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National opening ceremony of the J.V. Snellman Bicentenary Year

State Secretary Risto Volanen, Chairman of the J.V. Snellman Bicentenary Committee

### **Civilisation as the strength of a small nation**

Of all European ideologies, civilisation probably had most influence on the creation of modern Finland. In this, the influence of J. V. Snellman was particularly significant, one of his best-known ideas being that “civilisation is the strength of a small nation”. For this reason, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Snellman’s birth is dedicated to civilisation.

Snellman had his own interpretation of Hegel’s ‘die Bildung’, a concept which Reinhold von Becker, a contemporary of Snellman, translated into the Finnish word “sivistys” (cultivation). This term links Snellman’s idea of civilisation to the era’s broader intellectual developments.

At the time of Johan Vilhelm’s birth on board his father’s ship *Patience* in Stockholm harbour in May 1806, Europe was embroiled in the Napoleonic Wars. A year later, in 1807, Napoleon promised Finland to Russia as part of the Treaty of Tilsit. After the Finnish war, the Porvoo Diet and the Peace of Hamina, the Snellman family were obliged to choose their fatherland, and settled in the town of Kokkola on the west coast of Finland in 1813.

At the time of Snellman’s birth and in the early days of Finland’s autonomy, most countries were still finding their way in a rapidly modernising Europe. The modern era had long been in the making, marked by the American and French revolutions in 1776 and 1789, respectively. The ideas of the time cast a profound influence on the history of many countries, and continue to do so, for instance in discussions on the future of Europe or globalisation. From the outset, they also made themselves felt in Finland.

The principal ideology established in the United States and England in the early 1800s was that of freedom and utilitarianism. The liberalism of David Hume and Adam Smith based the development of the modern citizen and consumer on empiricism, observation of the mind and nature. These ideas influenced Finland too, particularly the work and writings of Anders Chydenius.

Continental Europe has, until now, swung between enlightenment and romanticism. Immanuel Kant based the ethical basis for modern man and society on reason, while advocates of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's romanticism demanded freedom while regarding society as that which enchained people. In Finland, these ideas were evident in the work of Henrik Gabriel Porthan and the national Turku romanticism of A. I. Arwidsson.

Snellman and his contemporaries also demanded freedom of trade, enlightenment of the people through education, and a national sense of identity, but other issues were also involved. For Snellman, material and social development required the combination of enlightenment, feelings and action in the cultivation of individuals and national cultures. For Snellman, civilisation at national level formed part of human development in general, development of both our species and individuals beginning with a vague sense of selfhood and culminating, via subjectivity, in free citizens and builders of society.

Snellman wrote his principal works *Versuch einer Speculativen Entwicklung der Idee der Persönlichkeit* (on the Idea of Personality) and *Läran om Staten* (Theory of the State) while actually in exile, due to his student radicalism, at Tübingen in Germany and Stockholm, Sweden, from 1839 to 1842. In the *Idea of Personality*, Snellman follows the process of civilisation from incipient self-consciousness, based on natural forces, to individualism, subjectivity and personality.

At every stage of civilisation, physical needs combine with reason, man thus continually according more elaborate intellectual content to his emotions, while free will strengthens. Ultimately, as free individuals, people conceive of others sharing the same environment as similar, thus forming the idea of nationhood.

In the *Idea of Personality*, Snellman contends that civilisation can also be interpreted as "civilisation at work in all intellectual enterprises." However, he prefers civilisation as a process to which all mankind contributes by giving intellectual content to personal needs and acting accordingly. This is how language, customs, legal systems and other cultural phenomena are created and developed. "For the personal spirit, the world exists in so far as natural necessity has been banished, leaving the spirit free", summarises Snellman.

In some ways, Snellman's *Idea of Personality* is an introduction to his *Theory of the State*. Citing Rousseau, he poses a problem at the beginning: how can people function as free individuals while also acting lawfully within

the state. In his earlier works, Snellman had followed Hegel, for whom freedom meant submission to the World Spirit, realised in the form of the State. Subsequently, Snellman disagreed strongly with the state of his time and Hegelian consensus, eventually presenting his own revision of the German master.

The interpretation of another Hegel scholar is still remembered in Finland, that we pass through one era to another via a dialectical process. For Snellman, dialectical development progresses through the individual's appropriation of his or her nation, and its development, inspiring man to strive towards "the best and happiest solution for our people", as Aleksis Kivi put it. According to Theory of the State, patriotism combined with reason "begins the development of nationality and maintains it as a specific form of civilisation".

Snellman also challenged Hegel's notion that one people and nation at a time lead world history towards its ultimate goal, believing that every nationality can be valuable as a form of civilisation, and no single, final objective exists. "The perfection of man does not lie in having achieved a certain, determined level of knowledge and morality, but in remaining able to strive for perfection. Every world historical aim which seeks to move beyond itself is building castles in the air", said Snellman.

Snellman's notion of civilisation as the combination of reason and needs may now seem remote, but it can be rendered comprehensible by linking it with other, related themes from his time.

Von Becker introduced the word 'sivistys' as the Finnish equivalent for the German 'die Bildung'. The word is said to derive from 'siivistää', meaning to tidy (siistiä), to clean up (siivota) or to brush linen in Central Finland's Kangasniemi dialect. Therefore, the direct German equivalent 'die Bildung' is related to the Finnish word 'sivistys', but also the classic European tradition and, in a way, the Anglo-Saxon one.

According to many sources, the German word 'die Bildung' refers to a picture, and was introduced in the 1200s by the theologian Meister Eckhart, to describe the Christian idea of how the image of the Creator develops in the human mind. The background to this, in turn, lies in the ideas of e.g. Saint Paul and Saint Augustine, of how the human psyche is restored by Christian faith.

Leaving aside the relationship of Snellman's philosophy with theological traditions, which in my opinion remains unresolved, I would venture that Snellman has much in common with Saint Augustine. The question of

Christian salvation became topical in Finland due to the coincidence of the national awakening with a Christian revival during the 1800s. Many parts of this drama also stemmed from the province of Savo in Eastern Finland, as the author Juhani Aho aptly records in his novel *Kevät ja takatalvi* (Spring and Winter Again). As we know, this year marks the hundredth anniversary of the publication of that *roman à clef* of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In time, *die Bildung* became a secularised term in Germany, used in philosophy and 1700s romanticism. Both Johan Heinrich Pestalozzi and Johan Friedrich Herbart deployed the term when studying the development of one's overall personality, eventually reflected in Finland's elementary school system, created by Uno Cygnaeus.

Nowadays the idea of individual or general cultural development being linked to spiritual 'cleanliness or purification,' as per von Becker, probably seems remote. However, German romanticism's elaboration of the potential of drama and tragedy, and indeed the entire humanist oeuvre, to cultivate the human soul, which falls in line with Aristotle's *Poetics*, was rather close to von Becker's notions.

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, drama represents its protagonists mimetically, who in turn base their actions on practical reason, which rests on our ability to give our feelings intellectual or rational content. Practical reason combines emotion with reason and reason with emotion, claims Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

However, *hamartia*, a tragic error, may occur in practical reasoning and the consequent actions. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle claims that the theatregoer experiences catharsis, emotional purification, upon witnessing the tragic consequences of *hamartia*.

Thus, one's identification with drama opens the way to re-enacting the protagonist's practical reasoning in one's own mind, alongside the consequences of the resulting actions. During the catharsis that follows, the emotional basis of reasoning gives ground to more intellectual content, bolstering one's practical wisdom – an idea rather close to Snellman's notion of civilisation. This brings us to the idea that humanist studies and culture, or poetics in a broader sense, can promote one's ability to govern oneself through the integration of reason and emotion as the basis for ethical action.

Nowadays, 'sivistys' is used not only as a synonym for pure informational enlightenment, but also as a translation of the English word *civilisation*. Undoubtedly the words *sivilisaatio* (civilisation) and *sivistys* are phonetically close, but I doubt that anyone can claim that von Becker was so

far-sighted. However, the Anglo-Saxon liberal tradition includes a strand related to the notion of civilisation.

In the early days of Finland's autonomy, and Snellman's productive period, the ideals of freedom and utilitarianism were becoming established in the Anglo-Saxon world. The assumption of a rational consumer and infinite natural resources provided the basis for economic theory, alongside the concept of the rational citizen as the basis for political theory. However, nobody could ignore the fact that such enterprising citizens were only just emerging.

Liberalism also saw an extensive debate on man and the cultivation of the individual, with John Stuart Mill presenting the most important opinions. Such strong confidence and desire for the development of free, responsible individuals influenced e.g. the Grundtvigian folk high school movement in Denmark and, via that, Finland in the form of its youth association, folk high school and workers' institute movements.

This Anglo-Saxon debate was characterised by faith in the triumph of the modern individual, tempered by the observation that civilisation can decline. This viewpoint was probably strengthened by tragic setbacks in the Continent, beginning with the imperial Holy Alliance of the 1800s, followed by the rise of Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In this kind of European setting, one can only wonder how Finland was able to achieve a modern democracy based on an educated, democratic citizenship, in such a short time. One could claim that Snellman and his contemporaries succeeded with their civilisation project.

Today, we live in a world where the future of Europe and globalisation is discussed on the same basis of freedom, utilitarianism and enlightenment as the future of European nations two hundred years ago. The outlines of the EU's constitutional treaty largely trace the history of enlightenment and liberalism. To a great extent, similar models are offered for globalisation, i.e. global modernisation, as during Europe's modernisation. Perhaps Snellman's jubilee year will highlight the question of civilisation's role in the globalisation debate on the development of nations and the attendant crises.

J. V. Snellman viewed each nationality as a valuable form of human civilisation, contributing to the development of all mankind. In the same spirit, one could claim that flourishing in modern Europe and the world requires that a culture, politics and economy have something special and

exclusive to offer, since copies are indistinguishable. Perhaps the theme of the jubilee year, civilisation, will add more dimensions to this question.

However, simultaneously with global modernisation, post-modern development is said to have begun from its origins in Europe and the United States, a development in which the enlightenment and liberal grand narratives are losing their significance. In the opinion of many contemporary philosophers, this will entail fragmentation of the human psyche and the vitiation of one's ability to manage one's life in a world where the cultural hegemony transfers to market-led information and the hyper-stimulant of entertainment capitalism. Perhaps the jubilee year will also raise the question of how modern enlightenment and responsible freedom can be reinforced. Do we still need what J. V. Snellman called 'civilisation' in order to forge a persona upon which the development of a democratic society can be based?