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## OBSERVATORIUM

ANALYSES, POSITIONS AND DISCOURSES ON CIVIL SOCIETY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PHILANTHROPY

No. 10 – October 2016

## Finnish Civil Society and the Broken Treaty with the (Welfare) State

By Eeva Luhtakallio

*“In societal life, such rules of conduct become established over time the breaking of which will be allowed extremely seldom. Politics educate simultaneously the entire people, teaching them to behave according to pre-established rules.”*

Reinhold Svento, who wrote the above in 1928, was a MP, minister, and finally a diplomat with a social democratic background.<sup>1</sup> The quote is a useful starting point for explaining the history of the Finnish civil society in terms that historians and political scientists widely agree on. The prevalence of abiding to rules combined with a paternalist attitude towards the people emerges recurrently in the literature.

Another recurrent feature in defining the fundamentals of the Finnish civil society is to say social movements created the nation. As known to varying degrees in the other Nordic countries as well, these two pictures are not in conflict, but parts of the very same story.

The development of the Finnish civil society cannot be understood without simultaneously looking at the development of the state – the civil society was indeed a state project to begin with, guided from the above and strongly in the hands of the state elite and the officials of the

state especially at the local level, both in terms of ideology and concrete practices.<sup>2</sup>

In this story, the citizens were an object of development, and a pedagogical project, and the same plot applies from the times of Snellman and the Fennomanian state project of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the president Kekkonen era from the 1950s onwards, to which the state’s paternal companionship with the civil society was particularly characteristic, to a degree that has echoes even today. These are, among others, echoes of strategic consensus within and among civil society groups, following a logic according to which avoiding both internal conflicts and too strong a controversy with the established powers holds the promise of influence and inclusion by the state. We still have and use the saying “hugging the protest to death” that refers to the practices used by the Kekkonen regime to invite “trouble makers” to the negotiation table, and hence render overt protest and conflict difficult to maintain. This long storyline has given the civil society a more or less official role and status as the state’s companion – if not the right hand, at least a trustworthy partner.

Of course there is another story as well, a story of independent peasants with considerable mobilization potential, and consequently, a story of landless peasants and workers, a civil war, and an extremely divided nation. But this is not the dominant one, and its echoes are far less obvious in today’s Finnish society.

I have in my research used France in particular as a comparative mirror to the Finnish political culture.<sup>3</sup> This, of course, fast renders the peculiarity of the Finnish state-civil society treaty obvious: even the idea of a civil society

deliberately pulling together with the state, and hence constituting a team of players on the same side, begins to seem absurd more than anything.

Today, this treaty is beginning to seem absurd to many in Finland, too. Even by considerably grading down the speed of change that always seems greater from very close-by, it still makes sense to say the long historical lines are subject to certain changes, path dependencies consequent to those changes, and weak signs of new patterns that may not figure clearly in measures of the average, but that have impact on the dominant discourses, imaginaries, and possible identifications at offer in the Finnish civil society.

The civil society in Finland, as in the other Nordic countries, is more differentiated than it used to be. The formal, registered, long-term membership based organizations are in decline – perhaps not drastically in statistic terms, but visibly even in them<sup>4</sup>, and definitely in terms of imaginaries and identifications.

This means that the civil society is divided into many quite different segments. One of the most traditional ones, the civil society of long-standing, large voluntary organizations especially in the social and health sector is charged of heavy duties, such as the majority of preventive social work. This charge also falls on the organizations less and less in cooperation with the state and more and more independently. The civil society organizations are very good at these tasks, but the conditions in which they work are often far from ideal. Project-based funding with no certainty of consistence, low job security, and scarce and competed resources are the new norm.

Another civil society can be described with the example of the events of the fall 2015. The refugee crisis in Finland is mainly a jest in numbers compared to almost anywhere else, but it has still shaken the society in unforeseen ways. When the borders in Southern and Central Europe still were open and the most numerous arrivals of refugees reached Finland, both the state and the old school civil society organizations, namely the Red Cross, were taken by surprise and needed several weeks to

get their act together. But a massive network of volunteers was already organized and stood at railway stations with food and warm clothes, interpreters, legal guidance, and medical assistance. These volunteers – then and still today truly numerous – represent a relatively new, or at least strongly modified organizing culture. The organizing is entirely social media based. It is extremely flexible, fast, and in many ways unbeatably efficient. At the same time it is individualistic, both in stressing the individual needs of the refugees and in emphasizing the individuality of each volunteer. This kind of volunteer work does not respect the state, or the traditional ways of doing, but bases actions on perceived necessity and urgency. In addition, there is a generally prevailing, very cynical attitude towards the state and suspicion over its ability to provide help among the volunteers. This may not sound spectacularly new from the perspective of many countries, but in Finland it does differ from the civil society imaginaries of cooperation with the state that used to be dominant.

The Finnish state–civil society treaty used to be based on the state taking care of its share (that wasn't small). Indeed, the treaty was based on the welfare state. In many ways, from the perspective of the civil society actors, the state has broken the deal during recent years.

A third perspective to the Finnish civil society has to do with repertoires and it is the purest case of global diffusion in this set of examples. A small anecdote to illustrate: since 2001, journalists have posed me the question whether the Finnish demonstration culture has turned more radical and/or violent, over a dozen times. This question comes up more or less every year and more – that is, every time there has been a large demonstration somewhere in Finland, and especially if something has been broken. It should be noted that it is still today relatively rare that something is broken – definitely the majority of demonstrations continuously cause zero material damage, and there have not been urban riots in Finland either.

However, the question of the potential changes in demonstrating keeps tickling journalists. In the beginning of the 2000s I used to

respond that as social movements are international/transnational, also their repertoires of action carry features diffused from elsewhere, but the mainstream of Finnish demonstrating still abides the rule of lawfulness and respect of private property that have traditionally been extremely strong. In recent years, however, I have responded that indeed, Finnish demonstrating has changed some and will probably change some more, and that these changes are results of diffusion and domestication of global trends, or at least trends well known in several other European countries, including the other Nordic countries. In particular, the practice of demonstration and counter-demonstration has become increasingly common. This is predominantly due to the non-negligible fact that Finland now has a significant, loud, and indeed quite influential far right and fascistic faction that, needless to say, departs strongly from the realm of traditional Finnish action repertoires by using outright violence in their actions, including stabbings of left-wing activists and Molotov cocktails thrown onto refugee reception centers.

Fourthly, my final viewpoint, and perhaps the strongest sign of change and discontinuity, has to do with processes of increasing inequality and polarization. The afore-mentioned extreme right is one sign of the latter, and so is the new generation of anarchists who don't mind street conflict with the far right, and who have shown readiness to extreme actions.

But perhaps much more importantly, the polarization of the Finnish civil society shows in the increasing disintegration of political participation, in all its different forms. My recent fieldwork has concerned a marginalized neighborhood where I have followed processes of participation – and, for a great deal, the lack thereof – and noted the many ways in which increasing social, cultural, and economic inequality intertwine. People living in this stigmatized, marginalized neighborhood – whether from a finno-Finnish or an immigrant background – vote or participate in any kind of activities of civil society organizations at extremely low rates. Why would they not – the whole society, it seems, is for many something they definitely do not feel part of, something that belongs to those who belong, and something

that has let them down recurrently. Anger against the elite is strong, but neither collective nor mobilizing. Instead, it follows by close the logic of marginalization: it pours down to the individual, to blame, and to withdraw rather than organize, collectivize, and mobilize.

All this just a few kilometers away from a gentrified, buzzing neighborhood with a movement to have “more city”. An activist of this urban network movement would select one of the several municipal councilor friends' number she/he has on her mobile in order to push through her and her group of friends' concerns – and this is not only a caricature, but a true figure in the also increasing new urban movement culture of networked, well educated, well-to-do people who carry out short term civil projects when they please. For the inhabitants of the marginalized neighborhood this is a different world altogether. They are the invisible civil society, not passive, but active in ways that are not widely recognized as societal participation, such as neighbor aid, or autonomous youth activities. In Finland, unlike in Sweden for instance, this part of the civil society has thus far not created a powder keg and bursted into rioting. But it is, to the least, constituting grounds for an increasingly segregated civil society, one whose different segments have very little knowledge of each other, let alone contact with one another.

The civil society is still building the nation, but it is no longer building one homogeneous, univocal Finland. The Finland that at least on the level of imaginaries existed as one is not one anymore, and the Finland the state actors want the civil society to build is not the one the civil society, at least all of it, is interested in building. One team pulling together is no more, but instead there is a more open field of actors, less certain patterns of action, and consequences to the entire political culture.

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