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Ellen Key (1849-1926) as a visionary of a new industrial society: transfer of ideas and their reception

The present paper on the Swedish author Ellen Key contributes to the session by highlighting the impact of social reformist authors with middle/upper class background on working class debates on political reforms and social justice. Key, who was widely renowned in Europe as an advocate of particularly women's and children's rights, sympathized with moderate socialism and actively contributed to educational projects for lower classes. Within this context, she published booklets and articles that were disseminated and translated across national borders. On the threshold of and during the war 1914–1918 she appealed to socialist groups as peace makers.

As far as the Finnish and Swedish middle class feminists are concerned, Key's ideas resonated among the radical circles whereas the moderate, Protestant groups remained hostile to her. The present paper will examine Key's resonance for and influence on socialist women intellectuals like authors and journalists in Sweden and Finland, exploiting the transnational and comparative approaches and the concept of intersectionality. The following questions will be answered: How did Key's texts travel across the Finnish-Swedish border in terms of translations? How were they disseminated in the respective countries? Did her authorship create socialist women's networks across the Finnish-Swedish border? How was her message of women's special role, based on motherhood, in the political and cultural evolution and associated reforms received? How was her radical program of educational reform received? How did her message of socialism as a pacifist force resonate among her readers?

The discussion will be mainly based on a comparative analysis of socialist women's journals, with focus on articles and book reviews, in the period from the 1890s until 1918. The paper is part of an ongoing research project with the aim of an entangled biography of Ellen Key and the Finnish feminist Alexandra Gripenberg. Among Finnish socialist women, Gripenberg was rejected as a representative of conservatism and an advocate of exploitation of women's labor because she rejected gender specific labor legislation. Key, in turn, was an ardent advocate of a special protection for women workers. Among Swedish feminists, this standpoint was rejected because it was seen as an hindrance of women's right to work on equal terms with men.