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## Students as "the Hopes of the Fatherland" : The Old Student House in Helsinki as a Center of Student Activism in the 1960s

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Routledge  
2017

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Aalto , S 2017 , Students as "the Hopes of the Fatherland" : The Old Student House in Helsinki as a Center of Student Activism in the 1960s . in P Dhondt & E Boran (eds) , Student Revolt, City and Society in Europe : From the Middle Ages to the Present .  
p̃y Routledge Studies in Cultural History , Routledge , pp. 358 375 .

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/310898>

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## Students as “The Hopes of the Fatherland”. The Old Student House in Helsinki as a Centre of Student Activism in the 1960s

Sari Aalto and Pieter Dhondt (as contributor)

Not one inmate was present at the fiftieth anniversary of Konnunsuo prison and similarly the students will be represented only nominally at the centenary ball of the Student Union of the University of Helsinki. Why should we in the first place stare into the past and invite Kekkonen as a speaker, when everyone ought to have the chance [...] to correct the mistakes of the previous decades, to return the Old Student House to the ownership of the students, and to throw out the puppets. The Fatherland once donated the building to its brightest hope. We have betrayed the donor.<sup>i</sup>

This quote is from an article by the active and radical left-wing student of social sciences Maunu Harmo. It was published in the student newspaper *Ylioppilaslehti* in October 1968, only one and half months before the centenary of the prestigious Student Union of the University of Helsinki. Simultaneously with the intensive preparation of the anniversary, radical left and progressive students, who had lost power in student politics, started to criticize the traditional forms of the celebration. Since May 1968, following student demonstrations in many major European cities, people had asked why Finnish students did not demonstrate. After all, according to a minority of Finnish radical students, there were plenty of reasons to be dissatisfied. The bureaucratic nonsense of the Student Union was excoriated as well as the alienation of its leaders from the “common student”.

In the article quoted above, Harmo announced the action plan of the radicals. Student houses in the city centre of Helsinki became the key symbols because the “common student” was denied open access to the main buildings of the wealthy Student Union. The Old Student House in particular had long been one of the main bones of contention between conservatives and radicals during previous years. The House had it all. With its great symbolic meaning it was a real *lieu de mémoire* of Finnish academic generations. In the heart of the city centre the House was on show to the general public and the upcoming centenary of the Student Union formed a great opportunity to attract attention. So on 25 November, on the eve of the anniversary ball, the Old Student House was occupied by the radical student movement Ylioppilaaat–Studenterna. The banner in front of the building declared: “The revolution at the University has begun.”<sup>ii</sup> The criticism was directed in the first place against the Student Union and the University of Helsinki. The actual festivities had to be moved elsewhere, as was the guest of honour and jubilee speaker, President Urho Kekkonen. In later years this occupation of the Old Student House has become a mythical high point of the student movement in Finland, even though Finnish university students had a long tradition of expressing their grievances in public. From the second quarter of the nineteenth century, students had played an important role in the capital city of Helsinki and their regular demonstrations and manifestations had become part of its urban culture.

Student radicalism at the University of Helsinki in the 1960s is studied in this chapter from the perspective of the Old Student House as an important *lieu de mémoire*. Since its opening in 1870, the House was the symbol of the role of Finnish students as ‘the hopes of the

fatherland' referring to the fact that they would be the future opinion makers on crucial social and cultural issues. The thread of the article is the development of the House from a place representing the pluralistic identity of the student community (section 1), into a place of contention between different divisions within the Student Union. From the end of the 1950s, traditional student culture was increasingly challenged by student radicalism, a challenge, which was partly also a generational conflict (section 2). Two notions of student identity were opposed to each other: the 'student as such' and the 'student as citizen' (section 3). Towards the end of the 1960s, these intermingled divisions came to a head in the struggle for the use of the Old Student House (section 4), culminating in the occupation of it in 1968 (section 5). In conclusion the question is raised about the legacy of this conflict within the student community (section 6). Thus, the peculiarity of the Finnish 1968 student revolt is that it was more the expression of an increasing division among the students themselves, rather than being a demonstration against university and political authorities. Even more unusually, the highest political authority, President Kekkonen, explicitly stated his support for the radical students.

### ***Spei Suae Patria Dedit* – the Message of the Old Student House**

The Student House in Helsinki was built in 1870 on the outskirts of town, as a meeting place for all students where they could study in their own library, eat in its affordable restaurant and organize great student balls. Yet from the start it was much more than just a meeting place. The House was designed as a symbol of Finnish national, united identity and became a manifestation of the role of the students in constructing this identity. This was expressed through the Latin inscription on the façade of the House: "*Spei suae patria dedit*", which means that the nation gave the house to its future hope, being the students. This referred to the fact that the funding for the House was partly collected from the Finnish people by student choirs who had given performances all over the country. But the inscription also emphasized the role of students as future civil servants and intellectual and political leaders who had to be aware of their responsibility for the development of their country. The message of the House was to make clear to the students their part in the rising Finnish civil society, as expressed by the university lecturer, and later professor, Johan Vilhelm Snellman. In line with the spirit of the times, Snellman pointed to the leading role of the academic community and especially the students in public opinion making and political involvement.

In that period Finland was a part of Russia which, as a grand duchy, enjoyed a large degree of autonomy. In 1828, Helsinki had become the capital city and also the university was moved there from Turku. Finnish students came to Helsinki from all parts of the country. The close connection between the leading educational, political, and administrative levels of the nation was marked by the central location of the university buildings in the city. In addition, academic traditions were accorded an important role in the life of the city: students' demonstrations, marches and processions became a specific part of the urban culture. Their presence in the capital city ensured that the activities of the students, as a matter of course, affected national debate. They were one of the key groups to develop Finnish identity and the

concept of 'the fatherland'. In 1848, for instance, students organized a spring celebration on the Kuntähti field a bit outside Helsinki city centre, which developed into a major patriotic manifestation. In contrast to the democratic ideas of the revolutions in many other parts of Europe during that year, Finnish students expressed their loyalty to the authorities and their patriotism in aesthetic and idealistic terms by singing Johan Ludvig Runeberg's *Vårt Land*. The poem was later translated into Finnish, *Maamme [Our Land]*, and the song became the national anthem of Finland.

Gradually, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the language question evolved into one of the first sources of division within the Student Union (which was legalized in 1880). The language of the ruling elite was still Swedish, but the Finnish language had started to develop rapidly. Leading national philosophers, university professors and political activists, such as Snellman and Zachris Topelius, promoted the idea of Finnish national identity being based on the Finnish language. Their views received support from the younger generation. After Finland's independence in 1917, the cultural and political orientation of the nation and its educated class was hotly debated. This was concretized in the question of the language of instruction at the University of Helsinki. A group of students started a campaign for a total Finnicization of the university, to change the language of the university to Finnish. In their opinion, all the Swedish-speaking courses had to be transferred to the recently founded Swedish-speaking university in Turku. Mass meetings in the Old Student House were organized as well as street demonstrations to increase the pressure on the political arena. The campaign was led by the Academic Karelia Society [Akateeminen Karjala-Seura], which had a dominant position in the Finnish-speaking Student Union. This secret, militarily structured society had been established in 1922, and was a typical example of the extreme right-wing movements of the times. Finally, the language question was resolved through a law in 1937, extending Finnish-speaking education to the whole university. However, Swedish-speaking instruction was also protected, so the ambition of the Academic Karelia Society of Finnicization was not realized. During the wartime, Swedish- and Finnish-speaking students began to cooperate again, resulting in a postwar student community, and more specifically a Student Union, which was pluralistic in character.

During the interwar period another political line of division was crossed in Finnish society. A bloody civil war in 1918 had divided the nation between Reds and Whites. As an outcome of the war the communists were driven underground and the way was cleared for a nationalistically orientated cultural and political atmosphere. So, for most of the (both Finnish- and Swedish-speaking) students, 'the fatherland' was anti-communist. After the Second World War the patriotic attitude and anti-communism of the students continued although the political composition of the country changed. When the Communist Party was legalized and, as demanded by the Soviet Union, extreme right-wing movements such as the Academic Karelia Society were forbidden Finnish students had to revise their concept of 'the fatherland'. On the one hand anti-communism was still strong among the students, in line with the tradition from the interwar period, but also due to the war experience and the general Cold War settlement. On the other hand the anti-communism of students was now marked by their commitment to western values of democracy and freedom.

In 1948, when the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance between the Soviet Union and Finland was signed, the students commemorated the centenary anniversary of the national anthem in the presence of a large crowd and the main political leaders of the country. Three years later, in 1951, students organized a torchlight procession in honour of Marshal Mannerheim following his death. From then onwards, this tradition was repeated each year on Independence Day. The yearly torchlight procession through the main streets of the capital city, in combination with speeches at the Senate Square, developed into the most important urban manifestation of students, attracting a lot of publicity. It became a central part of the celebrations of national independence, and served to highlight the students as ‘the hopes of the fatherland’ to the public.

### **Traditional Student Culture and Growing Student Radicalism in the 1960s**

Partly as a result of these high expectations of students, the purpose of a university education was not only to disseminate knowledge and offer a vocational training, but also to make the academic elite aware of their moral responsibility towards society and to educate them in order to become the leading opinion makers of the future. This was still the case at the beginning of the 1960s. To a large extent this kind of moral and citizenship education was taken care of by the student nations (*osakunta* in Finnish, *nation* in Swedish). There existed fifteen of these age-old student corporations organized on a regional basis by province, most of them Finnish-speaking, but with a few Swedish-speaking ones. From 1937, the membership of the student nations was voluntarily, but until the end of the 1960s almost all students joined them. They helped first-year students to start their life in Helsinki and their studies at the university, organized leisure activities, and offered opportunities to meet students from other faculties. At the same time the student nations played an important part in socializing the students and introducing them to the habits, lifestyle and ideological orientation of an academically educated class. Most of the students were united by a patriotic, nationalistic (and often anti-communist) attitude that surpassed the existing party-political division lines. However, different student nations held different views. Those from the countryside with a background in agriculture put more emphasis on the preservation of traditional national culture, whereas the nations from the big cities – especially from Helsinki itself – became homes for modern, liberal and radical students.

The student nations largely defined student culture at the University of Helsinki. However, from the 1950s they were challenged in this regard by associations assembling students from the same faculty or the same subject. At the time of their foundation in the 1930s and 1940s these faculty associations were quite small, but during the 1950s especially those of the professional faculties attracted a larger number of students and became more active and stronger actors in student politics. Initially they focused on vocational issues and questions concerning the studies, but together with their numerical growth, they also widened their interest, and began to play an increasing role in the social life of students. Gradually they started to share the academic traditions of the student nations. In the Student Union both the faculty

associations and the student nations represented traditional student culture. Until the 1960s the highest decision-making body of the Student Union, the representative council, which was elected every second year, was always composed of representatives of both groups. In spite of the prevailing idea of a unified educated class the groups sometimes opposed each other in the council.

The traditional student culture that they propagated was faced with growing radicalism in the 1960s. The basis for it had already been laid in the 1950s when a loose group of cultural modernists started to ventilate their opinions in the student newspaper *Ylioppilaslehti*. They questioned the idea of a uniform, national culture. The student newspaper *Ylioppilaslehti*, as well as the cultural committee and the Student Theatre became the central radical actors within the Student Union. All of these organizations were mentally independent and offered space to act in new ways – also provocatively. In many respects they were interconnected so that, for instance, events organized by the cultural committee brought forth young and radical artists and journalists. However, before 1966-67 there was no sharp distinction yet between traditional students and their more radical colleagues – the Student Union was still acting on a pluralistic basis. All of them interacted closely and the same people were active in the traditional student organizations as well as in the new associations.

Liberal and radical attitudes, which were not yet connected to political parties, were supported also by students from within the traditional organizations. So the upcoming radicalism was clearly a generational phenomenon. The young generation emphasized their belonging to a specific age group, which was influenced by American youth culture, modern technology and other international developments. In the research literature the radicalism of the 1960s is often characterized as a struggle between the postwar baby-boom generation and their parents, who had been students in the 1930s. On the one hand the older generation still had the hegemony to define the notion of ‘the fatherland’ and continued to do so in the terms of the 1950s: western-type freedom, anticommunism, the memory of the war and nationalistic patriotism. On the other hand the younger generation started to contest these predominant conceptions.

A clear indication of the change was the pamphlet *Isänmaan ja ihmisen puolesta – mutta ei ketään vastaan* [*For the fatherland and the human being – but not against anyone*], written by the student Pentti Linkola in 1961. He criticized the traditional view on nationalism and instead defended patriotism without nationalism. In his opinion pacifism could also be an expression of patriotism. Only two years later, in 1963, the international peace movement landed in Finland through the establishment of the Committee of One Hundred (*Sadankomitea*), which was a pacifist movement that took a position against war and nuclear armament in particular. Its role model was the committee of the same name in the United Kingdom, which was a separate department of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Almost by definition the members of the Committee in Finland were left-wing, progressive or radical students.

Little by little radicalism started to gain more ground. The criticism against prevailing values and institutions became louder, as well as the demands for change of society in a more liberal and modern direction. This was also visible in the shift of students’ attitude towards President Urho Kekkonen’s policy. When he was elected in 1956 his popularity among the

students had been low. However, the predominantly anti-communist position of the students made place for support for Kekkonen's policy of Finland's peaceful coexistence and confidential relationships with the Soviet Union. In 1964, the students confirmed this shift by presenting Kekkonen with a Student Union's mark of honour.

In addition, the traditional view of an independent educated elite that stood above the contradictions between various interest groups was challenged by the idea of the students' engagement in political parties. Party-political participation of students had been a subject of discussion since the end of the 1950s, but now students regarded this increasingly as a means to have an impact on the future of the welfare state. When traditional student culture was re-estimated, the liberalism and radicalism of students gradually caused them to connect to the parties on the left. In contrast to the (less pronounced) conservative position of their parents, radical students openly showed solidarity also with leftist political parties and started to join the social democratic party in particular. In 1965, a couple of these politically active students, representing the 'radical alliance' (political student associations of centre, liberal and social democratic parties), were elected to the representative council of the Student Union. Although they were still in a marginal position, they were very active and managed to get through some of their ideas. The union of student radicalism and the social democratic party was symbolically confirmed on the evening of the parliamentary elections of 1966. That same evening the Student Theatre celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the Old Student House by staging the musical *Lapualaisooppera*, which analyzed the right-wing Lapua Movement in the 1930s from the point of view of the political left. The writer of the play, the journalist and social democrat Arvo Salo, was elected as a young radical to the new parliamentary assembly where leftist parties got the majority for the second time in the history of independent Finland.

### **Student Identity as a Key Question: 'Student as Such' or 'Student as Citizen'?**

The conflict between traditionally oriented students on the one hand and radical students on the other hand came to a head in the debate about student identity. The former group emphasized a 'student as such' approach: in order to prepare students to become members of the nation's future elite their primary task was to study and so the focus was put on questions regarding the studies and the students' own culture. In contrast, the latter defended the notion of 'student as citizen'. Their conviction was that students should leave the ivory tower of the university and instead become involved in all kinds of political and social matters, increase their interest in international affairs and, as citizens of society at large, direct their activities to a wider audience. American students set the example as initiators and promoters of several civil rights and peace movements. Certainly the protests against the Vietnam War, broadcast on television, functioned as a source of inspiration for Finnish students from the middle of the 1960s.

The emphasis on proper student affairs by the student nations and the faculty associations, which represented the traditional view of student identity, can partly be explained by the expansion of higher education that took place in the same period. To a certain extent the establishment of new universities and the massive increase in the number of students forced the

Student Union to pay more attention to the students' living and study conditions. One consequence of the transformation of the universities into 'mass institutions' was that criticism of their organization generally increased. The Student Union, the Ministry of Education and even President Kekkonen himself proposed reforms concerning the studies, degrees, as well as the government of the universities, but changes took place slowly in traditional institutions, especially at the University of Helsinki. On the initiative of the students, for instance, detailed study guides were introduced and cooperation between professors and students was mainly accepted. These successes on issues concerning studies reinforced the position of the faculty associations within the Student Union.

Although radical students initially fixed their attention on cultural issues, they also soon became interested in questions concerning the university. The 'student as citizen' approach was applied to the university. Concretely they started to criticize the power of the professors, the hierarchical organization of the university and what they considered to be old-fashioned teaching methods. Radical ideas of equality and anti-authoritarianism gained ground among a wider circle of students. Even in the Student Union in 1966-67, the softer terminology of cooperation between professors and students was replaced by the more formalized demand of democracy. The students insisted on increasing their influence in university decision-making at all levels.

From the start, the demands of students for democracy and university reforms gained support from the state. For students, President Kekkonen in particular represented progress and change within society. Already in the early 1960s, Kekkonen – who had previously been active in Student Union politics, as chief-editor of the student newspaper *Ylioppilaslehti* – had realized the importance of getting the support from the younger generation. So he was the one to support the students in their arguments for reform. Kekkonen was very active in educational politics and eager to reform the university, which he regarded as old-fashioned and incapable to change from within. He listened to and especially encouraged radical students.

However, radicalism as a social phenomenon grew and the 'student as citizen' approach was developed mainly through the activities of small associations dealing with subjects such as women's rights, minority questions, pacifism and internationalism. In these associations radical students developed practices to demonstrate their opinions in public and to gain media attention by organizing all kinds of extra-parliamentary actions. Their basic ideology was to spread rational information about the faults in society in order to change attitudes and practices. One example of such an event, which drew a lot of attention, was the Independence Day party for alcoholics and homeless people, organized in 1967 by the so-called November-movement in the New Student House.

### **The Old Student House and the Question of the Cultural Centre**

The New Student House had been built in 1910 next to the existing Student House, so the epithet 'Old' was added to the latter. The New House was inhabited by the student nations, but it was the old one, housing the office of the Student Union, a great hall for student balls, and a



music hall for student choirs, that became the bone of contention between conservative and radical students during the 1960s. As mentioned before, the Old Student House had a significant meaning in the history of Finnish students as a *lieu de mémoire* to which every student generation had defined its relationship. At the beginning of the 1960s the House was going through a large renovation and reorganization because the People's Theatre (which was transformed into the City Theatre of Helsinki) moved from the big hall of the Old Student House to its own building. As a result, a lot of free space became available and created the opportunity for students to make something new out of the House.

Radical students in the cultural committee of the Student Union were the first to act. The events organized by the committee had become very popular in the last few years and so the importance of cultural activities was increasingly recognized by the Student Union. Certainly public seminars and modern teach-ins attracted a good crowd. In line with the notion of 'student as citizen' and with the motto of the left, 'everything is culture', these activities also dealt more and more with wider social and political issues. In 1966, many left-wing radical students were nominated to the committee that was set to develop the cultural activities of the Student Union. The committee noticed that there was a lack of permanent rooms for cultural events, and in its report it suggested the establishment of a cultural centre in the Old Student House. The purpose was to create new possibilities for students to enjoy cultural events, but also to strengthen the position of student activities within the cultural life of Helsinki.

At the same time the cultural centre seemed to be one means by which the radicals could modernize the old structures of the Student Union and, more generally, student culture. According to them, the student nations were no longer able to reach all students, so there was a need for an institution that would be more equally accessible for everyone. Traditionally, students' education to become critical and active citizens had been a task of the student nations. However, radical students uttered their frustration about what they conceived to be the conservative and inflexible attitude of the traditional student organizations in this context. For them, the development of the cultural centre as a space of social interaction among students presented an ideal opportunity to compete with the student nations in this regard. To a certain extent the discussion about the use of the House was a generational conflict as well. Traditionally the highly-respected seniors had taken care of the economics and rental of the House, and now the younger generation wanted to decide what to do with it.

The proposal to establish a cultural centre within the Old Student House triggered off a heated discussion about the use of the House. The idea of the cultural centre got a lot of support due to the popularity of students' cultural activities. The representative council of the Student Union agreed on one principle: the Old Student House should – once again – become a real student house. However, the opinions of what was meant by a 'real student house' clearly differed. On the one hand radical and liberal students – some of whom were also from within the student nations – supported the cultural activities and the idea of the cultural centre. These were countered on the other hand by the students from the faculty associations because these associations urgently needed more rooms for their own activities. During the 1960s, they had become bigger and stronger and had strengthened their position in student politics. When the faculty associations had started to resemble the student nations in their activities, their demands

for their own rooms and larger financial support from the Student Union became louder. The activists from the faculty associations wanted to transform the Old Student House into their own house, just like the student nations 'owned' the New Student House.

Tensions sometimes ran high. In the representative council of the Student Union radicals emphasized the importance of cultural activities. As Jeja-Pekka Roos (a student of social sciences and member of the group of social democrats in the representative council) put it: "One of the most important functions of the Student Union is to make students into citizens who are culturally aware and who have cultural pursuits."<sup>iii</sup> However, this was not obvious to everyone. The dominance of the left in cultural matters irritated many representatives. For instance, the medical student Eljas Tunkelo (representative of the group of faculty associations) pointed out at the meeting: "However, I must say that the Student Union wants to make culture into a privilege of certain cliques and thus keep it within a too tight circle, which can be seen in coupling university politics with culture."<sup>iv</sup>

The discussion about cultural matters reflected the polarization within the Student Union that had begun at the end of 1966 and intensified during the following year. The criticism against traditional student culture and the student nations became louder, especially in the faculties of social sciences and arts, and in the radicals' home bases such as the Student Theatre, the student newspaper *Ylioppilaslehti*, and the cultural committee. Traditional organizations had been the home and breeding ground for radicals, but when the radicals had assimilated traditions they started to criticize them. In 1967-68 they massively withdrew from the traditional associations yet continued their engagement in (leftist, centre or liberal) party-political student organizations, and all kinds of small associations that dealt with social and political questions. The tone of radicals also changed: they declared that there was no separate student culture and institutions like the cultural centre at the Old Student House should be open to all citizens of Helsinki.

At the same time, while radicalism gained more ground, the counter-reaction became stronger. This was clearly visible in the representative council of the Student Union. Opponents claimed that the cultural institutions and events represented only radical and leftist viewpoints and the plans for the cultural centre were seen in this light as well. There were two main groups of conservatives: first, the bourgeois students who formed the National Students Association which was connected to the political right (more particularly to the National Coalition Party); and secondly, a large number of politically independent students from the faculty associations of the numerous, more conservative and homogenous faculties of medicine, law, and agriculture and forestry.

With regard to the development of attitudes inside the Student Union the latter group of students became increasingly important. The large faculty associations opposed party politics and emphasized questions concerning studies and university issues – the 'student as such' perspective. This approach was approved in the election of the student representative council in November 1967. The faculty associations got the majority in the council, and the representatives of the political associations and the student nations were forced into opposition. In this way the liberal board of the Student Union in 1967 was replaced by a conservative one in the following year.

## The Occupation of the Old Student House

All these developments took place only a couple of months before the outbreak of fights in many European cities between students and authorities in the spring of 1968. As is shown in previous research and in the chapters in this book dealing with 1968, each of these student revolts had its own specific character. Nevertheless there were some common features too. In the background there was the general disappointment about the death of an ideology in the face of unbridled capitalism, applied also to educational affairs. European university policy of the 1960s had been based on the belief of continuous progress and economic growth, resulting in the massive expansion of university education. However, an increasing number of critical voices had begun to complain that education was being transformed into a production force and that students' status had changed from that of an educated elite to an educated labour force. Students started to demonstrate against what they called the technocratic orientation of education. The concept of 'alienation' was widely shared to describe the students' feelings about their position in the universities. Rituals of direct democracy were organized, among other reasons, to attract the attention of the wider public and the media. Sit-ins, teach-ins and sleep-ins, occupations of public buildings, all became symbols of the movement.

When the news about such events reached Finnish universities, radical students felt pressured to rouse themselves to action. Even the media expected something to happen. On 1 May there had been some unrest in a few university cities, but apparently Finnish students were not yet ready for spontaneous extra-parliamentary action. In his pamphlet *Ylioppilaitten vallankumous [Students' revolution]*, Antti Kuusi, a journalist and young assistant at the University of Helsinki, explained why. He pointed out that the close connections between radical students and the political parties actually prevented real criticism of the authorities. New Left was assimilated into the elites of the university students and society. Still, Kuusi indicated lots of reasons to be dissatisfied. With regard to the universities, he accused the political leaders within the Student Unions of preventing extra-parliamentary actions and he advised the common students in Helsinki to occupy their own house, the Old Student House. Also according to the Finnish League of the Student Unions, students' attempts to get through their demands by trying to influence political parties should be combined with extra-parliamentary actions.

In Helsinki, criticism against the Student Union was growing. A loose group of radical students, mainly from the faculty of social sciences, brought to the fore the idea of 'the common student' who had become alienated from the Student Union, its 'establishment', the student houses and the university as a whole. They demanded reform of the university in terms of student democracy and claimed that the Student Union had failed to defend the students' interests. They also criticized the Union's management of finances, use of the membership fees, and apolitical decision-making. Symptomatic of the common students' alienation were the plans for the celebration of the upcoming centenary of the Student Union. Indeed, the festivities soon became the main target for radicals who claimed that the common student was not invited to the anniversary ball. In reality however, the board of the Student Union had been preparing

the events for many years and it was their explicit purpose to integrate the radicals into a programme, which consisted of many diverse festive activities.

After the elections for the student representative council at the end of 1967, radicals were marginalized in student politics, but by the autumn of the following year they again dominated their old channel. The heterogeneous cultural committee resigned and new, leftist members were nominated. Soon the new committee became one of the leading forces planning actions. They organized all kinds of events in the Old Student House, such as an anti-imperialistic Third World Week (in collaboration with the so-called Tricontinental-association). This was held in the middle of November with one of the leaders of the Paris' student movement as a special guest. During the autumn, the idea of the occupation of the Old Student House had been announced several times in public and concrete preparations were put in place.

The Finnish equivalent of the international student demonstrations finally materialized on the eve of the centenary of the Student Union, on 25 November, when the Old Student House was occupied by the radical student movement Ylioppilaat–Studenterna. A special meeting had been called at the House to discuss the faults of the Student Union, but the doors were locked because of the anniversary ball the next day. And then – as the story goes – somebody broke the window and hundreds of students, who had gathered in the square in front of the House, burst in. In his memoirs one of the participants, Johan von Bonsdorff, described the atmosphere in the square before the doors opened:

Perunatori [the so-called Potato Square in front of the house] is full of people when The Moment approaches. Hundreds of students are going back and forth, waiting for Something to Happen as it has been announced, and as it has been suspected for weeks and lately openly promised. VAN HA KAN SA LE VAN HA KAN SA LE [The Old (Student House) for the people]. The shouting begins already before 5 pm. That's when they're supposed to start the meeting to discuss the mysterious dealings of The Student Union of the University of Helsinki with commercial banks, its corruption by student politicians, the forgotten democracy concerning studies and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which the elite of student politicians is celebrating the next evening with Power and Big Money. And the common student will be watching through the windows from the outside.<sup>v</sup>

Although the spontaneous nature of the occupation was emphasized, there had been a lot of preparation. Everything was well organized and the expectations of the media were clearly taken into account. When students had occupied the main hall, the leaders of the party-political associations started the meeting. The two-day occupation was non-violent and tidy. Students discussed in a so-called general meeting and in smaller groups subjects such as student democracy, decision-making and the economics of the Student Union. The atmosphere in the House was electrified when a group of conservative students tried to disturb the occupation. Some traditional student organizations declared themselves openly against the occupation and organized some counter-demonstrations outside the House.

However, the student movement Ylioppilaat–Studenterna was a loose collection of protesters, without a clear political home. Student associations of leftist, liberal and centre parties were represented, but in the morning of the second day of occupation students from

centre and liberal political associations quit, due to disagreement about the topics of the meeting. Indeed, though the occupation had started with discussions about the management of the Student Union and student democracy at the university, as the hours passed by they began to start talking about international politics, cooperation of workers and students, socialism and Marxism. As leftist students gained control of the occupation, the message gradually became more Marxist. The occupation ended with a declaration, a press conference and a special issue of the student newspaper *Ylioppilaslehti*, edited by the radicals.

### **Consequences, Continuities, and Change**

As a result of the occupation of the Old Student House, the board of the Student Union was forced to move the festivities for its centenary elsewhere. However, at the new location, the programme was completed as scheduled, including a jubilee speech by President Kekkonen. Unsurprisingly, Kekkonen proved to be well aware of the reasons for the student unrest. He stated his support for the young generation and their demands for reforms in society. “Youth that thinks without prejudice is the ideological bomb of the future. There lies the hope of the world,” he asserted.<sup>vi</sup> His speech illustrated that, at least according to Kekkonen, the students were still seen as the nation’s hope. He viewed the critical attitude of the (radical) students towards developments within the society as being vital for the future. Moreover, the position of the students at the University of Helsinki was regarded as being of particular national importance, as was shown by the large media focus on the occupation and the anniversary celebration. The anniversary ball and parts of the occupation were even broadcast on television.

Kekkonen’s support for the students’ cause was manifested also in their struggle for greater participation in university decision-making. Kekkonen, as well as the Ministry of Education, had pressured the university for reforms in previous years. Now a parliamentary committee was established to solve the question of the reform of the university administration. The proposal of the committee was based on the students’ demand for the so-called one man – one vote principle. In practice this would have implied that all the members of the university, including the students, would have received the same right to vote for representatives of the university bodies. However, the professors and most of the other academic staff opposed the proposal, as they were afraid of the politicization of the university. In the end the proposal never went through the parliament, but it caused a long battle between students and professors.

The sympathy and the support of the highest political authorities for the radical students makes the Finnish case unique in a European perspective. At least as peculiar was the general character of the Finnish student revolt, which was as much the culmination point of a conflict among the students themselves as a confrontation between students and the university authorities. The difference of opinion within the student community was especially apparent in the debate about the cultural centre and the use of the Old Student House. Looking back, it seems rather obvious that the radicals would occupy the Old Student House because of its symbolic value and because they were inspired by similar kinds of occupations abroad, for instance in Stockholm. The immediate cause of the occupation was the ambition to prevent the

centenary ball of the Student Union. The background however, was the debate about the character and function of the House. If the rooms of the Old Student House had been reserved for the faculty associations, the use of the House would have been restricted. On the other hand, by establishing a cultural centre in the House, the openness and accessibility of the House could be emphasized. The idea was to offer an open public space to all students and in that way the question of the cultural centre reflected what was at stake in the conflict during the 1960s in general.

An immediate outcome of the occupation was the establishment of the cultural centre in February 1969 in answer to the demands of the radicals. In this way, the board of the Student Union hoped to channel the activism of the common students and to integrate the radicals. The new institution emphasized openness and the spontaneous nature of its activities. However, it was soon apparent that there was no spontaneous member activity and the main events of the new cultural centre were presentations and concerts – previously organized by the cultural committee. The cultural centre did not manage to channel student activism. Originally the idea had been developed in the pluralistic spirit of the 1960s. Now the generation was changing and polarization between different student groups had deepened. So ideologically the occupation of the Old Student House put an end to a pluralistic era in student politics. This was also the case in the representative council of the Student Union. In 1968 the dominant position of the faculty associations was challenged by the mental hegemony of party-political student organizations. A year later the politicization of the Student Union revealed itself in the new elections for the representative council, when most of the politically independent student organizations decided not to put forward any candidates.

The cultural centre quickly developed into a leftist bastion and its program did not attract a large number of students. Though the centre was a new cultural player in the city of Helsinki, students were no longer the main actors in it. In 1978, a fire caused substantial damage to the Old Student House. In a symbolic way this would mark a change in student politics, at a time when students' boredom with party politics led to a return to traditional student culture. In the public debate, the fire at the Old Student House reminded many of the years before 1968 and with the restoration of the Old Student House, the idea of students as an independent, educated elite was restored to a certain extent as well.

In that way we have come full circle. Finland had a long tradition of students acting as citizens and participating in the national discussion in a pluralistic atmosphere. This tradition of the 'student as citizen' was activated again in the 1960s. In the first instance the radicals assimilated student tradition, but then they began to criticize it and created a new elite culture of intellectual party-political students. At the beginning of the 1970s, this led to the marginalization of the traditional academic student culture for almost a decade. The Old Student House became a symbol and a result of this development. However, while the demonstrators of 1968 claimed the House for the common student, it soon became clear that they actually did not represent the common student. So by the end of the 1970s there was a gradual return to the notion of the students as the 'hopes of the fatherland', acting with a pluralistic spirit.

### Further reading

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<sup>i</sup> Maunu Harmo, “Ylioppilaskunta, herran jumala! [Student Union, My God!]”, *Ylioppilaslehti* (04.10.1968): 6-7.

<sup>ii</sup> Bonsdorff, *Kun Vanha vallattiin* (1986): 22.

<sup>iii</sup> Archives of the University of Helsinki: *Protocol of the representative council of the Student Union of the University of Helsinki* (08.12.1966).

<sup>iv</sup> Archives of the University of Helsinki: *Protocol of the representative council of the Student Union of the University of Helsinki* (30.11.1966).

<sup>v</sup> Bonsdorff, *Kun Vanha vallattiin* (1986): 9. Original orthography.

<sup>vi</sup> Urho Kekkonen, “Tasavallan presidentin juhlapuhe [Jubilee speech of the President of the Republic]”, *Ylioppilaslehti* (29.11.1968): 4-5.