The Nordic countries are a special case in the global context. In a world dominated by economic criteria for all things they seem to disprove that ideology. Their economies run smoothly and are efficient, the living standards are high and yet they sustain a welfare state that provides for some of the most important needs of any citizen, such as the need for medical care in case of serious sickness, the need for education to enable the citizens to function as well informed citizens in democracies, as knowledgeable employees in their jobs and as well balanced human beings.

The welfare state also supports its citizens who are in dire straits because of unemployment, long-term illness or of other causes. Welfare is a substantial part of the economy of these states but it cannot be considered as justified by economic criteria if the results of all state institutions or state actions should contribute towards its economy, i.e. should produce economic benefits. The Nordic societies disprove the universality of economic criteria as an instrument in judging the success and quality of societies. The economy is only a part of society and within its sphere economic criteria are relevant, but societies include much more than economies and they are more complex than their economies and their success consists in much more complex qualities than economic ones. To name one, justice, is probably the most important.

Education has been a part of the Nordic welfare state for over sixty years. It seems clear that in the aftermath of the Second World War the configuration of social forces changed in the Scandinavian countries, i.e. Denmark, Norway and Sweden, as is mentioned in some of the articles in this collection, and the social democrats became the most powerful political force in all these three countries. But the important features of the Nordic party systems had already emerged in the 1920s with the increased politicisation of the social cleavages caused by the introduction of parliamentary systems, mass democracy and universal suffrage and the national and industrial revolutions that took place. These led to strong protests of farmer and labour movements and it became increasingly clear that the parliamentary factions had to coordinate themselves to secure their influence in political affairs.[1] In the decades after the war the influence of the social democrats was dominant. In Finland and Iceland the social democrats were not as dominant as a political force, but their views influenced the social and political development. One thing that happened, at least in Iceland, was that the other political parties adopted the social democratic views as

their own and put them into practice. We should expect that the social democratic features would be stronger in the education systems of the Scandinavian countries than of Finland and Iceland, but a strong feature of them all.

The book under review is a collection of articles written especially for this publication. As the name of the book indicates, they are all about the educational model that is accepted in all the Nordic countries and the challenges of neo-liberalism, i.e. the sovereignty of the economic criteria in all spheres of society. The book is divided into two parts. The first part is a description of the educational model in each of the five Nordic countries both structurally and historically. The second part concentrates on special issues or themes within the educational systems of the Nordic countries. It applies to all the articles in the first part that they are well structured, informative and clear. I found something in all of these articles that I did not know but experienced as valuable. These articles are necessary for appreciating the articles in the second part.

The second part of the book consists of a number of articles about thematic issues in the Nordic education system, all of them a result of the challenge of neo-liberalism. I found this part of the book exceptionally interesting and greatly enjoyed reading it. The themes discussed are dropout, the upper secondary school, the influence of freedom of choice on school for all, the problem of assessing children in Nordic schools, how progressive education has fared in the Scandinavian schools and the role of the social democrats in introducing market reforms in Nordic schools. All of these contributions are enlightening and contribute to better understanding of the relevant features of the Nordic school systems.

I want to take a closer look at one of the thematic articles. It is by Nina Volckmar and Susanne Wiborg and concentrates on the role of the social democrats in changing the education systems towards a market system. This article is very interesting and explains the puzzling phenomenon of why social democrats should want to bring market forces into the education system. It is well argued and comes to novel conclusions about the research object. The authors explore the three Scandinavian countries in this respect. It seems that decentralisation started the ball rolling in both Norway and Sweden, but the situation was more complicated in Denmark because parental involvement in school has a long history there. This development opened the way for local authorities to be more influential in

forming school policy. The influence of right-wing governments in the Scandinavian countries is obvious on introducing private schools into the state system, but what is surprising is the reluctance of social democrats to revert to the earlier state of affairs. The explanation offered is that the social democrats see these reforms as a way of preserving the welfare state and continue to serve as a power resource for the social democrats.

The development towards more choice-based schools can easily lead to detrimental consequences for the school systems in the Nordic countries. Some of these consequences are documented in this book and discussed. School systems are parts of societies and if the societies concerned change one would expect the school systems to change. But for successful systems like the Nordic ones it really should take serious reasons that do stand up to scrutiny to change them rather than ideological ones. But maybe that is underestimating the power of ideology.

This book deserves to be read widely and it will be a standard work on the Nordic school systems for a considerable time.

[1] Åsa Bengtsson, Kasper M. Hansen, Ólafur Þ. Harðarson, Hanne Marthe Narud & Henrik Oscarsson, *The Nordic Voter. Myths of Exceptionalism*. (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2014) 28.