



Responsible local communities – A neoliberal regime of solidarity in Finnish rural policy



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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the geographical literature on neoliberalism with a case study of Finnish rural policy. Through a close reading of policy documents and within the analytical framework of Foucauldian governmentality, we show how notions of local community and locality are being produced as intimate allies in the existence of rural citizens to allow more responsible local communities. The promoted approach speaks highly of civic participation but also appeals to the neoliberal ethos of finding new and cheaper ways for dealing with social problems. Thus the suggested approach is about producing an apolitical form of collective mobilisation for partnership in various governance projects. Neoliberal approach to solidarity presents a challenge to the still dominant Nordic (social democratic) understanding of welfare in Finland.

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1. Introduction

Finland is, by several measures, among the most “rural” countries in Europe. According to the OECD definitions of rural areas, Finland ranks fifth in terms of the share of territory covered by predominantly rural regions (89%), and second both in terms of population that it hosts (53%) and GDP produced within these regions (45%) (OECD, 2008, 32). Given, for example, the longer distances to services and weaker infrastructure compared to urban settlements, living in a sparsely populated rural area involves a particular risk. Owing to the reduced role of agriculture in rural economies since the 1960s, many rural areas have also suffered from a loss of jobs and population decline.

Since the 1970s, the so called Nordic (social democratic) welfare system has been able to provide reasonably high standards of public services and security across the country. For example in education and health, Finland has been among the OECD countries with lowest regional disparities (OECD, 2008, 23). The Nordic welfare model has three special characteristics: far-reaching state intervention in order to secure individual welfare, large institutional social rights and a social security system based on universal coverage and solidarity. This has meant a relatively high level of welfare benefits and state effort to provide security for all its citizens and to treat everybody equally (Hellsten, 2004, 135). Instead of actuarial insurance payments, the welfare system has stressed enhancing social equality through income redistribution. Also typical of Nordic

systems is the significant role of corporatism. Especially in the field of industrial relations, the Nordic model places great emphasis on collective bargaining. (Sippola, 2012, 53–54; Pierre, 2009, 40). The development of the Nordic model is often associated with the strength of social democratic ideology in these countries (e.g. Hellsten, 2004, 133; Esping-Andersen, 1990, 27). Since the late 1980s the welfare state approach to service provision has also been challenged in Finland (e.g. Eräsaari and Rahkonen, 1995). The challenge is most striking in remote and declining rural areas where welfare services, in particular, have been a key issue for quite some time.

This article is concerned with the ways and means of governing rural welfare in Finland. It addresses the need of documenting “new” forms of rural governance named by several rural scholars (Goodwin, 1998; Edwards et al., 2001; Connelly et al., 2006; Pini, 2006). With respect to the geographic literature on neoliberalism and governmentality (e.g. MacKinnon, 2002; Ward and McNicholas, 1998; Martin and Ritchie, 1999; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Peck, 2001, 2004) our aim is to enhance the anatomy of contemporary practices of governing rural welfare and, in particular rural social risks. Neoliberal governmentality accounts have been criticised for being unable to deal with the new forms of “individualised collective action” that have emerged along with an assumed neoliberal hegemony (Barnett, 2005, 10). In addition, the prevailing conception of neoliberalism has been blamed for suggesting a too narrow understanding and a lack of regard for “hybridized” strategies often typical of contemporary forms of governance (Larner, 2005, 10–12). These deficiencies are addressed here with a context specific analysis of how the ideas of community and locality are used to mobilise rural policy, their geographical and political implications, as well as

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a theoretical understanding of neoliberalism based on “analytics of government” and Michel Foucault’s lectures at Collège de France in the late 1970s. Although this article concerns the northern edge of Europe, Finnish rural policy is considered relevant in illustrating how current community-based modes of governance change the social democratic approach to welfare and solidarity and how they affect our understanding of neoliberalism itself.

In the following, we first clarify the methodology. We then examine how the notion of solidarity can be seen as part of the current desire to find more advanced modes of governing. Next we briefly depict the context of rural Finland and discuss Finnish rural policy, its mix of actors and assemblage of practices. We then analyse programming as a strategy of governing the rural population. Finally we wrap up and consider the wider politico-geographical implications of the proposed mode of governance.

2. Method and material

This analysis is based on a close reading of key documents, particularly the recently published “A Responsible Local Community – National Programme of Villages and Leader Groups 2008–2013” (SYTY, 2008), which sets out a general programme for co-operation between Finnish villages. The document is read closely from a neoliberal governance strategy perspective. Close reading is a systematic and disciplined method of revealing meanings in texts that are socially shared, but political rather than universal. It is often a critical endeavour since it helps the audience to gain understanding about the aims of texts when such meanings are not explicit. (Brummett, 2010, 3, 9, 17). This analysis searches for such arguments, rhetorical tropes or assumptions in order to analyse ideology (Brummett, 2010, 99–100) related to the contemporary liberal rationale of governance. Central to the analysis are the forms of ethical subjectivity which neoliberal technologies seek to offer rural citizens.

This reading corresponds with Carol Bacchi’s (2004, 48) notion of policy as a discourse. She notes that all policy programmes are actively constructed by perspectives on society, its problems and imaginable solutions. Although it is typical for policy programmes to present all ideas and conclusions as simply reasonable, this construction is always political in the sense that it consists of choices that are not inevitable. Policies are seen as consisting not of reason or uncontested knowledge but of ideologies and rhetoric that serve a political function; as moves in the struggle over a share of power (see Palonen, 2003, 175–177). This means above all that we read policy programmes as political texts.

In addition to its political ideology, the programme includes a wealth of hands-on practices sparked by the need to govern rural social life in a new way. The reading of this document is supplemented with a few observations made in other documents, SYTY’s web pages (SYTY, no year) and an official rural policy document, the “Government Report to Parliament on Rural Policy” (Government, 2009).

3. Governmentality, solidarity and neoliberalism

Michel Foucault’s (2009, 2010) work on governmentality provides an interesting perspective for studies on current neoliberal forms of governance. A central property of liberal power is that it works through freedom. This relates to policing, which reflects a determination to seed, enhance and cultivate certain human assets and identities as a strategy for “conducting the conduct” of population. Schematically, governing the present can be described as “governing through freedom” (Rose, 1999; Miller and Rose, 2008). Such an approach to policy-making is clearly visible, for example, in European “endogenous” or “community-driven” rural development policies (e.g. Edwards, 1998; Murdoch and Abram, 1998; Storey, 1999; Ray, 2000; Hyyryläinen, 2007; European Commission, 1988).

At the heart of the Foucauldian analysis of government is power and politics in the ethico-political sense. The term “ethico-political” refers to a sphere of techniques required for responsible self-government and the relation between one’s obligation to oneself and to others (Rose, 1999, 188). This points to the various technologies and authorities that seek to govern us, as free individuals, through ethics. Thus governing the present is largely about what Miller and Rose (1990) termed governing at a distance. Critical to governing are assemblages of networks, whereby authorities, individuals and institutions are mobilised and brought together to identify their own aspirations with those of others so that they can become allies in government. Spatially and organisationally distinct actors can be governed once they have been created as subjects who produce the ends of governing by fulfilling themselves rather than obeying any particular rule or ruler (Rose et al., 2006).

A mode of governance that acts through freedom and individual ethics requires certain organisational arrangements in order to function. This need links interestingly to the current discussion on “new governance”, in which the Weberian bureaucratic tradition of public administration, especially hierarchy, has faced criticism (Olsen, 2008). Weberian bureaucracy is considered to be too slow and inefficient in a contemporary globalised world. At the heart of the new governance debate is the urge to replace traditional bureaucracy with more dynamic modes of action, especially with business administration practices. In addition to several other uses of the phrase, new governance is often connected to the use of participatory networks that gather private and third sector parties and interests into a common forum where policy issues can be addressed through deliberation (Hirst, 2000, 14–19; Rhodes, 2000, 55–63; Sørensen and Torfing, 2005a, 198). It could be said that in order to be able to address communities and citizens, liberal power needs to take them “inside” the practice and routine of administration. Thus these actors can be addressed as partners in government activity instead of as objects, and the interests of participating communities, citizens or private firms can be aligned with the goals of various governance programmes, combining the resources of all parties (see Miller and Rose, 2008, 213–215; Nousiainen, 2011, 10). Tanya Li (2007) has noted that participatory governance organisations should be studied as loose networks or as assemblages that consist of differing and sometimes even contradicting elements, rather than as systematically functioning machines. New governance has also been criticised heavily for potentially undermining the practices of representative democracy and replacing democratic relations of accountability with a managerial ethos (Hirst, 2000, 33; Rhodes, 1996, 666).

Besides democracy, the new modes of governance can be discussed with respect to different welfare regimes. Donzelot (1991, 178) noted that the core idea of a welfare regime is to create an apparatus for the collective mediation of need and fulfilment between the individual and the society. The development of such apparatuses was linked to the birth of modern society in the 19th century. According to Ewald (2004, 55) the paradigm of solidarity differed from the earlier liberal paradigm of individual responsibility as it saw the risks of human life as not only dependent on individual action and choices. When modern sciences such as sociology and microbiology revealed a certain regularity in misfortune, it became evident that individual events, for example accident or disease, cannot only be explained by (lack of) individual character. Consequently it became reasonable to share responsibility when an individual was faced with bad luck (Ewald, 2004, 55). Solidarity can thus be seen as shared responsibility, in contrast with the liberal notion of individual responsibility (Liukko, 2008).

Social insurance was developed as a technology of sharing responsibility between those members of modern society who began to see their fate as interdependent and who were linked together by certain societal risks. Private voluntary insurance and

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