



Nineteenth Century Nationalism in Finland: A Comparative Perspective

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To assess the nature of Finnish nationalism, Finland should be compared with other minor nationalities within the great multinational empires of the nineteenth century. In this perspective it seems of utmost importance that Finnish nationalism developed in the interface between the Swedish and Russian centers, one economically and culturally dominant, the other politically dominant, but economically backward. Starting from this background, it is suggested that exceptionally strong incentives for nationalist mobilization existed not only in the Finnish middle class, but also in the upper class, and that therefore national consolidation and nationalism advanced calmly and steadily.

‘Internal national consolidation in Finland occurred calmly and steadily during the nineteenth century. By international standards, the changes were accompanied by relatively little conflict. Chauvinism and bragging about own race, language, and past – which played a conspicuous role in several other countries – remained minor here, particularly because of the non-sovereign position of the country and the linguistic division within the educated class’ (Klinge 1975, 54).

This view, presented by Matti Klinge, is somewhat unconventional in its emphasis on the steady and relatively calm advancement of national consolidation and nationalism in Finland. It has been more common to lay emphasis on the cleavages and the ardor in the nationalist struggles of the past century (e.g. Puntila 1975, 42–46). To be sure, it is characteristic of these assessments that they have been made without explicit reference to developments elsewhere.

This paper suggests that a comparative perspective is useful for an assessment of the nature and strength of nineteenth century nationalism in Finland. The conclusion is in basic agreement with Klinge’s view. The steadiness of the expansion of nationalism seems to be due to a specifically Finnish combination of the various factors that lay behind the nationalist

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movements, particularly among the minor nationalities of the great European multinational empires of the time. Indicative of these factors is the relatively strong representation of the dominant classes in the initial phase of the nationalist movement, and the important role of the wealthy freeholding peasantry in the early mass movement.

1. The Dual Nature of Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Europe

In an influential essay, Ernest Gellner (1964, 166) has portrayed nationalism as 'a phenomenon connected not so much with industrialisation or modernisation as such, but with its uneven diffusion'. The tidal wave of modernization, as Gellner calls it, has struck various parts of the world in succession, mobilizing the late-comers in a nationalistic defence against those territories already modernized, and bringing about struggles for independence in the territories defined by nationalist criteria. In the nineteenth century, this wave moved from the west to the marchlands of Europe (Gellner 1964, 164–172).

Gellner's definition of nationalism covers especially the movements of national self-assertion and liberation, particularly those not linked to an existing or even historically remembered polity, i.e. what has been called the 'unhistoric nations'. According to this view, nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness but rather the inventing of nations which did not exist. Nationalism arose during the era of the introduction of mass education in those late-comer regions where language or other ethnic differentiae provided a strong incentive and means for the backward population to think of itself as a separate 'nation' and to seek independence – a liberation from second-class citizenship. Several nationalist movements in the nineteenth century multinational empires (Russia, Austria–Hungary, and the Ottoman empire) are appropriate examples of this (Gellner 1964, 171–172; also Hobsbawm 1972, 395–401).

However, besides being a mode of confronting the consequences of late modernization, nationalism has another aspect. It is, to cite Eric Hobsbawm (1972, 392, 404), a 'civic religion' for the modern territorially centralized state. A territorial state which functions through a direct linkage between the individual citizens and a strong center must develop a set of motivations in the citizens which give them a primary and overriding sense of obligation towards it and eliminate the various other obligations which they feel towards other groups and centers within or without the territory. In an era of capitalist economic development and mass partici-

pation in politics by a mobilized population, nationalism has functioned as the ideology by which the population has established a sense of identity with the modern state.

The two sides of the phenomenon, or rather the two phenomena, are historically linked, at least in the sense that, after a successful national liberation struggle, nationalism has functioned as the 'civic religion' of the new state (Hobsbawm 1972, 404, Kiernan 1976, 115–116). However, in nineteenth century Europe, the importance of these two aspects differed in different parts of the continent. This has been explicitly suggested in a recent study by Tom Nairn (1977, 177–178). In the older states of Western Europe the nineteenth century brought about the maximization of the ascendancy of the dominant nationality, whereas in the East-Central parts of the continent, nationalism arose as the protest of underdeveloped peoples. For the latter, nationalism became the way of mobilizing and trying to catch up with the already industrialized areas of the west.¹

Nairn (1977, 153–154, 339–340) links the nationalism among the late developers of East-Central Europe to the uneven development of capitalism. It was in essence the forced reaction of one area after another to the spread of capitalism. In these areas, the majority of the better-off groups saw themselves excluded from the material progress of the advanced lands and mobilized against this 'progress'. In the mobilization of the people a militant, inter-class community was consciously formed and made strongly, though mythically, aware of its separate identity vis-à-vis the outside forces of domination. The nationalist mobilization against 'progress' was the only way for the backward, dominated lands, or more precisely, for certain social strata in these regions, to seek access to this progress.²

Nairn's analysis demonstrates the close relationship between the two nationalist phenomena. What is also essential in nationalism as the protest of underdeveloped peoples – though in an embryonic form – is mobilization across class boundaries, the creation of an inter-class community.

2. The Activist Groups in the Two Nationalist Phenomena

Citing Miroslav Hroch's study of nineteenth century nationalist groups (1968), Nairn (1977, 117) states that nationalism as a reaction to underdevelopment normally involved first the intelligentsia, then wider strata of the middle classes, and finally the masses. Hroch's study is a rather unique piece of comparative research on the structure of 'patriotic' groups in the phase immediately preceding nationalist mass mobilization among seven

small European nationalities – Czechs, Lithuanians, Estonians, Finns, Norwegians, Flemings, and Slovaks. Besides being small nationalities they are, for Hroch, ‘repressed peoples’, repression meaning the unequal cultural and political position of a group in a larger political unit (Hroch 1968, 16).

The overwhelming importance of such intellectual groups as university graduates, teachers, and priests was, understandably enough, typical of nationalism in these cases. Moreover, petty officials in contrast to higher bureaucratic strata, and small merchants and artisans in contrast to entrepreneurs and large merchants, tended to provide activists and supporters to the nationalist movements in this phase. The ‘patriots’ studied were predominantly upward mobile, the sons of parents from the lower ranks, who had risen just as far as was possible for persons of such parentage (Hroch 1968, 125–137; 1971, 129–130; see also Plakans 1974; Koralka 1971, 57–58, 62–67 and Portal 1971, 97, 100).

It was particularly the Eastern European cases in Hroch’s study (1971, 123) that displayed these traits – which fits in well with the suggestions by Gellner and Nairn that nationalism is a reaction to underdevelopment. At the same time, the social structure in these cases bore strong marks of the feudal past. The activists were recruited from outside the nobility and high bureaucracy, or from outside the ruling class of the feudal society (which largely identified itself with the repressing culture). They also came from outside the new rising bourgeoisie, which was likewise culturally alien to the nationalist groups. It was the activists outside the ruling groups who were able to spread the nationalist ideas to the masses and to mobilize them in the next phase (Hroch 1968, 16–17, 32–33). In short, in these cases a situation prevailed which may be termed as a cultural division of labor (Hechter 1975, 35–43).

On the other hand, in the core areas of capitalism in Western Europe, the main bearers of nationalism were, as has been repeatedly pointed out, the intellectual groups linked to the rising bourgeois ruling classes. What was important there was nationalism as a civic religion, the need for a unifying ideology which would overcome the unstabilizing effects of class conflict (e.g. Kiernan 1976, 111–112).

3. Finland in a European Perspective

At first glance, the position of Finland or, to be precise, of its great Finnish-speaking majority, in the two-fold division of nationalist phenomena sketched above, seems fairly clear. Finland was one of the

'unhistoric nations' in which movements for national self-assertion arose in the past century. The Finns were also one of the ethnically distinct minority groups of the multinational empires of the time, as were, for example, the Slovaks, the Estonians, and the Lithuanians. All of them gave rise to national movements. In Hroch's study the Finnish case appears as one example of national self-assertion by a repressed people, and as a case that is more reminiscent of the Eastern than the Western (e.g. Norwegian, Flemish) cases. For Hugh Seton-Watson, in his comparative survey, the Finnish national movement resembles closely the national movements which arose in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans (1977, 72, 430).

There is no doubt that in all these respects Finland really was one of the late developers of the east. However, it is not quite correct to picture Finland as a colonial territory or as an Eastern European periphery struggling through nationalism to free itself from the dilemma of uneven development, along the lines Gellner and Nairn suggest in their studies. It may be hypothesized that the Finnish 'deviations' from this pattern explain much of the steady advance of the national consolidation and nationalism in Finland.

Up to 1809 most of the mainly Finnish-speaking regions, which later came to make up Finland, remained more or less on the periphery of the Swedish state. In the Napoleonic wars most of them were transferred to the control of Russia, which made the Finnish-speaking regions an autonomous Grand Duchy in the Russian empire. Russia was economically more backward than Finland. This relative advantage fostered autonomous Finnish development in the nineteenth century so that Finland grew up as a state with an autonomous economic core (see Pihkala 1970, 241–244). Its independence in 1917 was a consequence of the Russian revolution.

There are at least three important characteristics of this development. First, the autonomous Finnish state was founded some decades *before* the politicization of ethnic differentiae, i.e. before the rise of nationalism. In a more fundamental sense than was true for any of the other small nationalities in Hroch's study (with the exception of Norway), Finland was an autonomous unit, with its own strengthening state apparatus. The necessity of fighting for the formation of a separate state unit, which faced the nationalist movements elsewhere, did not face the movement in Finland.

The second important point concerns the economy. During the late nineteenth century, simultaneous with the increasing penetration of

nationalist ideas beyond small intellectual circles, it was of the utmost importance for the development of a Finnish national economy that Finland was able to benefit from the large Russian market. Finland was a region of 'relative over-development', to cite Tom Nairn's expression (1977, 185–187). In short, the formation of a national economy as a necessary condition for the consolidation of the state had advanced exceptionally far by the end of the last century. Among regions of 'relative over-development' in Eastern Europe, only Bohemia and Croatia seem comparable to Finland.³

The third point arises from the fact that the Finnish state was consolidated between two established members of the European state system, Sweden and Russia. Because of the earlier history under Swedish domination and the subsequent transfer to Russian domination, political domination on the one hand, and cultural and economic domination within the country on the other, were not superimposed one on another. Political domination was ultimately in St Petersburg, whereas domination in the economic and cultural sphere belonged to the Swedish-speaking upper class. Furthermore, this consolidation between Sweden and Russia involved a combination of a non-feudal class structure (with a large freeholding peasantry that had emerged during the Swedish period) and a subordination to a great multinational empire. In these respects Finland displayed only superficial similarities to other Eastern European regions.

Recapitulating the perspective and Finland's position therein, we see that in both types of the nationalist phenomena, mobilization across class boundaries, or the creation of an inter-class community, played a central role. What the function of this mobilization was to be – whether it functioned as a civic religion for the state or as the protest of underdeveloped peoples – was closely connected with the position of the country or region in the international (capitalist) system. In the western core areas of capitalism, nationalism was closely linked to the ruling class; in the periphery it was mainly linked to middle class groups seeking popular support against alien economic and political domination.

The early development of the Finnish case points straightforwardly to the latter alternative. During the Swedish period there arose a non-feudal class structure and a cultural division of labor with a Swedish-speaking upper class. At the same time, the Finnish-speaking regions were backward in comparison both to Sweden and to Western Europe in general. But, immediately before the rise of nationalism, this picture was radically altered. Finland was established as a *state*, and it became *politically*

dependent on an empire, in contrast to which it was *economically 'over-developed'* (which became especially relevant in the latter half of the century).

4. Characteristics of Nineteenth Century Nationalism in Finland

All this resulted in a nationalism in which both aspects discussed above seem to have been intertwined exceptionally closely. In other words, nationalism in Finland did not play the role of a liberating force in the most typical Eastern European way; it also displayed, practically from the very beginning, strong elements of nationalism as a 'civic religion' for the territorially centralized state.

The political dependence on a great feudal state points to nationalism as a mode of self-assertion and liberation, particularly in the sense used by Gellner. On the other hand, the fact that Finland was a state which emerged and consolidated itself during the nineteenth century, points to the possible importance of nationalism as a 'civic religion' for the state. The economic 'overdevelopment' contains, at least potentially, varying elements. Nairn (1977, 185–187) cites it as an example of a situation causing nationalist movements for liberation and self-assertion. But, if looked at as a factor in the consolidation of the emerging state as was the case in late nineteenth century Finland, this situation may also strengthen tendencies for inculcating the sense of obligation to the state. Which aspect predominates, depends on how tight or loose the political dependence is, and the extent to which it limits economic freedom of action. In Finland the economic limitations were few (see Pihkala 1970).

It is suggested that this dual background should serve as a starting point for an analysis of linguistic nationalism in Finland. In this situation there were exceptionally strong incentives for the upper classes with their Swedish culture to adopt or accept rather easily the language and culture of the great majority of the people. It was important both because of the country's political dependence on Russia and because of the need to establish a sense of obligation to the state. In this respect Finland differed from the other ethnically distinct regions of the multinational empires of the time. In the cases which Nairn and Gellner seem to have in mind, the upper classes identified themselves with the power on which the region as a whole was dependent politically and/or economically. Therefore they had little incentive for nationalist mobilization (cf. Molnár 1971, 221–227). At the same time, what was central for them in the maintenance of their

position, was not so much the efforts to strengthen solidarity towards the state as the feudal class domination as such. Instead, in Finland the class structure was basically similar to the Scandinavian pattern, and therefore it may be hypothesized that the need to establish a sense of identity towards the state was also a primary concern for the upper classes.

This suggestion may be formulated in another way by saying that in Finland, unlike anywhere else in Eastern Europe, there existed strong incentives for nationalist mobilization not only among the middle classes but also among the upper classes. This view may be supported by referring briefly to some traits in nineteenth century nationalism in Finland. Information on the structure of early nationalist groups may be found in Hroch's study. He focused on the development of nationalist movements in the phase when a group of 'patriots' had already attempted systematically to spread 'the national idea' but without as yet penetrating the masses to any extent. In Finland this phase was reached in the 1840s and 1850s. In those decades the nationalist movement, which originated within the Swedish-speaking upper class, began to take on a clearly socio-political character under the leadership of J. V. Snellman. At the same time the estate-based political system (with the representation of the freeholding peasantry) remained dormant. The estates convened for the first time after a long delay only in 1863. According to Hroch the presence of the upper classes among the so-called Fennoman activists of the period was larger than their presence among the corresponding activist groups elsewhere in Eastern Europe. The proportion of nobles and high bureaucrats was particularly high. (Hroch's results for Norway (1968, 95–100) are largely similar to these results, but because of concentration on the whole *Storting* membership in the decades after 1814 they seem rather a poor comparison to the other analyses in the study.) This picture is completed with information on the recruitment of the activists. In Finland they were less often sons of parents from the lower ranks and less often geographically mobile than elsewhere (Hroch 1968, 83–89, 122, 128–129, 141, 142, 164, 167).

Snellman's aim was to establish national unity on a Finnish cultural base. He urged Finns with a university training to adopt Finnish as a working language, and to create cultivated literature that was both popular and patriotic. Over a longer period, national unity and patriotic indoctrination was to be achieved through revision of the public school system. A Finland united in language, culture, and loyalty might resist the dangers resulting from the dependent position of the country, and also develop further.⁴

The cultural demands were not accompanied by demands for any thorough reforms in the structure of society. On the contrary, by the end of the century the Fennoman movement had developed increasingly into a movement in which conservative tendencies gained an upper hand: 'The fact that the Finnicization movement was directed against the exclusively privileged Swedish-speaking upper class of that time, did not imply that the upper class should have been eliminated in order to found a democratically organized society, but that the upper class speaking Swedish and oriented to the Swedish culture should have been replaced by an upper class speaking Finnish and oriented to the Finnish culture' (Wuorinen 1935, 273; also Klinge 1968, 74, 114). On the other hand, by urging linguistic reform and the broadening of the social basis for school attendance, the Fennoman movement did contribute to the recruitment of new groups to the upper classes in the latter half of the century.

It may be argued that the Fennoman movement acted, on the one hand, for national self-assertion against the Swedish cultural dominance and against the dangers arising from the politically dependent position of the country. On the other hand, it clearly strove for the creation of an integrating ideology for the emerging Finnish state. This latter characteristic became increasingly dominant in the last decades of the 1800s, simultaneously with the reactivation of the estate-based political system. At that time the nationalist movement first gained support from outside the intellectual circles. Besides the Evangelic-Lutheran clergy, it was backed by the wealthy freeholding peasantry, which had representation in the political system. This group greatly benefited from the simultaneous capitalist transformation in agriculture, a transformation which created a peasant upper class and enormously widened the gap between the large peasants (becoming capitalist farmers) and the landless proletariat.

In developing into a political force based mainly on the clergy and the wealthy peasantry, the Fennoman movement began, in a pronounced manner, to function as the introducer of an agrarian and religious ideological alternative for the integration of the emerging nation. This was to be conclusively proven after the political mass mobilization in the beginning of this century; the Finnish party – the heir of the Fennoman movement – became the main opponent of the Social Democrats in the countryside, where the latter gained a larger turnout than in the cities, not only absolutely but also relatively.

In the 1860s there also arose a Swedish nationalist movement which leaned in its ideology on the Swedish-speaking agrarian and fishing population in the coastal areas. Its significance was limited, however. A far

more important political opponent for the Fennomen were the Liberals, supported particularly by the rising bourgeois groups. Nevertheless, the Liberals, while being mainly Swedish speakers, did not direct their main opposition against the cultural programme of the Fennoman movement. For them relations with Russia, where they demanded more independence than the Fennomen, were of primary importance.⁵

By the end of the century Finnish had arisen to a strong or even predominant position in the central institutional spheres of the society. The aim, crystallized in the Fennoman movement, to create an upper class culturally united with the majority of the people, largely by linguistic conversion, was materializing rapidly (Klinge 1968, 331–332). As has been pointed out in analyzing national consolidation in Finland, there was some upward mobility into the elites, but mainly the old upper stratum consisting of the old noble, burgher, and particularly clerical families, was to remain in charge of Finland up to independence in 1917, and far beyond (Klinge 1975, 17).

NOTES

- 1 Nairn (1977, 342–345) considers nationalism in the 'older states' largely as the reaction to the rise of nationalism elsewhere, among the exploited and underdeveloped territories and groups. This conclusion is not shared by Hobsbawm, from which the above two-fold division of the nationalist phenomena has been drawn. (See Hobsbawm 1972, 404–406; also Hobsbawm 1977, 14.)
- 2 One more formulation of the 'diffusion' of nationalism is that of A. D. Smith (1978, 240–243). Rather than modernization or the uneven development of capitalism, he takes the centralizing reform in the ruling bureaucracy to be crucial in explaining the rise of a nationalist movement against domination.
- 3 See Nairn 1977, 185–187. Perhaps also the Russian partition of Poland might be cited as an example: see Kiernan 1976, 120.
- 4 An excellent account in English on early nationalism in Finland is Selleck 1961.
- 5 In Finland 'the relative over-development' does not appear to have had similar manifestations of national self-assertion as Nairn claims has been the case elsewhere. In the Finnish configuration the linguistic (or ethnic) nationalism was connected with those elite groups, the position of which was weakening in comparison to the rising bourgeoisie. On the other hand, the attitude of the Liberals is indicative of the fact that it would be inappropriate to label them anti-nationalist.

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