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Historical perspective to “hate speech”? Socialist agitation in early 20th century Finland

The roots of political “hate speech” in Finland has been set often to years of political turmoil of the early 20th century. The general strike in 1905 and the Civil War in 1918 have been considered as the culmination points of the heated political situation. Those events included also rhetoric that would nowadays be referred to as hate speech. Especially the socialists have been accused of rhetoric based on hate towards the propertied classes.

In literature and also in historical research socialist agitation language and performance has been described as simple, rough and unsophisticated lower class register. Socialist rhetoric was based on contradictions and juxtaposition between the social classes and some of it might seem extreme to a contemporary reader. However, the language and discourse have changed over a century. Extreme and rough language was a part of general mentality in early 20th century. Strong emotions and also performing them in public were features of the mentality. Longing for principledness, honesty and authenticity woke those emotions. Popular movements also shaped the society towards hostility, because they all competed with each other fiercely for improvements of the society. There were dispute and controversy between and inside the popular movements.¹

The paper is based on my ongoing PhD research on socialist agitation and agitation meetings in rural Central Finland in early 20th century. One of the findings of the study will be that hate was only one dimension of socialist rhetoric and the meaning of hate in socialist agitation has been overplayed in Finnish historical research.

¹ Bergholm, Tapio 2002: Edistysusko ja puolueviha. – Katainen, Elina ja Kotila, Pirkko (toim.), Työväki ja tunteet. Väki voimakas 15. Helsinki: Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura, 192.