create a unified sense of belonging. Whichever way one tries to connect the pieces, there are always people falling through the cracks. This means that the epistemic work involved in constructing identities, enacting borders, and creating spaces for belonging is blown wide open. There are four aspects involved. (1) There are official laws and policies that define the grounds for gaining citizenship and institutions responsible for enforcing those rules. (2) There are experts who weigh in on how demographic categories are constructed and statistics depicting the population are gathered. (3) There is a constant battle in social and traditional media over conceptions of who we are, what defines us, and who are the others. (4) Finally, people are constantly engaged in drawing “multiple borders of belonging” in their everyday lives (Anderson et al., 2011a) while (re)defining their sense of membership. This epistemic work on borders affects and is affected by individuals’ encounters with surrounding people and institutions.

The dilemma for Nordic countries is, whether it is possible to maintain the legitimacy of a universal welfare-state in the eyes of the wider public in these circumstances. There is a pressing need to find new ways to imagine an integrated community and sense of solidarity if one wants to justify comprehensive welfare services and the ideal of equal opportunities (Schierup et al., 2006, pp.14-19). One is left with two questions. Is it possible to construct a strong enough solidarity amongst people to legitimate costly welfare system without these major spheres of belonging interlocking? Or is it possible to weave together the seams of these spheres in a way that allows more room for scattered transnational identities and belongings while maintaining an idea of unified community. Should one aim for solidarity within a complex society or construct a novel image of unified society?

The decoupling of the three spheres of belonging can appear threatening for those trying to hold on to traditional conceptions of national borders and identities, which is apparent in the backlash of right-wing nationalism across the Nordic countries. At the same time the situation is problematic for those who are striving to claim their place in a nation, get recognized as deserving social rights and be able to enact citizenship in a highly contested terrain. Then again, as the borderlines and categorizations are in flux it opens up space for renegotiating and rearticulating novel senses of belonging. As the chapters in this book demonstrate, people from various backgrounds and social situations living in the Nordic countries are actively engaged in epistemic work where accustomed borderlines are problematized and possibly reshaped. Where the chips finally fall remains to be seen, but the

ongoing process of questioning and affirming identities tied to nationality, citizenship and population presents a research topic of the utmost importance for social sciences – one that requires a multidisciplinary approach.

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