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Author(s): Turtiainen, Kati; Kokkonen, Tuomo

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9. Citizenship, populism and social work in the Finnish welfare state

Kati Turtiainen ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6318-7197>

Tuomo Kokkonen ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1675-0917>

Abstract:

This chapter ties together discussions of citizenship and social work practice in the context of growing populist and neoliberal political trends in Finland. These political trends are manifested in populistic right-wing movements on the one hand, and the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state on the other. Both political trends – populism and neoliberalism – tend to separate people into those who are ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’. However, the dynamics of globalisation has radically changed nation states, creating a need to redefine the understanding of an emancipatory idea of citizenship connected to human rights, because social rights on their own are no longer able to protect the human condition. These emancipatory approaches face resistance from contemporary populist political movements. This situation is paradoxical, as populist political movements also base their political mandate on an underprivileged group of people, namely those citizens living in fragile life situations within the nation state. Additionally, social work practice has conventionally been restricted by national contexts due to differences in social work traditions, social systems, social problems and cultures. These effects manifest in social work practices, intentionally or unintentionally, through the application of different approaches. Therefore, social work practice must redefine its position in the current political climate, and social policy must pay more attention to social work ethics as a human rights profession.

Introduction

This chapter analyses the relationship between social work, populism and social citizenship in the context of the Finnish welfare state. Traditionally Finland, as well as other Nordic welfare states (Norway, Sweden and Denmark), has had universal and institutional welfare policies with a strong public sector. This kind of social policy has been strongly supported by political parties and by people. Likewise, social workers have adjusted to the state-centred ideology of the socio-political system and bureaucratic management (Askeland & Strauss, 2014, p. 251; Marjanen et al., 2018).

During recent decades, populism in Finland has received increased support following a similar trend in other Nordic countries, as well as elsewhere in Europe. Although populist parties in Nordic countries are usually categorised as politically right-wing, their policies typically follow some of the programmes of social democratic parties claiming to uphold a commitment to social justice and

welfare. In Finland the welfare project has historically been a somewhat national project, as a consequence of the low number of immigrants compared to other Nordic Countries. Recently Finland, like other Nordic Countries, has been affected by large-scale migration, which has challenged the redistribution of social rights to asylum seekers and other forced migrants. The rising wave populism has strengthened the national tendency of the Finnish welfare state. Instead of seeing the welfare state as an institution unconditionally protecting human beings, one of the key themes of populism in Finland is to ‘protect’ the welfare state by restricting the sphere of social solidarity to the ‘original citizens’ of the nation state (Fryklund, 2018, p. 30).

This growing populism has created a new kind of struggle over the content of social citizenship and the extent of social rights. Instead of operating on the traditional political antagonism of left and right, populistic political debate attacks the idea of humanism and unquestionable common humanity. From the perspective of the welfare state this phenomenon is conceptualised – depending on its severity – as welfare nationalism, welfare chauvinism or welfare exclusionism (Keskinen, 2014, 2017). In Finland, the contemporary rise of populism is a challenging political trend for social work practice, because it opposes social work’s professional ethics, based on human rights and social citizenship being available to all people (e.g. Ife, 2008; Staub-Bernasconi, 2014) not just ‘original Finns’. Populism also opposes other global challenges, such as factual bases of climate change, which should be realised in people’s lifestyles. In addition, populism opposes human and social rights by denying the emancipatory outlook of identity politics.

In this chapter we discuss how populism on the one hand, and the welfare state on the other, relate to social work values as a human rights profession. The relevance of the discussion has general implications and is not restricted to the case of Finland. The current context of the Finnish welfare state provides an interesting but also challenging case for social work practice because it is committed to the welfare state as national project, and it draws its support from people in need, or the ‘common people’, as they are often referred to. We start by contextualising the evolution of social citizenship in Finland and the position of social work in it. Second, we discuss the logic of populism and how it differs from the social work profession. Before drawing conclusions, we reflect upon the challenges and boundaries of social citizenship based on the research literature.

Evolution of social citizenship in Finland

Historically the question of solidarity inside the nation state was effortlessly encapsulated into the political idea of the welfare state. During the years immediately after the Second World War, T. H.

Marshall (1950, pp. 6-7, 18) crystallised the idea of modern social citizenship as status based on ‘full membership of the community’. The elements of this political community were civil rights and political rights as the original foundations of liberalism. During the late 19th and early part of the 20th century the character of liberalism was changed by emerging social rights. During the time of building of welfare states, Marshall considered social rights as a radical turning point in the history of liberalism as they created a universal right to real income for all citizens and also presented limits to the free market and its economic system (*ibid.*, 27-33). It is also important to note that Marshall did not limit his idea of social rights to social legislation, but rather saw them in the context of humanism and ‘human equality’. Marshall’s concept of social citizenship was also absorbed in the building of Nordic welfare states, where it was refined and further developed.

Even today the mainstream understanding of the theory of social policy is deeply influenced by Marshall (1950). One example of this is the seminal book by Gosta Esping-Andersen (1990, pp. 21-26), *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, where he analyses social redistribution in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Esping-Andersen was critical towards Marshall’s idea of social citizenship, but not from the viewpoint of nationalism or its equation with nation state. According to Esping-Andersen, Marshall’s idea of social citizenship did not sufficiently prevent poverty because it did not adequately increase income redistribution as the basis of a welfare state. Marshall’s thinking reflected the British tradition of welfare state building that restricted public social responsibility to securing a flat rate basic income and saw social benefits based on income as a matter of collective bargaining taking place in the labour market.

This contradiction between the British tradition of a welfare state limited to social services and flat rate social benefits available to only those living in poverty, and Nordic welfare which includes all the aforementioned policies as well as fairly generous income based social benefits, has again become an acute topic of discussion. In the Nordic model, austerity policies hit not only the very poorest but also the middle class – especially families with small children – that have enjoyed the whole scope of the welfare state, from health and day care services to income based social benefits such as maternity and family leave, and unemployment benefits. In this political context, where welfare cuts are affecting the daily life of people who identify themselves as the ‘majority’ in society, it is politically easy to thematise the problems as an overburdening of the state, caused by the ‘other’, which means migrants. In a conventional political context ‘the others’ were those who did not want work, belonged to sexual minorities, lived a morally culpable life due to alcoholism or mental illness, or were guilty of welfare fraud. However, in the political climate plagued by

populism, immigrants and cultural minorities have taken the place of prime ‘contributors’ to the overloading of the state. Hence, in this populistic thinking centred on the social reality of ‘common people’, it is not only rational, but even morally sound to ‘close the borders’ and restrict social solidarity to the core of national citizenship (van Oorchot & Mauleman, 2012; Kamali & Jönsson, 2018.)

Suvi Keskinen (2013, 2014, 2017; Keskinen et al., 2016) has underlined the importance of conceptualising the link between welfare state and nationalism as is taking place in the concepts of welfare nationalism, welfare chauvinism or welfare exclusionism. These concepts represent and classify various nationalistic political strategies of social political systems in the context of Finnish immigration politics and policies. ‘Welfare nationalism’ refers to discourses and ideologies that intertwine welfare provision with national membership. According to Keskinen (2014) welfare nationalism characterises the way asylum and non-western migration is treated in Finnish politics. She follows Suszycki’s (2011, p. 56) understanding that welfare nationalism is a ‘commitment to the welfare-related national interests and ideas’, where the welfare state is presented as a national concern that should be the focus of politics and the economy. Welfare nationalism can be considered as a political mindset that is very close to the mainstream thinking in welfare state discourses of the latter part of the 20th century, such as is present in the thinking of Marshall and Esping-Andersen.

‘Welfare chauvinism’ refers to the political strategies that not only categorise the deserving and underserving as citizens or non-citizens, but also define citizenship with (ethno-) nationalist criteria and non-citizenship as ‘otherness’. In its political strategies welfare chauvinism also relies on consciously-created racialising categories. Keskinen (2014) writes that, in Finnish policies, right-wing populist parties, but also other political actors, ‘use this kind of rhetoric and build their political agenda on such a view’. ‘Welfare exclusionism’ reserves welfarist egalitarianism and solidarity only for those who live and work in the country. Welfare exclusionism seeks, for example, to exclude non-citizens living in a country with residence permits from benefits and public services. Additionally, welfare exclusionism can demand special conditions, based on language, culture, working status, incomes and length of residence for non-citizens as criteria for access to benefits. Keskinen (2014) illustrates that welfare exclusionism extends welfare chauvinist arguments that seek to exclude from welfare services on the basis of national identity and limit access to benefits for those perceived as ‘others’.

All three definitions (Keskinen, 2014) shed light on current Finnish politics and policies based on who is considered as belonging, or not, to the nation. It is also important to note that the nation state, national culture, and the division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ were not a significant problem for the early reformist movement, as the everyday life of the people at the bottom of social stratification, as well as the economy framing it, were largely national issues. The political promise of the post-WWII welfare state was to turn the austerity of a war economy into a national welfare economy where the equitable contribution of every citizen was traded for social citizenship and a rising standard of living. Thus, the concept of solidarity in a welfare state was, by and large, a nationally-endorsed concept of solidarity. The most important exceptions to this historical trajectory were the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948) and the 1961 European Social Charter and its constant renewal process. The European Pillar of Social Rights (EU 1991; Finlex 44/1991) is as a practical attempt to define the content of social citizenship beyond the nation state context. Its goal is to secure equal opportunities, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion for all citizens of EU nation states irrespective of their race, gender, religion or political opinion. Moreover, the European Pillar of Social Rights obligates EU member countries to combat social exclusion and discrimination, promote solidarity, protect the rights of children and improve the quality of the environment.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966, Finland ratified 1976)) and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EU 1991) are important developments of social citizenship because they manifest the routes of social development that are alternative to national welfare states. This development is backed up by the theoretical transitions that have seen the emergence of discourses about multicultural citizenship and seeing human rights as a seamless cosmopolitan extension to the social rights restricted by the boundaries of a nation state (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994). These changes within the emancipatory outlook of citizenship give emphasis to the trans-national human rights movements within social work. They also place the development squarely against the nation-based political outlook of populism.

According to Isin and Turner (2007) the future of citizenship is to strengthen recognition of the human condition in the areas where the traditional concept of social rights has been proven to be inadequate, and in areas where it has been eroded or become outdated. In practice this places the position of forced and voluntary migrants at the core of social citizenship. In a more general sense Isin and Turner (*ibid.*) emphasise the importance of decoupling the idea of citizenship from the mid

20th century culture structured around nuclear families supported by the working-class male breadwinner. They place difference, multiculturalism, minorities and rapidly changing identities and lifestyles as foundations of social citizenship.

Outlining populism in Finland

Populism is a ‘thin’ political ideology (Stanley, 2008) that is difficult to grasp in a single definition. In fact, more than a form of a political ideology, populism is a multifaceted and chameleon-like political movement. The actual appearance of populism has varied greatly during its history and there is considerable diversity within it. Instead of conceptual coherence, populism is haunted by ‘conceptual slipperiness’ (Gherghina & Soare, 2013). However, there are many elements that repeatedly take place within populistic movements, of which nationalism and statism, driven by xenophobia and faith in the authority of a strong leadership, are the most important. Additionally, populist movements typically draw from an affinity with religion and a nostalgic outlook on the past, combined with anti-elitism and intensive use of conspiracy theories and apocalyptic visions of the future (ibid., pp. 3-4; Roth, 2016).

Populism is also a reactive political movement by its nature. Since its roots, often placed in the late 19th century politics in the United States, populism has drawn energy from economic, social distress and uncertainty of life among ‘common people’. In this sense, people wanting to protest against the elites of society are found in the supporting structures of populism (Argersinger, 2014). In practical terms, historically populistic protests have been targeted against aspirations to expand free trade or against changes of industrial society, driven by technical innovations. Classic examples of historical populism are the links with agrarian movements or the calling for a stronger role for the state in developing the nation. Moreover, the link between populism and fascism has been – and is still – evident (Mișcoiu, 2013). It is also obvious that one of the most important themes of contemporary populism is the criticism against the welfare state. However, the welfare state *per se* is rarely criticised by populistic movements, but rather the neoliberal cuts to welfare benefits. In populistic discourse dismantling of the welfare state, combined with the welfare state’s previously described commitment to democracy, human rights, emancipatory identity politics, multiculturalism and increasing international co-operation, can be seen as threat to life the ‘common people’. Modern theory of social citizenship (Isin & Turner, 2007; Isin et al., 2008) is the extreme political opponent to populism, even though both – however in a different way and for different reasons – support the welfare state.

In its contemporary manifestation we can speak of neo-populism, advanced populism or 21st century populism. These are radicalised forms of the political movement. A typical feature of contemporary neo-populism is that, instead of stability and constitutionalism, it has become an ad-hoc collection of identities, social classes and ideologies as can be perceived in the politics of Marine Le Pen in France, or Donald Trump in the United States (Mișcoiu, 2013, p. 18). Using the concepts of Ernesto Laclau (2005), it can be argued that neo- or advanced populism often takes the form of ‘an empty signifier’ that is capable of seizing almost any social or economic phenomena in society and criticising it following the basic principles of populism, typically nationalism, xenophobia and faith in the authority of a strong leader. By doing so, populism also constantly reinvents its social and political foundation by recreating new political dichotomies between ‘us’ and ‘them’. These dichotomies do not only attack other parts of society, including the ‘liberal’ welfare state ‘favouring immigration and multiculturalism’, but they also inspire populistic political rhetoric, including hate speech (Kovala & Palonen, 2018).

Populism in Finland reflects the general outlines of historical development of the political ideology. The forerunner of the current leading populist party in Finland, the True Finns, was The Rural Party which was founded in 1959. It had its roots in the political struggle to improve the social situation of poor agrarian people in an increasingly industrialising society. The Rural Party defined itself as a political party speaking in the voice of the agrarian ‘forgotten people’ (Fryklund, 2018).

Despite being a strictly political movement, The Rural Party largely lacked xenophobic tones typical of contemporary populism in Finland and other countries. The Rural Party existed at a time when nationalism and, in the case of Finland, ‘Finnishness’ had a positive undertone and was not contested in a way typical of our time. Instead of xenophobia, its core themes were the voice of the poor people and criticism of the elites. Although sharing many political goals with left wing parties in terms of building the welfare state and extending the system of social benefits, the Rural Party differed from the labour movement due to its agrarian background and the substituting of socialist ideology with populism. The Rural Party was at the peak of its political power in the late 1960s and especially after the 1970 general election where it sent 18 members to the Finnish parliament of 200 members (*ibid.*).

During recent decades populism has manifested itself very clearly in general elections around Europe. This trend has also been clear in Finland where the populist successor of the Rural Party, the True Finns received 17.7% of the votes in the Parliamentary election of 2015, acquiring 38 seats

out of 200 in parliament. The True Finns Party was also invited into the right-wing coalition government formed after the Parliamentary election of 2015, despite having a political programme typical of other western European populistic parties. For example, in Sweden other parties have refused to co-operate with the Swedish Democrats – a populistic party closely resembling the True Finns Party. In Finland, due to the political pressures of the coalition government, the True Finns Party has split into two, with a considerable proportion of the most prominent populist politicians continuing in government under the Blue Reform Party. However, despite the stormy period in government, and despite the party splitting into two, the True Finns Party continued its success in 2019 general election by getting 17.5% support. The party has only one member of parliament less than the largest party, the Social Democrats.

Along with steady and relatively large political support, populism has left a clear imprint on Finnish society. Most importantly, it has led to more restrictive immigration policies and more conservative values in family policies, education and international politics. During the time of the 2015-2019 coalition government, Finnish populism also enabled the right-wing parties to exercise austerity policies that included many fiercely criticised welfare cuts (Fryklund, 2018). Through their tight grasp on political power, the two populist parties have also managed to create a political atmosphere in Finland where the idea of the welfare state has been associated with nationalism, and where the political agenda and vocabulary of politics is directed by populist discourses (Kovala & Palonen, 2018). This nationalist undertone of political thinking is extremely clearly presented in the concept of ‘internal solidarity’, used in the political programme of the leading populist party in Finland, the Finns Party.

Nationalistic and just policy includes the idea of helping underprivileged and marginalised Finnish people. We would like to support people in need primarily inside our own country. We call that *internal solidarity* (The Finns Party, 2018 [authors’ translation and emphasis]).

Social work and boundaries of social citizenship in Finnish welfare services

The birth of classical populism draws broadly from the same processes of modernization of society as the formation of modern social work in the classical works of Jane Addams, Beatrice Webb and Mary Richmond. Like social work, populism also strives to give a voice to citizens living in scarcity and uncertainty, and to change the world according to their needs and political will (Mișcoiu, 2013). Populism and social work can easily find the capitalist market to be a source of social problems. The fall of feudal society and the increasing power of market forces, the rise of

liberalism, together with industrial urbanisation, poverty, and homelessness were equally important for the development of populism as well as social work.

During the evolution of welfare state, and in the time of economic growth until the early 1990s, social work could respond to the needs of people in fragile life situations. During the time of welfare state building, social work in Finland, as in other countries, was rather a national project. Past decades of globalisation and the so-called neoliberal transformations of the welfare state have undermined the balance of the national context of social work. Generally, the changes have consisted of a combination of austerity policies leading to increased uncertainty in the labour market, increasing inequality of incomes, and the decline of welfare services and benefits (Pierson, 2006; Kananen, 2014). Also, social policy has now transformed into policies that strive for increasing economic efficiency of the market (Heiskala, 2006). This dilemma has been extensively reflected in social policy and social work research (e.g. Närhi & Kokkonen, 2014; Marjanen et al., 2018; Fazzi, 2015).

After the growing neoliberalisation of the welfare state, social workers have managed to restructure their position within the changing political landscape by resisting changes through ‘intelligent viability’, which means combining creative practices and developing professional counteraction with their service users (Nordberg, 2018). However, neoliberal changes have put social work into a difficult position as a welfare state profession, where it has to mediate between underprivileged people facing social problems and the changing public policies. The ethical challenges for social workers, caused by this difficult position, have connections to neoliberal economic pressures. (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016; Tiitinen & Kauppi, 2014.)

In practice, national and local budget cuts have been targeted at social and health services, which mostly affect people living in vulnerable situations in Finnish society. There has also been cuts in welfare benefits, and access to social security has been restricted and put under a stricter control. At the same time the number of long-term unemployed people is increasing. These changes, together with the rise of workfare-type activation policies, have led to a growing number of unfair situations for individuals (Metteri, 2012) as well as the polarization of society (Marjanen et al., 2018, p. 87). These changes are a serious challenge to social work practice as well as a seedbed for increasing populism.

The most topical point of contradiction between populism and welfare services, and especially between populism and social work practice, is how to enhance basic and human rights of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. Traditionally, in Finland the number of migrants has been much smaller than in other Nordic countries, but Finland was affected by large scale migration in 2015, along with many other European countries. At the same time the True Finns Party became a member in the government and managed to weaken the Alien Act and its interpretation (e.g. weakening the possibility of being granted asylum, and making family reunification impossible for many forced migrants). Moreover, even though the Finnish Constitution and commitments to the EU Social Charter guarantees basic rights to all people living in Finland, many local municipalities deny access to basic rights for undocumented migrants.

In Finland, the mainstream social work profession has not taken a position of radical social work or social mobilization (Nordberg, 2018), for example, by making alliances with civil society activists (see Briskman, 2014). However, research shows that people working towards the integration of migrants in Finland, including social workers, practise their expertise also using activist and critical approaches. However, there are places of control, such as the asylum process, where experts exercise more control rather than using their ethical obligations towards forced migrants (Sotkasiira, 2018a.) Also, the integration work of migrants does not sufficiently manage to improve their wellbeing as active and critical citizens (e.g. Sotkasiira, 2018b; Hiitola & Peltola, 2018; Turtiainen et al., 2018). Moreover, even though the Finnish welfare state provides income redistribution to migrants having residence permits, the redistribution of power and knowledge remains weak (Heino & Veistilä, 2015; Nordberg, 2015), which is the consequence of intentional or unintentional discrimination. It is obvious that the above-mentioned violations of actualisations of active social citizenship and human rights of asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, but also other migrants, are the places for social work to stress and demonstrate its ethical dimension. In general, the adversarial societal climate promoted by populism creates acts or silent acceptance of racism and discrimination towards different minorities in everyday contexts.

Conclusions

We have shown that populism is a political force that favours authoritarian policies as resolutions to all the problems and imperfections of liberal ‘open societies’, of which Finland with other Nordic welfare states are prominent examples. The ideas of ‘voice’ as well as ‘people’ in populism are fundamentally different compared to the idea of Nordic welfare states and social work as a human

rights based profession. In its historical role, populism has played a part in integrating poor and underprivileged social classes into the project of nation building, although at the cost embracing a glorious past and unified consensualism as a basis of identification of ‘us’ (e.g. Roth, 2016). Even though the populist idea of the distinction between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ or ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Laclau, 2005) motivates political action by voicing the frustration that exists within marginalised groups, this division opposes social work ethics in an ontological sense. This is because such a distinction is contrary to the fundamentally social nature of human beings that arises from the deep dependence upon each other to satisfy biological, psychological and sociocultural needs, which are common to all people (Staub-Bernasconi, 2010, p. 17).

In Finland, the roots of populism arose from the Rural Party promoting the rights of agrarian ‘forgotten people’ (Fryklund, 2018). Recently, the True Finns Party, which followed on from the Rural Party, encapsulated populism in a similar way to other European populist parties, primarily with the demand for closing borders and limiting social citizenship for asylum seekers and other migrants (e.g. Fazzi, 2015). We connected populism to these nationalistic and xenophobic right-wing political movements. These political movements aim to re-enforce nationalism and exclude social citizenship selectively from migrants, but also idealise a history that is hostile to gender and many minorities. Further, populist political ideology creates antagonistic divisions between imagined national identities being hostile to migrants, sexual and many other minorities. As Hirvonen & Pennanen (2018, p. 39) writes, populism limits the self-understanding of ‘the people’ ‘by defining themselves only in opposition to an imagined other’. These factors all together cause social pathologies instead of re-enforcing human, and social rights as well as human dignity to all people (*ibid.*).

This antihumanistic political environment that dodges commitment to human rights and idealises welfare exclusionism creates a challenging environment for an ethically sound social work practice (Roth, 2016; Keskinen, 2014). Populism forces social work to look for a new political position to balance itself within the tensions of neoliberal policies and populism. In Finland these tensions challenge social work practise in at least five fields to guarantee social rights and human protection for all people (Staub-Bernasconi, 2014; Ife, 2008). First, social work practice must rethink its state mandate as social rights based public policies may exclude people living in vulnerable situations, such as asylum seekers and undocumented people. Second, rethinking the state mandate may also have consequences in the structure of social work in order to advocate for those service users whose rights are weakened – on one hand, by neoliberal policies resulting in poverty, homelessness and

other social problems and, on the other, by populist policies that deny asylum seekers and undocumented migrants access to basic rights. Third, the needs of marginalised and poor people must be met in practice by enabling access to social benefits and services that create the circumstances for a dignified future. Fourth, social work must create places for participation and dialogue to promote human rights and dignity. Fifth, social work must promote sustainable approaches, which find ways to reconcile the global economical, ecological and social dimensions manifested in the local lives of people. These local, national or global eco-social approaches (Matthies & Närhi, 2017; Dominelli, 2012) are needed to oppose the populist denial of climate change and the consequences of the global economy.

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