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# The emergence of an Estonian landed elite

Johan Eellend, *Cultivating the rural citizen: modernity, agrarianism and citizenship in late tsarist Estonia*, Studia Baltica, Serie II:1, Södertörn doctoral dissertations 18, Huddinge: Södertörns högskola 2007. 247 pp. (Sammanfattning på engelska, utan titel.)

Although much is known about the process of modernization in Estonia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the transformation taking place in the rural sector has yet to be researched in any substantial depth. Especially missing have been studies that investigate the consequences of socioeconomic change in the countryside at the local level, that is, the parish (Est. *kihelkond*, Ger. *Kirchspiel*), the rural township (Est. *vald*, Ger. *Gemeinde*), or the individual farmstead. Thus, Johan Eellend's dissertation is a welcome addition to the existing historical literature on the Estonian rural world in an era of rapid change. The subject is well chosen and certainly deserves thorough treatment.

Applying Habermas's notion of the public sphere to the rural sector, Eellend seeks to elucidate how networks of communication and increasing interaction were created in the Estonian countryside, focusing on the last two decades before World War I. The most dramatic event in this period was the Revolution of 1905, when the tsarist regime was thrown off balance for nearly the entire calendar year. But throughout these years the central government was faced with growing grassroots mobilization in a modernizing and restive society. As one of the most developed parts of the Russian empire, the Estonian areas in the northern half of the Baltic Provinces participated strongly in this process. To structure the argument Eellend makes use of the following three concepts: modernity (used here interchangeably with "modernization"), agrarianism, and citizenship. The most fully developed and useful of the three is agrarianism, which the author defines as a "rural ideological response to modernization" (p. 19). The rural sector was particularly challenged by industrialization and urbanization, and one of the goals of agrarianism was to "preserve and defend peasant virtues within modernizing society" (pp. 31–32). Socially, the focus of the dissertation is on an emerging rural elite, the growing class of landed Estonian farmers whose numbers expanded considerably following major mid-nineteenth-century agrarian reforms. A smaller group of renters seeking entrance to this elite is also part of the picture while the great mass of landless peasants, whose land hunger would only be satisfied by the sweeping reform of 1919, remains on the fringes of the study.

Eellend analyzes the emergence of a rural public sphere in the Estonian countryside by means of several vehicles: an expanding Estonian-language agricultural literature, especially instructional books and journals; the activities of various

local agricultural societies and cooperatives whose numbers burgeoned in the years under study; and the role played by attempts at establishing a larger organizational base (agricultural congresses in 1899 and 1905 as well as the All-Estonian Congress, also meeting during the revolutionary year of 1905). The evolution of agricultural literature in Estonian generally paralleled the development in other fields as well.

An initial breakthrough, for example the works of Carl Robert Jakobson in the 1860s and 1870s, was followed by increasingly sophisticated and professional approaches which by the 1890s included translation of foreign models. An important example of this trend was the Norwegian agronomist N. Ødegaard's *Jordbrugs lære* (1893), which appeared in numerous Estonian printings beginning in 1899. Nor should the role of agricultural sections and columns in weekly newspapers and other periodicals be underestimated. With its strong Lutheran tradition the Estonian-speaking population had achieved near-universal reading ability by the end of the nineteenth century. By the mid-1890s specialized agricultural journals, edited by highly educated individuals such as Aleksander Eisenschmidt (Ph.D in agronomy at the University of Königsberg), began to appear and achieved a substantial circulation, for instance *Põllumees* (The Farmer) and later *Põllutööleht* (The Agricultural Journal).

The dominant rhetoric in the Estonian agricultural literature focused on the need to overcome backwardness – especially the legacies of serfdom – through modernization and applying rationality as well as a scientific approach to farming. As international awareness grew, models from the more advanced parts of Europe and the United States were increasingly appealed to. The envisioned ideal type in the Estonian rural world remained the sturdy individual farmer, that is, the male head of the household, who embodied a strong work ethic and a powerful sense of responsibility to his family and the farmstead. Eellend argues that the emphasis on the independent and self-reliant role of the individual farmer contributed to an ideal of active citizenship and participation in the life of the community. The goal of modernity was also reflected in the growing idealization of the nuclear family, a departure from the traditional practice in the Baltic region. Not surprisingly in an era that increasingly emphasized female domesticity, a strict gender coding of tasks was depicted in the literature. The well-known stereotype of an "external" male sphere and an "internal" female one dominated, although ethnographic studies on this period suggest that in practice patriarchal norms were at times sidestepped. Nevertheless, the key difference was that the male sphere was depicted as being tied to modernization and development while the female one embodied stability and sameness.

Despite the authoritarian nature of the regime and the growing fear of popular activism in official ranks, voluntary associations became the most important institutional means for social mobilization in the Baltic region during the late

tsarist era. Following the earlier model established by the Baltic German elites, the Estonians and Latvians took extensive advantage of the opportunities for self-organization. To be sure, the professed aims were limited and strictly apolitical, for instance, music, temperance, sports, and firefighting, but in practice these societies clearly contributed to the development of civil society. Among the most significant of these organizations in the Estonian lands were the local agricultural associations whose numbers mushroomed from seven in 1893 to eighty in 1911. In his study Eellend chooses to focus on the experience of five agricultural societies, selected in part for their geographical representativeness, but also for the relatively rich archival record that remains extant in each case. Among the membership, ethnic Estonian farm owners clearly dominated, but also represented were the local intelligentsia (teachers, in particular), farm renters, artisans, and a few estate owners (both Baltic Germans and Estonians). Eellend rejects the Soviet-era view that the Baltic German presence was merely an obvious attempt to exercise control over these organizations. He argues that the agricultural associations were also able to make effective use of the Baltic German elite's connections to higher authority for their own purposes. In addition, the presence of both Estonian and Baltic German landowners reflected growing class solidarity in the countryside, but the sharpening of ethnic divisions as a result of the Revolution of 1905 led many Baltic Germans to leave the agricultural associations. In terms of activities the associations focused on agricultural instruction and practical work, most typically in the form of monthly lectures with a strong educational emphasis. Also of increasing importance were periodic agricultural exhibitions which displayed farm animals, various agricultural products, and handicrafts.

As the number of agricultural associations expanded, the question of coordinating their activities for mutual benefit arose along with the possibility of establishing formal ties. The first attempt to move in this direction came at an agricultural congress in 1899 on which the tsarist authorities cast a wary eye. Despite some fears that a formal organization would lead to too much centralized control, the congress agreed to the formation of a central association, located in Tartu, but governed by a board whose members in the majority came from the local organizations. A second agricultural congress met during the very changed atmosphere of July 1905 in which the ability of the central government to limit the range of topics discussed had largely withered away. The striking focus on the rights of agricultural workers reflected a new social radicalism that clashed with the interests of the landed farming elite. A few months later, during the crescendo of the revolutionary mood in November, the All-Estonian Congress, representing the rural townships, the cities, and the voluntary associations, was called together in Tartu. In view of the rural background of great majority of the delegates, agricultural issues were very much on the agenda, but they were overshadowed by the

sharp ideological struggle between liberalism and socialism as well as the pressing issue of the future form of the Russian state.

The final substantive chapter of the dissertation focuses on the agricultural cooperative movement, which flourished in the freer post-1905 atmosphere and which Eellend views as a kind of natural extension of the activities of the agricultural societies. In addition to their propagation in Estonian agricultural publications, the groundwork for acceptance of the concept of cooperatives was also laid by increasing awareness of their success in neighboring countries, especially in the Nordic lands. The leading agronomist Aleksander Eisenschmidt set the tone by arguing that cooperatives would compensate for the disadvantages of small farms and also keep in check the negative tendencies that inevitably resulted from an emphasis on individualism in the rural sphere. Learning to cooperate, however, was a challenge, and many of these organizations struggled in their first years. Despite the opposition and interference of the tsarist authorities, one solution that emerged was to pool the resources of individual cooperatives into a larger network, such as savings and loan associations and consumer cooperatives.

The dissertation could have been strengthened by placing its major focus on agricultural societies into the larger framework of Estonian grass-roots mobilization in the late tsarist era, thus providing a broader context for understanding the role of the rural sector in the process of modernization. It is puzzling that important nearby models of agrarianism, among them Finland and Denmark, are only discussed in a fragmentary manner while distant East European examples receive more systematic treatment. Although the qualitative analysis here is very solid, complementary quantitative data – statistics on landholding, the agricultural associations, and the size of the emerging rural public sphere in general – are largely missing. That said, Eellend's work deserves praise as an original approach to the study of the Estonian rural sector which makes effective use of a wide range of archival and other primary sources. The focus on the three sub-themes of modernity, agrarianism, and citizenship provides a nicely coherent structure for the argument. Particularly noteworthy is Eellend's sensitivity to gender issues and his innovative treatment of the role of women in the changing Estonian rural world. He has taken an important step toward providing us with a more nuanced and complex picture of that world.

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