

# The Chosen Enemy – Nobility as the Antagonist in the Thinking of the 19th Century Finnish National/Democratic Opposition

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## A conflict of elites

The situation of European elites in the 19th century was changing rapidly. As a result of a technological and consequent social change the old, traditional noble elites were increasingly being challenged by the new professional, bourgeois, commoner elites. The main subject of my study at the moment,<sup>1</sup> and thus of this article, is the ideological conflict of Finnish elites in the second half of the 19th century, and how the new, non-noble, ‘democratic’ elite, when defining itself, in the process also managed to define its predecessor and competitor in a way that sometimes seems to haunt us to this day.

When a new phenomenon, in this case a political ideology, seeks to replace a former one, it has to justify its takeover.<sup>2</sup> In doing this it for obvious reasons usually presents itself as the new, best and only answer to all problems present – in the same time leaving behind any responsibility for any mistakes made by any government so far. The self-image of the 19th century non-noble opposition-to-become-a-new-elite was, that it was the sole champion of everything that was a) modern, b) national, c) democratic or d) had something to do with the social emancipation of oppressed groups like labour, peasantry, or women. For reasons quite as obvious, an ideological or political

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<sup>1</sup> The bulk of the text is based on my forthcoming licentiate thesis, *The semiotics, theory and concept of nobility, the ideal types of a nobleman and the literary democratic themes in the 19th century Finnish fiction*, which will be officially available (in Finnish) in the autumn 2001, in the library of the Department of social sciences, University of Helsinki.

<sup>2</sup> Carrard 1992: 1.

newcomer hardly ever begins its career by telling how great its predecessor was - but rather, how poorly it has performed in all respects. The old elite was accordingly defined as the opposite and the enemy of all the good things mentioned in the list.

In the Finnish case this was in fact particularly easy. Being an old, though many times transformed elite group, the nobility was a ‘traditional’ elite. It was dependent on a traditional form of society (then on its last legs), supported by tradition, tradition-conscious, and even tradition-bound, in an era that increasingly considered not being ‘modern’ as something downright criminal. Being mostly Swedish-speaking and serving an outside government (first central Swedish, then, after 1809, imperial Russian) it was a ‘foreign’ group, not a ‘national’ one, as the concept was suitably defined on the principle of “one language, one nation”.

It was also not ‘democratic’. Nobility as an institution was based on personal and private transmission of means, social and especially cultural capital, which took place mostly within families but also on the larger social scene – private tutors and exclusive company are the instantly recognisable features of a “noble education” to this day. The new elite, on the other hand, relied completely on public, even official, and therefore democratic (at least *more* if not *completely* democratic) transmission of information: state schools and universities, newspapers, books of fiction and non-fiction. And, to complete the picture, the nobility was also seen – or at least shown – as the enemy number one of the freedom of women, as marriage between noble woman and non-noble man was prohibited, and of the rural labour force, whose situation within the manor system was depicted – with exceptions, though – as far worse than without.

### **The monopoly of definition**

The emergence of the new ideological elite took place simultaneously and was made possible by the emergence of a new mill of power, the mass press. The expansion of the newspaper industry and other public, printed, anonymous forms of communicating knowledge created a new type of “invisible” social power. The new publicity offered an efficient and ever-expanding forum for ideological discussion, and consequently greatly enhanced the possibilities of a purposeful opinion-building project. The usual, ideologically tinted formulation of this development is that the “free”

opinion-building was thus made possible. Nevertheless, one can quite as justifiably say, that the new situation created a golden opportunity for those who simply wanted to replace power with power. To put it bluntly, the programme in question could read something like this: “We give you democracy – and then tell you exactly what to do with it.”

Judging from the names that pop out, when one reads the newspapers and fiction of the period, the new non-noble, professional elite-in-opposition was in great majority. It can be said to have had a monopoly to the public discussion and consequently to the definition of the phenomena that in the end constitute a society. It thus wielded the discursive power of the era. The new ideological elite quite knowingly used all the possibilities of the printed word – not just those of the newspaper polemic – to further its cause.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this monopoly situation we now hear only its voice, and a very loud one too. But: if we judge an era only by what its “modern” critics say about it, and about themselves, we are writing a history of modernization from within its own ideological framework - that is, a winners’ history.

Population growth and the rapid development of technology, which led into industrialization, urbanization etc., brought on an ever-growing need for well qualified bureaucrats to be engaged in planning, organizing and supervision. This in turn meant a growing interest from the part of the state towards developing an educational programme. State control over schools and universities increased, as did the amount of educational institutions and thus of students who received the standard education. The result of this development was the emergence of a big enough, uniform enough group of first generation governmental and professional (medical doctors, lawyers, architects, writers!) future elite members – ‘upstarts’, if you like. The critical mass in social plutonium required to sustain a chain reaction was achieved, and a reaction began.

The first generation elite was as cohesive as any group that has a common enough background and has studied and otherwise spent its impressionable young age together. It also had a common enemy. What it did not yet have, was cohesion across generations – the older generation simply was not there. For them there were no legions of elder cousins, uncles, or dad’s old army comrades, who could have come into their rescue and smooth their social path upwards. So they hurried to declare

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<sup>3</sup> See Häggman 2001a: 1–17.

all such “unearned” benefits improper; what counted, was a person’s own ability and virtue.<sup>4</sup> This of course did not keep their own sons and daughters from exploiting such benefits when it in the due course of time became possible for them.

The expansion of standard lower and university education and the new national level of publicity added to the same development. A new, national-level experience of common identity was being formed – a new “common ground” far larger than before, a shared consciousness that created a new kind of ideological unity: the *idea* of unity and togetherness shared by people not personally known to each other.<sup>5</sup> The first ideological quest for this nationwide consciousness of course was to define itself, which was done basically by defining its mental borders: who belongs to us, who doesn’t. (Later this initial programme of self-definition, ‘nationalism’, was incorrectly identified as the only possible occupation for the nationwide consciousness.)

“Possession of power can be identified with confidence only in cases of overt conflict – since those who prevail in such cases are able to do so precisely because they do, in fact, have more power than their opponents.”<sup>6</sup> The new, professional elite defined the old elite, the nobility, as the only significant power group in the 19th century society,<sup>7</sup> and the definition sometimes seems to have persisted to this day. So - who won the ideological war? The answer must be: those who had the essential power to define themselves and their chosen enemy far into the future, and thus to ensure that we still necessarily identify a nobility-dominated government (form) with bad government (content), without any need to look further into its actual principles and practices.

### **Fiction for a historian**

Now, about using fiction as a source material and/or having fiction as an object of historical study, which are two very different lines of business. I had my fair share of trouble in the past trying to sell

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<sup>4</sup> Some decades later, the communists, in their utmost application of 19th century ideals, brought this line of thinking into its logical conclusion: not even economic capital or bourgeois/peasant status were allowed to be transmitted in private, that is, inherited.

<sup>5</sup> About the role of the national press in the forming of the idea of a nation, see Anderson 1991. About the role of standard education in that process see Gellner 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Hindess 1996: 4.

<sup>7</sup> See below.

this my project. The comments I kept hearing were based on the fact that fiction is ‘not true’ – so, how can it be used to find out ‘truth’ about the past? But, as we all should well know, *no* text source should be simply trusted to tell the so-called truth. Ideological contents that can be hidden in documents that according to the prevalent reading- contract are supposed to be true (newspapers, official memoranda, governmental reports) can quite similarly be concealed into texts of fiction. Fiction actually leaves the writer more space to build up the whole structure to enhance the sought-for effect, and to plan and plant every detail to support, underline and add to the general picture. Even though the reader knows that the story is “not true”, it can and will deliver its message – often emotionally charged and therefore the more persuasive.

The truth problem concerns the first case, using fiction as a source. One might compare the representations of fiction to those of photography. When you take a picture of something, there inescapably are several haphazard items that you did not specially plan to be there. Consequently, valuable information about the era when the picture was taken, can later be “read” from the presumably innocent snapshot. The same goes for verbal depictions of contemporary everyday life. When a writer tells a story, he/she necessarily includes many details that have no ideological content in themselves, but are needed simply to give the story a concrete background and to work out the plot, thus giving direct testimony about his/her surroundings. To get out the genuinely reliable stuff you just have to clean out the ideologically charged elements.<sup>8</sup>

In the second case, when the status of a text of fiction is that of an object of historical (as opposed to literary or aesthetic) study, it is the other way round. A text is seen as a collective cultural product, not just something willed into existence by a culturally independent individual. One can forget all about the “reliable stuff”, and concentrate on the ideologically charged part with just as alert a mind. The more traditional history of ideas tends to accept the ideological message of any text at the face value, whereas a more deconstructive reading strives to reveal the hidden structures, allusions and motives behind the eloquence or the hidden meanings present in the *seemingly* innocent everyday detail. In this case the truth problem suddenly vanishes. Printed words on paper are very real, be they “true” or not. It is indeed true that they exist, can be read and do have effect on those who read them and internalize their meaning, and through them on the society they live in,

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<sup>8</sup> See also Häggman 2001b: 18–19.

and on its further development. The problem of interpretation remains, even grows: how does one verify the existence of hidden meanings?

### **Semiotics for a historian**

My answer to the above question is the tool kit for analysis provided by the discipline of cultural semiotics, more precisely cultural semiotics on its discourse-analytical aspect. The basic principle of discourse theory is, that the daily patterns of speech not only reflect but shape and alter the world we live in. How we say things affects how we see and understand them, and how we react to them. Concepts and figures of speech carry with them to new contexts and situations the connotations of their original (or a previous) context. As a result a concept – e.g. ‘democracy’, ‘censorship’, ‘revolution’, ‘nobility’ – always includes an invisible, “self-evident” notion about its value and significance, a preconditioned proper reaction towards the phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Cultural semiotics studies individual human beings as members of a certain culture, who have internalized and apply its sign systems within a society. Culture is seen as an over-personal organism, a generator that produces the structures necessary for the social life. The carriers of a culture take part in it in two different ways. On the other hand they by their action – in communication and interaction – shape, preserve and slowly reshape the structures of their culture, on the other hand realize them unconsciously even when they believe they are acting as independent individuals.<sup>10</sup>

The sign system within a culture can be seen as a collective memory built inside the minds of its members, the culture’s way to transfer its identity-building elements from one generation to next. While transferring and thus preserving some elements of the cultural identity the process can simultaneously cause others to be forgotten. This often happens when a society is changing rapidly, and the old sign systems no more correspond with a new way of life and a new set of values. As a result of this shift communication between a previous and a next cultural phase becomes difficult or

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<sup>9</sup> Kalliokoski 1996: 77–78. Karvonen 1996: 156–157. Sulkunen 1997: 13–18. Veivo & Huttunen 1999: 67, 77–83

<sup>10</sup> Tarasti 1990: 9, 35, 77, 156, 198, 292. Veivo & Huttunen 1999: 106, 154–155.

even impossible: when there is no common code, the ‘texts’<sup>11</sup> of the other cannot be interpreted correctly. Some more aggressive cultural phases actually willingly destroy the emblems and even the monuments of the previous phase.<sup>12</sup>

During the process of defining itself, a culture often develops an idea of its opposite, a *non-culture*, a zone of chaos. In a situation where there are two competing cultures both the *official* and the *counter-culture* strengthen the identity of their members by defining the adversary as a non-culture. The ‘texts’ of the other are either pronounced as *non-texts*, irrational and without meaning, or even *anti-texts*, strongly opposed to the values prevalent in the culture that is currently defining itself. A counter-culture can also purposefully shape its own ‘texts’ in a straightforward opposition to the ‘texts’ of the official culture. This kind of *texts of negation* can seem very powerful, but their power is actually derived from the power of the culture they are opposing.<sup>13</sup>

The official culture is usually a lot older, more articulate and more cohesive than the counter-culture, and is therefore well able to preserve itself, for a while. From the point of view of the counter-culture this looks like ‘conservatism’ and ‘resistance to progress’, as the dynamic development is supposed to take place in the periphery. Accordingly, the code of the official culture is usually seen as strictly formal, the counter-culture as more relaxed – for instance, an *etiquette* is often thought to exist only in the official culture, whereas the counter-culture promotes “normal good manners”. In a binary situation of one official and one counter-culture, the opposite cultures often take turns: the counter-culture of the cultural periphery, which has been developing in opposition to the official one, attacks it in order to gain access to the cultural centre and establish itself as the new official culture. This is done by overturning the values of the older culture, by erasing its ‘texts’ or by showing them as ‘antitexts’. Elements of the previous culture then retire to the margin. It collects its forces and develops on until it is strong enough to challenge the present

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<sup>11</sup> A conceptual practice established by Juri Lotman and his school. The word ‘text’ is used also of other than those cultural products that actually are verbal and written - they are considered to be “written” in a “language” of their own, appropriate to that particular cultural category (e.g. gothic architecture, English park, heavy rock music, jogging clothes...) and understandable only within that code system and in a ‘context’ provided by other specimens of similar nature.

<sup>12</sup> Tarasti 1990: 79–80, 291–292. Veivo & Huttunen 1999: 20, 130, 143, 159.

<sup>13</sup> Tarasti 1996: 17.

official culture. As the competing cultures often are in very different stages of development, they are prone to act towards each other with great hostility.<sup>14</sup>

Easily interpretable signs of hierarchy become necessary only when contacts become anonymous – as happens in the army, or in the city, but only rarely in the rural village. During the 19th century anonymous urban contacts no doubt became more numerous. The last semiotic question here concerns the emergence of such signs as a sign in itself. Who makes signs? How do they come into being? Are they created and taken into use quite consciously, to show off one’s status to those less fortunate? Or are they formed by a particular way of life within a group, and then seen from outside as signs of membership in that group? Probably both – surely not only the former.

Sign systems are usually very economical: a sign marks apart a minority, not the majority (the sign of majority being the *absence* of a particular sign<sup>15</sup>). The maker of a sign can nevertheless be the majority: those who notice as a sign something that in itself is a consequence of a certain way of life (e.g.: a nobleman is often a military officer and therefore carries a sword, so the sword, actually an emblem of the military, becomes a sign marking nobility). The preoccupation of the non-noble element with the signs signifying nobility can actually be a meta-sign of increasing contact between nobles and non-nobles - not of the opposite.

### **The semiotic image of nobility in the 19th century Finnish fiction**

Before I begin this last chapter, a word of warning. Please keep in mind that the source of the following semiotic chart were texts of fiction. If some of the themes seem uncomfortably romantic, childish or even naïve, don’t let it bluff you – underneath there still is a serious meaning.

The signs marking out nobility in fiction can be organized into six different categories, each of which corresponds to a certain type or base of power - the only type of power missing in the picture actually is the modern public, discursive type of ideological power. The semiotic picture of nobility is essentially that of a power group, an elite, not a social group. The actual signs that

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<sup>14</sup> Tarasti 1996: 250. Veivo & Huttunen 1999: 155–160.

<sup>15</sup> About the on/off -nature of signs see Veivo & Huttunen 1999: 37–38, 62.

constitute the categories are treated with not-so-gentle irony, or even open hostility - they are shown as irrationally composed *non-texts* or offensive *anti-texts* from the point of view of the “modern” thinking. As a power group the nobility is thus declared old-fashioned, based on an irrational tradition and no longer legitimate.

The first and most ancient noble power base is the military, the corresponding frame of reference being that of a *warrior*. Its starting point is in the primitive division of labour, the nucleus of nobility being those engaged in protecting the society. This image of power is straightforward and personal in the Weberian sense: who can make his will prevail over others, is powerful. The signs belonging to this category are the sword, “the weapon of honour” (often made fun of, especially by ironic over-dramatization), and the less honourable firearms (treated antitextually<sup>16</sup> as signs of death and destruction); the duel (it too often nontextualized by irony); horsemanship (referring to the noble cavalry tradition); the spurs (inescapably embodying the idea of “earning one’s spurs” and therefore rarely mentioned); hunting (as a sign of inequality in the hunting rights, an anti-text to the democratic thinking); and fine carriages (as a antitextual sign of wealth and exclusiveness).

The second, a somewhat more modern – belonging to the age of centralized states, organized armies and civil bureaucracies – source of noble power is the formal hierarchy. Its corresponding frame of reference is an *office/officer*, and it embodies hierarchic, institutional (as opposed to straightforward) power. To this sign category belong civil and military uniform and court dress (significant of hierarchy, an antitext to democracy); a case of its own is an uncouth, untidy uniform, an antitext to the usual “antidemocratic” prim neatness and therefore in accordance with the democratic ‘text’; decorations and titles (again antitextual signs of hierarchy, and of servility towards a foreign lord).

The third base of power is the *manor*. Landownership was the most important before-industrialization source of wealth, and the manor is therefore primarily a sign of great (if old-fashioned) economic power. Secondly it also means straightforward personal power over those under the direct command of the lord of the manor, and, as a sign of high status, also a diffuse, proto-institutional social power in the rural society. The manor building can sometimes act as a

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<sup>16</sup> The non- and antitextual aspects mentioned in the text are always seen from within the democratic ‘text’.

symbol of the noble estate: its crumbling walls are the sign of moral decay in the nobility itself. The manor lifestyle, an antitextual sign of anti-democratic haughty exclusion, is further divided into sub-categories. The lifestyle of the ladies is seen as less offensive from the democratic point of view: they are often pictured attending household duties and conversing freely with the staff, whereas a tradition-observing lord of the manor is depicted as leading a lazy life. To accentuate this undemocratic state of affairs, there is also another kind of noble lords: those who themselves till the soil of their fathers and share with the peasants the essential agrarian values. The theme of noble indebtedness (a modern nemesis!) is often illustrated by the threatening loss of the family estate.

The fourth noble power base is the *family*, the sources of power in question being the cultural and social capital. The key word here is restricted, private distribution. The practice of using private tutors was formed before the age of state-organized education, when the information needed in the service of the state was still only sparsely available and had to be gathered from various unofficial sources, and the tradition persisted even after complementary and substitute systems came into being. The social capital, relations and networks, was also handed down in the family line. The idea of a family is semiotically present in its traditions (the story of how the family became noble, the name, the maxim), in emblematic objects (coat of arms, portraits of ancestors, family estate), in the family politics (marriage, inheritance, fear of extinction and adoption to prevent it), in the mystery of the noble blood – all of them get their share of irony and nontextual over-dramatization – and in the ceremony, of which most interest attracts the funeral, combining the undemocratic pomp and circumstance with the inescapable, and delicious, nemesis of death.

The fifth base of noble power is the exclusive *high society*, which also functioned as a medium of distributing – and a forum for applying – cultural and especially social capital. The type of power wielded in the social scene was of diffuse nature: a question of influence, not of authority. The signs of this category are divided into two groups: the typical incidents of the high life (balls, parties, dinners, and the social hierarchies present in them – all antitextual from within the democratic frame), and noble manners. The attitude of the romantic fiction towards the noble behaviour is moralistic: it is seen as stiff, over-courteous, dishonestly flattering and endlessly intriguing. In the realistic period this distrust is replaced by an honest, if sometimes bitter, admiration of the free and self-confident manner of the noble, and their abilities in exploiting the possibilities of social

networks to the full. The use of the non-national Swedish – let alone the even more foreign French – is unanimously disapproved, or ridiculed.

The sixth and last source of noble power is finally the noble individual. The cultural capital is reproduced in every generation, the genes, though transmitted through the noble blood, different in each case: the result varies from one person to the other. The individual vices and virtues, in a word, the personal attraction, greatly add to the amount of the diffuse power an individual has. Some of the signs of this category build on a traditional notion of a nobleman (gallantry, the concept of honour, the virtues of a soldier, the ‘aristocratic’ morale as opposed to the ‘bourgeois’, the choleric and sanguine personality types, hot temper and the respective ideal of self restraint) – only nontextualizing them in passing. The others are as traditional, but have a more serious function in defining the nobleman as an enemy of the people. The most important of these antitextual signs is the notoriously sordid noble sexual morale, the most stigmatising feature the arrogant noble atheism. Yet another antitextual, anti-democratic theme is the noble pride, accordingly nontextualized by showing the ridiculous disputes and unhappy incidents (duels) it currently leads to. Other, less dangerous, anti-democratic signs of nobility in an individual are rich clothing, above-average stature, and the so-called noble features.

In the 19th century fiction concerning nobility there are also *texts of negation*: the sometimes overt, sometimes hidden allusions to democracy and equality as supreme values. The most ancient of them is the *dance macabre*, the reminder of the fact that death eventually takes us all, whether commoner or noble. The principles of equality in front of God and of the law, and the notion of us all being “sons of Adam”, all point out towards the idea of equality as both a natural and a heavenly state of affairs. The ethos of physical labour and the promoting of romance and marriage between “unequals” add to the idea of natural equality. The most tentative - though also most dangerous in the eyes of the censor - was the theme of revolution, usually carefully hidden in the story as images of a decapitated doll, a bottle of French wine from 1789, or the execution-like falling of giant trees.

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