

Finland today enjoys the reputation of a very stable democracy, grounded in strong national identity and less troubled by problems related to immigration than are the other Nordic countries. A glance at its twentieth-century history suggests a complicated background to this outcome. Finland is the only Nordic country that experienced revolution and civil war; it also fought and lost a war against a great power, and had to develop a strategy of survival in an exceptionally difficult geopolitical situation. But if we move further back in time, some key developments seem to prefigure a road to advanced and resilient modernity. During its century-long incorporation into the Russian empire (1809-1917), Finland maintained a political autonomy unequalled by any other territory under Russian rule, and this achievement paved the way for an exceptionally sustained process of nation formation; that trajectory culminated – after late and self-defeating moves towards Russification, and during revolutionary disturbances throughout the empire – in constitutional reforms, exceptionally radical for the times; Finland became the first European country where women acquired the right to vote in nationwide elections, and the first case of a Social Democratic party winning an absolute parliamentary majority.

Risto Alapuro's book, first published in 1988 and reprinted with a new postscript thirty years later, reconstructs this story in a lucid and balanced way, with extensive comparative references. Alapuro was one of the first scholars to take issue with Barrington Moore's notorious dismissal of small countries as dependent on big and powerful ones, and therefore irrelevant for comparative studies. That statement can now only be described as an embarrassing display of imperialist prejudice on the part of a radical scholar; Alapuro's rejoinder is too polite to use such words, but no less effective for that. He shows convincingly that the connections between great powers and smaller countries or polities drawn into their orbit must be analyzed in terms of interaction, with due regard to specific conditions and possibilities on the latter side; and external conditions may activate internal trends: "it is essential to ask why certain exogenous forces were conducive to autonomous development" (236). Alapuro adds that class structure was "the crucial endogenous factor" (237). But his own analysis suggests that the very peculiar pre-1917 constellation of quasi-statehood (or polity, as Alapuro calls it in the introductory chapter) and nation-building was no less crucial. It determined the framework within which class alliances and conflicts emerge and unfold. As Alapuro notes, "the arena of a revolution is the *state* – the state understood in Weber's sense, that is, as the institution that claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (173). We might add that in modern times the nation, in a more or less advanced stage of formation, becomes the horizon of revolutions.

The Finnish path of nation formation is exceptional in several regards. Most fundamentally,

it was marked by a continuous and mutually reinforcing interaction of state-centred and movement-driven trends, hence by a conjunction of the two factors often seen as alternative patterns. On the state side, it was of some importance that although the imperial Russian centre was unwilling to define Finland's special status in constitutional terms, the Finns insisted on treating it as a constitutional arrangement; this "as if" statehood is an exemplary proof of the much-cited thesis that if social actors believe a situation to be real, it is real in its consequences. On the movement side, the most distinctive feature was the linguistic conversion of the intellectuals, and ultimately of the political elite; Finnish became the dominant language of culture and politics, although Swedish survived as a minority language. The beginning of this process - unusually for a process of nation formation - can be dated exactly to the year 1809, when Finland was transferred from Sweden to Russia; the response of cultural and political elites affected by this geopolitical shift - the decision to accept separation from Sweden but reject assimilation to Russia - was an example of the "refusal of metropolitan integration" that Charles Taylor has noted as a recurrent theme in the history of modern nationalism, but with a difference. A previously unproblematic version of metropolitan integration - the belonging to the Swedish empire - had to be abandoned, but a looming alternative one was refused, and a third way was found: the adoption of an indigenous but hitherto peripheral language, accompanied by new interpretations of the popular cultural traditions associated with it.

If the events of 1809 mark the beginning of a Finnish path to nationhood, we may ask whether there is an identifiable final moment. Those who won the civil war (with foreign aid) claimed that their victory was such a concluding event; national unity and sovereignty had supposedly been vindicated against a subversive challenger with links to the ex-imperial neighbour. It is, however, tempting to see the later record of national reconciliation as a continuation of the process. There is no doubt that in this regard, compared to other European countries that have experienced civil war, Finland has - notwithstanding a brutal aftermath of the war - in the longer run been more of a success story, and this must have something to do with its specific ways of articulating national identity. As Alapuro puts it, "a tradition that provided few means of handling class conflict thus prevailed in the intellectual culture" (180); as a result, the vast majority of the intellectuals was hostile and uncomprehending when the country unexpectedly "drifted into a revolution" (152) after the general strike in November 1917. But the emphasis here is on class conflict, not *ipso facto* on class mobilization or class identity. As Alapuro shows, the relationship between trade unions and employers was - in the early years of the twentieth century - less conflictual than in the neighbouring Scandinavian countries; and the remarkably rapid progress made by the Social Democratic Party after its foundation in 1899, testifies to the openness of the political culture.

The “close ties.. between the agrarian and the industrial proletariat” (13) constituted the main power basis of Social Democracy. This constellation was a crucial part of a more complex class structure. Alapuro’s analysis of class relations has fundamental affinities with Marxian views, but is not reducible to that source. He allows for the specific role of the bureaucracy, which became a dominant force in the initial phase of Finnish autonomy within the Russian empire, and for the importance of the clergy as well as academic groups. But the structural dynamic of rural society appears as a particularly decisive factor. On the one hand, the strong position of an independent peasantry set Finland apart from other regions of the Russian empire and made it more similar to the neighbouring Scandinavian countries; this intermediate position between two historical regions is one of the features most strongly emphasized in Alapuro’s account of Finnish history. On the other hand, a particular pattern of economic development, also centred on rural society, distinguished Finland from both western and eastern neighbours: “In Finland,.. the interaction of the industrial and agricultural revolutions was different than in the rest of Eastern Europe. Because Finland’s capitalist transformation was based primarily on the rise of the forest industry, changes occurred immediately in the countryside.. This forestry-based industrialization contributed to the virtual simultaneity of the capitalist transformation both in industry and in agriculture” (39); all this led to “the *simultaneous* and *related* growth of the industrial and rural proletariat” (40).

This socio-economic complex of processes was the background but not the direct cause of the descent into civil war. Alapuro sides with those (notably Charles Tilly) who stress the continuity between non-revolutionary and revolutionary methods of class mobilization and collective action. In that sense, he cautions against the “volcanic” metaphor often invoked to describe revolutions. But this does not mean that a simple developmental logic leads from routine collective action to revolution. At this point, we should note a second aspect of Alapuro’s antithesis to Barrington Moore’s claim about the asymmetry of big and small countries (although this point is not explicitly aimed at Moore): Both kinds of countries are entangled in global dynamics that involve high levels of contingency. In the case of Russia and Finland, it was the geopolitical concatenation culminating in World War I that proved decisive. We can only speculate about the possible scenarios of revolution in Russia without the context of great power war and defeat; the revolution that actually happened and gave rise to a revolutionary situation in Finland was brought about and radicalized by the war.

Without the Russian revolution, there would have been no political crisis in Finland. Even so, the course of events reflected local circumstances and openings for autonomous action. The situation in Finland in the summer of 1917 was marked by three paradoxes. The presence of the Russian state had melted away, but there was no apparatus of coercion to

replace it; the higher level of autonomy was achieved without basic prerequisites of statehood. The political balance of forces, resulting from parliamentary elections in 1916, would under other circumstances have been conducive to the kind of class compromise that prevailed in Scandinavia; the Social Democrats and the grouping of parties that may be described - in a loose sense - as bourgeois were roughly equal in strength. But the two camps perceived each other as dangerously close to foreign allies (Russian in one case, German in the other), and therefore likely to strive for state power in ways that might be detrimental to Finnish independence. The formal recognition of independence by the Bolsheviks soon after their takeover only exacerbated this situation. Finally, the situational logic that culminated in confrontation forced the non-revolutionary Social Democrats to act in a revolutionary way. Although their part of the action began as a defensive move against attempts of the "Whites" to restore statehood with German support, and although there was no vision of a revolutionary alternative to capitalism (a Communist Party with a programme akin to Bolshevism) was founded by exiles in Moscow after the defeat), the logic of the conflict was revolutionary in the sense that it amounted to a violent showdown of alternative coalitions with claims to state power. This was a revolution where the worker movement emerged as "the main challenger to the established order" (131), but not a proletarian revolution in the sense envisaged by classical Marxism, nor in the profoundly redefined Bolshevik sense. In the postscript to the new edition, Alapuro responds convincingly to critics who had accused him of neglecting the role of revolutionary agency. His analysis does not downplay the agency of the Social Democrats and the movement behind them, but it underlines the peculiar connection of situation and agency. In that context, the insistence on continuity between collective action and revolutionary movement remains relevant: the pre-revolutionary experience of organization was crucial to the struggle beginning in January 1918.

The last part of the book discusses the Finnish experience in the context of Eastern European revolutions after World War I and the Bolshevik turn of the Russian revolution. A close examination of contrasts and affinities between the Eastern European movements shows how far they all were from a simple export of Bolshevism. It would be tempting to expand these comparisons to other regions, including some parts of the Russian empire, e.g. Georgia, where the Social Democratic movement had also become very strong before the revolution and proved capable of combining urban and rural support, but with a very different long-term outcome. That is, however, beyond the scope of the present review.

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