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## Making of Modernity in the Vernacular: On the Grassroots Variations of Finnish Socialism in the Early Twentieth Century

The article scrutinises the concept of socialism at the grassroots of the Finnish labour movement during the early twentieth history. Primary sources consist of three handwritten newspapers, produced by industrial workers, housemaids and the rural proletariat. While factory workers could adopt the orthodox formulation of socialism from *The Communist Manifesto*, the socialism of the housemaids had a more existential function for it gave them a political voice to articulate a greater meaning in life that stood in sharp contrast to the silent servility demanded by their mistresses. The concept of socialism gained most explanatory breadth among the rural proletariat in north-eastern Finland, where it was used as an indicator of inequality locally, as a weapon in national elections and as a direct linkage to the international labour movement. The examples demonstrate that vernacular socialism was more multidimensional than what the contemporary critics and later researchers have suggested. The concept of socialism was one of the main tools in the making of proletarian modernity: it was used to claim political subjectivity in the public sphere, to imagine a gap between the old world left behind and the new coming world, and to extend their spatial horizons beyond the local community.

Keywords: Grand Duchy of Finland, handwritten newspapers, modernity, socialism, workers

## Introduction

Rolf Reichardt noted in the 1980s that the history of ideas had been dominated by what he labelled as *Gipfelwanderungen*, “summit hiking,” referring to the focus on canonical elite thinkers and theories instead of populaces and everyday language (1985, 63). Still in the year 2020, it is difficult to find examples of intellectual history or *Begriffsgeschichte* (“the history of concepts”) that would scrutinise texts written by those people who did not write for living, which means the vast majority of human beings ever existed on this planet after the invention of writing. Probably there are both ideological and practical reasons for this elitist trajectory. The ideas of “best” thinkers, usually white men of privilege in “Western” history, have been perceived more coherent and refined than fuzzy and raw thoughts imagined by the uninitiated populaces (Maciag 2011). In addition, elitism is embedded in the histories of our archival systems that have preserved precisely that what has been valued important from the perspective of the past present (Carter 2006). The writings of ordinary people are scattered around the archives, and for a scholar interested in their ideas, tracing these fugitives of history requires extra work if compared to the more easily available sources—and extra work does not fit well with the current academic fashion of “publish and perish” (Colpaert 2012). Thus, we live in the strange situation in which the giants of conceptual history and ideology studies have for long ago acknowledged the importance of studying concepts and ideologies as they were used by the populaces (Koselleck 1972; Freedon 1997, 7), but theoretical endorsements have not led to the breakthrough of concrete works specialising in vernacular political languages. It seems that the most innovative contributions to the history of ideas at the grassroots of societal life have not originated from conceptual history or intellectual history but rather from the fields like cultural history, microhistory and book history (see e.g. Thomas 1971; Ginzburg 1980; Darnton 1985).

This article turns the scope of scholarship towards the very beginners of political thinking. The concept of socialism will be studied in the Grand Duchy of Finland in the early twentieth century by reading texts composed by housemaids, unskilled factory workers and rural proletariat. In the classical accounts of Finnish and European socialisms, the idea of socialism itself has been sketched on the basis of the most prominent theoreticians and the leaders of the labour movement, whereas its meaning for the rank and file has largely been based on anecdotal evidence or ignored entirely (Soikkanen 1961; Schieder 1984; Freedon

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1996, 417–55; Eley 2002). Departures from this trend are unusual (Marzec 2017). Although there has been a welcome shift to write women as part of the intellectual history of socialism since the 1980s, even the most recent attempts have focused on the educated minorities instead of ordinary working-class women (Kemppainen 2020).

On those rare occasions in which the socialist writings from below have been taken seriously, the results have been open to debate. For example, Jari Ehrnrooth's dissertation *Power of the Word, Force of Hatred* argued that while at the top of the Finnish labour movement the hegemonic Kautskyite Marxism dominated socialist thinking, at the grassroots, socialism was transformed from international, theoretical and rational to local, concrete and emotional. Instead of modern political thinking, Ehrnrooth found what he labelled as “old-fashioned” and “archaic” hatred in the handwritten newspapers of 1905–1914, produced by the rank-and-file workers (1992, 484, 491–2, 494, 563, 572–4). While some reviewers appreciated that Ehrnrooth had fleshed out the emotional dynamics pushing the labour movement forwards (Kujala 1995, 21–2), others questioned whether emotionality was specific to socialism or rather part of the Finnish modernity more broadly. Tapio Bergholm suggested that the Finnish popular movements at the turn of the twentieth century were not characterized by a deep antagonism between passionate hatred and rational education, but powerful collective emotions and enlightenment ideals coexisted simultaneously (2002). While the major Finnish interpretations during the 1980s and 1990s tended to explain the nature of the socialist labour movement either as an instigator of violent class conflict (Ehrnrooth 1992) or as a constructive element in the rise of civil society (Alapuro et al. 1987), it seems that the latest research has moved beyond the antagonism between emotion and reason (Teräs 2001; Salmi-Niklander 2004; Suodenjoki 2010; Rajavuori 2017). These studies have carefully analyzed proletarian agency in local contexts by limiting their focus on individual communities.

Using three case studies, this article wishes to expand from these regional reflections towards the general thought patterns of Finnish socialism and European modernity. Thus, in the following pages, a fresh interpretation of vernacular socialism will be constructed from all the mentions of socialism published in three different handwritten newspapers. While three papers with 115 issues in total cannot provide a comprehensive description of all the nuances attached to the concept, a surprisingly rich mosaic of proletarian socialism emerges from the found speech acts. Instead of archaic, authentic and irrational, the socialism I have encountered in the writings of the ordinary working people seems

“politically modern.” By this I mean that the working-class writers used the modern concept of socialism in order to 1) to claim political subjectivity in the public sphere, 2) to make a stark difference between the present and the past, and 3) to expand their spatial imagination beyond the local community. These features—subjectivity, temporality, and spatiality—have been noticed in the previous research on political modernities (see e.g. Rancière 2004; Koselleck 2004, esp. 255–75; Anderson 2006), but their concrete manifestations in the vernacular language have escaped critical scrutiny. This article hopefully not only broadens our scholarly picture of the most influential ism in the long nineteenth century but also challenges the age-old idea of the ordinary people not having enough intellect to be counted as truly modern political thinkers.

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### The Making of Modernity with the Concept of Socialism

Socialist movements arose throughout the European political space in the course of the long nineteenth century, but measured by seats in parliament it was in the Grand Duchy of Finland that the largest socialist party emerged (Hilson et al. 2017, 7). The specific features of Finnish socialism included 1) late beginning in the 1890s compared to other European socialist parties, 2) exceptionally large size of the party in the early twentieth century, 3) broad agrarian base but insignificant support from the intelligentsia, 4) highly political nature of the labour movement, i.e. political organization under the socialist party was more extensive than organization into trade unions, and 5) ideological moderation compared to other socialist parties operating in the Russian Empire (Kirby 1987, 482, 484; Alapuro 1988, 114–27, 178–9; Kettunen 1986, 61–9; Kujala 1989, 28, 326). However, the general features of Finnish socialism attached it to the mainstream of European socialism at the turn of the twentieth century, i.e. “vulgar Marxism” or “simplified Marxism” that was popularized by Karl Kautsky. The doctrine consisted roughly of three key elements: 1) economic theory of exploitation, 2) materialist conception of history, and 3) the independent organization of working classes into political parties as the main strategy (Sassoon 2010, 5–6; Soikkanen 1961, 28).

The concept of socialism played a key role in the formation of European socialist movements. In the German-speaking world, socialism had become a slogan during the revolutions of 1848 (Schieder 1984, 968), but for the imperial borderlands of the Russian Empire, such as the Grand Duchy of Finland, it was the Revolution of 1905 that played

a paramount role in the mass circulation of socialism (Marzec and Turunen 2018, 41–7). This revolution ushered new populaces into the political sphere, and for many Finnish workers the General Strike in November 1905 meant their first involvement in socialism. The strike also ended preventive censorship, and during the years 1906–1907 one could write about socialism more freely than ever before in Finnish history, until the Russification measures were reinstated in 1908 (Nygård 1987, 93). Even during this so-called second era of Russification, 1908–1917, the position of Finnish socialism was unique in the context of the Russian Empire in the sense that Finland had the only legally operating socialist party which could practice public agitation and spread the concept of socialism through newspapers, booklets and social evenings (Kujala 1989, 28, 326). The quantitative strengthening of socialism in the aftermath of the General Strike of 1905 had important consequences for the conceptual history of Finnish socialism. The number of those people who used the concept in order to make sense of their life multiplied, and this, in turn, led to rich conceptual variations of socialism at the grassroots of Finnish labour movement which will be studied with the help of three handwritten newspapers.

Handwritten newspapers used in this article were not a mere product of a unique historical event, i.e. the General Strike of 1905, but part of a wider and longer term cultural phenomenon: the rise of Finnish civil society and popular movements caused handwritten newspapers to flourish at the turn of the twentieth century (Salmi-Niklander 2013, 77–8). These papers were written collectively, meaning that the roles of editors, sub-editors, reporters and contributors would be changed after every issue. When the issue was ready to be published, it was usually read aloud at the workers' meetings (Turunen 2019, 174, 177). Orality affected the content. Many of the texts became extremely context-dependent with multiple references to local personalities, events and places (Berenberg 2014, 315, 322–3; Salmi-Niklander 2006, 113). Thus, compared to the printed newspapers, the relationship between the creators and the audience was closer in the handwritten papers. In addition, ordinary workers had more political agency as producers of handwritten newspapers than as mere consumers of the print. The handwritten examples below will show that the concept of socialism was one of the main tools that these rising subjects of Finnish civil society exploited to re-interpret their own social world anew: although the working people had gained universal suffrage in the parliamentary reform of 1906, they still felt lacking equality in practice, and this experience of inequality was repeatedly constructed using socialism as a conceptual gauge.

## Becoming a Political Subject

According to Rancière's definition, a political subject is a capacity for staging scenes of dissensus, "putting two worlds in one and the same world" (Rancière 2004, 304). He uses the French women in the late eighteenth century demanding equality as subjects of the Rights of Man as a historical example of political subjectivity. In the case of the Finnish housemaids living in the early twentieth century, a similar phenomenon of finding one's own political voice can be heard in their handwritten union newspapers in the capital of Helsinki. There is a dialogue, probably fictional, on the topic between two housemaids. Another one of them thinks that handwritten newspapers are useless for their content is of little value and already well known, thus, printed newspapers should be read at the union meetings instead of low-quality proletarian scribbles. The other housemaid disagrees and explains that writing develops thinking skills much more than just reading thoughts completed by other people. According to her, housemaids had been taught to be silent and their condition could be compared to the condition of the dumb: "we cannot interpret our emotions, thoughts, neither strivings nor hopes." She continues that in Finnish literature, the housemaids had been portrayed as simple-minded people, but, in reality, housemaids were no different from other people. This argument convinces the more skeptical housemaid, and she promises to contribute to the next issue of the union paper (*Palveliatar*, January 23, 1908).

Based on their handwritten formulations, the housemaids believed that they were marching at the tail end of the Finnish labour movement: they were the lowest underclass of the working classes, with the longest hours and least political awareness. However, the situation was not hopeless: "After all, there are some among the housemaids who are developed and lively, who value their lives and who do not drag along without a goal, namely, they are aware of the ideal, that great and common socialism of the poor." (*Palveliatar*, February 9, 1911). Spelling errors and missing punctuation in the Finnish original suggest that housemaids' harsh self-criticism was not entirely misplaced. Although this variant of socialism is perhaps not the most theoretically or technically sophisticated formulation found among the handwritten newspapers, the use of the concept in this environment shows how becoming a political subject might have looked like from the grassroots perspective.

In the union meeting of 1913, a housemaid shared her story that had happened a decade ago in Tampere. The amount of details in the story indicates that it was most likely based on real events. One day she

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was walking outside with her mistress. The lady became extremely irritated when the newsboys were trying to sell the local labour paper “to one of the finest ladies in town,” meaning herself. The lady called the paper “savage” and “inferior”: only “the riffraff” read it. This event ultimately transformed the housemaid’s life: “I got interested, I bought it secretly, I read it secretly at night and this is how I found out why it was dangerous.” Some weeks later a confrontation develops between maid and mistress over time off on Sundays. The mistress wants the maid to attend church during her two-hour break, but the maid wants to meet her friend instead. The maid gets her way, and the mistress is astonished by her stubbornness. The mistress complains that, in the good old days, maids used to go to church on Sundays, stay in service in the same house for long and did not constantly demand more money and time off. The maid suggests that perhaps the mistresses have become evil, too, earning the maid the title of “the most impudent maid we have ever had” from the mistress (*Palveliatar*, January 30, 1913).

Fundamentally, this is a story of a maid finding her own voice and becoming a political subject: running accidentally into a socialist newspaper on the street initiated a transformation, changing a humble servant into a quick-tongued fellow citizen who could hold her own in a debate with her employer. The story also demonstrates the adaptability of the concept of socialism to the local conditions: when the class conflict was portrayed in the Finnish working-class fiction from the gender perspective, the hegemonic plot concerned a poor girl abused by the predatory upper-class men (Palmgren 1966, 387–9), but in the stories imagined by the housemaids, it is the ladies of the house who come in for the sharpest criticism and most unfavourable portrayals. Ladies are described with negative adjectives such as “mocking” and “mean” (*Palveliatar*, May 12, 1910) and sometimes sarcastically called as “Her Ladyship” (*Palveliatar*, May 12, 1910). They have an “angry voice” and “fierce look” when commanding their servants (*Palveliatar*, May 26, 1910). In real life, it was often wiser for housemaids to remain silent and submissive in the house, but the domestic tyrants could be ridiculed in the realm of a handwritten newspaper that served as a medium of sweet revenge.

It might seem paradoxical that these housemaids often addressed their words directly to their oppressors who were not physically present in the union meetings, but this can be understood once the function of handwritten newspapers is explained more in depth with a help of another story published in *Palveliatar*. A young girl is trying to organize housemaids but her more conservative colleagues blame socialists for

atheism, strikes, riots and wasting money. These maids are afraid of being dismissed from their place of service, dream about getting a better life through marriage and make fun of the young agitator. The story ends with a question posed to everyone present in the meeting where the story was read aloud: "What could I do to awaken their understanding?" (*Palveliatar*, March 7, 1917.) It is typical of this specific paper to process the concept of socialism through fiction in which the housemaids act as protagonists. Surely many in this audience consisting of unionized housemaids had been in a similar situation in their own lives as the girl from the world of fiction. Why did the housemaids prefer fiction to factual prose when dealing with clearly political topics such as questions of union organization? Only speculative answers can be found: perhaps fiction made dull topics more captivating for the live audience, perhaps the short story as a genre simply happened to develop into a local tradition among the housemaids who then took themes and characters from their daily surroundings, or perhaps they wanted to challenge the mainstream image of housemaids in fiction that portrayed them in passive roles, as the minor characters of human life. In contrast, their own stories showed people who had perhaps never dreamt of entering domestic service but who, nevertheless, had found a greater meaning of life through socialism.

Even more important than the choice of genre is the question of why to formulate thoughts about socialism in a handwritten newspaper in the first place. The short answer is that handwritten newspaper enabled maids to create their own public sphere with minimal resources: only pen, paper and some kind of a shared meeting place were needed (Berrenberg and Salmi-Niklander 2019, 134). The concept of socialism, in turn, helped to restructure the everyday life: in the handwritten newspaper, housemaids imagined a narrative in which they were not weak and mistresses rude because of their personal qualities but because of the societal position they happened to inhabit in the capitalist system. Thus, socialism as a concept of modern political thinking helped housemaids to see their local oppressors from the systems perspective.

### Travelling Back and Forth in Time

If the making of modern political subjectivity by entering the self-made public sphere characterized the handwritten paper of the housemaids, industrial workers concentrated more on mental time travelling in the modern fashion. The General Strike of 1905 brought socialism to the



greatest factory in the Grand Duchy, namely, the Finlayson cotton mill in Tampere. The cotton mill workers established a social-democratic trade union in 1905 and started to publish their handwritten union newspaper *Tehtaalainen* from 1908 onwards. According to Koselleck's famous thesis on temporality, the emergence of modernity—especially the unexpected rupture of the French Revolution of 1789—diminished the value of experience in forecasting the future (Koselleck 2004, 263–7), but in this factory it was the year 1905 that had brought the modern temporality among the unskilled industrial workers: in their own words, the strike was “such an alarm clock for the proletariat in our miserable Finland that it should be time to wake up and sleep no more” (The annual report of the Finlayson cotton mill union in 1905, Tampere City Archives).

The factory workers who had woken up to socialism used their political imagination to travel back into their pre-socialist youth. A working woman wrote that in her youth socialism and the labour movement were practically unknown in Finland, apart from bourgeois newspapers that carried short pieces on “socialist riots” abroad. Back then, socialism “was thought to be only a treat for the great countries,” but now Finnish workers enjoyed “the luxury of a special labour party” (*Tehtaalainen*, May 1, 1914). Using a very similar periodisation, a working man from the same factory recalled his elementary schooldays at the turn of the twentieth century, when he was first introduced to socialism. According to his teacher, socialism meant dividing everything evenly between the rich and the poor, which would have to be done very often for there would always be lazy and drunken people. The teacher predicted that socialism would “disappear after spending a while in some dreamers' heads.” Now, around fifteen years later, the working man could update the situation of socialism in Finland: “There were a lot us working-class children in that class who have later come to realize that socialism is precisely the idea that wants to promote the interest of the poor and to create happiness and wellbeing for each class.” (*Tehtaalainen*, March 27, 1914). These two examples show how the factory workers used the modern concept of socialism in order to re-interpret their personal past. They clearly recognized the historical layers embedded in the concept and wanted to shape this tradition with their own hands.

Perhaps the shortest sensible definition of political modernity can be constructed from the experience of time: modernity means a belief that tomorrow will be different than today. This idea was famously crafted in *The Communist Manifesto*: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober

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senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” (Marx and Engels 2010, 16). In the Finlayson factory, one worker conceptualized the modern era with its increasing uncertainty as the “age of ideological currents” and warned the audience not to “blindly follow a current” but to “open their eyes” instead. A socialist current gained a positive definition: it wanted to improve the condition of the proletariat by taking the means of production to the collective ownership of all social classes (*Tehtaalainen*, no. 0, 1910). This formulation was close to the mainstream ideology of the Finnish labour movement, i.e. Kautskyite Marxism that highlighted the economic interpretation of socialism. It seems that ideological challengers of materialist understanding of socialism, e.g. theosophical socialism, did not threaten proletarian orthodoxy in these industrial conditions. The term “theosophy” received only one dismissive mention in the whole history of the union paper: “The theosophical direction dreams strange assumptions and arbitrary contemplations of god and his revelation.” (*Tehtaalainen*, no. 0, 1910).

The dominance of simplified Marxism at the Finlayson factory is not surprising since the main figures of the union were well connected to the social democratic mother party (Kanerva 1986, 611–2). One of the leading figures of the union, a female cotton mill worker, Ida Vihuri, wanted to define the concept of socialism in relation to the state church: “Socialism tries to release the working people from the spiritual and economic oppression in which the church keeps it.” (*Tehtaalainen*, August 15, 1908). The Christian labour movement was a local rival, and their party won a surprisingly large share of the votes in Tampere in the first parliamentary elections of 1907. Previous research has estimated that many religious factory women in particular contributed to their success (Haapala 1986, 307). Nevertheless, according to the Finlayson union minutes, the Christian labour movement was not seen as such a great threat as “the unorganized,” who fiercely opposed all united action (The minutes of the Finlayson cotton factory union’s board meeting 12.12.1913, The People’s Archives). According to Vihuri, the main challenge of socialism was to make the working people understand their miserable condition and to raise hope for a better tomorrow (*Tehtaalainen*, no. 1, 1911). Here two different political temporalities collided: many older Christian workers claimed that they were not living in misery and that socialists should not always lambast religion and church, whereas in the socialist understanding, the Christians were still sleeping the capitalist dream and believed falsely in the Divine Providence that would compensate their obedience in the life after death (The minutes of the carding section women

workers' meeting at the Finlayson cotton mill 11 December 1913, The People's Archives).

One source of the socialist misery in the present is easy to pinpoint: *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, translated into Finnish for the first time by N. R. af Ursin in 1905 (Kujala 1995, 55–6). Another key character at the Finlayson factory, Alfred Wuolle, introduced the ideas of “the main theoretical founders of contemporary socialism, Karl Max [*sic*] and Friedrik [*sic*] Engels” by transcribing long fragments from *The Manifesto*. The names of both German experts of socialism were misspelled, but the introduction to class struggle was faithful to the original formulation:

Thus, the nature of classes gives birth to the class solidarity and instincts of class hatred, and socialists claim that the attempts of each class to maintain or improve their condition and the conflicts arising from these attempts make up the politics and history of each nation. (*Tehtaalainen*, February, 1914)

The writer's choice of words, “socialists claim,” indicate that Finnish workers were capable of adding reservations and adjusting their intellectual commitment to the new concepts of Marxist socialism. In other words, the fact that the proletarian workers were influenced by the print does not mean that their political imagination was determined by the socialist authorities abroad. All in all, the names of the socialist giants appear very infrequently at the grassroots of political thinking: Marx is mentioned twice, Engels once, whereas Kautsky, the leading thinker of the Second International and Finnish labour movement (Geary 2003, 219–20; Soikkanen 1975, 50–1), received precisely zero references in the three handwritten newspapers analyzed. It seems that socialist name-dropping did not have much currency in this environment: more important than the origin of an idea was whether or not the idea could be applied to lived life of the industrial proletariat.

The ability to crack political jokes can be seen as additional evidence of independent political agency at the grassroots of socialism. In this handwritten newspaper, one million Finnish marks was promised to a person who would develop a serum that would cure “the deliriums of socialism” and make patients “silent” and “as stupid as possible.” The serum would “release the educated class of Finland from the malicious nightmare which is known by the name of socialism.” (*Tehtaalainen*, March 19, 1908). This joke can be deciphered in the context of long antisocialist tradition: bourgeois newspapers had presented socialism as a disease or poison since the 1870s (see e.g. *Uusi Suometar*, August 9, 1871; *Uusi Suometar*, August 14, 1871). When a local priest compared

socialism to brothels in that both had a bad effect on young people, the cotton mill workers did not consider this as a threat to their socialist ideology, but as a humorous statement that should be written down and laughed at in the union meeting (*Tehtaalainen*, March 1, 1909). Both humorous anecdotes were targeted against the old world of hysterical bourgeois newspapers and deadly serious priests who could not read the signs of the times correctly. For these proletarian prophets of modernity, the old did not have any intrinsic value: history was valuable only as far as it showed way towards the socialist future.

### Expanding Spatial Horizons

Perhaps the richest understanding of socialism can be found among the rural proletariat in Niinivedenpää, a small village in North Savo. Counting the combined frequency of the terms “socialism” and “socialist,” the members contributing to *Kuritus*, the organ of the orators’ society in the local workers’ association, wrote more about socialism than the other two handwritten newspapers put together.<sup>1</sup> The concept of socialism was here “rich” especially in terms of its spatial coverage: in contrast to previous research that portrays Finnish rural socialism as simple-minded land distribution in the local context (see e.g. Soikkanen 1961, 391), the political imagination of the rural proletariat contributing to this paper far exceeded the limits of the local community. Borrowing Benedict Anderson’s theoretical formulation (Anderson 2006, 6), it could be phrased that the Finnish workers in this rather peripheral village used the modern concept of socialism to imagine the universal political community of the proletariat in their handwritten newspaper.

One rural worker articulated the modern spatiality of socialism with an apt definition:

Socialism is that every human is guaranteed a fully sufficient material livelihood and that a worker gets the fruits of his / her labour. That nobody has to suffer from hunger and need, that all human beings could feel happy. (*Kuritus*, December 26, 1910)

The quote sheds light on the basic structure of socialism in the vernacular language of politics. First, socialism is firmly attached to the concept of work. The same writer localized the Marxist idea of class

1 “Socialism” (*sosialismi*) was mentioned 12 times in *Kuritus*, 16 times in *Tehtaalainen* and two times in *Palveliatar*, whereas “socialist” (*sosialisti*) was used 43 times in *Kuritus*, 17 times in *Tehtaalainen* and five times in *Palveliatar*.

struggle to the agrarian surroundings with a simile that the rural proletariat could easily comprehend: “For the interests of the rich and the poor are as opposite as the interests of wolf and sheep on the pasture.” As another writer elaborated, if everyone did useful work and lived from their own labour, the “wonderful goal that socialism is after” would soon be achieved. But, in “this societal order,” there were useless extra mouths to feed, namely, those who owned “the greatest riches in society and means of production.” (*Kuritus*, September 12, 1909). The choice of words, especially “means of production,” can be read as another sign of Marx’s influence at the grassroots of Finnish socialism, more specifically, at least a preliminary understanding of his value theory.

While the first pattern meant reinterpreting the local working conditions from the extra-local perspective of modern socialism, the second pattern, visible in the quote and in other proletarian expressions, too, is presenting socialism as universal happiness. This conceptual structure was usually built with the help of terms referring to human beings, humanity and humankind. A woman under a pseudonym exploited the structure in her writing entitled “How Did I Become a Socialist?” The answer was unambiguous: “Because I don’t have any of the qualifications needed in contemporary society to be a true citizen, to be a human being in people’s eyes.” Although these statements may appear superficially as innocent appeals for universal humanity, there could be an element of particularism inside the argument. For example, this writer contrasted her missing humanity with “the ones with capital” who already had “won privileges.” (*Kuritus*, November 28, 1909).

In addition to marrying socialism with the concepts of work and universal human happiness, the rural version of socialism includes patterns that are familiar from other handwritten newspapers: socialism as a certain victory in the future (*Kuritus*, December 19, 1909), youth being the vanguard of socialism (*Kuritus*, October 16, 1910), socialism as the elevator of working women (*Kuritus*, March 13, 1910), and socialism conceptualized through political jokes and short stories (*Kuritus*, April 3, 1910). More exceptionally, the concept of socialism pervades a new genre, i.e. poetry, a unique phenomenon that cannot be found elsewhere in the handwritten newspapers. This poem is an adaptation of an unidentified original and tells about “the spirit of socialism” whose prime force cannot be understood by “the bourgeois intellect” (*Kuritus*, January 1, 1910). The general lack of the concept of socialism in proletarian poems cannot be explained by the lack of proletarian poetry itself: as Kirsti Salmi-Niklander has shown, poetry was a common genre in the handwritten newspapers (2004, 544–5). It rather seems to be

a terminological issue: nor does the Latin-based ism term appear in any famous labour songs, for there were other more poetic alternatives such as idea (*aate*) to refer to the concept of socialism.

One distinguishing feature of socialism among the rural proletariat is its extraordinary aggressiveness. Ehrnrooth has interpreted this quality as primitive, archaic hatred, rising from the ecstatic proletarian consciousness (1992, 29, 389–91, 401–3). The critical juncture when the aggressive messages were composed should be identified here: most of them are from the years 1909–1910, i.e. the period of heated national electioneering since the Tsar Nicholas II dissolved the Finnish parliament four times between the years 1908–1910. Thus, it is not entirely surprising that the concept of socialism emerges repeatedly as a fierce rallying call for the socialist party: “fulfill your duty in the socialist camp” (*Kuritus*, January 1, 1910), “obstructionism cannot kill the idea of socialism, only slow down its progress” (*Kuritus*, December 19, 1909) and “show them that socialism has not reached its peak” (*Kuritus*, November 13, 1910). This variant of socialism often positions itself against party-political opponents in the Grand Duchy, especially the Finnish Party, whose conservative ideology is constantly mocked in the handwritten newspaper. The Finnish Party for example spread lies about socialists “under the banner of nationalism, the language question and hypocrisy” (*Kuritus*, August 8, 1909). While the aggressive statements inside the political language of the rural proletariat are certainly characterized by their confrontational undertone, they are in my interpretation better understood as “electioneering socialism” than, for example, as primitive hatred flourishing among the masses.

Finally, considering the lower level of education in the peripheral rural areas compared to the cities, this socialism of the rural workers, rural servants and rural crofters seems to be surprisingly well informed in its relation to the Finnish mother party and to international socialism. For example, this paper contains a rare comment on the party tactics from the year 1910, when the socialist party and labour newspapers debated whether the Finnish parliament should send its opinion on the new Russification measures to Nicholas II in the form of a short notice or a longer petition. The debate was connected to the broader question of cooperation with the domestic bourgeoisie: should the socialists work together with the domestic bourgeoisie in the defense of Finnish autonomy or rather preserve the purity of Kautskyite class struggle? Here socialists divided approximately into two main camps, the nationalist reformists supporting cooperation and orthodox Marxists promoting parliamentary isolation (Soikkanen 1975, 136–46). However, this pro-

letarian writer in his local paper claimed that “unanimity” should be valued over “squabbles,” both inside the mother party and his local association (*Kuritus*, November 27, 1910). The tendency to avoid disputes on the correct nature of socialism is clear in other handwritten newspapers too, and it is perhaps best explained by the limited resources available for political thinking: it was more important to agree on a good enough definition of socialism than to spend finite time and energy on ideological hair-splitting about correct socialist tactics.

The political imagination of the writing rural proletariat even exceeded the framework of national and imperial politics, for there is an abundance of references to great thinkers outside the Grand Duchy and the Russian Empire. For example, the concept of socialism was enhanced with ideas taken from Enrico Ferri, Eugene W. Debs and Aristotle (*Kuritus*, May 21, 1911; *Kuritus*, October 10, 1909; *Kuritus*, August 8, 1909). It seems that these workers living in a tiny and remote village truly believed they were fighting on a global battlefield: “But when everybody joins the international socialist party, they will form a great and strong army for class struggle.” (*Kuritus*, October 16, 1910). All in all, socialism, as it appears in the pages of this handwritten newspaper, stands in stark contrast to those early twentieth-century scholarly analyses and artistic novels that portrayed agrarian socialism as a naive dream of getting rich quick (Forsman 1912, esp. 41–2; Kianto 1909). Rather, the concept of socialism was used here not only to reveal how the fruits of labour were distributed unfairly in the local context, but also as a weapon in national elections and as a direct linkage to the international labour movement.

## Conclusion

Three handwritten newspapers from three different Finnish locations do not equal to a grand pile of first-hand evidence, but they nevertheless can be used to correct some common biases in the historiography of socialism. The analysis of the vernacular expressions of socialism has shown that the people who do not write for living are not mere passive recipients of political messages from the leading ideological thinkers, but possess more intellectual agency than what might seem plausible for scholars using armchair introspection as their main method to venture into the proletarian thoughts of the past (for the most famous examples, see Le Bon 1896; 1899). The conceptual variations of socialism at the grassroots of the Finnish labour movement proves that it is

not fruitful to chain workers under a single reductionist category (e.g. “the populace” in the singular) for such one-dimensional monoliths do not shed much light on the complexity of human history. While it is true that there were no major internal controversies over the correct use of the concept in the rank-and-file utterances, this does not mean that they lacked the political intelligence needed for conceptual contestations of socialism: rather, they chose to spend their resources differently, not on debating on the theoretical differences between scientific socialism and theosophical socialism, or on studying the international disputes between Kautsky’s Marxism and Bernstein’s revisionism, but on constructing a definition suitable for their own local environment.

In his pioneering work of Finnish labour history, Hannu Soikkanen commented on the vertical diffusion of socialist ideas and argued that when socialist concepts spread from the top of the movement to the grassroots, they transformed into “a few simple slogans” or adapted to local needs (Soikkanen 1961, 391). Based on the examples in the analysis, the latter part of this interpretation seems to be true, but the adaptation of socialism to the local conditions was more complex than the idea of simplification implies. The socialism of the housemaids in Helsinki had an existential function: it gave them a political voice to articulate a greater meaning in life that stood in sharp contrast to the silent servility demanded by their mistresses. Factory workers in Tampere could adopt the orthodox formulation of socialism almost directly from *The Communist Manifesto*, and used the vantage point of socialist temporality to re-evaluate their past and present. The concept gained most explanatory breadth among the rural workers in north-eastern Finland where it was used as a mental bridge that led the local members of the universal movement from their tiny village to the national, imperial and world-wide battleground of socialism. The high level of popular education can be seen in all of these grassroots formulations of socialism written by various groups of unskilled workers, a factor that was crucial both for the breakthrough of the concept and for the phenomenal rise of the Finnish socialist movement more widely. What I see in these grassroots formulations of socialism is political modernity in the vernacular: if modernity means becoming a political subject by entering the public sphere, imagining a gap between the old world left behind and the new coming world, and extending the spatial horizons beyond the immediate community, then one could say that the concept of socialism was one of the main tools in the making of proletarian modernity.



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**Tytuł:** Wytwarzanie nowoczesności w języku potocznym. O oddolnych odłamach fińskiego socjalizmu w początkach XX wieku

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł analizuje znaczenie pojęcia socjalizmu wśród szeregowych przedstawicieli fińskiego ruchu robotniczego w początkach XX wieku. Źródła, na których opiera się tekst, to trzy odrębnie pisane czasopisma, wytwarzane przez robotników przemysłowych, pokojówki i wiejski proletariat. Podczas gdy robotnicy przemysłowi przejmowali ortodoksyjne sformułowania z *Manifestu Partii Komunistycznej*, socjalizm pokojówek miał sens bardziej egzystencjalny, dostarczając im politycznych narzędzi do artykulacji tego, co uznawały w życiu za ważne. Taki akt ustawił pokojówki w kontrze wobec służalczości, której na co dzień od nich wymagano. Z kolei wśród robotników rolnych w północno-wschodniej Finlandii pojęcie socjalizmu uzyskało szeroki zakres znaczeń, gdyż było używane w dyskusjach o nierówności na poziomie lokalnym, jak również przy okazji wyborów na poziomie krajowym; wreszcie: jako koncepcyjny łącznik z międzynarodowym ruchem robotniczym. Zebrane przykłady dowodzą, że oddolnie wytwarzane znaczenia socjalizmu były bardziej

wielowymiarowe, niż sugerowali to ich ówcześni krytycy i późniejsi badacze tej problematyki. Tym samym, pojęcie socjalizmu było jednym z głównych narzędzi, służących do wytwarzania proletariackiej nowoczesności w Finlandii. Używano go do konstytuowania podmiotowości politycznej w sferze publicznej, do myślenia różnicy między przeszłym i przyszłym porządkiem społecznym, jak i do poszerzania politycznego horyzontu odniesień poza lokalną społeczność.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nowoczesność, odręcznie pisane czasopisma, robotnicy, socjalizm, Wielkie Księstwo Finlandii