

Roots and Routes of Finnish Sociology: A Contemporary Perspective on Early Sociology¹

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This occasion marks 90 years from when Uno Harva was appointed as Professor of Sociology at the University of Turku. Harva was a disciple of Edvard Westermarck, probably still the most famous Finnish Sociologist. Westermarck began teaching sociology at the University of Helsinki as early as 1890, holding the title of docent of Sociology. He became the first professor of Sociology in the UK at the London School of Economics UK in 1907. As it happens, 1890 is the year when a course in sociology was taught at the University of Kansas in US. This is commonly called the first course taught in sociology in the world. Hence, the history of Finnish Sociology is international from the very beginning and it is formalized in tandem with U.K., U.S. and France. For instance, Emile Durkheim had become the first Professor of Sociology in Europe in 1902, only five years earlier than Westermarck in the UK.

Finnish sociology emerges and develops simultaneously as a local, national project and also in close connection to the international development of sociology. The roots of Finnish sociology are thus multiple. When tracing the routes taken by Finnish sociology on the other hand, one finds a more hidden, and nowadays silenced tradition. Finnish sociological tradition emerges and develops as a nationalistic project, it is part in creating a myth of a homogenous Finnish people, and in doing so, it closely connects with scientific racism.

Uno Harva, like his teacher Edward Westermarck, would today be called a Social Anthropologist, Ethnologist or a scholar of Comparative Religion, rather than a Sociologist. Like other Ethnologists of his time, he was interested in understanding the origins of Finnish people and focused his studies on Finno-Ugrian people's myths and religious beliefs. However, in 1943 he also wrote an unpublished essay entitled *Sosiologia, sen tutkimusala ja tehtävät* (Sociology, its research field and tasks) – a manuscript nowadays kept at the National library. In the manuscript Uno Harva defines the task and field of sociology as follows:

“The humanistic field of research that the French philosopher Auguste Comte some 100 years ago gave the name Sociology is truly humane in the true sense of the term, because the focus of this field of research is the human being – not as a philosophical concept or as an abnormal hermit, but as the social being that man appears in lived life. As far back as we can follow human life and the development of human culture,

we always encounter man as a member of a community. This is quite essential to man and this kind of group being s/he has apparently been already in the beginning, otherwise it would be difficult to understand for instance the existence of spoken language, through which also the natural people who are on a lower stage of development express their thoughts and feelings” (Harva 1943, my translation from the original Finnish).

Further down the manuscript he continues to distinguish Sociology from other sciences, *natural sciences* being an important point of comparison. He writes: “Sociology cannot, like natural sciences, refer to adamant laws of nature but some kind of conformity to a law or regularity is common for its research objects. What is coincidental or occasional and not regularly repeating cannot as such be the object of sociological research. Social life requires regularity to which it always returns after fleeting upheavals or social transformations.” (Harva 1943, my translation from the original Finnish).

He then goes on to emphasize the importance of comparative and sufficient empirical data and to discuss the relationship between Sociology and other research fields such as Ethnology, or what he calls Ethnosociology, Economics, and Social Policy. He presents the typical dichotomy within Sociology: that is, the dichotomy of Sociology as a general science which studies “the society as a whole and its specific phenomenon keeping mind the totality” and Sociology as a specialized science that studies specific questions and social phenomena. He also mentions the complex relationships between the individual and the society as the great sociological problem of ‘our time’ referring to the relationship between race and culture as a key concern for sociologists.

What would be Uno Harva's message to a contemporary sociologist? In distinguishing sociology from natural sciences, Harva tells those colleagues who are turning to natural science models and experimental research designs in the quest for impact and relevance that systematic empirical evidence, which focuses on regular and recurring social phenomenon, not on the occasional or spectacular, is enough. In mentioning the complex relationship between the individual and society, he is in line with C. Wright Mills' (1959) famous formulation of sociological imagination as understanding the relationship between personal troubles and public issues.

But there is another, to a contemporary reader more disturbing thought present in Uno Harva's writings. It is the idea of human socio-cultural evolution from primitive to civilized, from agricultural to industrial, an idea that can be traced back to 19th century philosophers such as Hegel, Herder but also

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August Comte who, as we know, is considered the founding father of sociology. In his six volumes of *Course of Positive Philosophy* from 1830 to 1842, Comte examined what he called the five fundamental sciences (mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry and biology) and outlined the scientific evolution leading to sociology as the sixth, the most difficult science, which deals with human society itself. In the sixth volume of *Course of Positive Philosophy* Comte describes the historical progress and industrialization with human evolution located within Europe and amongst ‘the white race’:

“Now, according to this general rule, the predominance, beginning in the Middle Ages, of industrial life over warlike life, has directly tended to elevate the primitive type of social man to a degree, at least within our race.” (Comte 1842, 65–66, my own translation from the original French).

Moreover, sociology according to Comte needs to be developed within Western Europe and amongst the superior ‘white race’ before it can be extended to study other ‘less-developed countries’:

“Thus whatever it may be today, the eminent practical utility of sound sociological studies of the most advanced societies, (...) will necessarily have in the future even more importance and it will extend to backward populations. (...) Until the positive reorganization is sufficiently advanced, it is important, as I have explained above, that their systematic elaboration always remains exclusively concentrated on the majority of the white race, making up the vanguard of humanity, according to the exact sociological definition, which I directly formulated at the beginning of this volume, and which comprises only the five great nations of Western Europe.” (Comte 1842, 628–629, my own translation from the original French).

It is often claimed that in Finland, scientific racism was short-lived, culminating in a research project starting in 1924 to find the origins of the Finnish ‘race’ led by professor of anatomy Yrjö Kajava. The project involved among other things the measuring of 8,000 human skulls and yielded no conclusive results regarding the origins of Finnish ‘race’ (Rasismin historia 2016). However, the idea of different human ‘races’ with particular traits and hierarchically positioned continued to influence social sciences for much longer. The work of the race theorist and anthropologist Kaarlo Hildén was particularly influential. In his book *Maapallon esihistorialliset ja nykyiset ihmisrodut* (The Prehistorical and Contemporary human races of the globe) from 1933, Hildén argued against the wide-spread thesis that Finns were part of an East Baltic race – which had mongoloid traces – but instead belonged to the Nordic type of the ‘grand white race’, as did Swedes (Hildén 1933, 160–178). Hildén also argued that the Sami were a race of its own, completely different from the ‘caucasoid grand race’ (Hildén 1933, 181). Hildén’s book was part of the official curriculum of the Faculty of Social Sciences in Helsinki and informed, for instance, the thinking of the notable social scientist, Heikki Waris.

Waris is a key figure in the development of the Finnish Sociological tradition as it moved away from its anthropologi-

cal tradition towards empirical social research focusing on industrial and urban contexts. Waris’ doctoral thesis, entitled *Työläisyhteiskunnan syntyminen Helsingin Pitkäsillan pohjoispuolelle* (The birth of the working class society on the north of the ‘Long Bridge’ in Helsinki) from 1932 is a study of the population increase and urban changes caused by rapid industrialization in Helsinki. Waris was influenced by research by the Chicago School of Sociology, for instance by *The City* (1925), written by Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Roderick D. McKenzie who investigated the processes of migration, urbanization and industrialization in Chicago using biological metaphors of the city as an ecological unit in which different migrant and ethnic groups settle into different niches.²

Waris also wrote the first general book on Finnish society entitled *Suomalaisen yhteiskunnan rakenne* (The Structure of Finnish Society), which was published in 1948. The book starts with a presentation of the population structure of Finnish society in which Waris, drawing on Kaarlo Hildén’s 1933 book, argues against the ‘Mongoloid thesis’ and claims that ‘Finnish people represent the two sub-races of the grand white race, namely the East Baltic and the Nordic race’ (Waris 1948, 22). Moreover, according to Waris (1948, 22–24), the Finnish nation is ‘racially very unified’, in that even though there is a linguistic distinction between Finnish- and Swedish-speaking Finns, this is not a racial distinction. However, Waris distinguishes three minorities within the Finnish nation: Lapps, Roma and Jews. The latter two he considers as racially completely different from the Finnish people. He also argues that this ‘racial unity is an important support for the unity and strength of the state’ and that the ‘nation needs to take care that the blood heritage does not become weaker. This is why race hygiene has emerged as a struggle against abnormality’ (Waris 1948, 24).³

In a similar way to Waris, also the first professor of Sociology at the University of Helsinki, Veli Verkko represents another important strand in Finnish sociology, the study of deviant social behaviour, alcoholism and criminology in particular. Veli Verkko was also drawn to biological and racial explanations in explaining criminal behaviour. In his 1948 inaugural lecture, he spoke of race theory, by which he referred to the genetic predisposition of the Finnish population, specifically in regards to low alcoholic tolerance and predisposition to aggression. Veli Verkko’s legacy lives on in the work of Finnish criminologists, such as Janne Kivivuori according to whom the idea of racist or genetic predisposition to crime ‘is not impossible, or absurd’ as a thought (Kivivuori 2015) and who in his contemporary criminology textbook widely presents evolutionary explanations for crime (Kivivuori 2013).

Although race theories are no longer accepted as such in mainstream Finnish social sciences, the idea of an ethnically and culturally homogenous Finnish nation continued to be a taken-for-granted starting point in a lot of social research. The so-called *methodological nationalism*, i.e., the tendency to equate *society* with the *nation-state* and to unquestionably treat the nation-state as the natural container for the society continues to haunt a lot of social scientific research (Beck

2000; Chernilo 2006). It also overlooks the fact that the perceived homogeneity of a nation-state, is by definition, a historical project. As historian Miika Tervonen has argued (2014) the creation of an 'ethnically homogeneous' Finnish nation was a discursive and political project, which involved, for instance, deporting people with Russian and Jewish background, translating Swedish surnames into Finnish, and creating the discursive myth of an ethnically and 'racially' homogenous nation. It is also a myth to which key sociologists contributed, as I have argued.

Numerous key sociological studies from the 1970s and 1980s are examples of this. Take, for instance, a co-authored volume from 1985 entitled *Suomalaiset. Yhteiskunnan rakenne teollistumisen aikana* (Finns: Social Structure during Industrialisation), which claims to update Heikki Waris' book from 1948. *Suomalaiset* takes the idea of a homogenous Finnish nation as a reference point against which minorities – or the only minority discussed, namely the Swedish-speaking minority – is then discussed. Other minorities are excluded from the representation of the Finnish social structure.

Suomalaiset represents what Erik Allardt in an article from 1984 called 'the great tradition of Finnish sociology': that is concrete social research, which focuses on social structural questions and its changes. Of course since Allardt (1984) asked his famous question in the title of his text: 'Has Finnish sociology forgotten its 'great tradition?', a lot has happened: the emergence of gender studies as an independent discipline, the cultural and reflexive turn with a focus on interaction and language - which some consider to have eroded the grand narrative of the Finnish sociological tradition and its focus on social structures, and more recently, the emergence of postcolonial critique. The feminist and postcolonial critique has been crucial in – and I am paraphrasing the American feminist Audre Lorde here – giving tools other than those of the Master in order to 'dismantle the master's house', that is demonstrating the strong ethnonationalist narrative and undercurrent of Finnish and western sociology, for instance the myth of a homogenous Finnish people, which continues to haunt Finnish social sciences.

Moreover, the role that evolutionary and scientific racism has had in the general sociological tradition remains to be fully explored, although theorists such as Gurinder Bhabra (2007) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) have conducted important research in deconstructing Eurocentric ideas of modernity and capitalism within social sciences. Within the Finnish sociological tradition the connection between sociology and scientific racism is a history that is often is suppressed and silenced, or explained away as being part of a particular time and place, as something that does not concern us anymore. Yet, if we do not recognize that history and the role scientific racism has played in western social sciences and in the wider European investment in whiteness (see Bonnett 2000), we cannot develop a more inclusive, self-reflexive and global sociology.

Finally, today when populist, rightwing and neonazi groups are making claims on Finnishness and are involved in its definition, it should be the duty of social scientists and

historians to remind us that the homogeneous Finnish nation is a myth, that this is a diverse and heterogeneous country which was constructed as 'homogeneous' as a political project. Deconstructing the national myth of homogeneous Finnishness is also crucial in striving towards more inclusive and just society to which it is possible to belong regardless of one's ethnic, racial or social background.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of the key note lecture 'Roots and Routes of Finnish Sociology' given at the '90 years of UTU Sociology' symposium held at the University of Turku on December 8th, 2016.

2. Interestingly this ecological framework seems to have made a comeback in contemporary social sciences and political sciences, most notably in the form of the concept of resilience.

3. Like in other Nordic countries, eugenics in Finland was implemented through forced sterilizations. Since the first law on sterilization (the Sterilization Bill) from 1935 until the end of the second law (the Sterilization Act of 1950) in 1970, close to 60,000 Finns, 99 % women, were forcibly sterilized, most for eugenic reasons (Hietala 2005).

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