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Multiculturalism and nationalism in Finland

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Introduction

All societies are diverse, and one of the tasks of the state is to organize this heterogeneity. In this essay, I will analyze the last 200 years of the history of Finland from the point of view of managing ethnic, linguistic and cultural plurality. The story starts from the nation-building process in the 19th century and it ends with a discussion about contemporary and future challenges in finding the right balance between rights and duties, inclusion and exclusion. I argue that Finland makes an interesting case in combining nationalist thinking with extensive minority rights, and the true nature of the country is therefore often misunderstood. Increased immigration in the last decades, efforts to renew national self-understanding and the Finnish branch of European neo-nationalism make the current situation especially interesting.

From a province of Sweden to a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire

Finnish nation-building was a strange process that had an extraordinary outcome. After being a practically fully integrated part of Sweden for centuries, in 1809 most of the area of contemporary Finland became a Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire. When the Finnish Estate Diet convened in Porvoo that year, the Czar solemnly confirmed the existing legal order in Finland, guaranteed the privileges of the domestic elite and elevated Finns to the category of world nations. (On the political history of Finland, Alapuro, 1988; Jussila et. al., 1999; Kirby, 1979; Wuorinen, 1931.)

In the literature concerning nationalism, there has often appeared a distinction between two main types of nationalism. In the state-led version, the political-administrative unit pre-existed national self-consciousness, and the sense of national belonging could be developed within the structures of the state. In contrast, state-seeking nations have been nationalist movements searching for self-determination for the national community, operating within a state or empire that has been understood as foreign. (Tilly, 1999.)

The Finnish case was neither state-led nor state-seeking – or it was both of them. The Grand Duchy of Finland enjoyed a relatively large autonomy albeit without full sovereignty. The room for manoeuvre of Finnish decision-makers was ultimately determined by the will of the ruling Emperor, the Czar of Russia, the Grand Duke of Finland. After the first assembly of the estates, the Finnish Diet did not convene for decades. Therefore, the modernization of the state and society was difficult. However, the domestic elite could gradually consolidate autonomy through piecemeal reforms and administrative practice.

The Swedish language kept its status as the official language, the language of administration, higher

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education and much of cultural and business life. An important consequence of this was that even though Swedish speakers were a numerical minority, practically the whole elite was Swedish speaking, whatever its ethnic origin. Not all Swedish speakers were rich and powerful, though. A large part of them were rural dwellers living in the coastal areas, practicing agriculture or fishing. For the majority, the Finnish-speakers, the state was nevertheless linguistically foreign.

In daily life, however, this did not mean that much for the bulk of the population. Most Finnish-speakers dwelled in the rural areas of the Finnish mainland where also the local elite usually belonged to the same linguistic group. As a consequence of the Lutheran Reformation in the 16th century, the Finnish language had been elevated to the status of languages "that God understands" to paraphrase Finnish Lutheran reformist and the first translator of the Bible into Finnish, Mikael Agricola. Because the ability to personally study the Holy Scripture was important, lay people were taught to read. In international comparison, literacy reached high levels already in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The origins of Finnish nationalism

Finnish nationalism was not born among these rural dwellers, however. Rather, this ideology first gained ground among the urban educated class, many of whom were inspired by German Romantic philosophy (on Finnish nationalism, Jussila, 1987; Klinge, 1975, 1981; Liikanen, 2005). For Johann Gottfried von Herder, the cornerstone of being human and the main component of a national community was language. Linguistic groups were also national communities, each of which had its own culture. A political extrapolation of this ethno-cultural thinking claimed that every language-culture-nation should also have its own state and that in each state there should be only one national community.

This nationalist idea was later in the 19th century developed by Georg Friedrich Hegel whose ideas resonated well among Finnish intellectuals. Peculiar in Finnish nationalism and nation-building was that the protagonists of the nationalist ideology based on Finnish language were in most cases actually Swedish speakers themselves. Some of them had their origins in Finnish-speaking families. Nevertheless, many of them came from social environments with little contact to the Finnish-speaking part of the population. Some of the most influential of them hardly mastered the language they praised in their writings.

At the same pace with Finnish nationalism, the modern public sphere and civil society also developed. During those decades of revolutions and uprisings, authorities often treated media, associational life and nationalist ideas with suspicion. The 1850 degree prohibited the publication of other than religious and economic works in Finnish. The ban was gradually relieved, and the debate on the origins and development of the Finnish nation was continued in both languages.

During those years, an important forum was the Swedish-language Litteraturbladet run by the influential philosopher Johan Vilhelm Snellman. As a pupil of Hegel, he held the opinion that the Finnish nation only had a future if the Finnish language would be promoted to the status of official language and if it would also gradually replace Swedish. True freedom was possible only if the national spirit, behind which language was an important component, would guide the operations of both politics and individuals.

Some other intellectuals were frightened by these visions. In the late 1850s, there was an intensive debate about what nations were made of and what kind of measures would be appropriate to promote the position of the Finnish language (if any) and what would be the future of these languages. The radical nationalists on both sides of the linguistic strife maintained that Finnish speakers and Swedish speakers made two distinct nations. The more moderate participants argued that a common sense of belonging was possible to reach across the language divide.

Snellman also succeeded in making a political career. He became the leading figure of the Fennoman political movement and a member of the Finnish senate that functioned as the domestic government. In 1863, he managed to make a deal with Czar Alexander II that Finnish would be recognized as an official language alongside Swedish after a transition period of twenty years.

Another influential person, the poet, storyteller, journalist and historian Zachris Topelius, published in 1875 a textbook for Finnish schools. This book, The Book of Our Country, originally appeared in Swedish but was soon translated into Finnish, and it would be used as a source of knowledge and inspiration for many decades to come. Probably no other publication has had such an influence on Finnish national self-understanding.

This book is nationalist theory made concrete and as such a very interesting object of scrutiny. Simple or even naïve stories often conceal philosophical, political or theological considerations. With regard to the notion of the nation, Topelius took the moderate position promoting a milder version of nationalism. In his view, a nation was first and foremost a product of common history and shared experiences. "All the sons and daughters of Finland belong to the same nation, whatever the language they speak", he wrote in The Book of Our Country (1982 [1875], 13) and defined the nation in strikingly liberal terms:

> *"But it has been said that all those who recognize this country as their fatherland and love Finland as such, all those who obey the laws of this country and work for the future of Finland, all those make one nation. They are united by their love, their compliance, and their common good*." (Topelius, 1982 [1875], 124.) [1]

The making of a bilingual state

Practically all societies are culturally diverse in the sense that there are many languages, religions and value systems among the population. People belonging to the same society also often have different ethnic or national origins or identities, and there is usually a variety of customs and traditions as well. In this sense, all societies are multiethnic and multicultural. As a corollary, all societies are forced to organize this diversity in a way that keeps the country together and makes the formation of common objectives and the realization of these goals possible. (Saukkonen, 2003, 2007.)

So far I have presented the historical background of the political organization diversity in of Finland that could truly begin only after Finland became independent. Finnish autonomy grew gradually larger during the 19th century but national self-determination was nevertheless strongly limited by the role of the Russian Emperor as the sovereign ruler. At the end of the 19th century and in the early years of the 20th century, Russian authorities, inspired by Russian nationalism, also pursued increasing control over Finnish autonomy and a stronger role for the Russian language in Finland.

As one of the many unintended consequences of the First World War, Finland became independent in 1917, for many Finns somewhat unexpectedly. In 1918, the young country was torn in a cruel Civil War between the socialist "Reds" that started the revolution and their counterpart, the victorious "Whites". After the War, the discussion on the Constitution of Finland could be started. As a part of these deliberations, the Finnish Parliament also had to decide on the status of different languages and religions.

The state church system was dismantled in Finland already in the 1860s when ecclesiastical and secular administration were separated at the local level. Instead of the Lutheran congregations, education and many social affairs became the responsibility of the secular part of the local community, the municipality. In 1923, the Law regarding the freedom of religion was enacted, and since then the establishment of non-Christian denominations has been legal. Jews in Finland received citizens' rights in 1918. The Lutheran Church of Finland has until this day been regulated by a separate law and this religion is also mentioned in the Constitution. However, the position and autonomy of the Greek Orthodox Church has also been regulated by law, and both religions have been called national churches or people's churches (*kansankirkko*).

With regard to the language question, the solution was to declare the country officially bilingual. Here the uncommon thing was not to geographically divide the country into different regions with different linguistic profiles. Many if not most multilingual countries are also federal or quasi-federal states where the status of languages depends on the regulation at the regional level. Belgium, for example, is officially trilingual but it is only the capital region of Brussels that is officially multilingual. In Switzerland, a mi-

nority of cantons have more than one official language. In Canada, only New Brunswick is a truly bilingual province. (Cordell & Wolff, 2004.)

In the Finnish case, the whole unitary state was made bilingual and both Finnish speakers and Swedish speakers were to have the same rights vis-à-vis state authorities everywhere. The regional level of public administration has always been weak in Finland but municipalities, in turn, have had a large degree of autonomy and are also important providers of public services. Municipalities are officially divided into mono- or bilingual communities based on the number of the minority language speakers and/or their share of the local population. In the early 1920s, the province of Åland was declared monolingual Swedish as a part of an international treaty that guarantees the autonomy of the Åland archipelago. (McRae, 1999.)

Sometimes extraordinary solutions manage to endure time, and this has been the case in Finnish language policy. In the 1920s, a fierce language strife concentrated on the Finnish capital, Helsinki, and especially on the academic community in the city. The supporters of radical nationalism wanted to promote the status of Finnish language and to weaken the status of Swedish. The conflict, however, gradually abated. An important factor in this process was the need for unity across language communities and societal groups under the external threat of the Soviet Union. (Hämäläinen, 1979.)

Consolidation of Finnish multiculturalism

The next important phase for minorities and minority rights in Finland was in the 1960s when both political and cultural tolerance increased in Finnish society. A very important reform was the one regarding basic education.

Until then, secondary education had been available only for a minority of an age group. In the new system, all children would have a mandatory education of nine years. During the preparation process, there was a proposal that favored English language and would have made Swedish a voluntary language for Finnish-speaking pupils. In the end, however, instruction of domestic languages was made mandatory in every region of Finland. Sufficient conduct of both languages also became a necessary skill for all central government officials that were required a university degree and for many lower level civil servants, such as policemen, as well. The university curriculum also contained the examination of the other domestic language, the one not registered as a mother tongue, for all students.

The position of the minority official language, Swedish, was thus strengthened. The status of other traditional minorities in Finland also started improving. As a part of Nordic development, the rights of the indigenous Sámi people were recognized and different institutional solutions were created to safeguard and to support the maintenance of Sámi language, culture and livelihood. In Finland, the Sámi parliament was finally established in 1996. This *Sámediggi* is the representative body for the Sámi in Finland that decides on matters of Sámi language, culture, and their position as an indigenous people. It also can make initiatives, proposals and statements to the authorities. The situation of the Finnish Roma was also gradually improved in the latter half of the 20th century. (Saukkonen, 2013a.)

An important judicial landmark was the reform concerning constitutional basic rights in the early 1990s. The new Constitution paragraph stipulating the rights to language and culture described the basic framework of Finnish official bilingualism. Furthermore, it regulated that the Sámi, as indigenous people, Roma, and other groups have the right to maintain and develop their language and culture. The justification of this reform reveals some important aspects. Firstly, this right implied not only the negative right of minorities from state interference, it also included the responsibility of the state to support the realization of this right. Secondly, the notion of "other groups" was extended to also mean groups of later origin if these could be understood as minorities.

When the Finnish Constitution was a bit later more profoundly reformed, this paragraph remained unchanged. The Finnish legislation actually does not recognize any minorities, ethnic, cultural or national, by name except in paragraph 17 in the Constitution, referred to above. However, when Finland in the early

1990s also ratified the two Council of Europe treaties (1992, 1998) relevant from this point of view, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, in this context the minority groups and languages that these treaties would apply to were also enumerated. In addition to Swedish speakers, Finland reports to the Council of Europe on the situation of Russian speakers, the Sámi (the three Sámi languages spoken in Finland), the Roma and Roma language, Tatars and Tatar language, Jews in Finland and Yiddish, and the Karelian language.

In 1999, Finland also received its first Integration Act to meet the needs the society was facing as a result of increasing immigration. During the Cold War, immigration to Finland had been very limited. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and as Finland increased co-operation with European integration, immigration also started growing (Korkiasaari & Söderling, 2003; Martikainen et al., 2013). This Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers also took a quite liberal view on the linguistic and cultural rights of the new members of society. Integration was understood as personal development of immigrants, aimed at participation in working life and society while preserving their own language and culture. This non-assimilationist approach was supposed to benefit both those who come to Finland and the whole society.

To recapitulate, Finland became a multiculturalist country. Multiculturalism here means that the society recognizes its ethnic and cultural diversity, supports the maintenance of this diversity, safeguards the cultural rights of minorities and fights discrimination and inequality based on ethnicity or cultural difference. The Multiculturalism Policy Index developed at the Queens University in Canada also confirms that Finland is one of the most multiculturalist countries in Europe (Coburn, 2011; Duvieusart-Déry, 2011; Tolley, 2011).

For many Finns, these judgments come as a surprise. One reason for this might be the ignorance regarding both Finnish minority policy and the rights of minorities elsewhere. A more likely reason, however, is that the legal multiculturalism described above seems to be at odds with the widely shared idea of the Finnish nation and society, or Finnish national identity. In the symbolic dimension of nation-building and the political organization of diversity in Finland, the Fennomania-inspired nationalism has been going strong during all these decades.

Indeed, during all those decades that Finland has been officially bilingual, has recognized two national churches, accepted cultural autonomy for the Sámi, improved the position of the Roma and other national minorities, and established a liberal immigrant integration policy, the nationalist understanding of the nation has also held on. In the discussions regarding national identity in the 1980s and 1990s, Finnish society was often defined and described in terms of ethnic and cultural homogeneity and as a unique cultural community. (Saukkonen, 1999; Tervonen, 2014.)

Ethno-cultural unity was often not only taken as a demographic fact, it was also very positively charged. In a much-read sociology textbook that was published in the 1950s, professor Heikki Waris described Finnish racial homogeneity as a great asset and as an indispensable support for national unity and stability. Many authors have later repeated similar arguments (Saukkonen, 1999, 235–236). Ethnic and cultural differences within the nation have been treated with suspicion as something that threatens the existence and success of the country.

This dissonance between multiculturalist policies and the nationalist understanding of the nation has made Finland prone to misinterpretations. If one only examines either the formal minority policy and integration policy or the national narrative and self-image, one also tends to make a one-sided reading of Finland and to exaggerate either its tolerance or intolerance. In fact, Finland has genuinely been both a multiculturalist nation and a nationalist society, a combination of seemingly incompatible characteristics.

Recent developments

In the 1990s, this tension between legal and symbolic spheres of the political organization of difference

was about to reduce. When Finland joined the European Union in 1995, this act was often described as a return to Europe to which the country actually always had belonged. Increased immigration was also generally welcomed as a sign of or a factor promoting the internationalization of a previously peripheral and backward country. The high tech giant Nokia changed the image of Finland from one cherishing age-old traditions to another belonging to the avant-garde of technological progress.

At the turn of the Millennium, it even seemed as if the two dimensions of the political organization of difference were about to coincide. However, probably for the first time in the history of Finland since the mid-19th century, there existed two different versions of Finnish identity that strove for recognition among the Finnish electorate. Not everybody wanted to abandon the traditional self-understanding. There were also lots of people who were dissatisfied with the loss of traditional sovereignty, increasing immigration and the desertion of traditional values. This agony provided good opportunities for political populism and neo-nationalism.

Neo-nationalism is an ideological framework that in Europe consists of components such as anti-immigration sentiments, criticism towards the European Union, the emphasis of law and order and the idea that all states should be mono-cultural or at least led by the traditional majority community, the *Leitkultur*. Many European neo-nationalist parties started growing in the 1990s, often as a result of putting more emphasis on issues related to immigration. More recently, the critique of Islam and Muslims in European societies, in particular, has received attention.

In the Western European context, Finland seemed immune to parties and politicians of this type for a long time. The populist party, *Perussuomalaiset*, (the True Finns, later the Finns Party) that was founded in 1995 upon the ruins of an agrarian populist party gained some electoral support but remained in the margins of Finnish politics. Compared with other populist or neo-nationalist European parties, this party led by Timo Soini was also relatively moderate in nationalist terms and left-leaning rather than a right-wing party. (Arter, 2010; Jungar, 2011; Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Pyrhönen, 2015.)

This came to an abrupt end in the 2011 Parliamentary election in which the Finns Party received 19% of the vote nationally. Before the election, the party had also become significantly more nationalistic. Radical nationalists had started organizing themselves already some years earlier. Important actors in this regard were the association *Suomen Sisu*, and the blogs written by Jussi Halla-aho under the title "Writings about a sinking West". Halla-aho's writings often contained anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalist and anti-Islamic messages. He has been found guilty of disturbing religious worship and of ethnic agitation by the Finnish Supreme Court.

Before the 2011 election, Timo Soini and Jussi Halla-aho joined forces. In December 2010, Halla-aho together with a group of other neo-nationalists published the so-called Aloof Election Manifesto (*Nuiva Vaalimanifesti*, 2010). This manifesto strongly criticized Finnish language policy, immigration policy and immigrant and minority rights policies. (Nykänen, 2016.)

> *"Finland needs to give up the recent multiculturalist state-ideology, which is copied from Western Europe, especially Sweden, and praises and supports disparity."* (Quoted from Nykänen, 2016, 126.) [2]

The electoral success of the Finns Party brought nationalism back as a force in Finnish politics. Because the party remained in opposition, it nevertheless had little chance to really have an impact on policies regarding minorities' and immigrants' rights. The situation changed in 2015 when the Finns party succeeded in keeping most of its success from four years earlier. After negotiations, a coalition government consisting of the moderate conservative National Coalition, the Center Party and the Finns Party was formed.

It is interesting to look at the program of this Government led by Prime Minister Juha Sipilä (Prime Minister's Office Finland, 2015). One might think that the participation of the Finns Party would also lead to a revision of Finnish multiculturalism. In countries such as Denmark or the Netherlands where neo-nationalists have been able to influence government policy, especially the rights of immigrants have been restricted, and also otherwise there has been a strong emphasis on cultural unity and heritage, and on the traditional notion of national identity. (Saukkonen, 2013c, 2013a, 76–85).

In the Finnish case, however, there has in fact been little activity of this kind. True, the Finns Party was able to have a strong impact on the section of the Government Program dealing with immigration policy. In other parts of the program, the neo-nationalist influence is, however, minimal. In fact, the program solemnly states in the opening section:

> *"Finland is open and international, rich in languages and cultures. (...) We have a rich linguistic and cultural heritage and we foster a bilingual Finland in accordance with our Constitution and values."* (Prime Minister's Office Finland, 2015, 7.) [3]

Government participation and the unavoidable compromises all parties are forced to make in a coalition brought tensions within the Finns Party. In summer 2017, Jussi Halla-aho was elected as the successor of Soini as the leader of the party. His supporters occupied almost all prominent positions. This led to a split where those loyal to Soini formed their own parliamentary group and later also a new party. This group also continued in government whereas the Finns Party of Halla-aho became part of the opposition.

Contemporary and future challenges

The Sipilä Government has not seriously challenged Finnish multiculturalism and it has hardly discussed matters related to it. However, we can also make the judgment that the development of Finnish multiculturalist policies has since the rise of neo-nationalism largely been stagnating. This is an important finding because there has always been a gap between multiculturalism in theory and in practice. Finnish neo-nationalists are correct to point out the positive attitude towards cultural diversity and minority rights in Finnish legislation and in political and administrative discourse. Nevertheless, they also tend to ignore the fact that the implementation of laws and programmes has always been quite modest. Much of Finnish multiculturalism is based on project-based activities with little funding, for example. (Saukkonen, 2013b, 2013c.)

This means that Finnish nation-building is still an unfinished process. In the mid-19th century where we started this story, it was important to construct the identity of the nation that really did not yet exist as such to include all the people living in the country, irrespective of their language, culture or ethnic origin. During the first years of independence, the cultural rights of Swedish speakers and of people belonging to different religions were consolidated in the Finnish legislation. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, Finland gradually recognized other traditional minorities and improved their social and cultural situation. Since then, Finland has become increasingly diverse as a result of international migration. This development, in particular, has increased the urgency to further construct the nation in terms of diversity.

A somewhat similar situation appears almost everywhere in Europe. Societies are nowadays heterogeneous units, some of them even super-diverse because of the number and complexity of differences. There is a great need to find solutions in the different spheres of society, legal, political and symbolic, to give room for diversity while maintaining a sufficient degree of unity. In recent years, neo-nationalists have dominated the public debate with their longing for the assumed unity of the past. There is no decent way back to the imaginary homeland of nationalist stories, however. A sustainable road map to the future must be built upon a different kind of approach.

Endnotes

[1] Mutta se on sanottu, että kaikki, jotka tunnustavat tämän maan isänmaakseen ja rakastavat tätä sellaisena, – kaikki, jotka tottelevat tämän maan lakia ja tekevät työtä tämän hyväksi, – ovat yksi kansa. He ovat yhdistetyt heidän rakkaudellaan, tottelevaisuudellaan, heidän yhteisellä hyvällään.

[2] Suomen tulee luopua nykyisestä, muualta Länsi-Euroopasta ja varsinkin Ruotsista kopioidusta monikulttuuristisesta valtioideologiasta, erilaisuuden ihannoimisesta ja itsetarkoituksellisesta ylläpidosta.

[3] Suomi on avoin ja kansainvälinen, kieliltään ja kulttuuriltaan rikas maa. (…) Meillä on rikas kieli- ja kulttuuriperintö ja vaalimme kaksikielistä Suomea perustuslain ja arvojemme mukaisesti.

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