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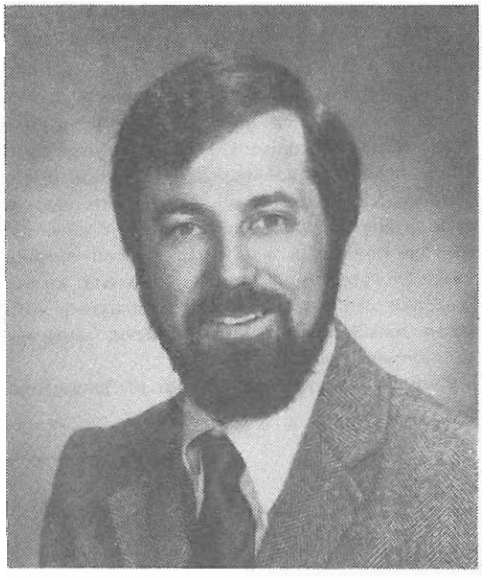
FORM AND CONTENT OF IMMIGRANT SOCIALIST IDEOLOGY: THE CASE OF THE FINNISH-AMERICAN LEFT



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Introduction

The post-Civil War United States can be seen as center stage for a drama of disruption and creation. In a resource-rich but population-poor country, the increased demand for labor necessitated by the advance of capitalist industrialization was met in large part by the wide-scale migration of workers from within the geographical nexus that Brinley Thomas (1954) termed the "Atlantic Economy." As these new actors entered the scene, they were not provided with a script. Instead, they were compelled to choose from among a variety of potential scripts, or, when that proved to be difficult or impractical, were forced to improvise their lines. This paper is concerned with those segments of this immigrant population for whom adherence to socialism was the response to their new circumstances that was chosen, shaped, and later generally abandoned.

Specifically, it will focus attention on one ethnic group, paying particular attention to the form and content of that group's socialist ideology. The case of Finnish-American radicalism can prove instructive since Finns were perhaps the most radical ethnic group to arrive in this country during the period under consideration. Their radical proclivities are evidenced by the disproportionate support the left received within the ethnic community. Although estimates vary and are imprecise (membership counts do not sufficiently account for the extent to which leftist sympathies permeated into the fabric of everyday social life), somewhere between twenty-five and forty percent of the Finnish immigrant population participated in the institutional network forged by radicals. In terms of their participation in major nationally-based radical organizations, the following information illustrates the extensive support Finns gave to the political left. Although Finns were a relatively small ethnic group of approximately 300 000, the Finnish Socialist Federation was the largest (and the first) foreign language federation of the Socialist Party between 1906 and 1918. After 1910, Finns converted in large numbers to

industrial unionism (particularly miners and lumber workers in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest), eventually becoming the dominant ethnic group in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). During the 1920's, the so-called "Red Decade," Finns were buoyed by the Russian Revolution and turned towards communism. Once again, they flocked to language federations, becoming the largest one in the Workers Party (by the middle of the decade, Finns comprised nearly 45 % of the total membership of the organization).

The question has to be asked, using Smelser's (1963) terminology: why did this "generalized belief" gain acceptance among such a substantial portion of Finns while many other immigrant groups remained relatively immune from its siren call? A first step in providing an answer involves a careful exegesis of the form and content of socialist ideology within the Finnish-American community. This paper will attempt to take that first step, and will, when completed, suggest what further steps are needed to come to an adequate understanding of the factors contributing to the differential support accorded to the political left by various proletarianized immigrant groups.

Rather than viewing ideologies as instances of illusion or a mis-readind of the world (i.e., false consciousness), the following discussion will follow Lyman and Scott's argument that they should be treated as "conceptual schemes that clarify the world at the same time they hope to change it (1970: 35)." What follows has been influenced by the seminal work of such figures as Althusser (1971), Gramsci (1971), Lukács (1968), and in particular by Gouldner (1976) and Rudé (1980). The ideology of protest forged by socialism must be seen, in general, as, to use Rudé's language, "'derived' notions (that are) grafted into the 'inherent' notions and beliefs (of a particular class or stratum) (1980: 35)." The unique situation of immigrant socialists which has not been adequately explored involves the following: an ideology had to be forged in a context characterized by the saliency of both ethnic and class identities and by the implications posed by the opportunities for acquiring a new citizenship.

Socialism: A Future-oriented Rationale

We will examine Finnish-American socialist ideology in media res, focusing on its articulation during the decade beginning in 1910, and thus prior to the move to Bolshevism. At this point, despite the consequences of intense nativist hostility, an ethnic community bitterly divided between "Red Finns" and conservative "Church Finns," and defeats on the labor front in such major confrontations as the 1907 Mesabi Range Strike and the 1913 strike in Michigan's Copper Country, the fracturing of left-wing unity, and government repression, the Finnish-American left reached its zenith. While the movement had already experienced one major schism, involving democratic socialists and industrial unionists, and another loomed on the horizon, it is nonetheless possible to examine features of the general ideology that underpinned Finnish socialism, since a number of commonly-held ideological convictions were shared by various factions which were often bitterly divided on issues of strategies and tactics.

Historically, the three major themes of the French Revolution have been articulated and shaped by socialists: freedom, equality, and fraternity. Though they produced no major theorists, Finnish-Americans sought to give expression to a coherent ideology in word and action. Beginning with freedom, it is first essential to note that it is a double-edged concept, implying both freedom from and freedom to. To be free implies to exist in a state where constraint, domination, and repression are eliminated. However, given the socio-historical relativity of the concept, what one individual or groups defines as freedom another individual or group may perceive to be the antithesis of freedom. This is due to the fact that, in the words of philosopher Frithjof Bergmann:

"an act is free if the agent identifies with

the elements from which it flows; it is coerced if the agent dissociates himself from the element which generates or prompts the action. This means that identification is logically prior to freedom, and that freedom is not a primary but a derivative notion. Freedom is a function of identification and stands in a relationship of dependency to that with which a man identifies (1977:37)".

It is axiomatic that socialists would not choose to identify with capitalism. Indeed, socialism is defined by its repudiation of capitalism, although in practice the animus of the rank-and-file was generally directed, not at capitalism, but at a specific ruling class personified in the form of venal capitalists intent on extracting as much profit as possible from the labor of workers, regardless of the detrimental consequences of such actions on workers. Thus, freedom is freedom from the capitalist, who is generally portrayed as an exploiter, an oppressor, one who treats workers as a means to an end, as mere machines or appendages to machines. In short, polemicists painted a picture similar to Brecht's dramas and George Grosz' art. Though the Finnish intelligentsia would agree with Marx that capitalism was an historical necessity that paved the route to socialism, the theme of capitalism as a uniquely productive, and therefore progressive, economic system is given little attention (cf. Berman, 1978). Instead, polemicists of socialism tended to treat capitalism as an atavism that prevented the social progress that would make all men free producers in ultimate control of the productive process, and not merely, in the words of a Finnish labor song, "working boys in the world's market place."

Freedom also meant release from the social pathologies that capitalism generated. Religious man was replaced, not by modern psychological man, but by sociological man, as the social problems that afflicted the Finnish-American community -- alcoholism being perhaps the most notorious, but including such problems as crime, prostitution, and violence -- were analyzed in terms of social causation. In the immigrant literature of such writers as Matti Hernshuhta, Richard Pesola, Aku Paivio, Kalle Tahtela, and Matti Huhta, a recurrent theme was "that workers were unable to develop their potential as human beings. In fact, workers were often described as spiritually and intellectually backward (Hoglund, 1977: 25)." The manifestations of social pathology were a result of the fetters of capitalism that served to alienate workers from their fellow-workers and from, in Marx's terminology, their "species-being." Thus, freedom from the domination of capitalism was deemed to be a necessary precondition for the emergence of human self-fulfillment. And socialism, of course, was seen as the key. In Aku Paivio's 1913 novel, Sara Kivisto, an immigrant workers' association is credited by the novelist with saving the heroine from the degradation of a life as a prostitute and providing her with a sense of meaning and self-worth that motivated her to help to free workers from the destructiveness of alcohol, fostering at the same time a heightened working class consciousness.

However, in contrast to utopian communitarians, socialists did not perceive industrial society per se as a threat to freedom. This can be seen most clearly in the frequent criticisms socialists directed at the one prominent instance of Finnish communitarian living in North America: the charismatic Matti Kurikka's Sointula (Harmony) settlement on Malcolm Island, British Columbia. Undoubtedly, some of the animus directed at Kurikka stemmed from the fact that he defected from socialism (between 1897-99 he had been editor-in-chief of Finland's first socialist newspaper, Työmies). Kurikka's experiment lasted only four years, from 1901 to 1905. It was predicated on an admixture of the utopian socialism of such figures as Fourier and Saint-Simon, Tolstoy's philosophy, and Madame Blatavsky's Theosophy. Socialists scorned it for its naive idealism and muddled quasi-religious

denigration of the class struggle, which Kurikka saw as an impediment to the acquisition of "spiritual power (Wilson, 1980: 17)." They condemned the commune's advocacy of free-love as a primitive throwback, viewing Kurikka's romanticism as a flight from modernity. In contrast socialists embraced modernity; their notion of freedom entailed, not the flight from, but the control of the direction of industrial civilization.

Equality was perceived as being closely related to freedom: the lack of freedom from capitalism was seen as the root cause of the extreme differentials of wealth and power existing in American society. Given the great disparities that radicals saw in this society, the focus of their concern was not so much on the shape of equality in a socialist society, but primarily on the nature of capitalist inequality. The following lament of Finnish-American lumberjacks alludes not only to the poverty that characterized their lives, but also to the low status they were accorded by the dominant society:

A wretched home, this cheerless camp!
And "finer people" sneer, make cracks;
"You ruffians, bums,
Bearded lumberjacks!"

Our wages are the rags we wear,
Our scraps of food no one digests.
Our beds are bunks,
And fleas our only guests.

(Kolehmainen and Hill, 1951: 38)

This pessimistic assessment of the workers' social condition is paralleled in traditional folksongs; devoid of political content, the following children's lullaby, which Aili Johnson discovered was commonly sung by immigrants, proclaims an unrelenting and eternal poverty:

O mother, wretched and poor,
That you should give me birth,
To be a slave to the earth,
To suffer misery.

(Johnson, 1947: 332)

Traditionally, escape from such oppression occurred only in dream, as the following song attests:

Over nine seas
I flew to a strange land
Where the trees are scarlet and the earth is blue;
There the mountains are butter,
The cliffs are pork;
The hills are sugar-cakes,
And the heather is honey.

(Johnson, 1947: 333)

In contrast, in the ideology of socialism depictions of the future contained concrete historical referents. The slave to the earth, and thus to an immutable fate, is capable of being transformed in an historically specific, and therefore changeable situation. The following verses comprise an adaptation Finnish-American socialists made of a traditional Finnish folksong, "The Wandering Boy":

Although as hoboes on a boxcar roof
We sing our many songs,
One day in a Pullman we shall ride,
Drawing great puffs of smoke.

Although we are but wandering boys,
Lacking the comforts of home,
Some day we shall sit in a great palace,
In the manner of great lords.

(Johnson, 1947: 339)

Under the influence of not only Marx and his successors, but also such figures as Edward Bellamy, socialists placed great faith in technological progress as a means of eliminating scarcity. Technology could replace scarcity and create a society of abundance, but this would occur only if technology was freed from the shackles of capitalism. This could be accomplished only through class struggle:

Although the share of slaves is ours,
Although we carry our chains,
Yet one day the man with the ship
We shall kick again and again.

(Johnson, 1947: 339)

Equality implied not only the reduction

in economic differentials, but a sharing of power. As one socialist remarked, "We Finns do not want to remain machines which wiser people crank." Socialism was concerned, not with reducing society to the communal horde, but with liberating the individual to become, not a means to an end, but an end in himself or herself. The centrality placed on the development of individual potential meant that the socialist notion of equality had marked affinities with the concept of equality articulated by the ideology of Americanism, where equality of opportunity as opposed to equality of outcome was stressed. The ambiguity of the Marxian goal, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," with its stress on differences in individual potentials and needs, finds its parallel in Americanism. In the early 1930's socialist Leon Samson, in his book Towards a United Front, argued that as ideologies, socialism and Americanism exhibited striking similarities. A quarter of a century later, Seymor Martin Lipset would embrace Samson's thesis as he argued that "a principal cause of the failure of Socialist ideology in America has been the fact that the symbolic goals of Socialism are indentical with those of Americanism (Lipset, 1960: 346; Samson, 1933).

However, unlike Americanism (and bourgeois liberalism in general), fraternity also played a central role in socialist ideology. Though fraternity is in socialist ideology perhaps the least developed part of the triumvirate of values, at a minimum it suggests a form of social relatedness characterized by cooperation among relative eguals who are motivated, not by a pecuniary calculus, but by a certain passion for the interests of the collectivity, and thus, as Ferdinand Mount (1976) has so astutely observed, when seen as an ideal of social relations extending beyond the intimacy of small groups, it is subject to "dilution," a watery version of blood ties.

For Finnish-American socialists fraternity was perceived to be not simply a goal of the future, but an important component of the struggle towards achieving that goal. In regard to freedom and equality, these objectives were to be achieved through collective rather than individual means. This has been referred to by historian William Hoglund as an instance of the Finns "associative spirit" (1960).

Together we rush to battle,
Hasten beneath the bloody flag.
Away the power of bosses!
Away ye cursed, ye bringers of sorrow!
Away the props of the great trusts.
Away the dark nights of oppression!
(Johnson, 1947: 337)

It is particularly important to note that the collectivity that would cast off oppression was defined in class rather than ethnic terms. It was as members of a class conscious proletariat, and not as Finns, that socialists believed they could potentially transform the world:

If the workers wish, they can
All the speeding trains,
The ocean's mighty steamers,
Tie in chains.

All the factories' giant wheels,
All the mines and every mill,
Yes, armies and navies, too
At their command stand still.
(Kolehmainen and Hill, 1951: 127)

If the fraternity brought to bear in the class struggle contained distortions and perversions, the ultimate goal of the future, viewed as a universal brotherhood of producers in a classless society, would be achieved when the working class had removed the impediments imposed by a class society. As such, it was predicated on the notion that humanity was not only malleable, but perfectible. The new individual of socialist society would be testimony to the errors of bourgeois ideologues such as the Social Darwinians who contended that human nature was an immutable given. Thus, the possessive individualism produced and sustained by capitalism would prove to be an

historically-specific character type, and its community-destroying propensities could be remedied.

Finnish socialists forged their radical organizations within the ethnic community -- partially due to choice, partially due to difficulties in communicating with other groups, partially due to intra-ethnic hostility, and partially because of roadblocks erected by native-born radicals to attempts at incorporation. In a situation characterized by the saliency of ethnic and class identities, Finnish-American socialists sought to commit themselves to what Serge Moscovici would refer to in another context as a "nonparochial ethnicity (1977: 165)." When socialist leaders urged the rank-and-file to Americanize (i.e., to learn English, to apply for citisenship), it was not in order to assimilate to the values and role expectations of the dominant culture, but to provide the bases for forging class solidarity. However, as the subsequent history of the Finnish-American left attests, praxiologically the linkages between class and ethnicity remained problematic. The ideological commitment to end ethnic particularisms confronted an emotional attachment to distinctly ethnic political organizations. This would be of great import to the later fate of these organizations because innovative organizations rely on a compelling ideology to sustain and maintain them over time. By ideologically defining their organizations as a way station to assimilation into a national, purely class-based political alliance, the Finns undermined the ability of these organizations to continue to exist over time and attract new recruits.

The debates over what was referred to as "hall socialism" (ethnically based facilities which became the hub of cultural and social life for leftist Finns) highlight the nature of the dilemma. To the extent that Finns created and nurtured their hall culture, they forged what could be seen as a model of socialist fraternity. For the rank-and-file membership, their organizations were clearly percieved as a sanctuary, a haven in a heartless capitalist world. They could be construed as symbolic demonstrations of a life liberated from the demands of work, loci for the expression of fantasy and imagination, and places where play informed the self-formative process of socialist man (cf., Hearn, 1976-77). On the other hand, to the extent that they sought to preserve these ethnically-based organizations, they could be accused of placing ethnic interests above class interests. And, indeed, the increasingly professionalized intelligentsia often made such accusations. Divorced from the day-to-day activities of hall culture, the intelligentsia justified their ascetic politics by appealing to a utopian future which, they contended, could not be achieved without demanding present sacrifices.

The portrayal of a utopian society of the future, though its contours were often imprecisely conceived, was made in distinctly secular terms. It was the product of secularized intellectuals who had experienced the erosion of faith in the wake of the spread of rationalism and its scepticism towards revealed theological truth. The natural audience of this utopia was a sector of the proletariat who, like their intellectual counterparts, had experienced the strains of disenchantment brought about by the double helix of secularization and rationalization. For both, there occurred a crisis of authority which meant that the traditional religious explanations of suffering and injustice were no longer compelling. Neither did they believe in divine intervention as a means of redressing sin and evil. In this context there occurred a quest for a new theodicy which propelled many to embrace "radical ideologies which looked to man's collective efforts --- to redress the world's wrongs (Smith, 1981: 95)."

Socialism can be seen as a particular type of theodicy, one in which a secularized element of society looked to reason for solutions to its plight. The editors of the social democratic newspaper Raivaaja, for example, sought to indicate that this entailed a repudiation of all dogma, for truth, far

from being subject to the dictates of sacred texts or charismatic individuals, would have to make its claim in reason's court. They wrote that "we have never believed in any authority, Karl Marx no more than Martin Luther (Kolehmainen, 1955: 44)."

However, in terms of forming a mass political movement, skeptical reason might appear to be an impediment to action since it subjects all authority claims to debate and generates ambiguity and uncertainty. In this respect, it would appear incapable of producing the emotional excitement required of mass movements. That it was able to do so indicates that socialism achieved, at least during this relatively brief historical frame, a reconciliation in the battle between reason and faith by transposing this antithesis into an ideology predicated on faith in reason.

A central mainfestation of this faith can be seen in what Max Weber referred to as a "veneration of science (1978: 515)." In particular, the natural sciences were perceived as offering to mankind the knowledge that could free men from the domination of nature, and in addition they afforded a model for a newly emerging science of society that could be utilized in man's quest for freedom from social and culturally-imposed modes of domination. Within the natural sciences, the theory of evolution provided a sense of certitude and meaning by indicating that the world operated in law-like fashion. Rather than confronting a world predicated in large part by a capricious fortuna, leftists believed that they had identified and could chart the proper course of social progress, a course which history would take if "accidents" did not interfere with the unfolding of the process.

Leszek Kolakowski, in his bitter but perceptive severing of personal ties with the main currents of Marxism, describes the particular appeal that Marxist-socialism had for the working class in general:

> Marxism has been the greatest fantasy of our century. It was a dream offering the prospect of a society of perfect unity, in which all human aspirations would be fulfilled and all values reconciled. It took over Hegel's theory of the 'contradictions of progress,' but also the liberal-evolutionist belief that 'in the last resort' the course of human history was inevitably for the better and that man's increasing command over nature would, after an interval, be matched by increasing freedom. It owed much of its success to the combination of Messianic fantasies with a specific and genuine social cause, the struggle of the ...working class against poverty and exploitation (1978: 523).

Finnish-American leftists avidly read the evolutionary theories of such thinkers as Engels and Bernstein. A perhaps minor example of their intense in science can be seen in the efforts of John Wiita to translate a work of the Dutch Marxist Anton Pannekoek into Finnish. Primarily remembered by contemporary leftists for his contributions to the topic of council communism, Pannekoek had a strong scientific bent. In fact, he was an accomplished astronomer and mathematician. What interested Wiita and many of his peers was Pannekoek's work, Marxism and Darwinism, in which he sought to illustrate the parallels between the Darwinian theory of natural selection and Marxism, which was posed as a science capable of making visible to human observation the social mechanisms that were the key to the evolutionary process. In 1914 Wiita published his translation of the book through the socialist publishing house in Superior, Wisconsin.

Evolutionary social democrats, the IWW Finns, and later the Communists shared the conviction that there existed laws of social motion that functioned with the regularity of natural laws. These laws were viewed as laying the foundations for the inevitable decline of capitalism followed by the rise of socialist society. The difference between evolutionary and revolutionary leftists rested essentially on the latter's readiness to force the hand of history.

Another manifestation of the importance

attributed to reason can be seen in the focus placed on education. Not only at the Work People's College, but in socialist halls throughout the country, Finns created libraries, conducted lectures, and in myriad other ways expressed their belief in the virtue and efficacy of education. Of course, in this they differed little from many other ethnic groups, although they differed in their conception of the function of education. John Bodnar, for example, discovered in the case of Slavic peasants, particularly those who maintained ties to organized religious bodies, that they defined the purpose of education as that of "retaining cultural, linguistic, and religious values of the ethnic group (1976: 1))." In contrast to this use of education as a device to defend a threatened past, the Finnish-American left treated education as an essential factor in orienting itself towards the future.

The scientific estate was intimately linked to the Finns' vision of a future classless society since it would be crucial in moving from a situation of scarcity to one of abundance. The Finns' emphasis on the role of scientific experts in the future does not appear to have been influenced by Veblen's thought, yet it bears a close resemblance to his concept of a soviet of engineers. This cadre of experts was uncritically portrayed as a stratum whose interests coincided with the interests of the society as a whole.

Related to this was an equally uncritical view of the cadre of trained functionaries that the Work People's College, a radical educational institution created by Finns in the Duluth, Minnesota area, was designed to train in preparation for the advent of the socialist commonwealth. One of the unintended consequences of this ideological orientation was that in the aftermath of the Finnish-American left, many ex-radicals had acquired, as Vivian Gornick observed in The Romance of American Communism, "organizational and analytical skills (which served them) well in careers in administrative positions (1977: 31)."

Finally, a further consequence of this particular definition of the situation came to the fore after the last major schism on the left. In the move to Communism, one witnesses a dramatic shift in which scientism, bureaucratic centrism, and instrumental rationality become dominant, progressively eclipising the role of a critical, undogmatic reason.

Conclusion

After exploring the content of Finnish-American socialist ideology, the following related questions arise: (1) why did such an ideology attract such large numbers of Finns, while other groups (e.g., Poles and Southern Italians) were not similarly attracted? ; and (2) which Finns were attracted to this ideology and which were not?

A clue to the answer to these questions can be found in Weber when he contends that socialism was a type of secular salvation attractive to certain intellectual status groups and the modern proletariat. The indifference of these groups to religion is predicated on the rationalizing and secularizing strains generated by their location in a capitalist market economy (1978: 485-486). While proletarianization (and marginalization for certain intellectual groups) is critical to this, further comparative research will have to begin by recognizing that among proletarianized ethnic groups in countries such as the United States secularization had a rather varied impact. Future work might begin by assuming that immigrant radicalism will develop differentially among ethnic groups, predicated on the extent to which secularization has had an impact.

For a secularized group, an articulate socialism -- forged in a context of labor strife and shaped by nativist hostility -- could serve as a vehicle to express both class and ethnic interests. In regard to the former, it provided a context where immigrants could attempt todefine a "norm of reciprocity" that provided an expression of rights and obligations of both superordinate and subordinate social members (Hearn, 1978: 461). In reference to the latter, it provided a

"congregational" setting that could serve as a socialist model of fraternity.

In the long run, Finnish-American radicals, like their counterparts on the left, had their hopes of creating a mass socialist movement crushed (Kivisto, 1983). While a number of factors contributed to this, including political repression, further research should, I would suggest, focus attention on the impact of the declining saliency of ethnic and working class identities.

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