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“Academic Citizen” and Transition of Society in Finland 1945 - 1970: Student Corporation *Karjalainen Osakunta* as a Case Study¹

1. Academic Citizenship, Social Capital and Student “Nations”

In the 1940s during the years after the WW II, card games – whist enjoyed popularity – became one topic among the students belonging to the student corporation *Karjalainen Osakunta* (Karelian Nation) at the University of Helsinki. Some members were ready to prohibit the card games in the Nation premises, associating the cards to vicious life: like the heavy use of alcohol, characteristic to many student veterans of war. While “regaining the lost years”, many post-war students had a clear goal to study quickly and find a decent occupation and income in a reconstructing country. In the card debate, one student of medicine had a personal argument defending the game of whist. According to him, the playing skills were essential in getting into the society in the future. The future for the student of medicine perhaps meant an occupation as a practitioner somewhere in the countryside, with a limited circle of friends belonging to the local elite. “Supports the whist club because of egoistic reasons”, commented the Nation chronicle.²

From the sociological point of view, the card debate can be treated as a question of social capital, in which individuals and associations are seen as possessing and collecting non-material capital – like adopting various skills or habits and creating useful human networks.³ This article discusses the concept of “academic citizen”, often used in the discourse of the university students in post-war Finland. Behind the discourse on academic citizenship, different role models and future expectations imposed on the university students can be found. These traditional views and the status of the educated people as an elite faced crisis during the great social and economical transition of the 1960s.

At the University of Helsinki, the traditional “Nations” (*Osakunta* in Finnish) were central reference groups in socializing the students to their future role. The Nations have their roots in the structure of medieval European universities, where students were divided into “nations” according to their regional origin. The idea was adapted when organizing the first university in Finland, the Academy of Turku in 1640. The Academy was later to be known as the University of Helsinki, which was the only university

in Finland until the 1920s. Its position as compared with the new province universities remained superior until the expansion and decentralization of the Finnish university system during the 1960s. Most students at the University of Helsinki joined the various Nations, at least as passive members for practical reasons until 1969 - 1970, when the position of the Nations as a part of the University changed. As joining the Nations became voluntary in practice and in student world the subject-related and political associations were felt more attractive, many Nations decayed in the 1970s and lost their “social capital”. In the 1980s, however, a wave of neo-traditionalism, continuing ever since, was experienced and the Nations became popular again among students.⁴

The Nations have always functioned as “clubs” arranging usual student social activities, but especially before the great transition they had also wider role in building the Finnish national state. The regional importance of the Nations in their recruiting areas, producing local elites, should also to be noted.⁵ “You have now got experience, how this society is lead, since we have got the highest education”, as Erkki Kivinen, the inspector of *Karjalainen Osakunta* (KO) pointed out to the Nation members before the students left for the summer vacation in 1950.⁶ Practising argumentation in the Nation meetings, cooperating inside the Student Union and outside the university with different corporations in the Province, creating networks with senior members, all this could be useful in the future. It was emphasized that in order to become a successful academic citizen, studying and adopting the technical side of the profession was not enough. This meant that wide all-around education, including knowledge in culture and cultivated habits, was considered essential. Otherwise the Nation (State) and Province might get only “bookish and self-satisfied” civil servants, “not capable of paying the debt to the Nation (State)”.⁷

2. The Great Transition of the 1960s: The Finnish Case from a Local Perspective

In Finland similar transitional phenomena – the general “emancipation” of manners, crowded universities of the large age groups born after the war, the politicalization of student culture – were experienced in the later part of 1960s as elsewhere in Western Europe. Focusing on a single “Nation” offers a micro-level tool in analyzing how these structural and ideological changes took place. *Karjalainen Osakunta* is one of the mid-sized Nations, established in 1905 after division of a larger corporation.⁸ The main recruiting area of the Nation after the war has been the province of North

Karelia (*Pohjois-Karjala*), a rural and one of the poorest provinces in Finland, if measured by BNP. After the war the regional capital Joensuu was the only significant town of the area.

Figure 1 shows the number of the new Nation members coming from the capital (Helsinki), provincial centre (Joensuu), the countryside of the province (North Karelia) or other parts of Finland (1944 - 1969): here it should be noted that the Nation lost some parts of the recruiting area to Soviet Union after the war.⁹

The most important feature worth noticing is the expansion in the number of students coming from the countryside of North Karelia. The phenomena is partly explained by the regional politics and more effective education, but the development reflects also one typical feature of the “Finnish case”. Still in the 1950s Finland was by economical structure an agrarian country, and the following social change – migration, industrialization – in the 1960s was felt strongly, especially in the areas like North Karelia. Many of those leaving the countryside after school never came back. “Out of my thirty classmates, only one has a permanent residence in Nurmes”, as one senior member (born 1941) had to notice in 1983.¹⁰

Figure 2 shows the development of the social background of the new members, based on the occupation of the father. Those students, who were second generation “academic citizens” or the social position of the father clearly refers to the upper strata of the society, are classified as “elite”. All the groups are, of course, heterogeneous. Especially so is the case with the “middle class”. The classification leaves to this group a large amount of non-academic professions in private and public sector, which clearly differ from the groups of farmers and workers: shopkeepers, technicians, lower officials in state administration, railroads and army, elementary school teachers and white-collar workers in companies. “Characteristic to the attitude of the middle class is the struggle upwards...to reach higher wages and greater independence, or at least to educate its children to higher position and easier circumstances”, as Heikki Waris, one of the path breakers in the Finnish history of education and social structure writes.¹¹ The march of the farmers` children to the University began already in the 1950s, and it is explained as previously mentioned: in North Karelia the structural change of the countryside was felt strongly. Although the education provided opportunities to social rise, the relatively small number and modest role of the workers` children as active members in the Nation still indicated a certain inequality in education.¹²

3. Servants of the State: Some Ideological Aspects of the Transition

In the first phase of the transition, beginning already in the 1950s, the students of KO became more active (“student as a citizen”) outwards, without rejecting the traditional ideals of “academic citizenship”. The ideology of planning had infiltrated into the state administration in the 1950s, it was thought that the social and economic problems of the countryside like North Karelia, could be kept in check by regional politics and planning.¹³ During the 1960s, KO took initiative in arranging large conferences, in which the problems of the province were discussed by decision-makers, experts and students: even ideas of the game theory could be taken of help in finding solutions. The students organized expeditions to the North Karelian countryside: in the published reports the social sciences and quantitative methods were gaining ground.¹⁴

The impact of political radicalism and leftist ideology reached rural and traditional KO later than some other student corporations. The traditional ideal of the Nations has been that they are not involved in party-political affairs. This has been, of course, more a subjective ideal than an objective reality. In post-war Finnish student life, resisting “politics” often meant in practice the same as anti-communism.¹⁵ Still in the beginning of the 1960s, the majority of the active members of KO relied on academic traditions, local identity and politically conservative ideology. When at the same time international pacifistic ideas began to spread at the university, the “peace” badge kept by some “radical” students could be characterized by traditionalists as a “Tupolev in take-off”. The Sovjet aeroplane referred to the supposed source of the Peace movement.¹⁶

In KO, more serious criticism against the ideology of the Nation was to be heard around and after 1968. In Finland the year of the European student revolution culminated in the occupation of the Old Students’ House by the radical students in November 1968, just before the Student Union was about to celebrate the 100th anniversary. In a discussion held earlier same year in KO, the students’ views of role of the Nation and academic citizenship were clearly more diversified than a couple years earlier. The “student as such”-approach had still supporters, but, according to one critic, the Nation now “educates only bureaucrats for the rigid bureaucracy”.¹⁷

By the end of the 1960s, the Nations were inevitably becoming too limited and for many students their traditionalist world-view did not seem to match the new reality shaped by television, global social problems and international popular culture. In KO the downfall of the “academic citizenship” was summarized in 1969 by Jukka-Pekka Sarola, a student of sociology, who criticized the dress code of the

traditional anniversary celebration of the Nation – dressing in white tie was obligatory – as unnecessary:¹⁸

Today it is no longer self-evident that we students become elitist onanists (*eliittinonanisti*) of the society... we might end up as unemployed graduates... When we are not integrating to this system, it is useless to try to dress us to a hired white tie and try to get us to believe something that we know is untrue.

The crowdedness of the universities aroused fear that high education does not necessarily lead to a secure future position. Already the sociologist of the 1960s classified the students according to their subject of study: Those studying in a subject with a lower status and worse future prospects – the expanding social sciences belonged to this category – leaned towards radicalism.¹⁹ Some historians have even explained the leftist student radicalism as a frustration of the students because of losing the traditional status as elite.²⁰ Fortunately, in many cases the fear in ending up as an unemployed graduate was only a fear. The critical student of sociology, Jukka-Pekka Sarola, offers one example not untypical for his generation of Nation activists. Many landed later in public sector, to work in the universities and administration: Sarola became a lecturer of sociology at the University of Joensuu, which had been established in 1966.

To sum up, the structural changes and ideological conflicts of the 1960s easily hide some important aspects of continuity, which now perhaps could be seen in a new light, while the self-evident role of the national states as a governing historical power has been questioned because of globalization. Although the role of the highly educated people as relatively homogenous, cultivated national elite came to end in the 1960s, the belief in the central role of the State remained strong. At the University, the Nations still trained people for the needs of the national state and local province. “Who could take better care about the conditions in Northern Karelia than us, the Hopes of the Province, who have the best qualifications”, could a young student of KO still ask in 1971.²¹

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Notes

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² Puukello (The magazine of *Karjalainen Osakunta*) 1948: 2.

³ The competition in collecting social capital by individuals, taking place in a complex system of distinctions and hierarchies (unlike playing card, the game of chess was never considered suspicious by the students of KO!), is stressed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), while in anglosaxon theoretical tradition the effective use of social capital possessed by individuals and associations is seen as a vital resource in creating a functional civic society and democracy. On associations and “social capital”, see Kaunismaa 2001, pp. 119-131.

⁴ Klinge 1990, pp.258-261; Kolbe 1993, pp.110-128; Kolbe 1996a, pp.272-277, 453-454; Kolbe 1996b, pp.52-53. There has been also more specific interest in the history of the Nations, especially by earlier historians, and various PhD theses have been written on their 19th century history. See, for example, Kuusisto 1978. The period after the war has, however, aroused more analytical interest only recently: see Kokkonen 2004.

⁵ Kolbe 1996b, p. 54.

⁶ KO meeting 15.5.1950: Archives of KO (Helsinki University Library).

⁷ Puukello 1947: 1.

⁸ Tolvanen 1955; Saloheimo 2005.

⁹ Source for the graphs: The Name register (*Nimikirja*) of KO, vol. 2-3 (KO Archives, Helsinki University Library).

¹⁰ Pieni Puukello 1983: 4.

¹¹ Waris 1952, p. 180.

¹² See Nevala 1999.

¹³ Kolbe 1993, pp. 425-427.

¹⁴ See, for example, the reports and discussions of Provincial Conference of North Karelia in March 1966: in Tanner 1966.

¹⁵ Kolbe 1996b, pp. 58-59.

¹⁶ KO meeting 12.11.1962; interviews of the senior members of KO by the author (Matikainen 2005).

¹⁷ Puukello 1968: 2.

¹⁸ Puukello 1969: 1.

¹⁹ The classification by Erik Allardt and R. F. Tomasson is cited by Ulf Sundqvist in a well-known collection of pamphlets and articles of the “1968 generation”: Tyynilä 1968, p. 30.

²⁰ Ylikangas 1987, p. 223. The cultural transition of the 1960s in Finland is well discussed in Tuominen 1991.

²¹ KO Archives: Annual report 1970, dated 30.9.1971 (Helsinki University Library).

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