

# The Integration Spectacle

## Migration, politics, and multiculturalism in a Finnish suburb

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*Abstract:* Migration politics in Finland are centered around “social integration” and “multiculturalism.” While the stated aims of such politics are equality and social mobility, the results are often contradictory, perpetuating the hierarchies and inequalities they propose to overcome. Utilizing Guy Debord’s notion of the “society of the spectacle,” I argue that there is a neoliberal Integration Spectacle that projects the appearance of societal change but is, in reality, an immobilizing force that works to obscure a particular racialized social order. I draw on my fieldwork in and around Varissuo, an international working-class suburb on the edge of Turku, western Finland, to analyze how both migrant residents of the area and the professionals within the so-called integration economy engage with, reproduce, and deal with this discrepancy.

*Keywords:* Finland, migration, politics, social immobility, spectacle

Inside an auditorium located in an award-winning shopping center in Turku, Finland, we are attending an education event. The room is packed with migrants, largely from the Middle East and Africa, along with some education and multiculturalism experts and a single anthropologist sitting at the back of the room. The women in front of me are checking the Iraqi dinar exchange rate, and I try to make detailed notes of every education and employment alternative presented by the speakers. Vocational schools from Turku and the surrounding area are present: gardening, health and social care, cleaning, maintenance, factory work. There are no higher education institutions, let alone white-collar employers. Advertising their school, a student

counselor from a neighboring town explains: “most of our students are from Varissuo . . . I mean Turku.”

The previous vignette describes one of the many events I attended during my two-year research in the working-class suburb of Varissuo—the most international district in the whole of Finland—and its surrounding area. While I initially sought to understand very locally situated inner suburban life, such as the dynamics of community, religion, age, gender, and class, I soon realized that what I was encountering was a microcosm of Finnish integration policies. These policies were often aimed at one thing, namely supporting such grand ideals as equality and inclusion, but they seemed to be working in



the opposite direction, fostering seclusion and a vertical hierarchy between the white European and the “integrateable” other.

It turned out that much of what was taking place in Varissuo, in terms of “multicultural work,” for instance, seemed to be about producing certain forms of documentation and types of imagery rather than creating any lasting effects for the suburb and its residents. My intention in this article is to understand this contradiction between the proposed and actual outcomes of certain policies through Guy Debord’s (2004) notion of the spectacle. I argue that the Integration Spectacle I am analyzing engendered a misrecognition of the persistent structural inequality that people were facing and focused on “integration” and a particular “model migrant.”

The various effects of neoliberalism on, for example, contemporary marginalization and poverty (e.g., Gupta 2012; O’Neill 2014), “integration” and ethnicity (e.g., Feldman 2010; Woolfson 2009), and environment and infrastructure (e.g., Bear 2015) have been documented elsewhere. My work in Finland, then, highlights another aspect of such configurations, namely how the political marginalization and socio-economic precariousness of minorities follows from a particular reification of the socio-economic order and racialized hierarchies.

This article will proceed first by looking at Debord’s theory of the spectacle and then by exploring the Finnish context in general and Varissuo in particular. Next, I delve into Integration Spectacle through day-to-day life within the so-called integration economy, analyzing both viewpoints, that of Varissuo’s residents and those held by “multiculturalism professionals.” I consider how the spectacle involves individuals through complicity and finish with a note about its relation to (bureaucratic) utopia, concluding that the spectacle in Debord’s terms is not the opposite of utopia (as in, being dystopic), but that it exists outside such ideals altogether.

However, a couple of notes on the writing are in order here: I use the word “multiculturalism” frequently, rather than terms such as “super-diversity” (Vertovec 2007), not because it is nec-

essarily analytically particularly useful but because it is the local category that my interlocutors consistently employed. It is, in the ethnographic sense, how people speak about their everyday life. During my 2016–2018 fieldwork, I worked with residents of migrant background and also interviewed authorities, educators, social workers, civil servants, and activists in and around the suburb. Among other things, in my capacity as a researcher I conducted interviews and attended seminars and meetings of what I call “the multiculturalism professionals,” a term encompassing various jobs, including civil service, education, social work, youth work, care, service, and art sectors. I also often spent my evenings at the local youth center or a local pub, played basketball, and joined Finnish language learning sessions. It was obvious that my field and the circles I was becoming acquainted with were fairly small. In the interest of preserving the anonymity of those who took part in my work, I have redacted any identifying information. Where possible, I refer to my interlocutors as “them” and omit details such as ethnicity and professional title.

## The spectacle

Drawing on Karl Marx’s (1982: 163–177) notion of “commodity fetishism,” Debord argues that the spectacle is the alienation created by capitalist economic development (2004: 16). For him, the spectacle promotes “consumable survival” (Debord 2004: 22) rather than structural change. Debord notes that reality has been taken over by fetishized imagery, that is, that we are faced with a social reality predominantly mediated by appearances and images that neutralize hierarchies and draw before the spectator one single available path forward: through consumption.

The spectacle is the enforced maintenance of the status quo, much like French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s *consensus* (2015: 42). In *Dis-sensus*, Rancière argues (2015: 139) that *politics* is a break or conflict between sense as a sensory

experience and sense as intellect or understanding, a tension between what is and what could be. *Consensus*, then, is the exact opposite: the naturalization of dominant power relations, as senses and sense are aligned. For my argument, I see Debord's notion of the spectacle in these terms: a situation in which we are not moving beyond the dominant imagery that occupies our senses and our sense. It is the "apolitical" (as in, devoid of conflict or challenge) naturalization of the current political situation, while simultaneously having the appearance of working toward change.

In connection to migration, anthropological literature has explored Debord's theory of the spectacle in terms of its goals. For example, Nicholas De Genova (2012) and Ruben Andersson (2014) have both examined how a "Border Spectacle," namely the hypervisibility of border enforcement and militarization as well as the depictions of migrants as "floods" at the gates of Europe, functions as the production of "illegality" and "deportability" that serves nation-state interests in the Global North and legitimizes increasingly harsh control measures. My approach is slightly different in that it looks at ordinary people encountering and engaging with the spectacle. I analyze how a particular imagination is evoked in the everyday, one that orients focus and limits the range of possibilities that people envision ahead of them. In contrast to the works of De Genova and Andersson, legality and illegality were not usually relevant categories in my fieldwork environment, as many of those I worked with had formalized their residential status years before.

However, as the term suggests, the Integration Spectacle is concerned with "social integration" and how those subjected to the spectacle are routinely produced as "integrateable," cast into a social role that entails, on the one hand, an expectation that individuals will strive to prove themselves and, on the other, the threat of being deemed non-integrated. Year after year, as with Debord's spectacle, the entire framework is primarily focused on merely maintaining the image of working toward social mobility, as will

become apparent later. Both the policies addressing marginalization and the initiatives to include minorities in the Finnish polity are unable to overcome a logic that is concerned with the individual as a consumer and, therefore, do not address the structural reality that those concerned often live with.

While the majority of my key interlocutors in Varissuo identified to some degree as Muslim, religion plays a minor role within the reproduction of the spectacle; a Congolese Christian or an Iraqi Mandeian would be equally included within its functions. Rather, the key distinction lies between the white Finnish citizen and the non-European, non-Western, and non-white migrant.

### The Finnish state

In Finland, rather than merely enabling neoliberal policies, the tradition of a Nordic welfare state grants the state an extremely strong role in executing them. However, especially contemporary neoliberal state power does not have geographical or institutional fixity (Trouillot 2001). The neoliberal state resides vertically "above" society, while simultaneously encompassing the localities over which it exerts control (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). What the salaried government functionaries do is only part of the state's concrete apparatus. Rather, the contemporary Finnish state is a sprawling network of ministries, municipal offices, voluntary associations, charities, activists, and enterprises. The public, private, and third sectors are intimately connected through public funding bodies. Such bodies include ministries (for example, those of welfare and education) and Veikkaus, the state-owned gambling monopoly, which uses its annual revenue of more than one billion euros to support various non-governmental projects, including social welfare and health initiatives (Veikkaus 2020).

The beginnings of Finnish welfare neoliberalism lie in the 1970s and 1980s, when the tripartite corporatist negotiation framework (state,

employer organizations, and trade unions) was first steered toward realizing neoliberal market reforms. Rather than a rolling back, this was a question of re-tasking the state; its primary function was now to actively ensure the functioning of the markets (Wuokko 2019). This development flourished during the 1990s recession. What is important here is that the trade unions were incorporated early in the transformation and, therefore, the incorporation in the 2000s of third sector actors, who were already dependent on public funding, was the natural next step. Something I will return to later is that this has also entailed the re-tasking of both non-profits and activism, effectively granting them a bureaucratic role traditionally associated with civil servants. The result is a political and economic chimera, a sort of welfare state effect, to paraphrase Timothy Mitchell (1991), upon what is, to all intents and purposes, an intensely neoliberal political project.

### *Varissuo: “A city within a city”*

The suburb of Varissuo is located some six kilometers from the city center, a considerable distance in an otherwise fairly compact urban area. While not among the oldest Nordic-style suburbs in Finland, it is at the epicenter of nationwide debates on urban marginalization, migration, multi-ethnicity, and “ghettoization” (e.g., Huttunen and Juntunen 2020: 4128).

Varissuo is intimately tied to much larger national housing developments. Much like Sweden, with its *miljonprogrammet* of the 1960s and 1970s (Hall and Vidén 2005), Finland undertook construction projects in response to housing demands created by the rapid urbanization of the country and the gravitation of a new modern class, made up of a manual labor force, toward major cities. These new suburbs, characterized by high population density and geographical separation—often carved out of woods—represented major transformations in the life-worlds of both manual laborers and residents of rural origin (Kortteinen 1982). As in Sweden, so in Finland these decidedly so-

cial democratic housing developments, aimed at promoting welfare and social security, had come to a halt by the beginning of the 1990s, due to dramatic economic transformations, a recession, and a decrease in industrial production, only exacerbated by the end of the Soviet Union next door. Many of the visions the planners may have had never materialized. Today, it is often argued that these dense high-rise suburbs reached their numerical and technical goals but not their social or aesthetic aims (e.g., Rasinkangas 2013: 59). Since the beginning of the 1990s, socio-economic and educational marginalization, accompanied by higher than average levels of unemployment, have become a stable feature in such areas (Stjernberg 2015; Kortteinen and Vaattovaara 2015 for Helsinki in particular). In popular culture and media headlines, these areas came to be associated with crime and insecurity. Furthermore, and coinciding with the globalization and fully fledged neo-liberalization of the Finnish economy following its scramble out of recession and accession to the European Union in 1995, the suburbs came to house increasing numbers of refugees, most notably those fleeing the violent conflicts in Iraq, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia. For the most part, especially in the beginning, this was because, compared with the city center or the markedly middle-class low-rise neighborhoods, the peripheral suburbs generally contained large quantities of social or otherwise affordable housing, and Varissuo more markedly so.

Varissuo was originally envisioned and advertised as a “city within a city” and a “city in nature” (Kauppi 2006). Built between 1976 and 1987, it has been one of the suburbs perceived in popular imagination to be a symbol for urban violence and decline for at least the last 30 years. Varissuo’s residents are predominantly from a working-class background, with small numbers of students and middle-class families living mostly on the edges of the area. As one of its largest suburbs, Varissuo has traditionally served as a migrant “entry point” to the city (Rasinkangas 2014), and it is now home to close

to nine thousand residents cluttered around a horseshoe-shaped road with towering blocks of flats nestled in the middle of the curve and along the highway at its base. Low-rise terraced houses circle the outer edges. Between the suburb and the city center there is a large industrial area, which slowly gives way to the university premises in Kupittaa. Here and there, the surrounding forest is a reminder of the area's outgrowing, peripheral history.

In the late 1980s, Varissuo was the first area of Turku to receive resettled refugees. Now roughly half of the suburb's population belong to an ethnic or linguistic minority, with communities of Afghan, Bosnian and Kosovan, Iraqi, and other Middle Eastern and Somalian origin, alongside Eastern Europeans and Southeast Asians (mainly Vietnamese and Thai) being the most visible. The suburb's ethno-linguistic and religious diversity is unique in Finland, which until the late 1980s was a country of outbound, rather than inbound, migration. The composition of residents is also reflected in the Turku Normal School, where the University of Turku trains teachers: religion classes according to student's declared denomination (or ethics for the non-religious) is part of the Finnish curriculum. At the Normal School, half of the students attend Islamic classes, making it the majority subject by a small margin.

At the end of 2017, the unemployment rate in Varissuo, which at the time had the largest working-age population of all Turku's areas, was 29 percent, more than twice the city average and three times the national average (City of Turku 2018). As with similar neighborhoods elsewhere in Europe, these high levels of unemployment and a decreased access to services certainly marked life in the suburb. During my fieldwork, Varissuo had a small social services representation, a medical center, a library, a supermarket, a tiny grocery store, a gambling hall, a youth center, five pubs, a kiosk, a Salvation Army thrift shop, a couple of restaurants, schools and daycare centers, Protestant and Pentecostal congregations, a small Muslim prayer room, and a handful of voluntary associations. This was

definitely something, but it was a far cry from the service center hub for the whole of eastern Turku that was envisioned in the 1980s. However, circumstances in Varissuo are in many ways different from what Loïc Wacquant has described as "prisonfare," a criminalization of poverty that takes over social welfare (2009). The suburb has a designated police officer who often patrols alone (and is known to everyone by face and name), spending roughly a quarter of his time in the area. Instead of the use of force and a constant police presence, much of the state intervention in Varissuo has materialized through bureaucratic procedures such as the availability and unavailability of various services, educational and vocational schemes, and the funding conditions for community initiatives and, as I have already noted, many of these procedures were aimed at reversing marginalization.

### *Integrating immobility*

Among his numerous responsibilities and activities, Khaalid provided employment services, helping people mainly from his own ethno-linguistic community to look for jobs, complete applications, and apply for employment courses. He rented a small and ascetic office space in Varissuo, with papers and files on a shelf and a laptop on a simple table. In 2017, the logic of the funding he received to facilitate this endeavor changed fundamentally. Rather than him being given a budget upfront, the authorities were now funding him retroactively, paying for each customer he managed to remove, even ephemerally, from the unemployment statistics (for example, by sending them on a course). Khaalid's service shows how state power in Finland is embedded in third sector charitable organizations and small private initiatives. The present re-tasking and fragmentation of the welfare state in relation to social policy and job markets has not led to any less regulation; however, the nature of regulatory functions has changed. Most importantly, the Finnish state is still the primary funder of all charitable and humanitarian non-profit activities by a large margin;

outside large (often international) organizations such as UNICEF or the Red Cross, fundraising is rare and it is difficult to legally raise funds through services such as GoFundMe.

Khaalid also illustrates what social and economic mobility in Varissuo connoted: the entrepreneurial subject. Khaalid epitomized individual success: he was smart, educated, and industrious and sought out economic opportunities as part of his community work. But being “entrepreneurial” here, in the Finnish sense, was broader than being an entrepreneur; it was first and foremost about repeatedly, relentlessly taking part in the system of “social integration”—even when this led to precarious manual labor or merely a string of employment courses, as was often the case. This particular meaning of being entrepreneurial also owes something to the idiosyncrasies of Finnish official jargon, where *yrittäjähenkisyys* (“having an entrepreneurial spirit”) has come to designate having the qualities associated with being an entrepreneur without necessarily actually being one. The common meaning of *yrittäjähenkisyys*, that is, being industrious, competitive, and possessing an ability to find opportunities as they emerge, aptly brings us to how the Integration Spectacle manifested: in the language of capital but claiming to describe human qualities, commodified but acting as if it was anything but.

### *Kotoutuminen*

In Finland, the hegemonic discourse of “social integration,” in politics and public debate alike, is heavily centered around the Finnish state and municipal power, rather than around non-profits or activism as might be the case elsewhere in Europe. And as with the general provision of social welfare, over the past decade cultural associations and local activists have been incorporated into the migration politics apparatus. “Social integration” translates in Finnish as the neologism *kotoutuminen* and means the process by which an individual of foreign origin becomes, and feels like, an active member of society. Closely related is *kotouttaminen*, meaning the policies and actions enacted to

facilitate this process. Both words are derived from *koti*, “home,” and are reminiscent of *kotiuutuminen* (“to feel at home”). When the first law on *kotouttaminen* entered into force in 1999, its publicly stated goal was to “promote integration, equality and freedom of choice” (The Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum-Seekers 1 §, author’s translation). While a number of public sector bodies are formally involved, in practice the social integration *kotoutuminen* designates is an intensely private individual endeavor, perceived in terms of customers and services rather than politics as such.

While in English there are a number of words, including patron, client, and customer, in Finnish a single word is used equally by a police officer taking someone into custody, a social worker, a shopkeeper, a pub landlord, and a corporate lawyer meeting with a client: *asiakas*. Not only is the word virtually ubiquitous, designating the degree of marketization of state functions, it also obscures the power relations and racialized hierarchies at play. Abbas, a man in his forties, exemplified this “customer approach,” when he described his life history in Finland, as we were sitting in the cafeteria in Varissuo’s shopping center: “So I was a quota refugee. You get put into language course, then employment course, entrepreneurship course. . . . Look, my friend, you have no idea. Ten years later, I feel like I’m still directed to these same services, despite my whole life being something entirely different from 10 years ago. If you’re a refugee, you’re *asiakas*, simple as that.” He finished, exasperated, with: “To Finland, I will be *asiakas* forever!” Furthermore, as I previously noted, “integrating” oneself is, crucially, something only non-Europeans, often of African or Middle Eastern origin, have to do. Should someone of British or Swedish origin commit a crime or disturb public order, the degree (or the impossibility) of *kotoutuminen* will never be part of the discussion in the aftermath of the incident. In this context, it is noteworthy that during my time in Varissuo my key interlocutors of migrant background rarely used the term themselves. In our discussions, the minority youth

jokingly made discursive distinctions between “those Finns” and “us foreign people,” while the adults spoke about striving against social marginalization, isolation, and stigmatization.

An important feature arising directly from the dominant understanding of the concept of *kotoutuminen* is that policies and interventions (in education, health, recreation, and social services) in Varissuo are tailored neither to overcome the structural inequality present in suburban realities nor to address the racialized societal undercurrents. Instead, they are supposed to strengthen “agency” and “participation” and encourage an individual’s “entrepreneurial” qualities, but, ultimately, they are about integrating people into a particular socio-economic position. Moreover, all the social workers and employment advisers whose work I had the chance to follow were working within a system where, although resources were directed by the state toward making people employable, as part of a very particular precarious strata of the workforce, very few resources were reserved for actual job creation.

It was obvious that the professionals and activists working within the Integration Spectacle often genuinely wanted to help and be useful. However, their work was often circumscribed by the focus on survival, on instilling in people the aspiration to become a model migrant, one who was “successful” against odds—real or imagined, and often put down to “cultural differences”—that were disproportionately stacked against such pursuits. Debord (2004: 31, 34–35) argues that, in its concentrated form, the spectacle turns its “stars,” such as political leaders, or rather the image of such individuals, to some degree into commodities themselves. Similarly, it is not merely services that are commoditized in the spectacle reproduced in Finnish migration policies—the model of the migrant itself is effectively a subject of reification. I say reification, because it was this model that moved resources, gave people jobs—if often only for a short time—and made its way into both internal reports and media articles. This model often attracted funding but no in-depth analysis

of the needs of Varissuo’s residents, making it obvious how various social and welfare projects were to be framed. In such a model, the particular imagery of a “successful migrant” in policy documents, media accounts, and even local activism was simultaneously the affirmation that the system was working: “Look how far they got!” Individual “success” in a spectacular neoliberal capitalist sense was seen as proving that, although at the opposite end of the spectrum, poverty and isolation were, likewise, entirely a question of how a person became integrated through their own efforts.

The ways in which the Finnish state and public administration, and by proxy various non-profit organizations and projects, engaged with the “integrationspeak” (in Finnish: *kotouttamispuhe*) and reproduced the image of the model migrant created very particular, ambiguous, and often inherently contradictory ways in which people who were subjected to the multicultural integration politics related to their social status in Finland. I have analyzed elsewhere (Juntunen and Laakkonen 2019) how in Varissuo irony became a popular way, especially among the youth, to critique the inherent systemic contradictions previously outlined in this article. It was a vehicle for political commentary; for the marginalized, the alternative to being silent (Juntunen and Laakkonen 2019: 77). Another common response was trying to conform to the image of the “model migrant”: during our first meeting, an activist in a cultural association repeatedly made the point that “they were not terrorists” but, rather, taught their children Finnish, worked hard, and wanted to contribute to society. He told me, with pride, that every night at bedtime his children would read Finnish to ensure that they developed a broad enough vocabulary. Another apposite point of view, that of the contemporary suburban youth, was expressed by a young man living in a neighboring low-income high-rise suburb. He recounted, in disbelief, how he had lost his possessions and his flat in a fire: “How could this happen to me? I’ve never received benefits, I’ve always been proud to be working. I tell you, bro, no benefits!”

The examples in this article—Khaalid’s community work and the two men oscillating around the image of the model migrant—underline what is at the heart of the Integration Spectacle: the pervasive imagery of a particular conceptualization of entrepreneurship, the marketization of social policy, and the “integrateable” others. What transpires under the spectacle, as it extends from job counseling to social work and from urban planning to voluntary initiatives, is that in Varissuo nothing actually changed substantially. The structure of the suburb did not change—merely another group of people survived. If there was social mobility, it was highly individualized: businesspeople, athletes, and politicians. Despite the commonly held belief to the contrary, in many ways Varissuo was not a bad place to live. It was a colorful but calm area, well connected to the city center by public transport, and during my fieldwork various actors were piloting a number of healthcare and social welfare projects. At the same time, however, the work against poverty or marginalization was always circumscribed by a particular social order, which operationalized neat catchphrases (“agency” and “participation” being the most popular) while doing nothing to the socio-economic structure or the lack of diversity in opportunities. In fact, it actively emplaced the residents of Varissuo into a particular social and economic spatiality. People rarely moved out of the suburb, but if they did, those who moved into the flats they vacated shared the same initial dispositions and socio-economic standing. Everything operated within a particular logic concerned with appearances: one evening, during municipal election campaigning, a delegation from the Social Democratic Party, most of them wearing red, visited the youth center while I was there. First, they listened to a short presentation by the staff. I anticipated a colorful interaction later between the candidates and some of the youth present, who I knew had a particularly carnivalesque nature, but to my surprise, they did not talk to the youth at all. They were solely concerned with the center’s technical functionality, such as the numbers of

young people who visited and the frequency of different activities.

I attended a number of education and employment events that were held in the city center for refugees and migrants, many of whom came from Varissuo and the adjacent high-rise suburbs in eastern Turku. Everything on offer was within the low-paid services sector or in industries that were dependent on international capital and vulnerable to global economic turbulence, such as shipyards and car factories. Vocational schools were present, but the idea of applying to university was completely unheard of, regardless of any competencies the attendants might have. These events stood apart from other general workshop or employment events because of their racialized nature; it was as if ethnicity became bureaucratically affiliated with poverty (cf. Nagy 2019). For example, I overheard a group of roughly 18-year-olds in a workshop being instructed, after initially being told how important good manners were, that when asked in a job interview why they wanted the position it was alright to respond, “I need money for food.” Nothing more was expected of those attending; despite the fact that they were supposed to be “entrepreneurial,” as far as the system was concerned, they still had no skills beyond those needed for material survival.

I have argued that the Integration Spectacle creates no space for mobility that would transcend the cast of the model migrant, a feature I will discuss further in this article. What it offers, instead, is an opportunity for “spectacular contemplation” (Debord 2004: 102)—meditations on marginalization but not on its causes outside of *kotoutuminen*. As Miriam Ticktin (2011) found when working with the *sans-papiers* in France, within the current political order care becomes a form of “antipolitics” that ends up reproducing the inequalities and hierarchies it seeks to address.

### ***Spectators and bureaucrats***

“Once you’ve been to one of these seminars, you’ve seen all of them,” a municipal official



sighed to me on the back row of a city center seminar organized for the various integration and multiculturalism professionals. As my companion focused on checking work emails, I tried to note down how many of the participants were involved in fixed-term projects, most commonly funded through Finnish state or Turku municipality institutions. If I included officials within departments assigned to specific projects initiated by the municipality, commonly set to run for two to three years, this turned out to be the majority. I was immediately reminded of another seminar, aimed at presenting different projects so that people would have greater knowledge of what was going on in the city, in which a speaker introduced themselves as a “project butterfly,” which was followed by approving laughter from the audience of fellow professionals.

When discussing the “utopianization of bureaucracy,” Nayanika Mathur (2020: 113) notes that utopias are imaginative; a sense of possibility and imaginability is involved. If bureaucracies are utopian, then, there must be a situation that is not only imagined as possible but also preferable to what is currently witnessed or is predicted to take place in the near future without action being taken now. In this article, I will argue that the spectacle is the graveyard of utopian thinking.

Earlier, I characterized the Integration Spectacle as an “apolitical” consensus, in Rancièrian terminology. To unpack this further, I will now examine more closely the actors enacting, but equally being captured by, the spectacle: the civil servants, the social workers, the activists, and the non-profits, engaged in *monikulttuurisuustyö* (“multicultural work”) and *kotouttamistoiminta* (“integrative” services or initiatives).

After attending a good number of seminars, workshops, and networking sessions, I came to realize how atomized the day-to-day workings of the projects and bureaucracies were. Entire events were held with few, if any, migrants present, and workshops were organized and papers drafted solely for the purpose of the collection of “best practices” and their dissemination among

the (mostly white) professionals themselves. Effectively, both professionals and volunteers were drawn into a cycle where an important part of their work was solely about the work itself. It also in many ways exemplified the new humanitarianism that Ticktin has explored, one that “no longer sees the possibility of larger political change” (2011: 74).

It must be underlined, however, that important work was being done in spite of the circumstances, which, together with the services provided by the municipality, was not all for nothing. My criticism is directed at the endeavor as a whole. At the heart of this criticism is a wish to draw attention to the mechanisms that generate hierarchy and immobility and neutralize everything into a recourse to “cruel optimism,” an “attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (Berlant 2006: 21). In fact, some professionals themselves also raised this criticism.

#### *Multiculturalism professionals*

The professionals were mostly working in projects that spanned just a few years, with no guarantee of further employment for themselves or a continued lifespan for the projects, regardless of what they achieved. For the professionals, then, just as important as helping their “customers” was finding someone else who could either do the same kind of work later on or help with finding the next project opportunity. Many of these people had to constantly find new ways of making themselves, and each other, valuable to the integration economy. This fragmentation was further evident in how in each seminar and workshop throughout my fieldwork, I found new actors, organizations, and projects, along with fewer and fewer people who could confidently say they knew who did what. Going back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, the documents I plowed through revealed names that would consistently appear in project reports or newspaper articles for a few years, only to later disappear. The climate was one in which there were no longer careers in, for example, social work, only careers as competitors within the

financial scarcity of what Catherine Besteman (2016: 171) has called the “neoliberal borderlands”: the interface between what used to be considered basic services, now cast as a hand-out-but-commodity, and their recipients, in this case the migrant “New Finns” as Besteman’s “New Mainers.”

The professionals were, therefore, in a double role as bureaucrats operationalizing the spectacle and, like everyone else, as spectators, encircled by the very same imagery. In their professional capacity, they possessed considerable expertise, but they were simultaneously operating in a limited field of possibilities, accompanied by a particular, limited vocabulary with which to address inequality, migration, and ethnic minorities. This circumscription of vocabulary has been observed elsewhere too (e.g., Feldman 2010; Volpp 2006, 2007), and here it mimicked the very separation it was supposed to address: between “non-cultural” citizen and “cultural” migrant (cf. Eliassi 2015). Overcoming cultural differences occupied a central role, while terms such as poverty and exclusion rarely entered the conversations. Crucially, the Integration Spectacle in Finland was not concerned with two-way “affective labor” in overcoming difference (e.g., Feldman 2010: 154); instead, it foregrounded solely the migrant-customer.

To describe the multiculturalism professionals, I use the term “bureaucrat” in a descriptive sense, following David Graeber (2016), to denote particular functions that even people not normally considered part of a bureaucracy found themselves entangled with. It is important to note, however, that educators, various coordinators, and social workers were bureaucrats not through their predisposition but through a “culture of complicity” (Graeber 2016: 26–27) and convergence (Kalir and Wissink 2015). As I have noted, even when an actor within the spectacle was not employed by the Finnish state, through the constraints enforced by public funding, they nevertheless became embedded in the state apparatus, with formal Finnish migration and integration policies as the center of gravity.

“It is what it is,” my companion, a civil servant working in integrative services and minority community outreach, shrugged during lunch in a tiny Asian restaurant. “But I have a list of people in my mind. Like, people I know to be good [at their job]. I try to put them in touch with each other and push them to apply for job vacancies in this field. That way we at least have a network of like-minded people.” As Feldman argues (2013), functionaries can be very knowledgeable about the shortcomings of the system in which they work. Indeed, there were many who, like my previously mentioned interlocutor, maintained a critical stance toward what they were doing, and knew very well how the “integrationspeak” failed to address the complexity of the social lives it sought to manage and how the means at their disposal were often inadequate. They found redress in doing things differently, outside the confines of their regular work, either by putting in many extra hours or, outside the workplace, cooperating with the less-institutionalized, more horizontal, activist groups. In this way they could bypass the constraints of the system to a degree. In other cases, their professional expertise and role were in a more generalized field, such as child custody services, which would exist regardless of whether there was migration, and this meant that they were more likely to address inequality from a less enclosed perspective. Nonetheless, in their work in a “discretionary grey zone” (Clark et al. 2015), challenging the commodification remained difficult. Their efforts certainly helped individuals, but they could accomplish little else. I made a note every time people said things should be done differently; “be more local,” “ask the people affected,” “make everything less about being cost-efficient,” and “have permanent jobs” were common responses. What usually eluded my conversations with professionals and bureaucrats (both actual and figurative) was how and to what end these changes would be implemented.

As I have argued, funding for “integration” or “multicultural work” became a means of enforcing certain outcomes. I have already men-

tioned how employment schemes, not just for unemployed refugees and minorities in general but also as part of the formalized integration apparatus, directed and curtailed social mobility. What must be highlighted here is not that people found just any job. The problem is that schemes almost exclusively favored particular employment patterns. Some professionals who ran or advised on these schemes admitted that it was odd to relegate, by default, African or Middle Eastern migrants to manual labor with entry-level contracts, but this was what the state encouraged and funded. At the highest levels of administration, both public and private, the commodified imagery dominated, envisioning the *migrant other* as a manual laborer, part of a racialized industrial reserve army (Marx 1982: 784). To be able to do something within the integration framework meant formulating your project accordingly.

In his *Comments on the society of the spectacle*, Debord described the spectacle as: “the autocratic reign of the market economy, which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty and the totality of new techniques of government that accompanied this reign” (1990: 2). This particular economy of images, of individual empowerment and individual success with little diversity in opportunities, is even more apparent when looking further at how circumscribed the career opportunities were for many of those with a migrant background. Even outside of manual labor in industry, care, and services, the vast majority of employment opportunities were what Heath Cabot (2014: 2) has referred to as “spillovers,” that is, produced by the formal bureaucratic conditions: still within fields that reproduced the spectacle. The educated, like Khaalid, often found themselves as “insiders” of the system (Tuckett 2015) “integrating” others as experts or providing “cultural mediation” within the sub-economy that had formed around migration. They often worked in social services or youth work, on information desks, or in arranging training workshops. The economic structures not only facilitated this but also effectively directed mobility toward this end through

internships, rehabilitative work schemes, and earmarked employment funds. The Integration Spectacle was both a material and an immaterial reproduction of a particular racialized social, economic, and visual order.

As the eve of the 2017 municipal elections was approaching, a local multicultural association in Varissuo hosted a debate that included candidates from the majority of the parties that were standing. For an ethnographer, the evening was confusing: even when asked to do so, candidates representing the entire political spectrum from far-right to feminist, left-wing to conservative, failed to produce a definition of multiculturalism, let alone debate it. As the event came to an end, one candidate noted, “Well, we’re not so far from each other after all,” to which many others nodded in agreement. This apparent uniformity across political divides makes sense if we return to Mathur’s (2020) notion of utopianization. While the welfare state in itself can be perceived as utopian, the Integration Spectacle is everything but; there are no ideals to agree on, as the case of “multiculturalism” shows. Instead, what the politicians in the previous example, as well as many of the professionals I worked with, orient themselves toward are words with no agreed definition but which are, nevertheless, elevated to policy. Spectacle being the graveyard of utopia means that the majority of people were left with an illusion of knowing “what they were working toward while being able neither to describe nor reflect on it.

### Conclusion: Spectacular survival

In this article, I have sought to analyze how migration and so-called integration policies produce outcomes that contradict their stated aims. By exploring the Finnish neoliberal welfare system, the development of suburbs such as Varissuo and, most importantly, life within the integration economy, I have argued that maintaining the appearance of working toward change concealed pervasive structural inequalities.

Exploring a “bordering encounter” in a post-Soviet context, Dace Dzenovska (2014) evokes the concept of “normal life,” which exceeds the contours of what I have referred to as survival: freedom from social and economic immobility and the feeling of being able to participate in the national polity. What I have called the Integration Spectacle entails a misrecognition of what “normal life” is about. The focus on the reified individual, within a considerably vertical power hierarchy, muted critical engagement with structural inequalities. Under the spectacle, people approached Varissuo’s socio-economic conditions primarily as if there were no systemic impediments to the principle of equal opportunities that was so revered. Instead, when the socio-economic precarity of residents was the topic, there was an inclination to frame it solely as a problem of both integration and vaguely defined “cultural differences.” The result was a circular integration economy that sought to fight marginalization by investing in the very same structures that reproduced it.

I have argued that people participated in the Integration Spectacle through complicity; they found themselves acting as if it was the only way things could be done. Tasks that traditionally had been part of the functions of the state or the municipality were now externalized into projects and scattered, while at the same time tightly reined in by the state itself. Ultimately, the disparities and hierarchies present in the Finnish suburban context—dislocation from the city, lack of diversity in socio-economic horizons, and disconnection from the polity—were produced by (and were reproducing) politics that acknowledge at least some of the problems but, being circumscribed by the spectacular imageries, can only augment survival. The Integration Spectacle was not powerful in a way that would engender absolute estrangement or force participation through fear. Instead, it brought about far more ambiguous relationships, ranging from alienation to sometimes even enthusiastic participation. The spectacle sustained itself on the financial power it exerted but also offered a compelling resolution in “agency,” “participa-

tion,” and “empowerment,” which people often readily internalized; the model migrant did its work.

That this took place in Finland, where the entire spectrum of parliamentary politics, save for its far-right fringes, publicly claims the future of the welfare state as its primary concern, tells us less about the ubiquity of such an ideal and more about how it has lost its utopian qualities. In line with how Debord describes societal reality under capitalism, as the particular imagery of “customership”, individual “agency”, *kotoutuminen*, and so forth has gained ground, the possibility of systemic change had become increasingly unimaginable.

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