



Local opinion: Why the US can't be like Nordic countries

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Gil Shapiro wants the U.S. to be like the Nordic countries; that is, like Scandinavia, Finland, and Iceland. He is especially enamored with Finland.

Who is Gil Shapiro? He is a resident of the Tucson suburb of Oro Valley and the past spokesman for the now-defunct organization, Freethought Arizona. The Arizona Daily Star recently published an op-ed of his on why the Nordic countries score higher than the U.S. on the World Happiness Report and what the U.S. needs to do to be as happy as them.

What is Freethought Arizona? Here's the first sentence from its website: "Freethought Arizona was established to grow and support a community of freethinkers, humanists, skeptics, agnostics, and atheists based on reason, science, and critical thinking."

A note on the website says that the organization has dissolved and will donate all of its leftover funds to "the Secular Student Alliance, Tucson Atheists Community Outreach Team (TACO), Camp Quest, the Satanic Temple of Arizona, and the Secular Coalition for Arizona."

Funny thing, but the embrace of atheism by the now-defunct Freethought Arizona is at odds with the fact that religion is taught in Norway's public schools. Does Mr. Shapiro's desire for the U.S. to be like Nordic countries include the teaching of religion in American public schools?

The above is an example of the problem that frequently occurs when people hold up other countries as exemplars for the U.S. In trying to show that the U.S. should be like some other country, they often pick facts that support their belief and ignore facts that don't.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a jingoist or nationalist who thinks that the U.S. doesn't have serious problems. Far from it. But my take on what ails America is different from Shapiro's.

Shapiro believes that the citizens of Nordic countries are happier than the citizens of the U.S., because the former have better public schools, mostly free health care, free college, a much stronger social safety net, and a highly progressive tax code — all of which keeps them from having to worry about being destitute and going without the necessities of life.

Perhaps. But another possibility is that those socioeconomic features of Nordic life are not the causes of happiness. Rather, these features are the result of happiness, a happiness that in turn comes from living in small countries that are largely homogeneous in values, race, and ethnicity.

Because of the homogeneity, they are high-trust societies and highly harmonious. It's easier to support a social-welfare state if citizens believe that their fellow citizens are not ripping them off.

The trust and harmony are now under stress in a few Nordic countries due to a relatively recent influx of immigrants of different races, ethnicities, nationalities, and religions. The traditional Nordic culture is still holding, but cracks are appearing. Sweden, for example, has dialed back the progressivity of its tax code, so that it is now less progressive than the U.S. tax code, according to such reliable and nonpartisan sources as the Cato Institute.

I saw the Nordic homogeneity when I had my consulting firm and went to Iceland to train just about every human resources manager on the island. I was the darkest person of all of the people I encountered. I asked my host over dinner if there were any black people in the nation. He replied that he knew of one black person.

Incidentally, my host lamented that his two children, both college students, were still living at home and not getting out of bed until late morning, although they were in their mid to late twenties. They were in no hurry to graduate because college was free.

Regarding primary and secondary education, Nordic countries outrank the U.S. on international comparisons. Finland in particular ranks high. It is in the top echelon along with such other leaders as Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan.

Finland's approach to revamping its public education system would have a zero chance of succeeding in the U.S. Among other comprehensive changes, it required that teachers have a master's degree, and it upgraded a teaching degree to be one of the most difficult and rigorous degrees to obtain.

Imagine the reaction of American teacher unions to such a change.

Nine years of schooling are mandatory in Finland and optional after that, but the country offers nontraditional options for learning after the ninth year. The social welfare state and the education system are firmly linked together in egalitarian ways. No doubt, a high level of social trust and harmony comes into play here, too.

South Korea is not a Nordic country but is certainly homogeneous. Its education system is dramatically different from Finland's, in that it requires long hours, plenty of rote learning, and make-or-break tests. Yet it is a highly effective system judging by how well South Koreans perform on international tests.

A similar situation exists in Japan, where the sense of community is so strong that students sweep the sidewalks and other public property bordering their schools.

Imagine the parental uproar if American students were required to do the same.

Nordic communities in the U.S. tend to have many values in common with the Nordic countries of Europe. My wife is half Swedish and half Scots-Irish. Her hometown is in northwest Pennsylvania, an area where a lot of Swedes settled. Nearby is Mt. Jewett, a small close-knit town that takes pride in its Swedish roots. Whenever Kim and I visit her family, we have

breakfast at a Swedish café in Mt. Jewett and sometimes visit the historic Nebo Lutheran Chapel and Cemetery, where a couple of Kim's ancestors are buried. Kim's dad (RIP) was honored one year as the king of the annual Mt. Jewett Swedish Festival.

The U.S. is of course a multiracial and multiethnic society, but one that seems to be splitting apart along racial and ethnic lines, as well as along lines of social class. The situation has become so divisive that the Swedes of Mt. Jewett and the Nordics of other towns are stereotyped and castigated as racist and privileged oppressors who benefited from slavery and colonialism, even though the Nordics and many other ethnic groups never participated in the slave trade, never became wealthy from King Cotton, never endorsed Jim Crow, never were against emancipation, and never engaged in colonialism. Their only sin is that their skin is white.

This divisiveness and mistrust are why Gil Shapiro's desire for the U.S. to be like Nordic countries is a pipe dream.