

**Torkel Jansson**

### **A TRIANGLE DRAMA:**

#### **The relationship between state, local self-government and voluntary associations. The Balto-Scandinavian area between the Vienna Congress and the Versailles Treaty**

A Swede, be he historian or a layman, will find quite a lot of peculiarities in Russian society and history, and, of course, his Russian colleagues and friends will find the same in Sweden. However, nothing is "normal" if things are looked upon in a long comparative perspective, and the purpose of this article is an attempt to sketch a historical background to conditions today. To take just two examples characteristic of Swedish conditions, it is "self-evident", to a Swede, that local self-government has existed as long back in history as we can trace it. It is also perfectly "normal" that voluntary associations grew so strong during the last century, that they have taken over both state and society. Even the quite aristocratic Olof Palme, as social democratic prime minister, talked of the ideal political life in terms of meetings in so-called popular movements, i.e. civic organizations with their roots in the 19th century.<sup>10</sup>

Another "self-evident" matter is that Scandinavia is a family of countries very closely related to each other. At the same time it should be said that these countries have a lot of things, and values, in common with the rest of the Western world, too. Countries have simply grown more similar. After a national capitalist integration of countries of a kind earlier unknown in the latter part of the 19th century, I would argue that democratization of states and societies after World War I meant a lot, even was decisive, in the process leading to a much higher degree of conformity. That must then be the main reason why I find conditions in Russia so different. Looking at the interaction between state and society, I find so much of a regulating state and so little of a civil society in this country.

It must be underlined that Scandinavia did not have many features in common when the Vienna Congress was opened in 1814. Empires and kingdoms were dismembered, the growth of the population was immense, and *l'ancien regime*, the old feudal order, was not able to handle this new situation — be it in the newly developed "open societies" or in the purest autocracies. What to do? Emancipation, in a wide sense, had arrived and with it the problem of *if*, and if so, *how* to establish different types of "night-watchman states".

The whole situation opened up for the eternal triangle drama. As everyone knows, Finland became an autonomous grand duchy after the Russian conquest in 1809, governed by its old, domestic Swedish laws. At the same time "Little Bernadotte Sweden" in the west returned to constitutional conditions after the so-called, shortlived Gustavian autocracy established in 1772 and 1789. To put it briefly, two new states had been born, and the new rulers, i.e. the quite liberal Alexander I and the in many ways conservative Charles XIV, had to govern these countries in accordance with laws established long before they got their chance to create a new social order.

To continue our story with things well-known, the Danish monarchy fell to pieces five years later and Norway was born again as a liberal, sovereign state in a very loose personal union with Sweden. The kingdom of Denmark proper continued as an autocracy, at least formally. To sum up: two states had become divided into four. In two of them, Sweden and Finland, society had governed itself since long in both urban and rural municipalities belonging to the "public sphere", to the *öffentlichrechtliche* sphere. In the two other states, Denmark and Norway, society had been governed from above according to autocratic principles since the 17th century. In the Baltic provinces society was more or less "leased-out" from the state to the feudal Baltic-German nobility and burghers (*der verpachtete Staat*), but in the second decade of the 19th century serfdom was abolished and the feudal responsibilities were handed over from the landlords to other institutions.

Let us take a closer look at the setting of our drama. What to do as a state, as a central government, when one could not keep control of local affairs from above anymore? To get an answer to that question one has to think of the cards the authorities had to play with. They were

not too many, only three in fact, and they fit very well into a triangle: the state at the top, and at the bottom we have on the one side local communities, i.e. municipalities belonging to the public, to the state, by law, and on the other voluntary associations placed in a "private, societal free sphere" under the rule of so-called Benthamite law.

Of course rulers of despotic or autocratic states were not interested in initiatives coming from the subjects (although these had started to think of themselves as citizens). Interestingly enough, new words had to be invented to characterize new phenomena. So the critics of societal self-organization, i.e. the traditional autocrats, invented the term "non-state institutions", *Unstaatlichkeiten*, to describe organs founded out of the control of the only permitted, central authorities. However, the members of civil society were as inventive as their counterparts. A very good example in our part of Europe is the Estonian word for "nation". The old *rahvas* meaning the enslaved people of the countryside (Estonian: *maarahvas*, German: *Landvolk*), could not be used to describe active citizens, so the new expression *rahvus* was invented by the liberals of the 1860s.

To return to practical politics, to the triangle, the czars and the barons in the *Baltic provinces* tried to live in accordance with their principles. When serfdom was abolished in this area, laws regulating peasants' municipalities under manorial control (German: *Bauerngemeinden*) were ratified, in which every thinkable social function was listed — with the important addition that no self-organization whatsoever among the peasantry was permitted — "to avoid errors and disturbance in civil and economic relations". When the upper-class women's association in Reval and other Baltic-German "societies" (*Gesellschaften*) had been founded, they were described as "organizations outside the state authorities"; the expression itself is quite revealing. However, the municipal laws were plants which grew quickly. Fifty years later the liberal Alexander II during the first, and always forgotten, "russification" made the municipal system more "democratic" in defeudalizing society and thus diminishing the influence of the barons. (The year 1861 in Russia will be commented upon below). In this situation, in the 1860s, Estonians and Latvians could start their first "singing revolutions" against the Baltic Germans - no wonder that the czar anthem was heard among the songs.

The czars could not behave in the same way in *Finland*, since Alexander I in 1809 had sworn to keep to the old judicial framework. Thus, he could not change local self-government, established since centuries. However, at the same time the czar had not given such promises to society as he had had to give to state institutions, and we can see the effects very clearly. Like in the Baltics, the structure of society became very "communalist" or "municipal" - and, in any case, very hostile to associations. It is also interesting how the Finns handled the municipalities in activating the slumbering, former subjects from Swedish times. Like politicians after World War II the Fennomans had to balance between Russian realities and Swedish inheritance, i.e. between the possible and the impossible thing to accomplish. Here one finds étatist hegelianism practised in a way which is very seldom found in Scandinavia. In Johan Vilhelm Snellman's book *Läran om staten* ("State Doctrine") from 1842 one meets individuals and groups beginning to identify themselves as citizens within the state in a Hegelian-German manner, i.e. within domestic, Swedish state institutions. Associations outside the sphere controlled by the state, i.e. voluntary organizations in society, were hardly involved in this process. What else could Snellman do? In my opinion he was a genius in the situation he had to live in.

Conditions were much the same in *Denmark*; autocratic state authorities could not support non-state affairs. Once more we are in an autocracy, but in a dissolving one. After the July revolution in 1830, people living in countries belonging to the German League were guaranteed so-called consulting estate assemblies (German: *Ständeversammlungen*), and since the Danish duchy Holstein also belonged to this set of states, such "parliaments" were introduced also in Denmark, four of them actually. It should be added that the king's chief advisors in this intricate case were carefully chosen; they were no less than Prince Metternich and Czar Nicholas themselves, who were the ones to suggest separate institutions for each and every part of the kingdom, in order to counteract nation-wide civism. The newly fledged citizens were, it should be added, forbidden to read Swedish and Norwegian newspapers, and such restrictions were also

promulgated in Finland. No more than other autocratic leaders could the Danish king rule local affairs from above any more. In Denmark like in the Baltic provinces and later Russia, local self-government was by necessity introduced in 1837 and 1841. The form of self-government was however rather moderate, and voluntary associations were hardly — or not at all — promoted by the authorities. The turning point came later, especially after 1849, when autocracy was abolished.

Developments in *Norway* after 1814 are revealing, and demonstrate the internal logic, more or less, of it becoming a liberal country. Parliament based on the principle of individuality and not estates had barely come together when the representatives from the countryside demanded the final say in municipal matters. Local self-government was established in towns and parishes twenty-five years later with several voluntary associations in a supplementary societal role. A main reason why local self-government became delayed was the simple fact that all important decisions, e.g. the decisions that implied some sort of expenditure, were taken not in the national parliament, but in the municipalities.

#### SWEDEN AS A "MIDDLE KINGDOM" AFTER 1809/1814

| NORWAY  | SWEDEN   | FINLAND   |
|---|--|---|
| In common with Norway. New "night-watchman states", i.e. <i>strong "societies"/associations</i> (esp. in towns and cities) = <i>privatrechtliche Öffentlichkeiten</i> | Own characteristics: <i>Strong organizations in very free municipalities</i> = the role of "popular movements"/mass organizations at different political levels in state and society | In common with Finland: Old constitutionalism, i.e. <i>strong municipalities</i> (especially in the countryside) = " <i>öffentlichrechtliche Öffentlichkeiten</i> " |

*Swedish* municipal life was, of course, the same as in Finland, but after the "bourgeois revolution" in 1809 (which is the former Moscow historian Aleksandr Kan's expression for what happened when the rule of the "Gustavians" was overthrown) voluntary associations in society were given the opportunity to play a much more prominent role here than in the Grand Duchy. Associations as an idea and as practical solutions were more or less exclusively imported from Great Britain, and not from Hegel's Germany. The development demonstrated in the figure.

The development of Sweden and Finland after 1809 continued in accordance with the lines previously described, if one looks at the state regulated sphere. Sweden and Norway developed the similar night-watchman states, the same open societies, after 1814. In the middle of the figure, in Sweden, where a series of voluntary associations invade open parish meetings and act inside them - especially during the second half of the 19th century when organizations founded by lower social strata became strong - we find the so-called *Folkrörelsesverige*, i.e. "Popular Movements' Sweden". Here we find the Nordic middle kingdom of the 19th century. However, one could continue to the left and to the right. Before the middle of the century, no municipalities in the sense used in this article and very few voluntary associations can be found in Denmark and Russia - there was a very weak relationship between state and society, considering formally organised contacts.

175 years ago the state did not want "any more on its plate", as it was stated by a liberal Uppsala historian, Erik Gustaf Geijer, who compiled his lectures on "The internal relations of society in our days" at the same time as Snellman in Finland worked on his already mentioned "State Doctrine". If the voluntary associations in society would not step in as "auxiliary troops", everything would collapse, and the only thing the old state had to do with its feudal remnants was to "disentangle the bankruptcy of the corporations".

And the auxiliary troops arrived to the Scandinavian double monarchy; the societal "free sphere" was completely flooded by so-called societies, non-state institutions. The state was dissociating itself from a series of functions it had earlier been responsible for, and so society had to associate itself. This resulted in two different types of societies in the Balto-Scandinavian area; if we label the autocracies communalist, we could use the term "associative" to describe Sweden and Norway. Like in Finland and the Baltic provinces after 1905, society demanded a lot, and the demands were respected. The voluntary associations were all nation-wide, collaborating organizations bringing people together. In Sweden, it is very difficult ever since then to become a member of parliament, if you only belong to a political party — in fact, you have to belong to some other so-called popular movement as well.

And speaking about *Russia* we must conclude that organizational life of this civil society type was of very limited importance to municipal life in the old mirs, which were very strong *per se*, or in the zemstvos established in the 1860s. They were unpolitical local administrative organs without possibilities to collaborate and influence state politics. It might be true, as it has been said, that the Romanov and Holstein-Gottorp dynasties represented a state without a live people.<sup>11</sup> My personal scholarly experience in this matter is very restricted, but I shall never forget a student I had from Moscow debating with another one from Estonia about the role of voluntary associations in different parts of the czarist empire in the late 19th century. This discussion revealed that the Baltic provinces housed far more numerous and much stronger civil organizations than what was to the case in the interior of Russia.

Finally I will discuss the end of World War I and the Bolshevik revolution. If I am not mistaken, it has been argued that there was a shift from the old orthodox red corner in almost every house to a new communist one, and there is at least one more striking ingredient in the inheritance from past times. In my opinion the new rulers took over the imperial idea of the relationship between state and society. Like before it was up to the state to decide what was to be the role and function of society. New wine was put into old bottles. Although a substantial body of local matters were discussed in kolkhoses and local soviets, society must now, anew, create forms of its own, if a "europeanization" is to be the aim of the new efforts. It can never be the task of a historian to judge anything, least of all future, but all the same I would like to conclude with the assumption that the dialogue in the triangle mentioned above, which includes the state, the local state authorities or municipalities and society's own associations, in a form acceptable to the rest of the world, must be given a chance if the idea of civism is to be the lodestar for the future of Europe.

<sup>10</sup> This sketch is a very concentrated version of some books and articles I have written about state and society in the Balto-Scandinavian area during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See *Adertonhundratalets associationer* (Summary: "Nineteenth-Century Associations. Research and Problems concerning an Explosive Vacuum or Principles and Forms of Organization between Two Social Formations circa 1800-1870"), Uppsala 1985, *Agrarsamhällets förändring och landskommunal organisation* (Zusammenfassung: 'Agrargesellschaftlicher Wandel und Landgemeindewesen. Einige Grundzüge der Entwicklung Balto-Skandinaviens im 19. Jahrhundert', Uppsala 1987, enlarged version in Loit, A. ed., *The Baltic Countries 1900-1914*, Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia, 5, 1990), "The age of associations" (*Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 4, 1988), "A Triangular Drama. Domestic, Continental and British Features in the Relationship between State, Municipalities and Voluntary Associations. Balto-Scandmavia in the Nineteenth Century" (*Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Toimetised/Proceedings of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. Humanitaarja sotsiaalteadused/Humanities and social sciences*, 1993), "Gesellschaft-Nation-Staat. Einer der Integrationsprozesse des 19. Jahrhunderts am Beispiel der balio-skandinavischen Länder" (*Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Toimetised...*, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> A parallel was drawn to Denmark and the Danes in the early 19th century. When Geijer, the Uppsala historian, who was born in a typical Swedish parish with its traditional local self-government, visited this neighbouring country in 1825, he liked the people very much, but at the same time he found them "dead" as political beings, to use his own words.