

in the Nordic countries. Most significantly, *Gapassipi* challenges the notion that Iceland is peripheral to broader artistic developments by situating Icelandic artists like Pálsson as active participants in transnational artistic movements, while highlighting the uniquely Icelandic character of their work.

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■ Michael A. Livingston. *Dreamworld or Dystopia?: The Nordic Model and Its Influence in the 21st Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp x + 156.

This book offers a refreshing view of the Nordic countries from an Anglo-American outlook. The Nordic Model is discussed from a cultural perspective, a stimulating complement to the traditional focus on political economy that tends to dominate such analyses. The combination of mini-cases and a broader cultural sweep makes for entertaining reading, while the cavalcade of comparative observations on four Nordic societies is impressive. As implied in the title, *Dreamworld or Dystopia?*, the author deserves praise for presenting both the pros and cons of the Nordic Model.

The book consists of two sections: “Images” and “Reality,” plus a concluding chapter. In the section on “Images,” the chapter about “Utopia” begins by complimenting the Nordics for highly successful branding. Livingston claims that the Nordics have been uniquely able to project a positive image of themselves with a focus on gender equality, human rights, and environmental sustainability, and he depicts them as “peaceful, healthy and productive” (p. 25) countries that combine innovation, creativity, and design. Livingston finds cultural expressions of Nordic values in literature, especially in Nordic Noir, in which moral themes involving social and economic justice and the treatment of women are inserted into the more traditional detective context. He also cites successful Nordic branding of its gourmet cuisine, with Noma restaurant in the lead, following the so-called Nordic Cuisine Manifesto, which lists simplicity, purity, and freshness as principal goals. In addition, he mentions Scandinavian design that prioritizes functionality without eliminating beauty and that is intended for everyone.

This praise of Nordic values is balanced by a chapter on dystopian images, in which the Nordics are described as a region that pursued a series of well-intentioned but self-destructive policies that have undermined the conditions of their own success. High taxes, excessive regulation, and a conformist approach to life are cited as undermining the Nordic model.

As part of this negative image, excessive immigration and lack of adequate multiculturalist policies are said to have given rise to criminality.

Livingston's claim about Nordics' uniqueness in promoting their "model" is somewhat exaggerated. This is surprising, coming from a US-based author, living in the world of Anglo-American neoliberalism, a "model" efficiently promoted through the World Bank (the Washington consensus), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and now broadly adopted by the EU in its free market mantra. Even if this neoliberalism has been seriously criticized after the 2008 financial crisis, and the rollout of some restrictions on globalization more recently, it is still a backbone of the "Western" approach with many Southern and Eastern followers, including Australia, South Korea, and Japan. In addition, we now have the Chinese model: a "socialist market economy" with the dictatorship of the proletariat combined with a market economy. Not only has China managed to impress the world with its extraordinary growth rates; it has attracted admiration from authoritarian leaders across the globe. The spartan Nordic model with limited spoils for political elites carries little appeal to cultures where strongman leadership prevails.

The second section of the book, on "Reality," discusses core issues confronting the Nordic Model today. A chapter on human rights asks: Have the Nordics, especially the Swedes and Norwegians, let human rights run wild? Does this make them intolerant to other cultures? As the Nordics get sizable migrant populations, do they become a stage for conflicts with other cultures, for instance, regarding child marriages or the ritual slaughter of animals? Do the Nordics lack experience with cultural diversity, while priding themselves on social trust? The author here aptly explains central topics in today's Nordic soul-searching debates.

A chapter on environmental issues brings up the challenge between stated ecological ambitions and economic development to support the welfare state. Particularly, the Norwegian case, as a leading European oil-exporter with aspirations as a climate leader, illustrates the tension between idealism and self-interest that lies at the heart of Nordic environmental policy. As the author observes, the iconic climate activism of Greta Thunberg leaves little room for Nordic leaders to back down from climate engagement, haunted as they are by their children to stop their empty talk.

However, with respect to both human rights and especially environmental issues, the Nordic engagement with the European Union over the last quarter-century has attuned them to common European policies. Three of the Nordic countries are EU members—Denmark since 1973 and

Sweden and Finland since 1995—while Norway and Iceland are members of the European internal market and thus subject to EU policy in most domains. Staunch critics have claimed that the Nordic parliaments are now basically rubber-stamping EU directives into national law. Surprisingly, the book hardly brings these trends into the discussion, yet some of the initiatives that the book ascribes to the Nordics are in fact more broadly European. For example, the current climate initiative, the European Green Deal, has been developed across the EU, with the support of both Nordic and other EU nations. Human rights and anti-corruption are also strongly endorsed at the EU level, as well as within the OECD.

It is true that Nordic policy makers at times emphasize social-democratic policies in international arenas, but it is through positions in the EU rather than on their own, that their initiatives really matter. Due to the successful promotion of neoliberal deregulation, Nordic policy makers now have far less control over their economies and must join forces with other Europeans in their pursuit of social and economic values. A major exception is Norway's taxation of the petroleum industry, where the state secures 77 percent of the profit for a public pension fund that has grown to become one of the world's largest, but this is an odd case due to special resources.

Another noteworthy issue is the author's choice of Nordic companies to illustrate Nordic values. Interestingly, Livingston discusses Nordic values with reference to Nordic companies, such as Volvo, Lego, Ikea, Skype, and Spotify, claiming that they carry basic Nordic values and perspectives at the core of their businesses. However, the reader remains unsure of how representative they truly are. The Nordic economy is, after all, less about coffee, literature, toys, and furniture, and more about energy, raw materials, finance, agri-business, construction, and logistics. Yes, Volvo is a dominant, now partly Chinese, carmaker in Sweden, but Sweden is also about telecom/technology (Ericsson), construction (Skanska), and Energy (Vattenfall). Yes, Denmark is about Lego, but also about Energy (Ørsted) and agribusiness (Danish Crown, Europe's largest slaughterhouse). And, yes, Norway is about energy (Equinor and Statkraft), but also about electrometals (Norsk Hydro) and fertilizer (Yara).

A more representative framing of Nordic business could have made the book's argument for Nordic success as the avant-garde of social and environmental responsibility even stronger. The author's selective approach to companies spills over into his take on innovation, which in the book is mostly about food, coffee, cinnamon buns, and literature. While he makes good points about the affinity between technical and cultural innovation, such as Skype and Spotify being not only about computer technology,

but also a sense of freedom and individuality, the analysis covers only a small fraction of the Nordic economies. A broader introduction to the major thrust of Nordic innovation efforts would have been helpful: the ocean economy; the new boom for mining; the circular economy in construction; the monetizing of life science and health technology; and new developments in green energy, gaming, or artificial intelligence would have been good examples. Many of these programs are shared with the EU and intertwined with EU initiatives.

Of particular interest to Nordic readers is Livingston's view of how attractive the Nordic Model remains in the outside world. His vivid description of how the model is loved and hated in the United States, by Democrats and Republicans, respectively, is a useful reminder that the political culture in the Nordic countries, in which most parties on both the left and right buy into common social-democratic values, does not translate well to the polarized political conditions elsewhere. Interestingly, the author also points to the diversity of the Nordics as a possible advantage in promoting the Nordic Model(s) abroad. The attempts to solve current challenges in different ways by each of the Nordics have allowed other countries to pick Nordic inspiration *à la carte* from the preferred variant.

The book concludes with an important chapter, arguing that the Nordic model provides a more attractive example of democratic capitalism than the Anglo-American neoliberal model, especially at a time when the latter is struggling with serious setbacks. To quote the author: "The Nordic Model, which attempts to balance individual and community goals rather than allowing the former to ride roughshod over the latter, may well offer a more attractive version of democracy than that on offer in larger countries" (p. 154). However, Livingston's focus on values and culture leaves out important historical, social, and institutional factors that have fostered and sustained the Nordic model. Suffice it to mention the free peasantry under "enlightened monarchy" with a religion communicated in vernacular and early literacy, followed by bottom-up working-class mobilization for a socially balanced capitalism, carried by strong trade unions.

The relevance of the Nordic Model(s) for developing nations should therefore be accompanied by a discussion of the institutional, historical, and social conditions for the model's exportability. Reservations may be appropriate even in a European context. When discussing the options for Nordic-style social-democratic governance in the transition to the EU, the Hungarian economist János Kornai pointed out that this model has a tradition of relying on a trustworthy and competent state and high

levels of social trust in institutions. The Soviet legacy in Eastern Europe was a distrusted state, which would need much improvement before it could be trusted to manage a Nordic-style welfare state. As a recipe for a possible transition toward a Nordic Model, this book clearly needs to be complemented by a more in-depth social and institutional analysis. However, as a cultural appetizer and an introduction to Nordic values and aspirations, it is a valuable and enjoyable read.

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