

Book review

Ugelvik, T. and Dullum, J. (eds) (2012) *Penal Exceptionalism? Nordic Prison Policy and Practice* Routledge

Increasingly after the 90s scholars acknowledge a major shift in the crime control industry. This post-welfare or late modernity approach is characterized by populism, punitivism, high prison rates, extended community control and so on (see for instance Garland, 2001). Although these observations are based mainly on the US or UK experience they are understood as global trends in the penal policy and practice. Starting from these premises, John Pratt published an award winning two-part article in the *British Journal of Criminology* (2008 a, b) where he describes the Nordic countries as having a different ‘culture of control’ and therefore he calls the phenomenon as ‘Scandinavian exceptionalism’. Briefly, in the first part, he argues that the low prison rates and the relatively human prison conditions in the Scandinavian countries lend support to the idea that Scandinavian countries escape somehow from the global trends towards more punitive mood. He goes on to explain that this resistance is due to the ‘highly egalitarian cultural values and social structures in these countries’ (Pratt, 2008: 120). In the second part of his paper, Pratt examines the more recent trends in penal policy in the Nordic states and notes that the same factors that contributed to the penal excesses elsewhere are now affecting the Nordic states: less confidence in experts, decline in trust in government, increase media reporting and so on. At the same time the welfare system of the Scandinavian countries is restructuring and failing to be as inclusive as it used to be in the past. These variations seem to come together with a different set of values that promote intolerance, social exclusion and populist punitivity.

Starting with this important article of John Pratt, the third annual conference of the Scandinavian Studies of Confinement research network focused on a number of questions around the idea of ‘Scandinavian exceptionalism’: why are the Nordic penal institutions viewed as so different from a non-Nordic vantage point? Are Nordic prisons and penal policies in fact positive exceptions to the general rule? If they are, what exactly are the exceptional qualities, and why are Nordic societies lucky enough to have them? Are there Nordic ‘bad examples’ in the penal area? Are the Nordic countries even similar enough to warrant such comparisons? Is it even possible to talk about a specifically Nordic penal model in the context of massive penal policy transfers that took place lately from Anglo-American jurisdictions? Could it be that a certain way of doing prison research in the Nordic countries creates a gap between internal and external perspectives?

The answers to these questions are very well organized into five different parts. Part I – ‘Exceptions or not?’ brings together the papers that challenge the idea of Scandinavian exceptionalism. For instance, Thomas Mathiesen focuses on more detailed Norwegian penal practices that contradict the exceptionalism thesis. He provides inside details of how conjugal visits, education, solitary confinement and other prison processes are organized in a totally different way than Pratt seems to suggest in his paper. Peter Scharf Smith provides more examples from Denmark that come into conflict with the general belief that the Scandinavian prison conditions are of a high standard. David A. Green offers an interesting comparative perspective between the media coverage in the Anglo-American media and the Scandinavian one. He concludes that although Nordic media practice seems to follow the Anglo-American trend, the homogenization of media content and practice has been tempered in the Nordic countries.

In Part II – ‘Commodification of exceptional penal systems’: the book focuses on the way the image of Scandinavian exceptionalism was produced. In a very well documented chapter, Roddy Nilson demonstrates that the image of Sweden as a very progressive and modern country in terms of prisons was a result of a successful marketing campaign. Different champions like the Myrdal couple or Torsen Eriksson spent time in US contributing to the penal policy transfer between US and Sweden but at the same time publishing and promoting the welfare system embedded into Swedish penal-social policy. In the next chapter, Andrew Jefferson discusses the nature of comparison and the politics of comparisons and concludes that comparisons perform; they are productive.

In Part III – ‘Closing in on the Nordic I: culture of equality’: the book analyses whether the Nordic countries simply have different ways of excluding deviants than the Anglo-American ones. Thomas Ugelvik, Cecilie Basberg Neumann and Robert Andersson explore in three chapters different ways in which the Norwegian and Swedish societies deal with cosmopolitan city and the issue of otherness. As Pratt and Eriksson later in the book conclude, the culture of *likhet* (a sort of ‘culture of togetherness’) creates an oppressive conformity. Those imprisoned for being criminal feel deeply the pain of imprisonment as a wrong doer and also as someone rejected by the all-powerful state towards which they suppose to act with loyalty. Andersson, using the example of ADHD diagnoses in Sweden, illustrates how Scandinavian countries are not based on the value of equality but on the ‘culture of intervention’. This culture is described as a benevolent government that counts on the expertise and professionals trusted to do good and thus being entrusted with the lives of the population.

Part IV – ‘Closing in on the Nordic II: prison management and prison culture’, deals with another argument used by Pratt when calling for the Scandinavian exceptionalism – the humane prison conditions. What constitutes humane prison conditions? Under what circumstances can they be said to exist? Compared to what? The next three chapters challenge the idea that comparing prison systems is even possible since there are differences in practices even between the wings of the same prison let alone between different prisons or prison systems. Based on Swedish research, Bruhn, Lindberg and Nylander stress the idea that the trend towards specialized treatment wings may threaten the culture of equal treatment of prisoners.

In the final part – Part IV – ‘Scandinavian exceptionalism revisited’ – Pratt and Ericsson acknowledge the need for some adjustments and nuances but validate the original thesis: there is Scandinavian exceptionalism.

Overall the book does not provide a definitive answer to the question: is there a Scandinavian exceptionalism? The thesis seems to be severely challenged in both its fundamental assumptions: the low prison rate and humane prison conditions. What is a real merit of this book is that it puts on the table different ways of comparing penal systems apart from simply comparing the prison rates. Furthermore, it forms an important contribution to the comparative literature by stressing the risks and limitations of doing comparative research ‘at a distance’. By putting together contributions from very highly esteemed scholars from inside the Scandinavian jurisdictions and also from outside, the book provides valuable and balanced resources for policy makers, managers and students in penology.

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