

The critics of false culture

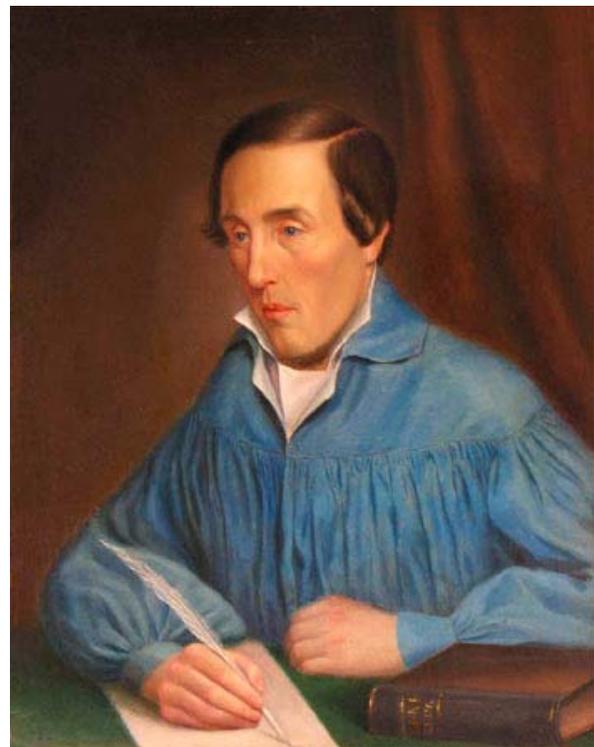
On the Finnish reception of the Enlightenment

This article discusses the heritage of the Enlightenment from the perspective of Finnish nineteenth century cultural discourse. It argues that the Finnish reception of the enlightenment had a negative tone. This critical attitude was expressed amongst Finnish intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century. The main target of the critique was the French style Enlightenment and the French way of life in general, which was understood to be civilized but lacking in the idea of real culture. J. V. Snellman opposed this dominant interpretation by highlighting the importance of the Enlightenment era and by cherishing the basic values of its ideas.

MY ARGUMENT CONTRIBUTES TO THE DISCUSSION ON the Enlightenment as a contradictory phenomenon, as has already been stated during the Aboagora symposium. My example comes from Finnish intellectual history, from the Finnish nineteenth century discussion about the heritage of the Enlightenment. I view the problem of the Enlightenment as a historian of the nineteenth century. During my studies on this era I have made the following observation: something strange must have happened during the previous century, since people still referred to this period many decades, almost a century, afterwards. I'm here referring to—mostly Swedish-speaking—intellectuals; the average Finn, a Finnish-speaking peasant, did not care much about the questions of light or darkness, unless it had to do with the growing of his corn.

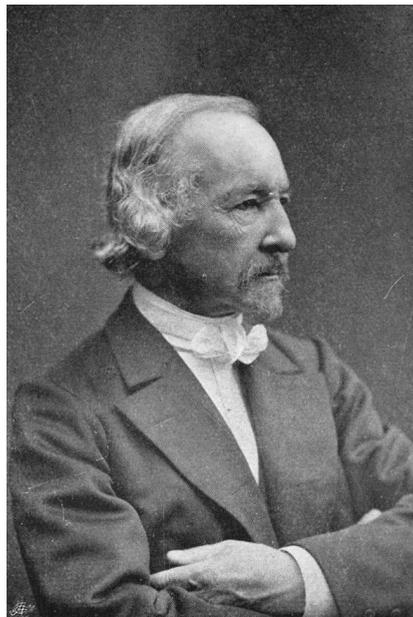
I am not a historian of the eighteenth century. Therefore I have to admit that what I know about the Enlightenment I have mostly learned from nineteenth century Finnish scholars. Thus, my information on the Enlightenment is quite biased, since it has been transmitted through its nineteenth century reception. In many respects this reception seemed

to have a negative tone in Finland. In several nineteenth century writings one can find, Firstly, a negative attitude towards the French revolution, which was understood to be a violent, unnatural event that was tearing society apart and breaking down old institutions and secondly, a negative attitude towards the French style Enlightenment, or more correctly, towards ideas that were associated with the French Enlightenment. This reception or critique did not necessarily have much to do with the actual writings of the Enlightenment thinkers—usually one cannot find direct references to any names.



Portrait of J. V. Snellman by Oskar Nylander, 1849.

I have come across these references to the ideas of the Enlightenment when studying the Finnish nineteenth century discussion of culture. At the beginning of the century Finland was a new nation; separation from Sweden had taken place in 1809 and there was a strong need to lay the foundations of a Finnish society, a need to define a national identity or culture of its own. A central question was what kind of identity this would and should be. In this cultural discourse there was a tendency to look back to the age of the Enlightenment, and especially towards the French Enlightenment, as a cautionary example, as an example of something



Zacharias Topelius, 19th century.

gone wrong. The message was clear: Finnish society should not be built upon these kinds of foundations. What was, then, wrong about the Enlightenment and its ideas? I will give a couple of short examples.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Johan Jakob Tengström (1787–1858), a university teacher at the Academy of Turku, was writing about the eighteenth century as an era of false Enlightenment, or false culture. His critique was mainly directed towards the French Enlightenment and towards the French way of life in general, which he felt to be very civilized, but lacking in the elements of real culture. From this statement one can clearly find the old tradition of culture as self-cultivation. Tengström also viewed the concepts of culture and civilization as opposites. He criticized the culture of the Enlightenment as being egocentric and hypocritical; it favoured short-sighted utilitarianism and had no appreciation of historical traditions or the achievements of other cultures.

Tengström was writing in the early nineteenth century, approximately 30 years after the French revolution, but still much later on this same idea of the French Enlightenment as a cautionary example keeps coming up in the Finnish context. One example could be Zacharias Topelius (1818–98), a journalist, novelist and historian (still writing actively in the 1870s and 1880s), for whom the eighteenth century appeared as an era not of progress but decline. At a general level criticism was also directed towards the skeptical tone of the era, one important aspect

being the secularism of the Enlightenment thinkers and their abandonment of higher values.

To these Finnish thinkers the Enlightenment as an age and its ideas represented the *hybris* of man. It can be stated that in Finnish discourse the Enlightenment, the light, became darkness, at least in some respects. Why were the Finnish thinkers so negative about the Enlightenment? One answer is that in their eyes the Enlightenment neglected the idea, or ideal, of real culture and education. This is what, for example Tengström was clearly stating. The term education should be understood here in relation to the German word *Bildung*. In the Swedish language

the counterpart to this ambiguous German word is *bildning*. *Bildung*, or *bildning*, is fundamentally about the self-formation of the individual; and in the Finnish case also the self-formation of a nation. Finnish citizenship becomes bound to the idea of education: in order to become a real member of a society one has to become educated enough—educated in the meaning of *Bildung*.

To close my argument I would like to introduce a second example and it comes from Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806–81). Snellman was a philosopher, journalist, teacher and a central figure in Finnish nineteenth century discussions on nationhood. Snellman shared the ideal of education or *Bildung* with his contemporaries; he was actually one of the leading theorists of education in Finland. He was also critical of the ideas of the revolution. On the other hand, he felt that many of his contemporaries in Finland had severely underestimated the power of Enlightenment ideas and, wrongly, treated the whole era as a historical error, as if it were an accident that somehow just happened, but without any wider meaning or positive results. In Snellman's opinion, the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment as an era were crucial to his own age. The era had not only laid the foundations of the nineteenth century development, it had also established some basic values that were still valid and worth following. These values included, criticism, egalitarianism and a genuine will to popularize its ideas; the willingness to step down from ivory towers and go public.

For Snellman the philosophy of the Enlightenment was not about doctrines, it was about attitudes. For him the central principle of the Enlightenment was freedom of thought; freedom of the critical faculty of reason to decide between what is true and false, between good and bad, and the freedom of each new generation to estimate and rethink these ideas and values. Snellman, in my mind, combined in his thinking the concepts of the Enlightenment and *Bildung*. It has been stated by Yehuda Elkana during this symposium that the Enlightenment was an unfinished project. I could add to this, in the spirit of Snellman, that it has to stay unfinished, since this unfinished nature really is the true nature of the Enlightenment. ■

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