



Classical Liberalism in Finland in the Nineteenth Century

Jens Grandell

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Finland is a Nordic country bordering Sweden, Norway, and Russia. Finland is often considered a bridge between eastern and western cultures, even though it historically has been more affected by Prussian intellectual influences than by Russian ones.¹ Finland is a relatively small country with a population of about 5.5 million people. Looking back on the nineteenth century, when Finland was one of the poorest countries in Europe and its GDP per capita under half of the Western European average, one can without exaggeration consider Finland a success story (Toivola 2005, 18–19; Jalava et al. 2006, 106; Kekkonen 1987, 155, 323). The liberal tradition holds an important part in this story as liberal ideas pushed the country forward and tied it closer to the development of the rest of Western Europe. Since the early nineteenth century liberalism has run through the Finnish ideological landscape, sometimes barely visible but always there. Finland may not have as robust a liberal tradition as Sweden, but liberalism has impacted Finnish history in a major way and still does today. According to a recent study, 50 percent of the Finnish population are positive towards liberalism (EVA 2020).

The present article is a look into the history of the liberal turn in Finland in the nineteenth century and at how this turn changed Finland to the core. The period I deal with stretches from 1809, when Finland passed from Swedish to Russian rule, to roughly 1885. This period covers the period of peak liberalism in Finland, circa 1863 to 1880. In a second, future, part I will discuss the subsequent history of



Grand Duchy of Finland

1. The east-west bridge notion goes back to at least the mid-nineteenth century, when the Finnish historian, writer, and journalist Zacharias Topelius popularized it in his writings.

liberalism in Finland, which gained independence from Russia in 1917 and has since been an independent republic. My focus here lies mainly on the historical context and on the influences that inspired the liberal turn in Finland. The Finnish case is interesting from an international perspective, as the liberal breakthrough comes relatively late—but when it does come, it is all the faster and reaches deeper. Although liberalism as a political creed was successful in the nineteenth century, there has been comparably little research done on the subject. I can find no scholarly book treating the history of liberalism in Finland, which I believe points at the rather weak liberal tradition of the twentieth century.

I begin by exploring the earliest manifestations of liberalism in Finland noting for example how Anders Chydenius, now considered the father of Finnish liberalism, was mostly forgotten during the nineteenth century. I turn to the liberal breakthrough in the mid-nineteenth century when liberalism became the leading political and economic strand of thought in Finland. This was the period when many leading liberals entered the scene in Finland and founded the groundbreaking newspaper *Helsingfors Dagblad* in 1862. In 1880, the same liberals founded the Liberal Party based on classical liberal themes. I touch on the inspirations behind liberalism in Finland, including Édouard de Laboulaye, John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Frédéric Bastiat. Lastly I focus on what could be called the heyday of Finnish liberalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century and consider how the so-called language issue, over Finnish and Swedish, affected the cause of the Finnish liberals, who mostly belonged to the Swedish-speaking segments of society—at least until the last two decades of the century.

Early manifestations of liberalism in Finland

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the political culture in Finland started to shift towards a more modern path. From around the late 1850s, liberal ideas started to circulate more actively in the Finnish public discussion and quickly gained ground among burghers, businessmen and journalists. It was then—after the Crimean War—that liberalism took a real hold in Finnish society. The difference from before the war was quite drastic. Later on, not least through the liberal newspaper *Helsingfors Dagblad*, liberal ideas gained such a strong foothold in Finland that in 1880 Finnish liberals were organized enough to found their own political party, whose program they first published in the Finnish press on December 5 of the same year.² The path from the first half of the nineteenth

2. The party program can be read for example under the headline “Det liberala partiets program” on page 1 of that day’s *Helsingfors Dagblad* ([link](#)).

century to this point had its ups and downs.

When discussing the history of liberalism in Finland and Sweden, the story usually begins with the Finnish-born eighteenth-century priest and enlightenment thinker Anders Chydenius (1729–1803), who today is considered one of the originators of Swedish-Finnish liberalism. Sadly, however, he was mostly forgotten and overlooked during the years of the liberal breakthrough in Finland. The main reason for this was probably that his writings were intended for his own time and therefore published as pamphlets easily destroyed or lost. He was rediscovered only in 1877 when Ernst Gustaf Palmén, a historian and member of the liberal grouping around the Finnish language journal *Valvoja*, began publishing Chydenius's political writings, accompanied by a biographical introduction (Norberg n.d.; Karonen 2019, 139, 143, 149–150).³ Chydenius's insight and greatness, then, were tragically forgotten and do not play a significant part in the story told here.



Anders Chydenius
(1729–1803)

From the twelfth century Finland was part of the Swedish empire, and the language of the elites was Swedish. Finland was well integrated into the Swedish empire, a part of the country like any other Swedish mainland areas. In 1809 Sweden lost Finland to Russia, and Finland was made a part of the Russian empire. Finland was separated from Sweden and placed under Russian rule as a grand duchy with relatively broad autonomy in economic and internal affairs. This strategy followed a common tactic of pacifying newly conquered areas by granting them their formerly enjoyed rights and privileges. In 1812 the Finnish capital was moved from Turku to Helsinki to reduce Swedish influence in Finland and to bring the capital closer to Saint Petersburg, and in 1828 the only university was moved from Turku to Helsinki.

Swedish law and the Lutheran church remained in place, which guaranteed that Finland would stay tied to a western legal and cultural tradition. These traditional institutions were something that the Finns strictly adhered to, and, above all, the Finns developed the notion of the importance of the rule of law. Finland's spiritual affinity remained closer to Sweden than to Russia. This added up to Finland being a rather stable society and one of the best-governed areas of the Russian Empire at the time.

The diet of Finland consisting of four estates—nobility, priests, burghers

3. I will discuss the journal *Valvoja* in more detail in the follow-up to this article.

and peasants—was another remnant institution from Swedish rule. For more than 50 years after 1809 the Russian emperor did not see fit to convene the diet. Bureaucratic rule was put in place and the power was in the hands of a very few people—people who more often than not were loyal to the Russian crown and imperial interests.⁴ As the diet did not convene until 1863, several much needed economical and societal reforms were delayed. Finland experienced a period of stagnation, economic and otherwise. Come mid-century, Finland was a backward country, in fact one of the poorest in Europe (Heikkinen 1999, 131–134). Strict censorship of the press, limitations on the freedom of association, and economic regulation certainly did nothing to improve the situation.

It was more or less impossible to discuss the need for reforms, as such discussion could easily be considered criticism of the government, which according to the censorship decree of 1829 was forbidden. One concrete example attesting the difficulties was that the Swedish word for diet, *lantdag*, could not be used in Finnish newspapers during the first half of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, a decree was issued in 1850 forbidding all publications in Finnish dealing with other than religious and economic matters.⁵

The political situation in Finland during the first half of the nineteenth century led to Finland falling behind its western neighbors in terms of societal and political liberalization. However, close geographical and mental proximity to more developed countries, such as Sweden and Denmark, worked in Finland's favor. The ruling elite of Finland all spoke Swedish and many of them had close ties to Sweden. They read Swedish newspapers, and for a long time Swedish historical literature was widely spread in Finland, as Finland did not yet have a written history of its own. Some of the influential Finnish historians looked up to two of the main Swedish historians of the time, Anders Fryxell and his liberal counterpart Erik Gustaf Geijer. One of the liberal forerunners in Finland, the journalist and member of the diet August Schauman (1826–1896), held Geijer as his highest ideal as a thinker, historian and stylist (Schauman 1892, 362). This alone is enough to make the claim that Geijer's impact on Finnish intellectual life was very large



August Schauman
(1826–1896)
(Source: [Finnish Heritage Agency](#))

4. There were of course exceptions to this, one case being the liberally minded professor Johan Jacob Nordström (Peltonen 1992, 118–119).

5. For more about censorship in Finland, see Landgrén 2015.

(Grandell 2020).⁶

In other words, Sweden was still close to the Finnish mind. The most prominent of the liberal Swedish newspapers, *Aftonbladet*, founded in 1830 by the Swedish liberal Lars Johan Hierta (1801–1872), was banned in Finland until the 1860s but found its way to some readers in the grand duchy thanks to smuggling. In the 1850s, *Aftonbladet* played an important role as an outlet for Finnish liberals looking for a way to comment on issues of common interest in their home country, as this was not possible in the Finnish press. *Aftonbladet* happily served as a channel for what it termed ‘letters from Finland,’ and Swedish liberals in general were happy to lend newspaper space to such missives as supported their critical view of the Russian empire. In the 1830s and 1840s *Aftonbladet* was widely criticized in Finland for its radicalism and hazardous liberalism, along the commonly held view of the time of liberalism as something foreign and potentially dangerous (Grandell 2020, 156).



Lars Johan Hierta
(1801–1872)

The liberal views that *Aftonbladet* introduced in Finland from the 1830s onward are among the earliest phases of liberalism in Finland. They were most notably preceded by academic discussion of economics in the early years of the nineteenth century. At the Imperial Academy of Turku, which was relocated to Helsinki in 1828 (and today is the University of Helsinki), professors such as Daniel Myrén (1782–1831) lectured on Adam Smith’s theories (Björkqvist 1986, 84). At the same time, the journalist and docent Adolf Ivar Arwidsson (1791–1858) published his radical writings on freedom of trade in the newspaper *Åbo Morgonblad*. It was in this paper that the Finnish reading public for the first time were acquainted with *The Wealth of Nations*, which Arwidsson cites in an article applauding freedom of trade.⁷ In 1821, Arwidsson wrote about the persistence of old habits and economic opinions:



Adolf Ivar Arwidsson
(1791–1858)
(Source: [Finnish Heritage Agency](#))

6. A taste of Geijer’s liberalism appeared in the present journal (Geijer 2017/1847).

7. Parts of *The Wealth of Nations* appeared in Swedish translations as journal articles in the 1790s and as books around the turn of the nineteenth century (Vallinder 1987, 230–231).

One has seen the most evident proof thereof in the preservation of the corporation system and manufacture-monopolies. As children of their time, they were in the beginning the only means to achieving higher cultivation in the work-production. That time in which they came to existence and were able work, is now gone: these memories thereof remain as remnants of ancient prisons, amongst the smiling temples of freedom and light. (Arwidsson 1821)

Another striking example of early liberalism is the academic dissertation *Tänkar om frihet i handel* (*Thoughts on Freedom in Trade*) published in 1826 by Michael Tjeder (1797–1842), the son of a carpenter and student to Daniel Myrén (Heikkinen et al. 2000, 62). The text is best described as a straight-out argument for free trade, which is quite remarkable in a Finnish context this early on; some have seen Tjeder’s dissertation as the first time that the teachings of liberal western literature were introduced in Finland (L. H. 1926, 9). Tjeder begins his work by citing David Ricardo, which is the first time Ricardo is brought up in Finland, and moves on to prove the benefits of free trade with references to Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say. Smith was Tjeder’s main source, and he termed *The Wealth of Nations* “Smith’s immortal work.” Tjeder’s concluding remarks take the form of an ode to freedom and the benefits of liberalism:

Yes, may the day come, when the interests of the citizen are not put under guardianship, when one shall find that, humanity ought to be regarded as one family on earth, when one finally realizes that her needs are interconnected to such a degree, that her communications ought to be as open and free, as if the peoples of earth constituted one republic! May the day come, even if beyond centuries, when it is possible to think of such a freedom of trade, that every nation is allowed to use its capital and its industry in such a manner as it best sees fit! May the day come, when one shall consider the individual’s interest connected with the common good of Society as a whole! (Tjeder 1826, 57)

However enthusiastic Tjeder was about free trade, his work did not receive a great deal of attention and was mostly forgotten until the very late nineteenth century (Björkqvist 1986, 99).

Discussion of liberal economics was continued in the 1840s by the two newspapers *Åbo Tidningar* and *Åbo Underrättelser*, now with inspiration from the Swedish *Aftonbladet* (Landgrén 1995, 16, 201). Even so, classical liberal theory faded away for decades and did not really attract any unconditional spokespeople until later on in the 1850s. Although it is possible to find expressions of liberal thought in the 1830s and 1840s, it existed on the margins and such discussion was constantly facing censorship and closed societal and economic views.

From the 1830s, the dots can be connected to the philosopher and journalist Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806–1881), who began to publish his short-lived peri-

odical *Saima* in 1844. Two years later the authorities banned it for its overtly liberal position and free-spoken style. Snellman was largely influenced by liberalism and held that the state should be subordinate to the individual. In his 1842 seminal work, *Läran om staten* (*Science of the State*), Snellman criticized mercantilism, applauded Adam Smith's theory of free trade and generally accepted a liberal stance on economic questions—although he by no means can be called a full-blooded Smithian. With time, he became an ever more ardent spokesperson for free trade and liberalism, as he saw the struggle for economic freedom in the context of the wider freedom movement in religion, the state, and civilization



Johan Vilhelm Snellman
(1806–1881)

(Patoluoto 1986, 271). *Läran om staten* had a great impact on intellectual life in Finland, and it could be said that Adam Smith was re-introduced to the Finnish reading public in this publication (Jahnsson 1907). Certainly without Snellman's contributions the liberal breakthrough of the 1860s would most likely not have been as swift as it was (Peltonen 1992, 119–121). Later in our story, however, we shall see that Snellman breaks with the liberals and emphasizes the Finnish language as critical for a robust Finland.

Liberal ideas flowed into Finland not only by the written word. After the Crimean War, which ended in 1856, intellectual travel also became an essential channel for new ideas. Abroad one had the opportunity to engage more freely with liberal ideas in civil society. Two cases in point are the Nordic countries Denmark, with its liberal constitution of 1849, and Sweden, with its debate about parliamentary reform running through large parts of the nineteenth century. Many Finns travelled to those countries and drew inspiration from them, and it was almost impossible for the authorities to control this inflow of ideas.

Furthermore, the University of Helsinki, or the Imperial Alexander University in Finland as it was called, was developing a locus of liberal thought from roughly the 1840s onward. Thanks to academic freedom, university professors were relatively free to speak on issues they considered important. One good example is the professor of constitutional law Johan Jakob Nordström (1801–1874). Nordström held that in a well-organized state the freedom of the individual and the right to property is safeguarded through the nation's share in legislation and control of government under regulated forms. In his lectures given in 1845, he specified that the individual's fundamental rights consist of equality before the law, personal security, the right to freely choose place of residence and not to be deported, freedom of association, freedom of expression and of the press, freedom

of conscience, the right to appeal against a decision by an official, and the right to compete for public office (Lindman 1948, 100). The similarities to the French civil code of 1804 and to the first amendment to the Bill of Rights are apparent. Because of his liberal stance and his courage to bring up such themes in public, Nordström quickly became a favorite among liberally minded university students.

Looking at the rather modest liberal tradition of the 1830s and 1840s, the year 1848 was somewhat of a turning point. Although, many intellectuals in Finland celebrated the news of the French revolution of 1848, their space for action was soon undercut even further, as the authorities feared the spread of revolutionary ideas. The Russian authorities tightened censorship, and policing of university students became even more intense. Freedom of association was also restricted. These measures provoked resistance among the people affected by them the most, as they highlighted Finland's lack of self-government and subjection to Russia.⁸ University students became ever more agitated and opposed to the government and the bureaucratic rule. This was the generation that was going to bring forth the liberal breakthrough in the 1860s.

The Crimean War, which from 1853 to 1856 pitted Russia against an alliance of France, the Ottoman Empire, the United Kingdom, and Sardinia, had a significant impact on the ideological landscape in Finland. In order to fight the spread of rumors about Russian losses, the Russian authorities relaxed censorship, making it possible to publish news about war events—including foreign news, something that previously was restricted to the government's official newspaper. It was now that one of the early Finnish liberals, the already mentioned August Schauman, started to take shots at the loyalist side of the Finnish political spectrum, at the same time promoting a western-minded point of view. It can be argued that Schauman's writings saw the birth of a novel way at looking at the relationship between Finland and Russia and at how one should understand the place of Finland amongst European nations. Schauman's view suggests the liberal narrative of Finland as a constitutional *state*, not a subjugated province (Grandell 2020, 174–188).

Favorably for Finland, Russia lost the Crimean War, and owing to this outcome the liberal breakthrough was made possible. The war had weakened Russia and it realized the need to modernize its society to be able to compete with the western powers France and England. Another important factor was the new emperor, Alexander II, who succeeded to the throne in 1855 and reigned until 1881. Now you had an entirely different political backdrop, and quickly there was movement to try out liberal reforms in Russia's borderlands and then perhaps to implement them on a larger scale in Russia itself. For this purpose, the loyal and

8. The same workings can be noticed elsewhere in Europe around the year 1848 (see, e.g., Ginsborg 1979, 10).

tranquil grand duchy of Finland was a suitable testing ground (Klinge 1996, 220). And there was increasing demand for liberal reforms in Finland as industrialization was starting to pick up pace.

The post-war era also saw the birth of several liberal newspapers, as the press now had more freedom to operate. One of the most notable of these newspapers was *Wiborg*, published in a city in eastern Finland of the same name and bearing the subtitle *Newspaper for literature, trade and economy*. One of its two editors, Carl Qvist (1827–1897), was the first person in Finland to propose a thorough liberal program. Qvist discussed economic problems and appeared as an ardent opponent of mercantilism (Landgrén 1995, 28; Björkqvist 1986, 328). He drew inspiration from Adam Smith, seen in his treatment of the division of labor, and from Jean-Baptiste Say. Qvist was strongly supportive of free trade and wrote:



Carl Qvist (1827–1897)

The cheaper a product can be obtained, the cheaper its purchase will be, it may now be produced anywhere, within the country or abroad, on this or on the other side of the sea, by the nearest neighbors or by the antipodes. And, as the profit of the individual is also that of the nation, the nation in its entirety can only benefit from an unrestricted free trade system. (Qvist 1859)⁹

When reading letters and newspapers from the post-war era, it is easy to see that there was hope and anticipation in the air. Many liberally minded Finns now put their faith in the new, supposedly more liberal emperor Alexander II. It is also easy to see where all this enthusiasm emanated from. Censorship was relaxed even further, which helped activate the discussion of common affairs and at the same time freedom of association was furthered. These were important steps for the formation of common interest groups. It was now possible for liberal clubs, such as *Industriföreningen*—the Industry Association, founded in 1860—to gather under official forms and agree on a common agenda, namely the advancement of commerce and industry. In the opening issue of its journal *Ströskrifter*, from 1861, one reads the following lines displaying the attitude of the Industry Association:

History shows us great men of the state, such as Cromwell, Frederic the Great, Napoleon and others, all of whom have tried to lead industry through organic

9. After the editors Carl Qvist and Johannes Alfthan of *Wiborg* left the newspaper in late 1859, it took on the character of an ordinary provincial paper (Tommila et al. 1988, 260).

laws, but it also shows us names such as Adam Smith and Turgot, who with deep insight and clarity have understood to lay the foundations of an economic school, whose teachings have spread widely around and have managed on easily understandable grounds to proclaim the notion, that industry best flourishes when it is left to its own devices. (*Ströskrifter* 1861, 12)

The liberal breakthrough

Quite suddenly, in the late 1850s and early 1860s, you had a situation where liberal newspapers were discussing the need for reforms and different associations were publishing their own journals with articles on issues related to liberal advancements. It was also now that the first private bank was founded in Finland. All this added up to a working civil society, which in turn pushed Finland toward becoming a modern country.

Most notably, from the 1850s onwards, liberally minded persons began to attempt to adapt the tenets of liberalism to Finnish conditions. The field of liberal thought became ever more active, with influences attained from the Scandinavian countries, from France and England and from the United States. A rich European and North American tradition of thought regarding the organization of the ideal society began to be expressed in several different places at the same time, not least within the university, the student societies, and the newspaper press.

Finnish historiography sometimes speaks of the ‘Ice Breakup’ of the 1860s. The term Ice Breakup is derived from a 1856 poem by Zacharias Topelius titled “The Breakup of the Ice in Ule River,” in which he expresses the positive outlook of this time. This can for example be seen in the following lines:

I will have air! I will have light! My destiny
I wish to create in my own course

Before the 1860s, there was no liberal movement *per se* but one could instead speak of loosely associated people promoting liberal ideas. It was the activities of these people which enabled the liberal breakthrough of the 1860s.

All the positive developments aside, one big issue was still unresolved—the diet had still not convened, meaning that political reform based on representation was not possible. This bothered the liberals. Despite the easing of censorship, the liberals still could not publicly call for the diet to convene. In a speech given in 1856, the freer political climate of the post-war era however encouraged the liberal Professor of theology Frans Ludvig Schauman (1810–1877) to plea, in the name of the Finnish people, for the reinstatement of parliamentary life in Finland and for an end to censorship. The speech was also printed, which was possible thanks

to academic freedom, and it quickly became an opening shot for the creation of a public opinion on the issue (Klinge 1996, 193–194). Like a rolling snowball, the plea of Schauman lived on and gained traction in the public mind. Finally, international events played into Finland's situation. Poland, another autonomous part of the Russian empire, was revolting and causing the Russian emperor headaches. As a token of appreciation to the Finns for continually being a loyal and peaceful part of the empire and to further their loyalism, Alexander II finally made it official that the diet would be summoned, which happened in 1863—over a half a century since the previous occasion (Klinge 1996, 211, 220). This followed Alexander II's practice of granting Finland liberalization as a reward for remaining peaceable under Russian rule.

In Finnish history, the year 1863 holds a special place. It ended a period commonly referred to as the 'night of the state.' Now followed political reforms and industrialization, or in other words modernization (Hjerpe 2008). The principal ideology behind this turn was liberalism and the ongoing discussion since the 1820s. In 1862, some of the leading liberals founded the newspaper *Helsingfors Dagblad*. Up until the 1880s, this was the chief liberal newspaper in Finland, and in the 1870s also the largest newspaper in the country, showing just how successful the liberals were and that there was a large demand for liberal ideas. The newspaper was also the voice of the Liberal Party, which was officially founded in 1880. The period from 1863 to roughly 1885 was in many ways the peak of liberalism in Finland. Already in the first diet, the liberals held sway in two of the four estates, the nobility and the burghers.

It was during this era that industrialization began to pick up pace and Finland started its journey towards future prosperity. Not least, a number of government reforms and technological innovations contributed. Under Snellman's management, liberal monetary reform was finalized and Finland was given its own currency in 1860. The Finnish markka was tied to a silver standard in 1865 and therefore detached it from the Russian ruble, and in 1878 it was moved to a gold standard. In 1864, the first limited company decree was enacted, and the number of limited companies started to grow towards the end of the century. The framework for financing was broadened with the founding of the first private commercial bank in Finland in 1862, the AB Förenings-Banken. The first railway was opened in 1862 between Helsinki and Riihimäki. The Volksschule-system with primary education for children was launched in 1866. In combination with the diet resuming its work, these reforms got the economic wheels to spin and Finland began to prosper economically after the 1860s, chiefly thanks to wood processing (Toivola 2005, 18–19; Jalava et al. 2006, 106; Kekkonen 1987, 155, 323; Hjerpe 2008).

The inspirations

As regards the key inspirations behind the liberal turn in Finland, I have already mentioned the importance of Denmark and Sweden. But which thinkers do we find behind Finnish liberalism? It is not an easy task to pinpoint exactly all the influences, as the historical research on liberalism in Finland is lacking. What follows is therefore a short summary of some of the most visible references and inspirers.

Liberal ideas were imported to Finland from abroad, and introduced to the public chiefly through newspapers, journals, and academic dissertations. Another important channel was travel. First-hand experience was an effective way to learn about other societies and to get in touch with people of interest. Paris was certainly predominant in this regard. Several Finnish liberals went there, not least to take in the lectures of the professor of comparative law at Collège de France, Édouard de Laboulaye (1811–1883). In his time Laboulaye, who was an ardent opponent of the French emperor Napoleon III, was probably the most famous French liberal writer and thinker—certainly in Finland—and his impact on Finnish political language was without doubt significant.¹⁰

From the 1850s one starts to find references to Laboulaye in newspaper articles and in private letters sent home from Paris. Laboulaye's liberalism sat well with the needs and wants of the Finnish liberals of this period—in many ways the very anti-liberal political situation of France was similar to that of Finland. Laboulaye's appreciation of freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom of confession, and most importantly decentralization and the need to confine state action within strict boundaries were key themes picked up upon in the Finnish discussion. Furthermore, you also have Laboulaye's robust Christian allegiance and his message that love of God and freedom work together as remedy to the threat posed by egotism (Gray 1994; Laboulaye 1864). This is in many ways comparable to John Stuart Mill's views on political engagement as a counterbalance to excessive individualism.

To continue on the French thread, one also has to mention Alexis de Tocqueville and his *De La Démocratie en Amérique*. Together with the American constitution, Tocqueville offered a new perspective on how to organize society.

10. One of Laboulaye's popular works was the satirical novel *Paris en Amérique* from 1863. The book, in which he praises the United States and juxtaposes it to an old-fashioned and conservative France, was translated into Swedish in 1864. Laboulaye is also known for being the man behind the *Liberty Enlightening the World* statue, later known as the Statue of Liberty.

This was an alluring image to many Finnish liberals, who saw that European society was rotten and stagnant. Not least thanks to Tocqueville, the American way of life was brought into the discussion and Finnish liberals started referencing him when speaking for a free and industrious society based on democratic and patriotic ideals. Tocqueville's text was also used to defend the view that it is indeed possible to have a nation consisting of different groups of people—this argument was used to criticize the Fennoman view, which favored the Finnish language based on a principle of 'one nation, one language' (I will come back to this).

From the British side, the most important influences come from Adam Smith, visible in most of the texts concerning economics from his period, and from John Stuart Mill. Mill's works *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) and *On Liberty* (1859) were swiftly translated into Swedish—the latter translated and published in Helsinki in 1865. The appreciation of Mill is evident in Finnish newspapers. One of the liberal papers published excerpts from the *Considerations*, calling it an extraordinary work; in another paper, one finds a long article praising the genius of Mill. From this point onwards, Mill's ideas start to have an impact on liberal views in Finland, not least his assessments of the duties of the citizen and representative government. Mill was to become one of the most important inspirations, besides Charles Darwin, for the Finnish-speaking liberals in the *Valvoja* group.

Concerning economics, French inspiration is noticeable from the 1840s onward, most visibly in the form of references to French economists Jean-Baptiste Say and Frédéric Bastiat.¹¹ Free trade became an important theme around mid-century—very much perceptible in academic texts as well as in articles. This was for example the case with the already mentioned newspaper *Wiborg*, in which Bastiat was dubbed the most excellent of the French economists. In addition to the previously mentioned works by Snellman, another important publication was the 1853 academic dissertation *Historisk teckning af den i Finland tillämpade lagstiftningens grundsatser för näringsarnes och det allmänna väståndets befrämjande* (*A Historical Description of the Laws Applied in Finland for the Advancement of Trade and the Common Prosperity*), written by the liberal jurist and future professor of economics Axel Liljenstrand (1821–1895). In this work, where one finds Mill, Say, and Bastiat among the references, the author applauds Bastiat and the Manchester school for their efforts against all kinds of economic regulation. In 1860, Liljenstrand published *System af Samfundsekonomis Lärör: Ett Försök* (*System of the Teachings of Economics: An Attempt*), where he sought to popularize economics for a broader audience. Through this work, Mill was integrated into Finnish theorizing about economics (Björkqvist

11. Bastiat's work *Sophismes Économiques* was translated into Swedish in 1848 and it is more than likely that this translation was studied in Finland as well (Björkqvist 1986, 198).

1986, 307, 309).

Another notable work was *Om det industriella arbetet i dess förhållande till nationalförmögenheten* (*On Industrial Work in Relation to National Wealth*), written by the liberal businessman and journalist Robert Frenckell and published in 1860. Again, references to Say, Bastiat, Mill, and Richard Cobden are aplenty. Frenckell's study has been called "a song of praise to free trade and free competition" and a defense of liberalism.¹² Later on Frenckell would become director of the state treasury.

Starting with the diet of 1863, the government began to deregulate the Finnish economy. The pull of one of Finland's most important trade partners, namely England, was strong, and international trade and investment began to reach Finland. Mercantilism gave way to liberalism, and the likes of Smith, Say, and Bastiat provided the intellectual basis. Now followed the heyday of liberalism, and, Valfrid Vasenius (1848–1928), also member of the liberal *Valvoja* group, wrote: "Mill, Laboulaye, Buckle and even Darwin were our prophets in the 1870s" (Vasenius 1893, 283). Compared to other European countries, liberalism broke through in Finland at a relatively late stage, but when it did, it happened quickly and it characterized the tendency in economic policy for decades to come. In the field of cultural change, such as granting Jews citizenship and separating church from state, the change would be considerably slower.

Another strong international influence on Finns was the national liberation movements in Greece and Italy. Finnish liberals certainly used the Italian Risorgimento to criticize empires and to show their support for such movements. In many regards liberalism was tied to the national movement in Finland, as the notion of freedom also could be applied to the right to rule over one's own country. This is a notion of negative freedom applied to politics, or freedom from Russian interference in Finnish affairs. As such, the European national liberation struggles aroused interest among those who praised the idea of freedom of peoples. It is also worth noting the republican concept of war as a legitimate means for the citizens of a nation to achieve political self-determination. Not surprisingly, the Italian Risorgimento movement was a problematic subject from the perspective of Russian authorities in Finland. The whole point of writing and talking about the war was political; it was a critique of the Austrian Empire and empires at large and a tribute to a national struggle for independence, often waged under republican auspices (Klinge 1978, 119–120; Hazareesingh 2001, 8; Grandell 2020, 220–222).

12. See the biographical sketch of Frenckell on the Valtiokonttori website ([link](#)) and also Björkqvist 1986, 326.

Combating censorship

One chief hallmark of Finnish nineteenth-century liberalism was the battle against censorship and for freedom of speech. In 1829, Finland received its own censorship ordinance, which followed the general Russian one from 1828 (Ruud 2009, 38; Knif 2016, 226–227). Censorship became an official part of the Finnish bureaucratic system, and it was tightened further when it was placed entirely in the hands of the Russian governor-general in 1847. From a contemporary nineteenth-century perspective, the Russian law was quite liberal, but in time it was supplemented with various directives that made it increasingly strict and repressive. Furthermore, the repressiveness of the law was very much a matter of comparison groups. Within a Nordic frame, the Finnish reality was exceptionally repressive, but if you look at wider Europe, the censorship system was unexceptional.

Already in 1821, Arwidsson had stressed the importance of freedom of the press for a working public sphere. For the liberals, it was key to be able to promote their views in the press and to be able to discuss reforms and criticize such issues that they saw as a hindrance for progress. The program of the Finnish liberal press was chiefly based on a liberal press ideology, drawing on Mill's ideas, according to which the individual citizen ought to be free to form his views on society through a free press (Landgrén 1995, 16, 26, 240). In addition, one must also keep in mind that censorship was an infringement on the publishers' freedom of trade, which further placed it in opposition to the fundamental values of liberalism. Censorship has been considered a contributing factor for the "misery" of classical liberal theory in Finland in the 1830s and 1840s (Björkqvist 1986, 283).

In order to improve the situation, liberals launched a press campaign against censorship in the early 1860s, which drew lots of attention and was relatively easy to gather around. When the diet convened in 1863, censorship was one of the issues on the agenda. The report on the bill by the Law Committee, which had a strong liberal presence, is telling of how the liberals perceived the issue of freedom of the press and from where they drew inspiration for their arguments. One passage states: "Since England as early as 1694 preceded by example and abolished censorship and the North American Free States in 1791 in its constitution adopted the freedom of the press as a constitutional principle, most other civilized countries have followed each other's example" (Hans Kejslerliga Majestäts Nådiga Propositioner 1865).

Despite opposition from the bureaucratic side, the diet approved a freedom of the press act in 1864. This temporary law was effective until the next diet in 1867, when a new bill presented by the emperor was rejected. This meant a return to the situation before 1863 and pre-publication censorship (Landgrén 1995, 90).

The heyday

The modernization of Finnish society gained pace as censorship loosened and the public came to life. Then, from the 1860s onward liberal concepts were put into practice through political reform. The main political goals of the liberals were implementation of constitutionalism, self-government instead of centralized bureaucracy, liberal judiciary reform, deregulation of economic laws in order to support entrepreneurship, and separation of state and church. Some of which were easier to implement than others. Furthering women's rights can also be pointed out as one theme closely linked to persons in the liberal camp.

One notable achievement was that much greater freedom of trade was realized in 1879, a testament to the success of the discussion since the early nineteenth century. For the liberals of *Helsingfors Dagblad*, economic questions were of big importance, and also they were politically less controversial than, say, arguing for the neutrality of Finland in case of war. One of the newspaper's chief editors, Edvard Bergh (1829–1903), explained that economy was going to be the newspaper's principal subject. He saw that greater interest in economic issues would have a positive effect on morals, which in turn would affect religious sentiments. Furthermore, Bergh saw that a society penetrated by economic principles and reforms was also a society interested in common affairs, which in turn would bring forth a constitutional consciousness. *Helsingfors Dagblad* underlined that freedom was the most important prerogative for all kinds of industry. The newspaper generally admired the English system, and one of its writers, Anders Herman Chydenius (1833–1896), noted with approval how economy imbued English society and how the country was run like one big merchant's house (Landgrén 1995, 204–205).

The Finnish language issue

On the other hand, as liberalism achieved its biggest victories the Finnish political field was starting to fragment, as the language question gained traction. In short, the language question regarded raising the official status of the Finnish language in Finland and thus unifying the country. On one side, there were the Fennomans and, on the other, first the Liberals and later the Svecomans. The divide dated back to the period of the Crimean War, but after 1863, during the period of reinstated parliamentary life, the gap split wide open.

For the Fennomans, a term that indicates the prioritization of the Finnish language, the most important question was that of language. They held that Finnish had to become the official language of Finland, under the catchphrase 'one mind,

one language.’ Only this way would Finland become strong enough to remain internally independent and fight off a Russian threat to further incorporate Finland. The cause drew inspiration from German idealistic philosophy and the idea of a national spirit guiding the people. In contrast, liberals regarded clearly defined laws and constitutionalism as the most reliable bulwark against any threat from the east. It was their goal to conceptualize Finland as a self-contained polity as completely as possible and thus reduce its dependence on Russia (Engman 2016, 119). Generally, the liberals held German philosophy and its main proponent G. W. F. Hegel in low regard and, like for example the French liberal Laboulaye, took regular shots at the German school. The Fennomans in their turn argued that laws are feeble things and that they are too susceptible to political fluctuations. There was no guarantee that the Russian emperor would respect them in times to come. Here you had two different strategies aiming at a shared goal, namely, strengthening Finland in relation to Russia.

The Liberal Party

The issue of political stability and robustness in the face of possible Russian incursions made constitutionalism and the notion of the Rechtsstaat leading concerns of Finnish liberalism in the later part of the century. The concept of the rule of law was formulated during the absolutist age, as a reaction to prevailing conditions. The legal state meant an end to arbitrariness, which characterized absolutist rule. The legal community represented an attempt to replace a situation where whim rules with a situation where the law rules. This included the idea that the law should be consistent and impartial. If something was allowed, it was allowed for all. The law should also be impartial with respect to class, rich or poor. And although the law can always be considered an obstacle to freedom, the liberals were ready to accept the necessity of such an inhibiting institution. For most of the liberals it did not suffice to guarantee the rule of law; they also required representative institutions through which public opinion could be expressed and absorbed into the political process (Arblaster 1985, 15, 54, 58, 73–74; Sheehan 1978, 43).

In 1880, the first genuine political party was founded in Finland, namely the Liberal Party. Leo Mechelin (1839–1914), one of the foremost liberals of the time, penned the party program. In many ways, the founding of a political party was a reaction to the widening gap between Fennomans and liberals and the rising Swedish movement.



Leo Mechelin (1839–1914)

In the program of the Liberal Party it says that “the state should refrain from every kind of regulating of the productive labor, from every kind of interference with individual entrepreneurship...the party builds upon the science of economics, not upon the teachings of tendentious agitation” (see note 2 above). This was a clear statement in a classical liberal vein against the historical school, or ‘socialists of the chair’ (‘Kathedersozialisten’) as the liberals called them. Many contemporary politicians on the Fennomans side adhered to the historical school.

The Fennomans reacted quickly to the liberals’ move, and their intellectual leader J. V. Snellman, already an old man and, as mentioned, once a forerunner of Finnish liberalism, launched a passionate attack on the liberal program. Snellman had repeatedly taken issue with how the Liberals allegedly claimed the recent progress of Finland for themselves and with their lack of support for the Finnish-language cause. Coming to the 1880s, society had changed significantly since the 1860s. The Fennomans side was now much more powerful and more organized—and it had public opinion behind it. As a reaction to this, a new political force saw the light of day, namely the Swedish Party, formed by the Svecomans—Swedish Nationalists who later on were joined by many of the former members of the Liberal Party. The attack of Snellman against the liberal program was in other words a part of an ongoing power struggle between Fennomans and Liberals, as opposed to a critique of the liberal themes put forward in the program. In Snellman’s words, the true liberal was the one who worked for elevating the majority of the population from darkness through the means of learning (German ‘Bildung’) (Snellman 1880, 2).

The liberals of the Liberal Party felt that questions about language usage should be decided *ad hoc*, rather than upon uniform imposition, and they put their main emphasis on the liberalizing of society (Engman 1995, 198). In how they viewed the language issue, the liberals were arguably conservative—just one fact speaking to the quite common intersection of liberal and conservative views. Their relative ambivalence concerning the two languages of Finland was becoming a harder sell, resulting in many party members turning to the Swedish Party. At the same time, many of the reforms liberals spoke for had been implemented and in that sense there was no longer the same kind of aspiration toward liberal aims. Also, to some degree the Fennomans and an even larger degree the Swedish Party generally upheld liberal ideas and values, making it all the more difficult for the liberals to argue the case for their existence. What was more, you had a new generation coming in with new ideas and questioning the old ones. As throughout most the western world, after 1885 the intellectual tide among the young generation turned away from liberalism.

Liberalism came under attack for being elitist and not in tune with the needs of the large majority—the Finnish-speaking peasantry. As a concept, liberalism was

from the 1870s caricatured and disparaged by its political opponents, who started to question the concept and posed the rhetorical question of whether anyone can actually explain what liberalism means (see, e.g., Meurman 1878). The historical school of economics rose up as the main contender to liberalism and its teachings were easy to link with the program of the Fennomans. Amongst the Fennomans, the historical school was considered a synthesis of liberalism and socialism (Björkqvist 1986, 340, 490). The concrete results of this critique, however, were quite modest in the sense that the liberal fundamentals of the economic system were not shaken (Heikkinen et al. 2000, 142).

Also, the nineteenth-century Finnish word for the concept of democracy (*kansanvalta*) was constructed on the same concepts as the ‘people’ (*kansa*) and the ‘nation’ (*kansakunta*), which made it far more usable for the Fennomans’ nationalist purposes than for the concept of liberalism. In the end, this contestation of the concept of liberalism was what ended the Liberal Party in Finland. However, liberalism did not disappear (Kurunmäki 2013, 95; Engman 2016, 123), as evidenced by the rediscovery of Anders Chydenius, the activity of the liberally minded Finnish-speaking *Vahvoja* group, and the founding of the liberally minded economic society *Ekonomiska Samfundet* in 1894. Interestingly, when Finnish-speaking intellectuals late in the century turned to liberalism they preferred the less political term *vapaamielisyys*, based on the Swedish word *frisinnad* used as a synonym for liberal. This way they were freer to combine liberalism with certain Fennoman ideals, and that way continue the Finnish liberal tradition into the twentieth century.

Concluding remarks

When studying liberalism in Finland, the general tendency is that liberalism moved from being a concept signaling disruption and unrest to a mainstream concept that all political sides wanted to claim for themselves. Later on in the nineteenth century it lost traction as the question of Russian suppression of Finnish autonomy became more acute, the language question split the political field, and the world at large turned away from liberalism. This is when the concept of constitutionalism started to take over. The common argument and the recurrent core of the Fennoman critique of the liberals went that liberalism was something foreign and that it was associated with language-based privileges. Furthermore, the Fennomans considered liberalism to be promoting abstract theory and ideals out of touch with reality. It can also be argued that liberalism reaped its greatest successes in countries where the movement offered undisputed leadership to the national movement, as in Germany where the liberals were responsible for the organization and the conceptualization of the national movement. In Finland, the

national movement was not in the same way a one-party affair, but instead it was shared by both liberals and Fennomans, even if they tended to emphasize different themes (Arblaster 1985, 58; Kelly 2015, 336).

All of the above-mentioned factors worked together to weaken the appeal of liberalism during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. A movement that had started slowly in the 1820s and picked up pace in the mid-century was now coming to an end of sorts, at least as a major political factor. However, even though liberalism as an idea and a political creed started to lose some of its luster, one still has to stress the importance it played in nineteenth-century history and that it changed Finland to the core and played a seminal part in modernizing the country.

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About the Author



Jens Grandell holds a D.Phil. in history from the University of Helsinki. He is a researcher at the Prime Minister's Office working on a scientific edition of the works of the liberal statesman Leo Mechelin. He has conducted research on nineteenth-century liberalism and republicanism, nation building, nationalism and historiography in the nineteenth century. His research is characterized by a biographical methodology and an interest in the individual as an exponent for political ideologies. His most recent publications include *Från ett årtionde i Finland: August Schauman, republikanism och liberalism 1855–1865* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 2020). Since 2008 he has been editor for the historical journal *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*. His email address is jens.grandell@yahoo.com.

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