

“IF ONLY WE HAD A RAILWAY!”

THE ROLE OF THE FINNISH RAILWAY NETWORK IN THE NATION’S TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS AS SEEN BY ERNST GUSTAF PALMÉN

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The idea of technological progress and its inevitability was very much reflected in the Finnish popular enlightenment literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Most of this literature was written by educated, Finnish-minded (Fennoman) politically and culturally active persons, members of the national elite, such as professor Ernst Gustaf Palmén. Palmén emphasised the significance of railway technology and of an efficient railway network in bringing technological and cultural progress to different parts of the fatherland.

Technology – in its very broad meaning – is one of the key concepts in the Finnish as well as in the global context. This can be seen daily in newspapers, on television, on the internet and in personal communication. Now we can read optimistic estimations on how technology will eventually offer the final solution for the climate change, then we anticipate for a cell phone with extraordinary accessories, mostly unusable and totally unnecessary for a common user. Relevant is not the question *whether* we need new technological applications, but rather when they *will* become available. It is not necessary that the problems, to which soon-to-be realized technological applications will offer the solution, have actually occurred already or even have been observed by anyone. The changes are assumed to be unavoidable anyway.¹

The title of this article, “If only we had a railway!”, illustrates the hopes and expecta-

tations at the end of the nineteenth century for all the good things that technological progress would bring about to the society. As still today, technology was presented to the larger public as ‘the saviour of the world’. According to the popular enlightenment literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, technology was expected to create economic as well as immaterial well-being.² During the past hundred years, this attitude towards technology has not changed very much.

At a broader national and international level, an interesting and significant example of the ever growing enthusiasm for technology is the Millennium Prize, a Finnish tribute founded in 2002 and worth one million euro, which is awarded to an innovator who has managed to develop a technological application which improves our everyday life. As it is written on the Millennium Prize Foundation’s website: “The Millen-

nium Technology Prize is Finland's tribute to life-enhancing technological innovations. The Prize has been established to steer the course of technological development to a more humane direction. In particular, the prize seeks to highlight innovations that assist and enrich our everyday lives today as well as in the future."³ The founding of the foundation was promoted actively by prominent industrial forces.⁴

THE IDEA OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS

The idea of technological progress being unavoidable has its origins in the period of technological determinism, at the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is reflected in the Finnish popular enlightenment literature of the time and has still some repercussions in a number of technological museums today.⁵ In the nineteenth century sources, several examples can be found of how both the present and the past were harnessed for a hypothetical future. Even how audacious the expectations sometimes were, they always proved to be worth waiting for. A straight line of technological progress characterized the discourse, and the very few disappointments that occurred were borne up in the name of the whole nation's benefit. Linking technological progress with the nation's well-being was in no way uncommon. Technology was often considered the basis of a better future in an economical, cultural and educational respect, and also on the regional as well as on the national level.⁶ That technological progress was regarded as unavoidable can be explained by the over-optimistic expectations towards it. As long as technological change was seen as a more or less triumphant cavalcade of success, no alternative way of development for the future was left.

REASONABLE AND UNREASONABLE EXPECTATIONS

Expectations towards technology at the late nineteenth century were mostly very concrete. The pseudonym E.E.P. wrote in 1888 in *Kansanvalistusseuran Kalenteri* (The Calendar of The Popular Enlightenment Movement): "Already in the backwoods, many cottagers, who knew nothing as astonishing until recently, have seen with their own eyes the high speed of a steam locomotive, or at least they have heard how engineers in distant areas have been searching for a suitable direction for the railway. No wonder, that just the name 'railway' evokes already happy feelings almost everywhere. People are looking forward to inexpensive imported goods and favourable conditions for export, to mental awakening combined with material well-being, and finally to a more active cooperation with the rest of the civilized world, all caused by this modern way of transportation."⁷ The benefits which were expected to be brought about by the railway were already in the 1880s very specific and especially beneficial to one's everyday life. As an unknown author wrote in 1896, after having waited for the railway in the Satakunta area for a quarter of a century: "he who is waiting for something extraordinary to happen, can never wait too long."⁸

However, the very high hopes linked with the modern railway technology could only lead to disappointments. Expectations were not all that reasonable. Firstly, technological expectations in general were in many ways far too optimistic, and secondly, the coming technological change was, already in the late nineteenth century, quite often seen as too unavoidable.

The expectations towards railway technology varied from meeting very practical needs, as mentioned above, to ideological illusions. Hopes that the railway would transport food supplies, raw material and

timber – just to mention a few of the main goods – were reasonable and almost always fulfilled. On the other hand, the idea that the railway would form the long longed-for connection to the western world and thus lead to westernization of the eastern parts of Finland was – at least from today’s perspective – over-optimistic and ideologically untenable.

A striking and publicly debated example is the question of Eastern Karelia. In the debates concerning railway and culture it was taken as an example for two reasons. Firstly, Karelia and especially the ‘Finnish’ areas right near the border wanted to be connected to the ‘mainland’ in any possible way. The railway was considered a good option for that. Secondly, and this is the ideologically questionable reason, the railway was seen as a way to bring western culture and, what is even more important, Lutheran faith to the traditionally Orthodox area.⁹ The Karelian railway was regarded as a new artery in the Finnish railway network, since life-long experience had shown that “the most effective way in our country to diffuse efficient ways of livelihood, transportation, communication among people, culture and enlightenment, is and will be – the railway.”¹⁰ So, after all, the Karelian railway was given a symbolic role in bringing the Finnish-Lutheran cultural tradition to the most eastern parts of the country. From a national perspective, it could be regarded as a legitimate and commonly accepted way of breaking down the Eastern Orthodox cultural tradition of the Karelian area by the state.¹¹

ERNST GUSTAF PALMÉN’S VISION OF THE FINNISH RAILWAY POLICY

In my research, I approach this theme through the writings of individuals who played a prominent part in the popular

enlightenment literature. One of them is Ernst Gustaf Palmén. Taking into account his background, his profession and the network in which he was active, Palmén is an example of someone belonging to the Fenoman elite. Palmén was born in 1849 (d. 1919) as the son of Professor and Baron Johan Philip Palmén. His mother belonged to the von Bonsdorff family, known as a conservative and Swedish-minded family, with a great interest in natural sciences. Palmén’s stepbrother Johan Axel Palmén was one of the first Finnish natural scientists fascinated by Darwinism. Ernst Gustaf Palmén is also a good example of a late-nineteenth-century influential member of the elite, involved in many social, cultural and political networks.

What makes him an important figure in this special case was his powerful role in the popular enlightenment circles as well as in the debates concerning railway technology and its impending benefits for the whole nation. Palmén was professor of Finnish, Scandinavian and Russian history, a Finnish-minded politician, and the driving force behind the popular enlightenment movement. His most visible position with regard to the latter was that of editor and productive writer in the *Oma Maa* (One’s Own Country) book series, the creation of which was Palmén’s idea as a reaction against the Russification acts executed under Governor-General Bobrikov’s rule. According to Palmén, it was necessary to have a book series to strengthen people’s self-esteem in these politically unstable times. Concrete acts took place in 1905 when Palmén was appointed as the chief editor.

In his own technological enthusiasm Palmén tried to discover congruence between technology and other important political issues of the time – such as the question of the Finnish-language comprehensive school or the question of language policy in general. His idea was to reduce

the gap between the common people and the cultural and political elite, and in connection to this he stated that technology can bring along both economic and mental prosperity. Nevertheless, he strongly emphasised that technological progress alone was not enough. Only when combined with the introduction of a proper Finnish school system and a reasonable language policy, it could be prevented that seven men out of eight lived in unacceptably low economic and mental prosperity.¹²

Palmén tried to convince the common people of the benefits of an innovative railway policy, and at the same time he did not hesitate to argue for the benefits of an aggressive railway policy at the higher national level. According to Palmén, the main purpose was to make sure that the control would stay in Finnish hands also in the future, and would not be taken over by the Russians as a result of the feared aggressive Russification policy. Palmén was convinced that a well-planned railway network could secure the existence of this country, and at the same time strengthen it by constructing an urgently needed network to support the nation's uprising industry, which was economically, logistically and geographically very much tied to the management of the railway network. As such, it was of the utmost importance to make the railway network as beneficent as possible for the whole nation, as Palmén himself wrote already in the 1890s. Thus, although Palmén recognized the individuals' need for a railway network, he continuously stressed that building such a network was in no way a donation of the state to anybody, but simply an economically calculated, profitable investment for the sake of the fatherland.¹³

WORK IN THE NAME OF THE FATHERLAND

During the first decade of the twentieth century Palmén's point of view radicalised somewhat. Following the general shift in the range of thought of the Fennoman movement, Palmén distanced himself increasingly from the conviction that the state has obligations towards individuals in this regard. In 1909, he wrote: "Countless of distant places, which were doomed to suffer from isolation, have thus been connected to vigorous work on behalf of the fatherland and its culture."¹⁴ What Palmén meant, was that the state had provided means of effective transportation, and in consequence people were summoned to participate as energetically as possible in the construction of the fatherland.

A united nation, as a result of a successful railway network, and people who supported the nation's building process were, for Palmén, concrete signs of the victory of the Finnish-minded Fennoman movement. Palmén accentuated this at least in three different ways in his writings about the Finnish railway network. Firstly, the fact that the network opened up the inland was symbolically extremely important for him, since in his view the inland represented the real core of Finnishness. The town of Hämeenlinna, and in a later stage particularly the town of Jyväskylä, were to be considered, as Palmén pointed out, the real centres of Finnish culture, as the costal areas were inhabited by a Swedish-speaking and at least to some extent also a Swedish-minded population. In this case, Palmén argued for the capital's unnamed needs, though in real terms the inland towns were probably economically and culturally more dependent on the wealthier capital and costal areas than vice versa.

Secondly, Palmén agreed with Johan Vilhelm Snellman's view on how railways leading inland were a concrete sign of the

importance of Middle Finland. According to Palmén, this was also a very clear evidence of the success of the Fennoman policy – to which Snellman was one of the main contributors. This raised big hopes for the nation's prosperous future. Finally, Palmén wanted to stress the importance of the provinces and of all the potential they were given by the developing railway network. He emphasised the crucial role of the provinces in forming the Finnish culture, and his opinion was shared by other key figures of the Fennoman movement, such as Zacharias Topelius. In *Maamme kirja* (Book of Our Land) Topelius introduced the idea that the different provinces complemented one another, and together they would form the nation. Already in the second decade of the twentieth century, Palmén could claim that the economic and industrial progress that was under way in Finland was partly due to the fact that the inland provinces were made economically important actors in the constructing process of the nation in a very concrete way.¹⁵

THE NATIONAL ELITE AS AN IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTOR

As can be seen in Palmén's popular enlightenment writings, the national elite was given an equally important role in the railway question as in any cultural or political issue. Palmén, unquestionably a member of the elite himself, referred often to Snellman and Topelius to back up his standpoint. Also the role of the State of Finland in the railway question was discussed and emphasised regularly. Those very few foreigners who attempted to build their own private stretch of the railway network were, one after the other, labelled as speculators whose erroneous actions had to be straightened out by the state; the entrepreneurs realised that their business was doomed to fail.

The national elite and the state had closely connected roles in the public debate concerning railway technology. The state had to create the favourable conditions which would enable and stimulate technological progress. The elite was supposed to create a suitable environment for modern technology, within the frames of the conditions established by the state, and what was even more important, the members of the elite had to assimilate the modern technology into the traditional culture.¹⁶ The most suitable and effective way to do this was by presenting new technological innovations in the same publications and by using the same concepts as the traditional culture. In the case of the railway question, the traditional Finnish culture consisted of 'nature', more specifically of forest and water, and of education, schooling and language.

In 1912, Palmén summarized, in many ways, all what is mentioned above, by pointing out how the Finnish people had started to build new technological solutions for themselves as well as for the coming generations, with an unprecedented devotion. Obstacles which had existed for centuries were finally being removed. Palmén emphasised the importance of railway technology which he considered sustainable development and to which the simultaneous political changes had been subordinate.¹⁷ In his writings he showed how technological innovations played an important role in a nation's cultural and national progress, and how both technology and culture were the key factors in a nation's way to an economically and politically better future.

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- ¹ Salmi 2002, 401-402.
- ² See for instance Palmén 1910b, 795-796; Palmén 1909b, 142; Sirelius 1910, 589; Kyläkirjaston Kuvalehti (Tammerkosken rautatiesilta) 1893.
- ³ <http://www.millenniumprize.fi/en/prize/overview/>.
- ⁴ Nykänen 2007, 113-116.
- ⁵ See for instance Michelsen 1993, 9; Michelsen 2000, 63-65 and 68-73.
- ⁶ E.E.P. 1888, 43-44 and 63; Kansanvalistusseuran Kalenteri 1896, 72; Palmén 1912, 145.
- ⁷ E.E.P. 1888, 43-44.
- ⁸ Kansanvalistusseuran Kalenteri 1896, 72.
- ⁹ Kyläkirjaston Kuvalehti (Karjalan rata) 1894; see also Kyläkirjaston Kuvalehti (Uusilta radoiltamme I) 1903; Kuisma 1993, 205-207 and 212; Rinne 2001, 48-49.
- ¹⁰ Kyläkirjaston Kuvalehti (Karjalan rata) 1894.
- ¹¹ See for instance Rinne 2001, 48-49.
- ¹² Palmén 1888, 163; Palmén 1898, 377.
- ¹³ Palmén 1898, 385; Palmén 1899a, 18.
- ¹⁴ Palmén 1909b, 142.
- ¹⁵ Palmén 1908b, 242-244 and 247-249; Palmén 1909b, 131 and 138-141; Palmén 1912, 136, 140-141 and 145; Palmén 1921, 285; Kala 1921, 287.
- ¹⁶ See for instance Hård 1998, 66.
- ¹⁷ Palmén 1912, 145; see also Tiitta 1994, 221.
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