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From democratization to flexibilization – The flourishing and fall of working life democracy

My paper analyzes the use of the concept ‘working life democracy’ in Finnish political rhetoric from the 1960s until early 1990s. Utilizing the conceptual historical approaches of Quentin Skinner and Reinhart Koselleck, I examine how major political and labor market parties used and defined the concept of working life democracy in their programmatic statements and how the concept changed during the period as a result of political struggles. Drawing on Skinner’s methodology, I concentrate on struggles between different ways of using and legitimizing concepts. In this respect especially the tension between the concepts of working life democracy and competitiveness as components of the national interest becomes significant. Even though I restrict my analysis to Finland, it should be noted that the debates and trends examined were largely transnational.

In the 1960s and 1970s, working life democracy was a standard ideal in all Finnish party programs from left to right. It was widely agreed that old hierarchical organizations should be democratized, but there were substantial differences as to what was considered ‘true’ or desirable working life democracy. In leftist and trade union rhetoric the concept meant true possibilities of decision-making and control of managers for employees within companies. Also profit sharing and collective forms of ownership such as wage-earner funds were envisioned as means to redistribute economic power. Bourgeois parties and Finnish business, in turn, wanted to promote consultative employee participation without actual redistribution of managerial power. The leftist alternatives were often portrayed as detrimental to efficiency and competitiveness. The reforms made in Finland during the 1970s and 1980s were mostly in line with the stance of business organizations. They increased employee participation but did not redistribute actual power or ownership of companies.

The concept of working life democracy provides an interesting viewpoint to the role of democracy in Finnish political thought. The practical vanishing of the concept from political rhetoric in the 1990s was closely connected to a new conception of economic necessities, the rise of neo-liberal beliefs and practices as well as discrediting of leftist/socialist critique of capitalism after the end of the Cold War. The close connection of the concepts of democratization and socialism apparently led to the former being set aside from mainstream political rhetoric rather than defining new, neo-liberal or neo-leftist content to democratic working life. In Finland this seems to have consolidated the conception of the economy and working life as apolitical domains, where decision-making is based on necessities and expertise, hence narrowing the scope of democracy. Citizens and employees can have more ‘participation’ in flexible working life, but final decisions should be left for managers and economists who are aware of economic facts. From the perspective of an individual employee, the development of the past decades has not made working life more democratic, but more competitive and insecure – a trend experienced throughout the western world.