

Risto Turunen: From the Object of History to the Subject of History – Writing Factory Workers in Finland in the Early 20th century

The Finnish workers adopted socialism in the early 20th century. At the same time, handwritten socialist newspapers spread all over the country. Why did the ordinary working people want to express their ideas in the form of a handwritten newspaper at the age of the print? I answer the question by focusing on the handwritten newspaper of the largest Finnish factory, namely Finlayson & Compagnie located in Tampere. This cotton factory had a religious reputation throughout the 19th century, but during the General Strike of 1905, the workers established a socialist trade union. In addition, they started to publish their own union newspaper *Tehtaalainen* (“Factory Worker” in English) that appeared about fifty times between 1908 and 1917. I analyze this newspaper from three complementary perspectives: the form, content and meaning. The form set boundaries to the content. The forms of production, presentation and reception were all collective by nature. Any union member could write to the paper. Each issue had an editor-in-chief, sub editor and reporter. One person read aloud a single copy of the paper at the monthly meeting where the union members listened the latest issue together. This collectivity separates the handwritten newspapers from the individualistic forms of workers’ writing such as personal letters or drawer poetry. The handwritten and printed newspapers of the early 20th century share some common features such as publicity and layout. The major difference is that a factory worker lacked the skills or time to publish in the print media. After the formal analysis, I explore the content with quantitative and qualitative methods. I have coded these diverse writings into a corpus of about 40 000 words. The statistical analysis proves that collective terms, especially collective singulars such as “laboring people”, “working population”, “proletariat”, “group”, “labour movement” and “class” were frequently used by the socialists in order to create political awareness. The first-person plural “we” was used more often than the first-person singular “I”. This quantitative distant reading of the whole corpus is followed by a qualitative close reading of one writing on writing entitled “The Meaning of *Tehtaalainen*”. The chosen text explicitly stresses the collective brainstorming potential of the paper. The analysis of the form, content and meaning indicates towards a shared identity project. In my interpretation, the implicit goal of the handwritten newspaper was to surpass the limits of an individual and to construct a collective subject. By writing, the cotton factory workers are changing themselves from the object of history to the subject of history.