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## **Imperial Difference in Nordic Welfare States: Overlooked Colonial Legacies and Sámi Struggles**

### *Introduction*

When it comes to imperial and colonial legacies and the need for various decolonial approaches to analyze them, the Nordic states offer an interesting, yet under-studied comparison point. Traditionally, both in the Nordics themselves and globally, colonial continuities are overlooked or considered less important in these cases. However, we know 1) that coloniality is a global phenomenon and the Nordics have been long embedded in various imperial relations, 2) recent historical research has begun to unearth various colonial entanglements dating back to making of the colonial modernity, and 3) perhaps most crucially, the Nordics are home to the only indigenous population of Europe, the Sámi. Their cultural region, Sápmi, stretches over the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish nation-states. Yet, in wider debates over colonial legacies and decolonizing sociology, perspectives and research regarding the only indigenous people in Europe and their colonial situation have been largely missing.

A historical sociology of the colonial legacies in the Nordics is important also because the erasure and deflection of imperial entanglements of the nation-states there and their national narratives has been so successful and thorough that the Nordic countries themselves are “largely marked by a blindness towards their own specific colonial trajectories (and especially the imperial difference)” (Tlostanova 2023, 154). I have made the same argument myself regarding the national narratives of Finland (Korhonen 2021). One could say that the colonial legacy of erasing and occluding colonial legacies from historical and political understandings is a unique feature of the Nordic welfare in terms of its forcefulness and effectiveness. Or, as Gunlög Fur points out regarding colonialism and Swedish history, “unthinkable connections?” (2013).

Tlostanova et al. have forcefully argued in favor of this project: “Obviously, the role of the Nordic imperial-colonial projects in modernity/coloniality needs to be further theorized. A productive direction would be to elaborate on the forms and ways of [them] joining modernity/coloniality”, and importantly, how the position of relatively less imperial power “was compensated or rechanneled symbolically, discursively and epistemically.” (2019, 292). To my knowledge, no one else has yet advanced this in historical sociology.

More generally, my analysis of colonial legacies and specifically of imperial difference in the Nordic welfare state, joins a wider project in sociology to expand and pluralize our perspectives on histories of colonialism and their continued legacies. Raewyn Connell has argued for a generally more pluralized approach in this regard (2007,2018), while Manuela Boatca and Anca Parvulescu's award winning *Creolizing the Modern* (2022) has advanced this particularly. In this vein, many have argued for approaches that are globally more comparative and analyze overlooked cases and regions (see for example Itzigsohn 2023, Go and Lawson 2017). Furthermore, in terms of advancing a historical sociology itself better at analyzing colonial legacies, i.e. less burdened by the imperial entanglements of the discipline (Steinmetz 2013) and colonial methodologies (Bhambra 2016), sociologist Sujata Patel has argued for a decolonial methodology that takes into account "geographically varied and intellectually diverse decolonial critiques" beyond the binaries of East-West, North-South (Patel 2020, 374). In this regard, Nordic welfare states are a blindspot hiding right under our noses.

However, this does not only mean analyzing colonial legacies in different previously overlooked locations, but doing so analytically more relationally by considering also inter-imperial dynamics. Some have called the Atlantic-centrism and Western-centrism of sociology in excavating colonial legacies to run the risk of re-colonizing decolonizing approaches (Moosavi 2023), which is similar to what happened with some indigenous sociologies' nation-centrism after WWII (Patel 2020), and also something that postcolonial approaches have been critiqued of in focusing on particular colonial relations while overlooking others.

Parvulescu and Boatca write elsewhere that a more inter-imperial approach means the retrieval of histories and experiences of colonial and imperial situations that have been overlooked and reinscribing them into social theory (2023). For the Nordic welfare states this needs to be done both in terms of their internal understandings as well as in terms of how they have been globally perceived and incorporated into sociology's analyses of colonialism and its legacies.

With my co-author, following Boatca and Parvulescu, I have previously turned the inter-imperial analytical gaze towards Turkish nation-making, situating it within wider imperial circuits of knowledge transfer (Bavbek and Korhonen 2024). I suggest that the same analytical move can be useful in analyzing colonial legacies and the imperial difference of the Nordic welfare states. It helps us position their self-conceptualization as well as socio-economic organization "within inter-imperial legacies and negotiations." (Ibid., 22). Furthermore, this helps overcome "the reification inherent in the assumption that empires interact with each other only as state formations by revealing connections, exchanges, and mobilizations across empires as well as below the state level" (Parvulescu and Boatca 2022, 10).

I will be analyzing the Nordic welfare states specifically through the concept of imperial difference. Imperial difference “provides a productive entry-point for analyses of colonial trajectories and structures in Scandinavia because it both firmly places the region within the context of European imperial expansion and acknowledges its specific manifestations” (Tlostanova et al. 2019, 294).

Imperial difference distinguishes between various modern empires and reflects how the emergence of modernity was an inter-imperial affair (Boatca and Parvulescu 2022, Bavbek and Korhonen 2024). For efforts at analyzing colonial legacies and advancing decolonial approaches, historically contextualizing imperial difference is crucial as it “disrupts the homogeneity of imperial spatiality and complicates it by drawing our attention to various complete or partial losers that failed to fulfil their imperial missions, occupied second-class places within the modern imperial hierarchy, and competed among themselves rather than with the winners.” (Tlostanova et al. 2019, 292). This is a historically important point that is underlined by the case of the Nordics, as these states like to distance themselves from colonial legacies by arguing that their imperial projects either failed long ago or never even existed. Furthermore, properly historically contextualizing imperial difference is also analytically important as it “enlarges postcolonial conceptions of power which often remain confined to the discursive Foucauldian analysis between the West and the “Other” and the associated Fanonian feeling of “abbreviat[ion]” and “violation”.” (ibid.) Nordic states and their histories have similarly tended to argue for a position outside of these postcolonial conceptions of power. As Tlostanova et al. point out, the effective erasure or full assimilation of the Sámi is an example of the distancing from coloniality that the Nordic states have been successful at.

Paying attention to the global historical context of colonial legacies and their effects on decolonizing sociology resonates also with recent critiques over decolonial approaches becoming mere buzzwords or theoretical propositions. Madina Tlostanova has pointed out that “decoloniality is not a new universalist metatheory that one can attach to anything just as it is not a situational tactical slogan used by specific disenfranchised groups in their fight with the state or the corporations.” (Tlostanova 2023, 145). Rather, both in terms of decolonizing efforts in US sociology, to have a more comparative and relational understanding of colonial legacies, and in terms of similar efforts in the Nordics, not to simply import discussions from elsewhere, we should develop a better historical understanding of the imperial difference in the Nordics.

### *Empirical Inquiries*

I address the imperial difference in the Nordics in two steps. First, I will review recent literature on colonial legacies in the Nordics, especially in terms of postcolonial and decolonial approaches in the social sciences and history in general and in sociology in particular. There is wealth of new studies, but they remain

fragmented across language lines and largely disconnected from US and global debates in historical sociology (see for example Lehtola 2015, Merivirta and Särkkä 2022, Kohvakka 2023, Keskinen 2019, Doran 2023, Höglund and Burnett 2019, McGuire 2022, etc.).

Second, I will put this literature to test through an empirical case study of the Finnish state and its imperial difference through three main avenues. First, I will analyze Finland's various imperial entanglements throughout the 19th and 20th centuries through an inter-imperial lens. During this period the Finnish state developed, there was a national awakening, and the country went from Swedish rule, to Russian rule to independence. Each of these developments were variously connected to imperial relations (Korhonen 2019)

Second, I will explore the relations of the making of the welfare state with global coloniality. This involved the construction of a modern welfare regime and in a developmental state that went from the poorest in Europe to one of the richest within 60-70 years (Korhonen 2020). This Finnish developmental state was built on peculiar settler colonial endeavors, large-scale internal migration, and very unique relations between Western empires and the Soviet Union since WWI. During this period, the Sámi in Finland suffered through their worst forced assimilation, including state-led forced sterilization programs.

And third, I will focus on the Finnish state's historical relation and treatment of the Sámi up until recent times. My gaze will be turned inwards and I will analyze the policies and attitudes towards the Sámi by the majority Finns.

Through this exploration, I give an outline and a theorization of the imperial difference in the Nordic context. This can hopefully be a useful comparative reference point for wider efforts at decolonizing sociological research, especially in terms of analyzing the entanglements of the Nordic welfare state within global imperial differences in general and with the decolonial politics and resistance of the Sámi in particular.

As a Finnish scholar, and not an expert on Sámi scholarship, I approach this research from the perspective of Finnish national politics and its colonial legacies in engaging the recognition of Sami rights – beyond formal inclusion and equality – as a historically dominated minority. Sámi histories and self-representations in the context of colonial practices directed towards an indigenous population have been written since at least the 70s, supported by transnational ties and the establishment of the Sámi Delegation (Nyssönen 2008), but only recently the histories of colonization and exploitation have begun to be accepted on a state level. This however, is not yet well reflected in state policy or national historical reflections. In both Nordic and global comparisons, the Sámi in Finland have not been similarly able to gain recognition as an autonomous movement or within a global rights discourse beyond formal and ahistorical assimilation into the national state (See also Nyssönen 2007).

## *Conclusion*

This kind of a greater understanding of differences and global comparisons in terms of imperial difference and continued colonial legacies today importantly “allows for the formulation of categories that are fit to define not only the local manifestations of historical colonialisms but also global modern/colonial intersections, correlations and deep coalitions between different experiences of coloniality.” (Tlostanova et al. 2019, 293).

This paper joins the effort to analyze a wide range of colonial legacies globally and their implications for postcolonial and decolonial approaches that “could prove especially valuable for the development of analysis of settler colonialism beyond the more well-known settler colonial contexts of North America, Latin America and Oceania” (ibid. 294). Finally, by decentering the role of the Nordic welfare state from its old position as a “model case” (Krause 2021) of equality and social solidarity, by analyzing its inherent imperial difference and colonial legacies, historical sociology can contribute to analyzing colonial legacies more relationally and hopefully advance the ways in which they are considered and not overlooked in contemporary politics.