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# BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC. BIOGRAPHIES ABOUT AND BY THE ELITE

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In my works on Finnish intellectual history, biographies have obviously been one of the central sources for my studies. I have conducted three large studies over the last fifteen years, in which the *National Biography of Finland* database has been a major tool in my work.<sup>1</sup> These kinds of digital collections and databases obviously provide many new opportunities for research. New digital tools for data creation, searching, browsing, and analysing, both from the perspective of “distance” and “close reading,” not only provide new tools for historical research but also have the potential to reveal new dimensions out of the past.<sup>2</sup>

However, although the databases have been available for some time, their use transnationally has been quite difficult due to various restrictions on exploiting the data. Hence, there is a need for creating large European cultural heritage databases, such as for biographies and other intangible language-based accounts. The consortiums, such as In/Tangible European

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<sup>1</sup> Jukka Kortti, *Valtaan ja vastavirtaan. Helsingin yliopiston valtiotieteellinen tiedekunta 75 vuotta* [Power and Opposition: 75 Years History of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki] (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2020); Jukka Kortti, *Ylioppilaslehden vuosisata* (Arena of Intelligentsia. The Century of Ylioppilaslehti) (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2013); see also “From Culture to Politics. The Dynamics between the cultural and the political public sphere in Finland in the early twentieth century,” *From Culture to Politics*, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/kortti/research/219-2/>.

<sup>2</sup> Franco Moretti, “Conjecture on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68; Jim Mussell, “Doing and Making: History as Digital Practice,” in *History in the Digital Age*, ed. Tomi Weller (London: Routledge, 2012), 79–94; Hannu Salmi, *What is Digital History?* (Cambridge and Medford: Polity Press, 2020).

Heritage: Visual Analysis, Curation and Communication – InTaVia is about to advance this aim. The project is highly important to providing access to cultural and historical data across Europe.

I am currently directing a research project on the one-hundred-year history of the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle. I am also the vice chair of the wider consortium on Yle's history, which includes four universities and three sub-projects.<sup>3</sup>

Only a year ago, I heard that the National Audiovisual Institute in Helsinki, one of the main tasks of which is to safeguard Finnish broadcasting culture, is updating its Radio and Television Archive database according to the ideas of linked data. I immediately contacted the directors of the archive, and already in early June this year our researchers, including myself and a couple of my students, found ourselves pre-testing the software. The beta version of the database was ready for our use at the end of 2023.

It was evident that these new tools provide new insights into the history of Finnish broadcasting, especially in terms of using the metadata of radio and television programs. Since the institutional history of Yle was written in the 1990s – actually, the first history book was published already in the 1950s – there is a need to find new perspectives on the history of the company.

The new Radio and Television Archive database is based on the system that SeCo, the Semantic Computing Research Group at Aalto University and the University of Helsinki, has been building for some time, the so-called Sampo model. I heard about this new Radio and Television Archive database when professor Eero Hyvönen, whose research group is part of InTaVia, briefly mentioned it when he was introducing their latest Linked Open Data service and the semantic portal *ParlamenttiSampo* about the Finnish Parliament in March this year.

## A PANORAMA OF LIFE AND CULTURE?

In addition to presenting these new kinds of digital possibilities for research, the use of artificial intelligence has recently provoked discussion here in academia, as in almost all areas of society, about how we should deal with AI in studies.

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<sup>3</sup> “Yle 100 Research Program,” Yle 100 Research Program, last modified January 25, 2024, <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/yle-100-tutkimusohjelma/yle-100-research-program/>.

AI has been seen as a problem in terms of ethics, but also as an opportunity. For example, my university, the University of Helsinki, has recently encouraged degree programmes and teachers to use AI in their teaching.<sup>4</sup>

AI can also be utilised in making presentations. So, when I started planning my presentation for the seminar *There's History in All Men's Lives*, I gave ChatGPT the command: "Make a presentation on Finnish biographies." ChatGPT provided a skeletal outline titled *Exploring Finnish Biographies: A Journey Through Remarkable Lives* divided into sixteen slides. They included an introduction, agenda, and contextualization of Finnish history, which, of course, would be well-justified elements if I was going to give a speech on Finnish biographies. That was not the case here, though.

One of the slides was titled *Prominent Finnish Figures* and included the composer Jean Sibelius, architect Alvar Aalto, and artist Tove Jansson. AI mapped and searched databases that included the National Biography of Finland. Concerning its open access English language articles, the website of the National Biography of Finland writes:

*This online collection of over one hundred Finnish biographies includes famous national figures, politicians and artists as well as a witch burned at the stake and an 18th-century bear hunter. Together they provide a panorama of Finnish life and culture from medieval times to the present day.*

However, although it says that it provides "a panorama of Finnish life and culture," it is worth emphasizing that the online collection mostly "includes famous national figures, politicians and artists." *Biography Sampo*, the Finnish participant in the InTaVia, is based strongly on short biographies published by the Finnish Literature Society.

The websites of *Biography Sampo* include pictures of politicians, musicians, artists, athletes, etc. One could ask, how "a panorama of Finnish life and culture" can be presented if it only consists of a minority stratum?

Yes, I know that *Biography Sampo* was also created within a knowledge network of linked biographies that include War Sampo, Wikipedia, and Geni.

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<sup>4</sup> "Using AI to support learning," University of Helsinki, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://studies.helsinki.fi/instructions/article/using-ai-support-learning>.

com, which include “ordinary people” as well. The website of the Semantic Computing Research Group (SeCo) tells us:

*The traditional perspective on great men and women has been expanded nowadays, e.g., to minorities and the so-called “ordinary” individuals to create a more balanced picture. Biographical information is published online in abundance elsewhere, such as Wikipedia.<sup>5</sup>*

However, although I do not know the share of “ordinary people” in *Biography Sampo*, I assume “the salt of the earth” is a minority in the database. What I am saying is that the National Biography of Finland, as with so many other national biographies, is about the elite.

For a social historian, this is problematic, but for an intellectual historian, it is more acceptable. Intellectual historians, as well as scholars writing institutional histories, are first and foremost interested in opinion leaders and people in power. Yet, my kind of media historians have also been interested in the social history of media i.e., ordinary media users in recent years, for instance.

## WHAT IS ELITE?

According to the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (a print version from the 1990s found in my bookshelf), elite means “the richest, most powerful, best educated or most trained group of a society.”<sup>6</sup> In terms of sociological and political theory, elites hold a position of importance in society: “They accept one another, understand one another, marry one another, tend to work, and to think, if not together at least alike,” as American sociologist Charles Wright Mills stated during the golden age of American social sciences in the 1950s.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “BiographySampo: Finnish National Biographies on the Semantic Web,” BiographySampo, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://seco.cs.aalto.fi/projects/biografiasampo/en/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 448.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York, Oxford University Press 1956), 4–5.

Social scientists were interested – often in terms of class theories – in scrutinizing the high and the mighty during the modern history of industrializing nations in the 20th century. Nevertheless, as Mills states, the networks are crucial to understanding the elite. This not only concerns small young nations with small elite circles such as Finland or Slovenia, but also major European countries such as France, Germany, and Great Britain as well.

However, elites were not a popular subject of research during the latter part of the 20th century, when economic inequalities diminished and the interdependencies between the upper- and lower-class groups were moderated in Western countries. In history studies, new trends, such as the rise of the “history from below” approach in academic history research, decreased interest in elites at the end of the 20th century.

In the 2000s we have seen the rise of a new type of elite research, a case in point being Thomas Piketty’s influential study on wealth and income inequality since the 18th century.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one reason for the growing interest in economic elites is globalization, in which the dependency of national economic elites on the working classes and their organizations has weakened.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, elite research is alive and kicking in history research, which can be noted in the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC), for instance. *Elites and Forerunners* is one of the networks of the ESSHC and, according to my experience as a chair in the network in recent conferences, is rather active and diverse.<sup>10</sup>

## INTELLECTUALS SERVING THE STATE

The concept of an elite can vary depending on the context and criteria used to define it, but it generally refers to a small, distinguished, and influential segment of a larger population. One elite group that this definition applies to

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Johan Heilbron, Felix Bühlmann, Johannes Hjellbrekke, Olav Korsnes, and Mike Savage, “Introduction,” in *New Directions in Elite Studies*, ed. Olav Korsnes, Johan Heilbron, Johs. Hjellbrekke, Felix Bühlmann, and Mike Savage (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> See “Networks,” European Social Science History Conference Networks, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://esshc.iisg.amsterdam/en/networks>.

perfectly is the intelligentsia, which I have studied in recent years, especially the university elite.

When intellectual historian Ron Eyerman refers to the “intelligentsia” he means a historically specific stratum: “Intellectuals are first of all that social category which performs the task of making conscious and visible the fundamental notions of a society.”<sup>11</sup> Although the link between elites and the stratum of the intelligentsia is not automatic, cultural, political, bureaucratic, and other elites can be conceived of as composing part of a whole called the intelligentsia.<sup>12</sup>

When it comes to biographies, as well as prosopography studies, intellectuals comprise a major share of the databases. In Finland, their role is historically even more important than in many other countries. In particular, the university intellectuals and the state have lived in symbiosis in an extraordinary way. This relationship is illustrated more clearly than perhaps in any other country in the deliberate design of the Helsinki Senate Square; the original university building and the first senate were situated opposite each other in similar buildings, with the only difference being the university’s Ionic colonnade representing Greece and the Senate’s Corinthian colonnade representing Rome.

There are many reasons why the Finnish educated class has traditionally been close to the State. One fundamental reason is the importance of German idealism, as theorized by the Finnish statesman and philosopher Johan Vilhelm Snellman. Finland was a young nation, still part of the Russian empire during the 19th century, when the international rise of nationalism following the Hegelian ideas of *Weltgeist* (the spirit), the superiority of the state, and an overall emphasis on *Bildung* (education) influenced the nation-building project of the intellectual class. For Snellman, a university should educate people for the service of the state. The contribution of the academic elite to nation-making has been even more significant in Finland than in many other

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<sup>11</sup> Ron Eyerman, *Between Culture and Politics: Intellectuals in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Peter C. Ludtz, “From Methodological Problems in Comparative Studies of the Intelligentsia,” in *The Intelligentsia and the Intellectuals: Theory, Method and Case Study*, ed. Aleksander Gella (Los Angeles, CA, 1976), 37.

“young” European nations, and the university elite has been subject first and foremost to the state.<sup>13</sup>

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY: BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

The biographies written about elites – and usually also those written about “ordinary people” – are public; they are meant to be read by everybody. In academic history research, such biographies are usually not enough to make a coherent account of a person, or a group, not to mention an entire era. In terms of historical method,<sup>14</sup> the data should be more diverse than that from a single source, which often provides a narrow or biased reading of history.

One often-used way to broaden the scope of sources in intellectual history research is to utilize the diaries and letters written by authors, artists, academics, and other opinion leaders. Writing of diaries and letters has its roots in the 17th century, but, along with the privatization of modern bourgeois everyday life, such writing increasingly focused on introspection during the 19th century.<sup>15</sup> As genres of writing, diaries and letters have been loosely defined as being autobiographical. Historically, the boundaries between these two types of writing are vague and shifting.<sup>16</sup>

Although diaries and letters are personal and intimate writings, they could also be written knowing that they will be read by a wider audience in the future. This is often the case with politicians and diplomats, whose letters, and also diaries, are part of their communication activity in their work. Indeed, the line between private and public in autobiographical writing is vague. As French micro-historian Alain Corbin has noted, the

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<sup>13</sup> Jukka Korti, “Intellectuals and The State: The Finnish University Intelligentsia and The German Idealist Tradition,” *Modern Intellectual History* 11, no. 3 (2014): 359–384.

<sup>14</sup> By historical method I mean a systematic body of principles and rules critically designed to present a synthesis of the past.

<sup>15</sup> Alain Corbin, “The Secret of the Individual,” in *History of Private Life. IV. From Fires to Revolution to the Great War*, ed. Michelle Perrot (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 457–547.

<sup>16</sup> Ritva Hapuli and Maarit Leskelä-Kärki, “The public and private worlds of writing,” in *They Do Things Differently There: Essays on Cultural History*, ed. Bruce Johnson and Harri Kiiskinen (Turku: Cultural History 2011), 188.

social and environmental context of a writer is always present in his or her writing as “mute spirits.”<sup>17</sup>

Concerning the diaries of politicians, one of the major publications in Finnish political history is the diaries of the former President of Finland (1946–1956) J. K. Paasikivi (1870–1956), published in the mid-1980s.<sup>18</sup> They were kept secret for over a quarter of the century because President Paasikivi revealed his true negative thoughts about the Soviet Union in his diaries, and so their publication was considered politically dangerous during the Cold War.<sup>19</sup> The diaries are still a major source for the Finnish political history of the early Cold War. Nevertheless, when Paasikivi rewrote his diaries from his years as Prime Minister and President before his death, he likely thought of them as potentially publishable in their original form. Indeed, the diaries hardly address his private life at all.<sup>20</sup>

One of the editors of Paasikivi’s diaries was the historian and public intellectual Matti Klinge (1936–2023), who published his 24-part public diary (1999–2023). In the diaries, he combines, condenses, and experiments with his thoughts, following the classical essay tradition. In addition, Klinge also published a 6-part massive autobiography in 2012–2021. They are excellent sources for the study of Finnish post-war intellectual history, albeit highly biased.

This ambiguous border between private and public has been one of my research interests in studying intellectual history, especially the cultural public sphere. My idea, referring to Jürgen Habermas, but also to the sociologist from the Weimar era, Ernst Manheim, is that the cultural public sphere originated in a closed, more private sphere – that of the salons and associations. In these circles, intellectuals developed themselves morally as humans before they entered the more public, political public sphere.

<sup>17</sup> Corbin, “The Secret of the Individual,” 497–506.

<sup>18</sup> Juho Kusti Paasikivi, Yrjö Blomstedt, and Matti Klinge, *J.K. Paasikiven päiväkirjat 1944–1956*, vol. 1, ed. Yrjö Blomstedt and Matti Klinge (Porvoo: WSOY 1985); Juho Kusti Paasikivi, Yrjö Blomstedt, and Matti Klinge, *J.K. Paasikiven päiväkirjat 1944–1956*, vol. 2, ed. Yrjö Blomstedt and Matti Klinge (Porvoo: WSOY 1986).

<sup>19</sup> The Finnish Cold War era has often been described by the term *Finlandization*, meaning the process by which a small independent country was forced to abide by the politics and policy rules of a larger, more powerful country, namely the Soviet Union.

<sup>20</sup> Yrjö Blomstedt and Matti Klinge, “Saatesanat,” in Juho Kusti Paasikivi, Yrjö Blomstedt, and Matti Klinge, *J.K. Paasikiven päiväkirjat 1944–1956*, vol. 1, ed. Yrjö Blomstedt and Matti Klinge (Porvoo: WSOY, 1985), 5–9.

Autobiographical writing, especially letters, was part of this process that intellectuals used to create their philosophies of life, which we were able to read from publications in periodicals, newspapers, essays, short stories, plays, novels, film scripts, etc.<sup>21</sup>

## THE FUTURE OF BIOGRAPHY STUDIES?

Unlike printed texts in book and newspaper collections, handwritten materials have been much more difficult to utilize in terms of digital history. However, this situation is changing. For instance, the Recognition and Enrichment of Archival Documents (READ) project funded by Horizon 2020 has its *tranScriptorium* project, which is developing capabilities for computers to read handwritten texts.<sup>22</sup> This also provides possibilities to research handwritten texts produced by ordinary people, such as wartime letter collections.<sup>23</sup>

Another source to be utilized in biographical research, as well as intellectual history studies more systematically, is obituaries. The culture of writing obituaries varies from country to country, but as a genre of biographical writing, they are a unique source combining the private and public spheres. Thus, the creation of a transnational database on obituaries could also further intellectual history research.

Elites can exist in various domains, including politics, business, academia, sports, and culture, and they may be characterized by their prominence, exclusivity, and often a degree of privilege or advantage over others. Nevertheless, these individuals or entities often possess exceptional skills, knowledge, wealth, power, or influence that sets them apart from most of the population.

However, who we include in “the elite” and what kind of persons we highlight changes over time, and is dependent on the historical context. What is remarkable in both the ChatGPT presentation of Finnish biographies mentioned above, as well as the *Biography Sampo* webpage, is the relatively

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<sup>21</sup> “From Culture to Politics,” From Culture to Politics.

<sup>22</sup> “READ-COOP SCE,” European Cooperative Society Read Coop, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://readcoop.eu/>.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g., “DIGIKÄKI – Digital History and Handwritten Sources,” Digikärki, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://www.tuni.fi/en/research/digikaki-digital-history-and-handwritten-sources>.

equal share of accounts about women. In Finland and the Nordic countries, this can be explained by the historical politics of equality between men and women, but it also tells us much about the overall cultural change in how we look at gender issues and the position of women in society and culture, at least in western cultures. The same can be said about the share of texts about immigrants in *Biography Sampo*. In conclusion, not only our ways of studying elites, but also what “the elite” consists of, changes along with the development of our cultures and societies.

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