

Viking Capitalism and Iceland's Postcolonial Identity

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Eiríkur Bergmann Einarsson (2014), *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis: Boom, Bust and Recovery*, Palgrave MacMillan.

Í umsögn gagnrýnenda kemur meðal annars eftirfarandi fram:

„The book is a highly interesting read particularly for international audiences hoping to get a deeper insight not only into the causes and consequences of the collapse of the three banks, but more importantly also into the historical, political-cultural, and no less into the political-psychological background and dimension of the crisis. The chapters presenting Iceland's economic history as well as the rise and fall of the Icelandic banks therefore present a very useful summary of the existing literature on the subject, although the interested reader could also have hoped for a more diverse selection of sources.”

Political Science has a tellingly ambiguous name that can be interpreted both as the science of politics and the political, but also as a discipline that is political in its essence. Poststructuralist approaches to the study of politics have always adhered to the principle that the social sciences constitute an emancipatory project and should therefore be decidedly and explicitly *political*. Eiríkur Bergmann follows this understanding of political science in his new book *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis: Boom, Bust and Recovery*, where he aims most of all at “explain[ing] the exceptional case of Iceland's fantastical boom, bust and relatively rapid recovery after the Crash” (p. 1), i.e. the collapse of Iceland's three major banks within just three days in October 2008. But the book also has much broader ambitions, aiming no less to “explain the lessons for the wider EU crisis and for over-reaching economies that over-rely on financial markets” (ibid.). The more decidedly political side of the argument presented in the book is further captured in the ambition to also “try to unravel and correct” the “endless myths about the crisis and the greater Icelandic revolution” (p. 2).

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less into the political-psychological background and dimension of the crisis. The chapters presenting Iceland's economic history as well as the rise and fall of the Icelandic banks therefore present a very useful summary of the existing literature on the subject, although the interested reader could also have hoped for a more diverse selection of sources. The chapters on Icelandic national identity as a postcolonial project and on Iceland's foreign relations (chapters 1 and 3, respectively) are arguably the most relevant with a view to understanding the main claim of the book, namely that Iceland's rise and fall as a "Nordic Tiger" – or the broader phenomenon of "Viking Capitalism" – can only be truly understood when taking into account Iceland's historical experience of colonial rule (most relevantly at the hands of Denmark), but even more importantly the crucial relevance of the twin notions of sovereignty and independence in Icelandic political discourse. Discourse analysis is certainly a reasonable choice of method (and indeed theory) when studying the ideational background conditions that make political behavior plausible beyond mere utility maximization. Iceland's reluctance to join the European Union (EU) despite the country's deep integration into the single market project (as part of the European Economic Area) is testimony to a much deeper concern about a loss of formal sovereignty, independence and indeed national identity.

The book makes some good points in relation to the "Icelandic project", Iceland's "postcolonial national identity" and the "eternal struggle for independence". Such ideas are certainly relevant in making sense of rhetoric in Icelandic debates on European integration in general, but also in understanding the arguments made by political figures such by Prime Minister Sigmundur Davið Gunnlaugsson or the Republic's President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, here described as "the main cheerleader of the Viking Capitalists" (e.g. p. 148). However, the argument that this "eternal struggle for independence" and Iceland's postcolonial national identity also explain the phenomenon of Viking Capitalism – and the reckless actions of the Viking Capitalists – seems quite far-fetched. This is arguably the main weakness of the book, i.e. that the author – while convincingly pointing out the relevance of the colonial experience to Iceland's national identity – draws the conclusion that this also explains the phenomenon of Viking Capitalism, yet without presenting any thorough discourse analysis that would support such a conclusion. This is to some extent a methodological shortcoming, as too little attention is paid to the ways in which the forces driving the behavior of the main protagonists in the failed banks could be studied. Considering the explanatory ambition of the book (see above), it is also striking that the author neither offers any alternative explanations nor delves into any discussion of action-theoretic hypotheses that could for instance have been derived from new institutionalist theorizing.

Much of the book is devoted more to presenting a narrative of the events leading up to as well as the aftermath of the collapse of the three failed banks. This narrative comes at the expense of a deeper analysis of the forces driving the phenomenon of Viking Capitalism, and this is where the book's explanatory ambition evidently clashes with the secondary aim of explaining what *actually* happened – and to correct presumable misperceptions held by foreign observers. In this context, the author also falls prey

to the temptation of not merely analyzing discourse, but indeed participating in the discursive construction of knowledge about the Icelandic crisis. There is a reason why poststructuralism and discourse analysis are interested in analyzing discourses, namely that the latter are seen as hiding power structures that benefit some at the expense of others. This is however not precisely what the author is doing in this book. Instead, his project rather submits a counter-narrative that reads, a bit too simplistically, as a story of foreign oppressors and undermining the independence of the Icelandic nation. It is difficult to look past the author's construction of selves and others in this context, which is precisely the kind of identity construction that poststructuralism intends to *deconstruct*. The concept of "foreign oppression" appears too frequently, and the author draws a more or less direct line from the "foreign oppression" that Iceland experienced during the "Cod Wars" to the "foreign oppression" that the author identifies in the behavior of the British and Dutch governments – and indeed the EU as a whole (!) – in the wake of the debate on the Icesave Agreement(s). In this context, the author also lacks sufficient critical distance to the political figures whose actions are analyzed, highlighting for instance "the political, intellectual and moral leadership of President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson" in giving "valuable credibility to the Viking faction of capital both in Iceland and internationally" (p. 84). Considering the scope of the crisis that resulted from this celebrated Viking "outvasion", one would indeed hope for a considerably more ambivalent assessment of the forces that created a political climate that justified the excesses of this Viking Capitalism.

In connection to this, a cardinal flaw in the presentation of the argument is that dissenting voices are completely marginalized. The author has too strong a tendency to treat Icelanders as a monolithic bloc. There is too much talk of "the Icelanders", which does not adequately pay respect to the highly controversial nature of the situation, the way its causes were discussed and what lessons are to be learned from it. As the author correctly points out, the crisis threatened to tear "the fabric of Icelandic society apart", but this is also evident in the very different responses that the crisis prompted in different parts of the political spectrum, but even more so in the reinvigorated Icelandic public sphere. At the time the book was written, the extent of the protests against the government's suspension of the EU membership negotiations were quite possibly not foreseeable yet, but the undercurrent of these protests was quite obviously already there when the book was written.

Overall, the book is certainly a valuable read for international audiences who want to get a deeper understanding of the ideational factors underlying both the very emergence of "Viking Capitalism" and the lessons (not) learned from the collapse of the three failed banks. Arguably, this point is driven home most illustratively by the author's own construction of a discourse of Icelandic selves pitted against oppressive foreign others. Considering the critical, poststructural tradition that the author claims to write in, a clear and explicit indictment of those responsible for the excesses of Viking Capitalism – and thus for the burdens now shouldered by the wider Icelandic population would however have been necessary.

