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Who is the Finn? Globalization and Identity in Finland

JOUNI HÄKLI

In What Sense a Finnish Team?

I begin this article with a personal note, one that captures well the circumstances within which national identities are experienced and negotiated in our interconnected global world. I am not a big sports fan, but one game never fails to catch my interest: that is ice hockey played at the World Championship level. In view of national identification, I suppose it is only natural that, as a Finn, I have fervently supported the Finnish national ice-hockey team since my childhood . Watching ice-hockey World Championship Games at the age of six ranks among my first memories of excitement related to both television and nationality. Since 1970 I have followed, with undiminished interest, the changing fortunes of the Finnish team in its efforts to beat the teams of other countries. Some rivals continue to occupy a prominent place on the world map of ice hockey , others no longer exist (most notably the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic). No other television experience has caused so sweaty hands and such trembling as watching these tournaments.

I am sure that all those who have watched sports with something special at stake are familiar with these reactions. In my case this 'something' is the feeling that this team, wearing symbols of nationhood I have learned to distinguish from all other similar symbols, represents *the Finnish nation*, and moreover, *myself* on the most personal level. Therefore, as a member of the Finnish nation, I have come to share both losses and victories of the Finnish team. I think it is thus safe to say that watching World Championship ice hockey ranks among the strongest contemporary experiences of Finnishness for myself – and for many others, for ice hockey is the most popular spectator sport in Finland. It is, therefore, a particularly revealing case for considering how the relationship between the Finnish national team, the Finnish people and the rest of the world has evolved over the recent years.

We can begin this by looking at the changing composition of the Finnish World Championship ice hockey team. Until the early 1990s, most of the players came from teams playing in the national league. Professional players, mainly from the North American National Hockey League (NHL), were an exception, even though they were important role models for domestic players. The predominantly domestic profile began to change, when the International Olympic Committee

allowed professional players to participate in Olympic ice hockey for the first time in 1988.¹ By that time, and given the general professionalization of sports, an increasing number of Finnish players had already followed the example of Matti Hagman, who in 1976 was the first Finn to play professional hockey in the NHL. Since the mid-1990s the share of foreign-based players in the Finnish national team thus grew rapidly so that all members of the team representing Finland in the 2004 World Cup tournament lived abroad and worked for foreign teams (Table 1). In terms of place attachment these players could just as well have represented Florida or Colorado instead of Finland. However, there is no question about the focus of loyalty of these players. They all are Finnish nationals born in Finland, and veritable icons of Finnish ice hockey.

The example suggests that one's Finnishness is still determined at the moment of birth rather than by events in later life. Moreover, increasing international mobility – globalization at the level of individual experience – has failed to unsettle the foundation of the representational relationship between native Finnish players, the Finnish national ice-hockey team and the Finnish nation – no matter where these players currently live, what language they speak in their daily life, where their children go to school and what country collects their taxes.

Clearly, place of birth rather than place of living forms the basis of Finnish national identity. This observation may block any quick progress toward a post-national, cosmopolitan, global future, at least for the Finns. Studies on the sense of Finnishness among immigrants show the flipside of the "ethnocratic" definition of Finnish identity.² For example, Veronika Honkasalo³ a scholar of comparative religion, interviewed in spring 2000 young first-generation immigrants to Finland and found that they considered Finnishness an attribute reserved exclusively to "native Finns". None of the interviewees believed that they might ever become "proper Finns". Moreover, sociologist Outi Lepola⁴ has pointed out that immigrants do not become 'Finns' simply by gaining the Finnish citizenship. The process is much more complicated and first-generation immigrants as well as their children may always be 'excluded' from 'Finnishness'. Also more generally, studies on globalization and national boundaries have shown that national identities still figure strongly in our quotidian lives, despite the profound changes brought about by processes of cultural, political and economic globalization.⁵ It is therefore appropriate to ask, 'Why does the idea of nationality still command our loyalties and what are national identities?'

Identities Interest Us, But Why?

Identity is clearly one of the catchwords of current times. Politicians use the word as much as academic researchers, government officials, business people, and laymen. We engage in *identity talk* whenever we reflect upon who we are, where we come from, and where we belong.⁶ The upsurge of interest in identities can partly be explained by the rise of ethnic and regional political movements, the growing flows of migration and displacement, and the breakdown of the geopolitical certainties of the Cold War era. Arguably, however, globalization stands out as a key factor in making identities interesting.⁷

Globalization is used broadly to describe various processes of political, economic and cultural integration on the global scale. In an increasingly interconnected world the movement of information, capital, goods and people is

easier and faster than ever before. In this context, the relationship between globalization and national identities is complicated. Instead of thinning out cultural differences, globalization has, in fact, accentuated awareness of these differences by multiplying the points of contact between individual and collective agents from different ethnic and national cultures.⁸

If we are not rapidly becoming 'the same' because of growing global interconnectedness, what, then, is happening with national identities? What is happening with Finnishness? We may begin to answer this question by examining what identities are. Some authors argue that the term applies to individuals rather than collectives.⁹ In psychological analyses identity is usually understood as a view of the self that people develop as acting agents, while being objects of their own and others' observations and interpretations. In this view identity is connected to the experience of individual particularity and the key question is, 'Who am I?'¹⁰ However, identity cannot be analytically reduced only to individual experience. The logical flipside of difference is similarity, which points to collective, or shared, elements. Locality, region, nation, gender or ethnicity, for instance, may provide frameworks for the rise of collective identities. Even though their existence depends on individuals who produce and reproduce such identities, their construction also requires social practices and shared narratives that join people together.¹¹ Therefore, it can be argued that individual identities are always *social* identities.

Moreover, identities have to be practiced before they can become fully meaningful in social life. They have to be performed to become actual.¹² For example, in discussing national identities anthropologist Michael Billig states that one should not ask 'what identity is' but rather 'what it means to claim to have one'.¹³ Identities have no stable essence, as they change and evolve in the acts by which we acknowledge difference and sameness. Historically and geographically specific circumstances condition these acts and make up the conditions for 'identity talk'. The question 'who is the Finn' has been answered differently through the history of the Finnish nation-state. The Finnish identity is not permanent, for each generation interprets the symbols and 'narratives' of Finnishness anew and assigns fresh meanings to them.¹⁴

Here we return to the relationship between globalization and the Finnish national identity. The question I pose in the title of this article can be read and answered in at least two ways. On the one hand, we may ask where Finns have come from and how. On the basis of historical research it has become well established that people living in what today is Finland have not always identified themselves as 'Finns'. Until the late nineteenth century collective identifications among the population had other, more particular and concrete points of reference. These were typically family and kin, village, local community, and sometimes region.¹⁵ National identification was not relevant at all in the practices of everyday life. Hence, from this perspective, the question gets rephrased as, 'How did Finns come about in the first place?'

On the other hand, it is perhaps more important in the context of this volume to ask who the Finn is in the face of current globalization. What are the processes and activities that prompt us to reflect on who Finns are in the contemporary world? Here we must turn to the major events and developments that have caused this question to become more actual than perhaps ever since Finland gained independence in 1917. Among these major developments are the breakdown of the

Soviet Union; the opening of the Finnish economy to the international market; the membership of Finland in the European Union (EU) in 1995; and the concomitant growth of foreign population living in Finland.¹⁶ So, the two questions I will seek to answer in the following are: (1) Who were the Finns in historical terms? and (2) Who are they becoming in encountering the processes of global rescaling and deterritorialization?

The Creation of Finns: Nation as a "Root Metaphor"

A quick look at how Finns came into being is in order to set up the discussion of more recent developments. I begin with the idea of nation-building as the creation of *unity within difference*. Every nation believes, or is made to believe by its leaders, that it is eternal and has the right to a particular homeland.¹⁷ Finns make no exception. Still, they did not always exist, but awareness of nationhood had to be built among the population by the political and cultural elite. Before Finns became Finns, their primary collective identities were to be of a particular *kin* or from a certain *village*.¹⁸

At the core of nation-building, therefore, is the challenge of superseding the local, regional and social differences that people identify themselves with – that is, of creating a reality that unifies people without erasing their peculiarities.¹⁹ It is necessary for the protagonists of nationalism to show the masses that all their differences somehow belong to the same family – that the family resemblance is strong enough to accommodate differences.

Creating unity that surpasses various kinds of differences is not an easy task, not least because personal and collective identities truly mattered even before the age of Finnish nationalism from the 1850s onwards. Therefore, to be able to accept Finnishness as their primary collective identity, ordinary people living in the Finnish territory had to rearrange their priorities and loyalties. A social order founded on the internalization of roles and social schisms based on the four-estate society (nobility, clergy, burghers and peasants), as well as several other deeply rooted distinctions such as occupational, regional, ethnicity, kin and status differences, had to give way to a new layer of modern collective identification: the Finnish nation as "an imagined community."²⁰

This is precisely what happened in Finland during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The idea of Finns as a unified nation was actively created by the political and cultural elites using elements of shared language, culture and tradition. These elements were crucially important in achieving a sense of unity that accommodates other differences. However, the unifying elements did not simply lay there to be found and be used for 'waking up' the nation. In the process tradition was molded, it was utilized selectively, the Finnish language and grammar were normalized and cultural products were deliberately 'nationalized'. The Finnish national epic *Kalevala* is a prime example of how the oral tradition of a certain group, the Karelians, was converted into a unified literary product that ended up being a central symbol of Finnishness. The tradition for sure was genuine, but the distance from Karelian folk culture to the intellectual circles of mid-nineteenth century Helsinki was long and winding.²¹

Therefore it is right to say that what brought Finns to existence was less the unique cultural tradition or particular language than awareness of these among the masses. This consciousness has not been an easy achievement. It has demanded

persistent efforts by the protagonists of the 'Finnish cause' to establish 'Finland' as a nation on the cultural world map. Moreover, the Finnish nation-building has required conscious dissemination of the idea among the population by means such as national schooling system and general-conscription military, mass media, literature, arts, and national monuments, cultural institutions and buildings.²²

The end result of successful nation-building is best described as the *naturalization* of the idea of Finns as a nation. In philosopher Chaim Perelman's terms, Finland has then emerged as a *root metaphor*, that is, as an interpretative framework that is automatically applied without ever recognizing that it is only a metaphor. According to Perelman, thinking is often based on conditions that are not reflected upon. When something is described through a "root metaphor" it is seen as *the* reality – the only way of looking at things. As a "root metaphor" nation has seized to be an idea and become reality in itself, a reality that transcends difference and unites what is seen as different.²³

Globalization and the Changing Finnish Identity

The nation might be a "root metaphor" that goes unquestioned in the everyday life of a national polity, whereas the negotiation of a national identity is an ongoing, never-ending process. The continuous search for what it means to be a Finn has been possible precisely under the shelter of the metaphor of *nation*. That Finns exist as a nation has opened up a space for the deliberation of the question 'who Finns are'.

Since the early 1990s the questions concerning the Finnish identity has centered on influences brought about by several major shifts in Finland's geopolitical position. I consider three developments particularly interesting in this context: (1) the breakdown of the Soviet Union; (2) the globalization of the Finnish economy; (3) and Finland's membership in the EU. All these processes have increased the numbers of foreign population living in Finland.

First, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a dramatic event that opened up space for the renegotiation of the position of Finland among either western or eastern nations. In the late 1980s Finland was still positioned as a political and cultural borderland between East and West. The foreign-policy doctrine of Finland's self-proclaimed neutrality during the Cold War was so hegemonic that it was also reflected in the way in which ordinary Finns saw themselves. This borderland neutrality was seen as an unquestionable 'truth', based on geopolitical and economic realism and touted in innumerable occasions – newspaper editorials, governmental speeches and statements, and politically correct elite discussions.²⁴ However, in some countries, such as West Germany and the USA, this neutrality was treated with suspicion. The notorious term *Finlandisierung* (Finlandization) was coined to denote how the Soviet Union could influence the domestic politics of some small countries located outside the 'Iron Curtain' but still within its sphere of influence.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union suddenly made it possible to re-think the question of who Finns are with less concern about what the reaction in Moscow might be. The change in thinking did not take place overnight as the political situation in Russia was unstable for quite some time. However, a new space for renegotiating the Finnish identity opened up in the early 1990s. This could be seen most clearly in the talk about the West as Finland's 'true'

geopolitical group of reference. After a long period of foreign-political realism that – behind the facade of geopolitical neutrality – emphasized connections to Soviet interests, it was only a matter of ‘normalizing’ Finland’s geopolitical position. New identity talk started to gain ground with the specific aim of showing that Finland was the gateway of the West toward the East rather than a neutral watershed. In other words, Finns now began to highlight their identity as an unquestionably western nation.²⁵

Second, the opening of Finland’s economy to the global market paralleled the new geopolitical tone of the Finnish identity talk . The first steps included liberalization of the movement of capital and an increasingly relaxed regulation of trade across the boundaries of the Finnish national economy. A corollary development was Finland’s full membership in the European Free Trade Agreement (EFTA) in 1986, an economic component in the ongoing European integration process.²⁶ Following the late 1980s Finland has gradually adjusted to living in the turmoil of the global economy. The Finns now realize that their most important economic, social and political contributions are weighed up in the context of global competition. This realization has fundamentally shaken the citizens’ understanding of Finland as a ‘bird nest’ offering shelter from the world’s hardships.

This feeling of shattered ‘nest’ has had its impact on the Finnish identity. Talking about ‘Finns’ and ‘the Finnish identity’ is increasingly based on comparing and positioning Finns within the globally competitive field of national achievement and characteristics. Often this reflection on ‘who we are’ has focused on Finns’ cultural achievements . Celebrities such as conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen of the Los Angeles Philharmonics, Formula One World Champion Mika Häkkinen, or ice-hockey players Jari Kurri and Teemu Selänne who built prominent careers in the NHL have become national icons. Rock and roll groups, such as Bomfunk MC’s, Nightwish, The Rasmus, and HIM have added to Finland’s international fame and their service for the country has received acknowledgement from President Tarja Halonen. Sometimes the success in global competition of large Finnish companies, such as the Nokia Corporation, has evoked national pride.

However, not all reflections on the Finnish identity have turned positive. Especially before Finland’s EU membership in 1995 much of the identity talk centered on showing how badly Finns do compared to more ‘civilized’ European nations. This negativity stems from the tradition of stigmatizing Finnishness that ethnologist Satu Apo has, perhaps rightly, termed “self-racism.”²⁷ The core statement in this thinking is that Finns are uncivilized backwoods people. In newspaper writing preceding the EU membership this self-mocking statement was presented in the following variants:

- Finns are impolite
- Finns are socio-emotionally too serious, not playful and lack dancing skills
- Finns do not know how to communicate, they fail in small talk and speeches
- Finns are too straightforward and realistic, incapable of complex discussion
- Finnish language is so archaic that it prohibits intellectual activities
- Finns are biologically and culturally pathological with severe problems of drinking, violence, suicide and male mortality.²⁸

Curiously, the reflection on what Finns are like as Europeans produced discourses looking for the low points of Finnish culture, instead of, for example, celebrating the remarkable achievements of a country rising from the ashes of the Second World War. Satu Apo explains this self-mockery by referring to the fact that it has been common among the Finnish elites to have a peasant or working class background. Hence, many nation-builders and opinion leaders have seen 'development' and 'progress' as a reflection of their own distanciation from the banal culture of the common people. What results is a long tradition of seeing that 'Finnishness' falls short of what it ought to be, and moreover, that Finns' habits and customs should change to measure up with those of other nations.²⁹

Her argument is credible, but fails to address why the masses have adopted this bleak 'self-portrait'. From a slightly different vantage point negative identity talk could be seen as a social-psychological means of coping with certain aspects of Finnishness, such as heavy drinking habits, that can not simply be 'brushed under the carpet'. By deliberately exaggerating undesirable characteristics of the mainstream Finnish way of life, by being more modest than is necessary, Finns may discharge or even invert the negative meanings of these cultural traits.

Clearly, joining the EU was a watershed in the negotiation of who Finns are, occasioning much talk about identity. Discussions about EU membership as the crucial political choice that definitively settled Finland's belonging to the West exemplify a positive tone in this debate.³⁰ More ambivalent issues were connected to the position of domestic food production in the European market and to the future of rural areas – their landscapes and traditional ways of life. This rural identity had already been under pressure because of urbanization and the increasingly dynamic economy based on information technologies.

Concerns about the future of rural Finland have found expression in various forms of localism that have recently questioned the thesis about globalization as a homogenizing force.³¹ It seems that the early twentieth-century idea of who Finns are is being adopted and revised as a series of localized identity markers in the rapidly changing world. Examples of this 'revival' are comic books and novels written in regional dialects or with a strong connection to particular localities, and the rise of domestic pop music with lyrics depicting ordinary places (about the contribution by visual artists, see Paul Wilson's article in this volume). It is difficult to say at this point whether these localisms gradually erode the unity of the mainstream Finnish identity or whether they are a passing fashion. It is nevertheless clear that they have changed the way how most Finns currently see themselves and how they experience their quotidian environments in the context of globalization.

Increasing international mobility has also influenced the setting in which the Finnish identity is negotiated. The touted (but somewhat erroneous) image of Finland as a country with a homogeneous national culture reflects nation-building processes that succeeded in establishing the nation as a strong "root metaphor" superseding ethnic, local, cultural, religious, socio-economic and political differences (some of which had existed for centuries).³² Because the absolute number and proportion of foreigners living in Finland has been smaller than in most European countries, even small changes that increase the visibility of the outside world within Finland may be significant for the way in which Finns see themselves as part of the world.

The number of foreign citizens living in Finland has grown rapidly since the 1990s (Table 2). Finns today accept foreigners living in Finland more easily than before (Table 3). The growth of positive attitudes toward immigrant workers is paralleled by the growing interest of Finns in the international job market, especially Europe.³³ Still, all foreigners are not treated equally: the longer the distance from the 'most desirable' group of foreigners (that is, white young professionals with steady income) the harsher the attitudes become. Umayya Abu-Hanna, a Palestinian journalist who immigrated to Finland from Israel 25 years ago writes:

Because there are few immigrants in Finland, and Finns are a homogeneous group, foreigners represent first and foremost 'Otherness', for better and for worse. The unique and individual aspects of foreigners are overshadowed by this Otherness. The majority population sees primarily 'difference.' Elsewhere in the media and politics the myth of homogeneous Finnishness is reproduced – more persistently than the Finnish history would suggest. "This is what we Finns are like," they say. Therefore Otherness is mainly not so good, and never the best. When 'good' has already been defined and embedded within the dominant national identity, Otherness and change can not be for the better. Foreigners remain mirrors for the Finnish culture, not the bearers of new languages, cultures and historical backgrounds.³⁴

Nevertheless, new foreign based population groups now exist in Finland and are slowly carving spaces for themselves in the Finnish mainstream culture that is becoming less homogeneous, more open to outside influences, and less culturally protectionist. New loyalties and sources of identity are emerging, not replacing the national identity but perhaps making it less rigid and monolithic. It appears that the question 'Who is the Finn?' is currently answered in at least partly novel ways.

Conclusion: Who is the Finn?

Having begun this paper with a personal note, I will conclude with one. Anthropologist Mary Douglas notes that "nothing else but institutions can define sameness. Similarity is an institution."³⁵ National identity is simultaneously about similarity (what 'we' have in common) and difference (how 'we' differ from 'others'). The Finnish nation-building process succeeded in creating the idea of Finns as a strong "root metaphor," one that has tolerated much critical consideration on who we are and what we are like. This identity talk is an ongoing process that reflects the changing cultural, economic and political circumstances in which people live their lives.

Globalization and the related rise of various localisms perhaps best describe most of the changes that now condition the negotiation of Finnish identity. It has shaken the foundations of Finnish unitary culture by opening up new possibilities to interact with the world and its cultural richness. Today Finns consume products from all over the world and travel more broadly than ever before. Finns also encounter more cultural difference in their quotidian living environments than just two decades ago. The ensuing challenge is to accept as Finns also those foreigners who wish to become ones.

The revival of local cultural traditions, dialects and loyalties have challenged the nation-state-centered hierarchies of identification by offering a more nested and multi-layered context for identity talk – one that brings together local ties and global flows. Entirely new kinds of communities now command the loyalties that previously were reserved only for the nation-state. Among these are ethnic minorities (for example the indigenous Sámi or the Swedish-speaking Finns; of the latter, see Kepsu and Westerholm in this volume), company-based 'tribes' (for instance the employees of the Nokia Corporation), or localities (home town or region).

Clearly, in approaching the Finnish identity there can never be an exhaustive answer to the question, 'Who is the Finn?' Yet, my observations concerning the composition of the Finnish ice-hockey team in the 2004 World Cup is revealing in ways more than one. These players represent a generation of Finns for whom an international job is the rule rather than an exception. They move in and out of Finland flexibly and make important choices based on possibilities rather than necessities. They probably feel very 'Finnish' but have also acquired a cosmopolitan mentality. They are very loyal to their professional teams, but consider it an honor to represent Finland in World Championships when invited to do so. These young professionals can never shake off the heritage of having grown into the Finnish national culture but fluently adopt new habits, styles and tastes from others. They are 'the Finns,' just like many others in their generation: people who have no choice but to be Finns, yet who *choose* to be ones.

Endnotes

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