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THE HISTORY OF EXPERIENCE AND AGENCY: A CRITICAL INTERVENTION

The agent called society as a mediator between experiences and expectations: a conceptual history perspective to the making of Nordic welfare states

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Reinhart Koselleck has taught us that one of the main characteristics of modern political concepts is their being "temporalised". They were shaped as a means of governing the tension between "the space experience and the horizon of expectation" that was constitutive of the modern notions of history and politics. The concepts became "instruments for the direction of historical movement" (Koselleck 1979, 344), which was often conceptualized as development or progress. From our current historical perspectives, the making of the welfare state easily appears as an important phase and stream of "historical movement" in the Nordic countries. However, it was quite late that the concept of the welfare state played any significant part in the direction of this movement (Beland & Petersen ed. 2014; Edling ed. 2019).

Historical analyses focusing on the usage of the very concept of welfare state are helpful for questioning the present views on the welfare state as a joint national project of long-term design. On the other hand, a conceptual history of the welfare state should also ask *how* the political agenda and the political agency were conceptualised in the course of what only late, gradually and in a conflict-laden way was conceived of as the past, the present and the future of "the welfare state". In this paper, drawing from my earlier studies (e.g. Kettunen 2014, 2019a and 2019b), I will focus on some aspects of this question. I will argue that in the Nordic countries the concept of *society* was provided with specific meanings that made it play an important role in the making of the Nordic welfare states, notably in governing tensions between experience and expectation at different levels: in the politics making and shaping the welfare state, in the policies implementing the welfare state and in in the encounters of welfare state practices and people's life-world.

“Concepts are more important for what they do than for what they mean”, as Nikolas Rose puts it (1999, 9). The profoundly ambiguous meanings of ‘society’ have made it do many different things in the linguistic arsenals of different political actors, including Margaret Thatcher who famously claimed that “there is no such thing as society”. In the Nordic countries, what the concept of society does seems to be interestingly associated with an assumption that the society does something, i.e. that the society is agent with own will and subjectivity. To be sure, ‘society’ as an actor is not a unique Nordic phenomenon. Sociology provided its modern society with the capacity of setting the norms, distributing the roles and teaching the values. In less theoretical discourses, statements in which society expects, requires or condemns something are familiar outside of *Norden*, as well (cf. Bowers & Iwi 1993). However, there seems to be something particular in how agency is included in this concept in the Nordic countries. I will argue that comparative and historical reflexivity is a crucial aspect of any individual and collective agency, and in the making and functioning of the Nofrdic welfare states, such a reflexivity was associated with the notion of society as an agent.

Society as a temporalised and spatialised concept

In the nineteenth century, the intertwined temporal and spatial ideas of historical progress and transnational interdependence became crucial ingredients for the construction of a modernising nation-state society. Modernisation and the construction of the nation-state – often in connection with colonial and imperial ambitions – broadly overlapped in the horizons of expectation in nineteenth-century Europe. Within the framework of a modernising nation-state society, problems were defined from two intersecting perspectives: as issues of rationalisation or as problems of maintaining, creating and restoring social cohesion. At the intersection of these two perspectives, the questions that Michel Foucault examined as issues in the making of the subject[1] appeared. In connection with these questions, norms and criteria associated with age, gender and social class

[1] Foucault wrote at the beginning of the 1980s that the main theme of his scientific work had been the history of the making of subject. With support from the conventional meanings of the term *sujet* in the French language, he described a particular form of power: "This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. In is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject too." Foucault 1983, 212.

were constructed by means of statistics in order to define and assess the positions and capacities of people as actors in the market, in production, in the family and in the national community.

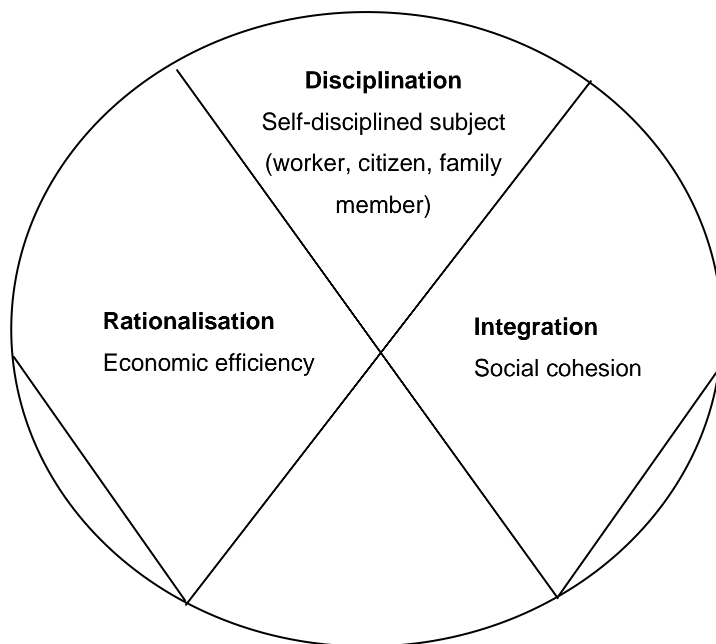

Figure 1. *The notion of modernising nation-state society as a framework for defining problems and solutions.*

A particular crossing of temporal and spatial dimensions appears important in how the modernising nation-state society was adopted as the framework for defining social problems and solutions in the countries of Europe's Northern periphery. The elite groups that were active in nation-building processes consciously adopted the distinction between what later was referred to as centre and periphery. According to this view, the educated elite of a peripheral country, and later the popular movements, e.g. labour movement, could and should define their political tasks on the basis of the knowledge on more developed – or more "civilized" – countries. Problems should be anticipated and solutions should be planned by acquiring information on the experiences, solutions and mistakes in the centre of industrial modernisation.[2]

In this pattern of thought a general feature of modern politics – that is, its comparative and historical reflexivity – appeared in a particular way that can be characterised as eclectic peripheral avant-gardism. The outside world provided a framework of external preconditions and constraints, of hopes and threats, of both impulses and alarming ideas, of models and also unpleasant examples, of

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[2] Marta Petrusewitz (2004) describes similar kinds of periphery perspectives and intellectual activities by the cases of Poland, Ireland, and the Two Sicilies, 1820-1870.

points of reference and also limits as to what was possible. It was considered important to learn from both the solutions and the mistakes of the more developed countries so as to be able to exploit what Alexander Gerschenkron (1962, 356–363) called “the advantages of backwardness”.

‘Society’ became a temporalised concept in the Koselleckian sense, “an instrument for the direction of historical movement”. Two dualisms of modern ‘society’ seem important for its role as such a tool in the making of the welfare state. Society was conceived of both as an *agent* and as a *target* of knowledge and politics, and it was a *normative* as well as *descriptive* concept. In texts discussing social problems and their solutions, the concept of society referred to normative criteria and capacities, and these criteria and capacities were then applied to the empirical society in which need, poverty, class divisions, discontent and a lack of discipline were recognised. The party manifestos of the Nordic labour parties from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century demonstrate all this meanings of ‘society’. Capitalist class society is harshly criticised, the fullfilment of the interest of society is demanded, and the moving of the means of production to the ownership of society is found necessary. This would happen after the working class would achieve the power in the society. In this political argumentation society as an actor and society as a target of critics and politics as well as the normative and descriptive society were interlinked by a view on world history and one’s own agency in the service of history.

With respect to economy, society was a normative representation of the interest of the whole in a dual sense: ‘society’ referred, on one hand, to the interest of the *national economy* above the private economic interests and, on the other hand, to the *social principle* that put limits to economic action for preserving or reconstructing social cohesion. These dualisms can be found as characteristics of the modern concept of society, yet in the Nordic countries ‘society’ seems to have been provided with a stronger charge of agency and with a larger amount of normative power than was the case in many other European countries. An extra normative power was included in ‘society’ as this term was and is often used as a synonym of the *state* or *public power*.

The state called ‘society’

The success stories of Europe’s Northern periphery have been used to highlight the active role played by the nation-state for the integration process with respect to international industrial capitalism (especially, Senghaas 1982), and for good reason. Capitalism in general is a politically constituted mode of economic action, as Karl Polanyi (1944 [2001]) argued, and this particularly

holds true for the Nordic countries. In the Nordic countries the state had developed significant capacities to produce and utilize information. The state provided (not least, the infrastructural) prerequisites for the expanding market economy, and economic liberalism appeared beneficial to the representatives of the state bureaucracy and those defining the interests of the state. These were two sides of the same coin, and an active role for the state in the processes of modernisation gained a notable legitimacy, which also became manifest in the use of 'society' as a synonym to 'state'.

'State' and 'society' tend to be confused in Nordic political languages. The use of 'society' as a term for the state or for the totality of the state and municipalities began much earlier than the era of the welfare state, wide public sector, and corporatism that are sometimes mentioned as the basis for the tendency to "unify or even identify 'state', 'society' and 'people'" (Knudsen & Rothstein 1994, 218). Furthermore, this conceptual phenomenon does not only appear in "Social Democratic" Sweden, as the Swedish critics of the "patronising" welfare state have claimed (Trägårdh ed. 1995), but also in Finland where Social Democracy has been, since the Civil War of 1918, much weaker.

Nordic political languages seem to have conserved elements from the political philosophy before the 19th century when civil society did not mean a sphere separate from the state but was a way of conceptualising the state (Riedel 1975; Bobbio 1989; Heilbron 1995). According to a plausible hypothesis (Aronsson 1995; 1997), the development of the Swedish term *samhälle* (society) to refer to the state derives from the tradition of local self-government among the free-holding farmers. In the mid-1700s, the advocators of the Enlightenment adopted this concept and thereby linked Enlightenment ideas and ideals to the local associational practices. The term then referentially expanded to include larger political units, namely, what was becoming called the nation.

'Society' as a term for the state, or for the whole of central and local government, provided the state with an inherent moral power. The criteria for situations in which the term 'society' could, and still can, be applied to the state and municipalities stem from the notion of society as the moral order of the relationships between individuals or groups. 'Society' is applied to public authorities in situations where the relationships between public authorities and individuals or public authorities and private actors, often those in the sphere called 'economy', are looked at from this kind of moral point of view.

Arguably, this usage of 'society' can be found in all Nordic countries, but a particular strong variant appears in Finland. According to the Social Democratic ideology developed in the Nordic countries, the state could and should be changed into an instrument of political will and planning. However, this mode of thought never achieved the kind of hegemonic position in Finland as it did, especially, in Sweden. One can say that in Finland the planning reason has been seen as an inherent property of

the state itself, and politics is supposed to put in action the agency of the state. The ideal of national consensus did not imply an absence of conflicts. Finland has a more conflict-laden past than the other Nordic countries. The Finland of too-much-conflict and the Finland of too-much-consensus seem to intertwine. Conflicts were deepened as they easily turned into struggles on the right way of defining and representing the general national interest and the right of talking in the name of "society".

The society of virtuous circles

In the late nineteenth century the concept of society came to refer to economic activities (*samfundsøkonomi*, *samhällsekonomi*, *yhteiskuntatalous*) at the national level at the same as it also came to refer to the social principle putting limits on economic activities for preserving or restoring social order and cohesion (*socialpolitik*, *sosialpolitik*, *yhteiskuntapolitiikka/sosiaalipolitiikka*). In the early twentieth century, the national economy and social policy grew more distinct as fields of knowledge and policy; yet since the 1930s they became interlinked as different parts in what were conceived of as welfare-generating self-reinforcing processes.

The Nordic political compromises of the 1930s reflected the class structures of the countries and their positions in the international economy, and they drew from the experiences of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe. They included political coalitions of "workers and farmers", that is, the Social Democrats and the agrarian parties, and the consolidation of the practice of engaging in collective negotiations and agreements in the industrial labour markets (only the former part applied to Finland before the Second World War). A positive-sum game was supposed to connect the interests of worker-consumers and farmer-producers, on the one hand, and of workers and employers on the other.

The practical significance of the new employment and economic policies adopted before the Second World War, even in Sweden, has been debated. On the level of political discourse, however, the new ideas of a virtuous circle indicated important changes taking place in the 1930s. The virtuous circle included something more than just organized economic interests promoting each other. It was also a virtuous circle between equality, efficiency and solidarity which, in a sense, can be seen as being based on three different ideological strains of the Nordic modernization processes: the idealised heritage of the free, independent peasant; the spirit of capitalism, and the utopia of socialism.

The virtuous circle was supposed to be achieved through compromises between conflicting organized interests and with the support of science-based social planning within national society. This mode of thought, combining the objectives of economic growth, social equality and widening democracy, was reinforced after the Second World War. It was based on a recognition of conflicting interests, and the correct definition of political objectives and the means of combining and achieving them remained contested issues. However, confidence in the possibility of virtuous circles provided a widely shared framework for political conflicts and compromises in a process that, retrospectively, can be seen as the making of the welfare state.

The trust in a virtuous circle between economic growth, expanding democracy and increased equality was, as such, not specific to the Nordic context. During the Second World War, it had become a more or less explicit part of the so-called post-war planning in Western countries (Kettunen 2013). However, the post-war development in Scandinavia, especially in Sweden, was perceived not only by some Nordic citizens, but also by many outside the Nordic region, as entailing uniquely consistent steps along this universally applicable road to progress. In the Cold War world, more than one candidate for a universally applicable road existed. The notion of a Nordic middle way included a particular claim of universality, expressed, for example, by maintaining that 'freedom and welfare' was the principle of Nordic social political cooperation (Nelson 1953

In the 1930s, the beginning of what has been characterised as the formative phase of the Nordic welfare states also included a change in the temporalisation of the idea of what it means to be Nordic. Most notably in Sweden, the previous self-image of living in a poor and peripheral country, and thus the peripheral perspective in relation to the centre, lost much of its previous significance as a way of revealing the code for the future (Andersson and Hilson 2009). The word 'Nordic' became loosened from its previous references to nation-states on periphery of modernization. It was provided with new ideological power, manifested in the emergence in the 1930s of "Nordic democracy" (Kurunmäki and Strang 2010), which referred to a model of a nation-state society that contrasted strongly with notions of backwardness and dictatorship. Much of what had previously been associated with the centre of modernisation was actually now attached to the notion of Nordic society.

A reinforced intra-Nordic centre–periphery mode of thought also appeared, especially, in the relationship between Finland and Sweden. In both countries, the empirical reference point for 'the Nordic society' was primarily Sweden. In Finland, Sweden was, from the 1930s, elevated to the level of representing the future code for Finnish society, and this intra-Nordic variant of the centre–

periphery distinction was politically influential until the 1980s (Karvonen 1981; Kettunen 2006). Controversial political variations of this comparative interest appeared, including not only the adopting of models but also warning examples, or arguing that before taking any measures Finland one should wait and see the Swedish experiences of a reform. The extensive migration from Finland to Sweden, especially in the 1960s, indicated the role of comparisions in people's attempts to control their own life, and those comparisons also provided an incentive for the comparative reflexivity of politics.

The society of immanent critique

Social change was conceived of as self-reinforcing processes generated by 'circular cumulative causation', as Gunnar Myrdal (1957) put it in his theoretical elaboration on this viewpoint. Those processes were often vicious rather than virtuous circles, but the direction could and should be turned by means of knowledge-based societal planning and compromises between all relevant interests. Virtuous circles contained the code for society's future change and reform and, thus, the normative standards for assessing the present. This implied an idea of "immanent critique": the normative standards of a society served as the criteria by which society could be criticized (Lohmann 1986).

Immanent critique could be applied as a Marxian critique of ideology, with the aim of proving that (bourgeois) society could never meet the normative standards, including freedom and equality, which appeared on its market-faced surface. However, immanent critique could also imply a strong commitment to, or a hegemonic struggle with, what were recognized as the normative standards of society, which then, through a society's political process, could be applied to the self-criticism of a particular society. In this type of immanent critique, society was criticized in the name of society itself, and this was very much the case in the Nordic countries (Kettunen 1997).

Arguably, the idea of society as an agent with its own normative standards played a particular role in the Nordic countries and implied favourable prerequisites for immanent critique. One contributing factor was a particular type of conformity based on the Lutheran tradition that was secularized in Nordic nationalisms and welfare states (Stenius 1997; Markkola 2011). Conformity by no means implied an absence of class conflicts and class consciousness. Rather, the construction of the nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) offered a normative code against which socially subordinated groups could elaborate their individual and local experiences of suppression

and injustice, and generalize from these experiences to political class consciousness. The idea of a society being able to anticipate, criticize and revise itself was then, in the 1930s, promoted by the class compromises between workers, farmers and the bourgeoisie, and by the agenda-setting power of reformist socialism.

The normative standards of society were not only moral rules, but also rules for the most rational functioning and rationalization of society. They were also rules for how the productive capacities of individuals could be released, as well as rules concerning the contents of those capacities, such as self-disciplined citizenship. In the ideational framework of a modernizing nation-state society, the perspectives of economic rationalization and social integration intersected.

In the late nineteenth century the concept of society came to refer to economic activities (*samfundsøkonomi*, *samhällsekonomi*, *yhteiskuntatalous*) at the national level at the same as it also came to refer to the social principle putting limits on economic activities for preserving or restoring social order and cohesion (*socialpolitik*, *sosialpolitik*, *yhteiskuntapolitiikka/sosiaalipolitiikka*). In the early twentieth century, the national economy and social policy grew more distinct as fields of knowledge and policy; yet since the 1930s they had become interlinked as different parts in what were conceived of as welfare-generating virtuous circles.

As an attribute of economic life, the adjective 'societal', which directly derived from the word for 'society' – in Norwegian and Danish, *samfundsmessig*; in Finnish, *yhteiskunnallinen* – was associated with the principles of a 'planned economy', which during the economic depression of the 1930s became, internationally, a popular objective, one with various political colours. Accordingly, 'society' would actively steer and rationalize the economy. The formulators of the Norwegian Labour Party programme, for example, raised demands for a 'societal economic initiative' (*samfundsmessig økonomisk initiativ*) and a 'societally planned economy' (*den samfundsmessige planøkonomi*) (Slagstad 1998, p. 192).

In the context of economic rationalization, the word 'social' (*social*, *sosial*, *sosiaalinen*) had a quite different meaning. It was associated with delimiting or compensating for those particular outcomes of capitalist economic rationalization that endangered the welfare of those involved (notably the workers) and threatened the cohesion of society. The strong links between the concepts of state and society contributed to the masculine connotations of 'societal', which carried over into public power and the domain of public life. As for 'social', its meaning was now limited to what was between society and the family, or between the public and private domains, and was thereby demarcated as feminine.

The distinction between 'societal' and 'social' also offered tools for conceptualising the notion of a society of virtuous circles. Pekka Kuusi, a Finnish scholar and practitioner of social policy, published in 1961 a book that is often regarded as laying out the plan for the Finnish welfare state. Kuusi did not use the concept of a welfare state but elaborated a hierarchy between societal policy (*yhteiskuntapolitiikka*) and social policy (*sosiaalipolitiikka*). The latter was part of the former, and those persons shaping social policy had to clarify for themselves the goals of general societal policy. Inspired by Gunnar Myrdal's theory of circular cumulative causation, Kuusi expressed his strong confidence in the possibilities of turning vicious circles into virtuous ones within modern society: "Democracy, social equalization and economic growth seem to be fortunately interrelated in modern society. Social policy seems to spring from free and growth-oriented human nature" (Kuusi 1961, 8; 1964, 34). Social policy would release individual productive capacities. In the "growth-oriented society", 'social' was no longer a counter-principle to 'economic'; with the support of a comprehensive long-term societal policy, social, economic and political factors would work interdependently in the self-reinforcing process of progress. The society, "our society", was simultaneously the subject, object and framework of such growth-oriented agency.

Unsustainable society?

A history of the present is concerned, as Mitchell Dean (1994, 35) puts it, "with that which is taken-for-granted, assumed to be given, or natural within contemporary social existence, a givenness or naturalness questioned in the course of contemporary struggles." Conceptual history in general can be conceived of as such a history of the present, and the concept of society is very much "a givenness or naturalness questioned in the course of contemporary struggles".

It has been argued in debates on postmodernity and globalisation that the modern Western concept of society is somehow too strong and too limited to sustain. It is too strong while referring to "an integrated holistic entity" (Featherstone 1995, 134) with progress and rationalisation as its inherent dynamics, and too limited due to its ties with the nation-state and national borders. In the Nordic countries, 'society' has been a very popular concept. Obviously, 'society' in Nordic political discourses bears those characteristics which have been referred to as the unsustainable modern idea of society. It has been fixed to the nation-state, referred to an integrated entity with its own subjectivity, and included progress as an inherent code in society itself.

However, conventional 'society' seems to be very persistent. Even in the time of EU citizenship and

globalized finance markets, use of ‘society’ in a meaning that extends over the borders of nation-state is more probably a conscious provocation than an indicator of a gradually eroding old concept. You do not find much talk about Europe as a society (Kettunen 2018).

In the 1990s, ‘welfare state’ was often consciously replaced by ‘welfare society’, associated with the critique of the “patronizing” welfare state. ‘Society’ referred to the state-free sphere of private and voluntary activities and actors; it was ‘civil society’ in the sense widely adopted in the 1980s, completely different from the Hegelian state-civil society distinction. However, in the Nordic countries, any attempt to create a political alternative by replacing ‘state’ with ‘society’ faces the heavy constraints of old conceptual conventions. ‘Welfare society’ can turn to support the legitimacy of the welfare state, because in the long Nordic tradition ‘society’ represents the general and public against the particular and private. ‘Welfare society’ is an ambiguous term, and controversies concerning the welfare state can be concealed by talking about ‘welfare society’.

In the end, ‘welfare state’ is a popular concept in Nordic countries. Almost all political parties and interest groups talk warmly and sympathetically about the welfare state. No political party can expect to get large support by declaring to oppose the welfare state, that is, institutions strongly involved in people’s everyday ways of relating their experiences and expectations. The arguments for a radical deregulation that emerged in the 1980s have been pushed into the margin. Those concerned about economic competitiveness or advocating budget discipline and austerity politics motivate these concerns by the necessity to create or rescue resources for the welfare state. The welfare state is used as an argument for restrictive immigration policies and for the promotion of labour immigration. Those defending the welfare state against the pressures of globalised capitalism argue that the welfare state by its security networks and risk sharing systems generates competitive advantages. The welfare state seems to be a goal that sanctifies the means and a means that sanctifies the goal.

The ways in which the national “we” is sustained and reproduced in the political responses to globalisation bear continuities from the older ideology of the virtuous circle. In the 1990s, the concepts of “social capital” and “social investment” gained international popularity, and in the Nordic countries this obviously opened up new opportunities to revitalise the ideas of the virtuous circle between social cohesion and economic success. Much of the ideological power of knowledge, education and innovation in the Nordic countries stems from the promise that competitiveness and its preconditions in the global economy can – or even must – be seen from a wider perspective than that of neo-liberalist deregulation.

However, at the same time as egalitarian institutions and participatory practices can be defended as preconditions for knowledge-based competitiveness, true membership in a competitive community is a matter of individual competitiveness. This, in turn, consists of communicative and innovative skills and talents and reflexive capabilities of monitoring oneself from the point of view of competitiveness. Besides winners and losers, there are people who cannot even participate in this competition. One may conclude that an insoluble tension appears between what are recognised as the institutional preconditions of competitiveness and how the contents of competitiveness itself are conceived.

In the Nordic countries as well as elsewhere in Europe, the 'social' seems to have new Janus faces. On one side, social policies are supposed to provide a social infrastructure that helps "us" to create competitiveness based on commitment, knowledge and innovativeness, that is, on "social capital" and "human capital". On the other side, the 'social' exists in the efforts to prevent and deal with social exclusion. These efforts mainly take the form of "activation policies", with their diverging national variants. In the adoption of these transnational ideas that are shared in all EU and OECD countries (Lødemel & Trickey 2001; Keskitalo 2008; Alanko & Outinen 2016), old national historical legacies have been actualised, notably legacies concerning the role of work. Not least in connection with immigration policies, the old notion of work as the condition and locus of individual self-discipline and social order within a national framework has strongly re-emerged.

In a competitive community, social problems tend to be defined as issues of individual behaviour, and policies are designed to create incentives for improvement. This does not exclude the protection of the weak nor efforts to increase their capabilities, and, as a recent Finnish survey (Kallio et al. 2020) demonstrates, explaining poverty with moral deficiencies such as laziness is less popular than it used to be. However, weakness is associated with individual properties rather than with a role in social relations and socioeconomic structures.

In the making of the Nordic welfare state, the notion of society as an agent mediated between experience and expectation, not only in politics and policies, but also in people's efforts to control their own living. Ordinary people could take on a dual relationship to "society". They had, as individuals and members of social groups and classes, the possibility to blame society for the hard conditions of their living and, at the same time, the possibility to seek for support from the society against their troubles and suppressive practices. Arguably, this mode of thought has lost a lot of its legitimacy. However, it is far from self-evident that people willingly accept any individualised or – in references to the imperatives of a globalised economy – naturalised explanation for their grievances. In right-wing populist movements, we may find some evidence of political implications

appearing in the constructions of bordering collective threat images and in the subsequent forms and contents of political protests.

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