

Citizen

Elias Tuomaala

I grew up in Finland. It's not a very important country, really. Small, pretty cold, kind of empty.

But I was always very proud of Finland. We had, so to speak, figured it out. The government provides free health care; it offers excellent public schools; it cares for the poor. Finland has cured almost every social ill out there. The welfare state, a paradise on Earth, takes care of everybody.

My own grandparents were communists; my father, a trade union activist. So I grew up a socialist, too. Starting in middle school, the ideology became a cornerstone of my identity. I joined the Left Youth of Finland, I marched around the city with a red flag on Labor Day, and I spent countless nights debating taxation in the dive bars of Helsinki.

Of course, I knew there was poverty outside the Finnish borders. But there was very little I, or Finland, could do about that. We couldn't just open our borders, we couldn't take care of everybody in the world.

But at the end of the day, it didn't really matter. I was, after all, a patriotic Finn. My responsibilities were to other Finnish people. We ought to build a just society for ourselves and let other countries be.

At the age of sixteen, I moved to a boarding school in rural India. There are not many countries in the world less alike than Finland and India. You can imagine I was in for a hefty culture shock.

From food and weather to language and religion, everything around me was new and either scary, exciting, or both at the same time. But nothing left me quite as troubled as the contrast in living standards. On my very first visit to the nearby city of Pune, a little girl knocked on our car's window. She looked me in the eyes through the dirty window, and begged for food or money. She was wearing nothing but rags, and she was clearly starving. I had never seen absolute poverty before. Now, it was all around me.

To be sure, I also encountered many incredibly wealthy families during my time in India. I saw great injustice in this inequality. At first it made me prouder of the system back home. Unlike many of my peers at the school, I had worked rather than paid my way there. I hadn't been born to riches. I was just an ordinary boy who had been given a chance, by a Northern welfare state.

But ultimately, I began to wonder: was I really that different? After all, I too had been born to a great privilege of sorts. Sure enough, it wasn't family wealth. But my citizenship, my access to Finnish welfare services was also a birthright. Almost any reasonable view of justice would agree that I was no more deserving of it than anybody else in the world.

This led me to a realization. The Finnish welfare state is nothing but a wealth-sharing club for a global upper class. It doesn't take from the rich and give to the poor: it takes from the rich just to

give to the marginally less rich. It guarantees a livelihood to anyone born to the Finnish kin, and disregards everyone else. The welfare state hasn't eradicated poverty. It has just cleaned its own backyard from it and locked the gates. The equality within is dark irony at best: in Finland there are no gated communities, because Finland is a gated community.

To me, this conclusion is about much more than politics, or even ethics – it is a question of identity. I said I used to be a patriot. Now, the whole concept sounds deeply troubling.

How could I take pride in having been born in Finland? It was sheer luck. How could I celebrate national distinctions? Building walls between people is a shame, not an achievement. How could I ever think another Finn deserves my help more than a starving child in India? Nationality cannot excuse injustice.

Patriotism is about loving your country and countrymen. I guess that can mean many things. But too often it seems to mean loving other people less, just because they are not your countrymen. Then, I believe, patriotism is just another word for discrimination, discrimination based on nationality. In its core, I believe that is no different from discrimination based on race, gender, or sexuality. I am no patriot.

The international legal system may not let me call myself a global citizen, but that doesn't mean I can't act like one. I was born as a Finn among Finns, but I intend to live as a human among humans.