

IFRWH-conference

Women's history revisited: Historiographical Reflection on Women and Gender in a Global Context (National Historiographies 1)

20th International Congress of Historical Sciences

University of New South Wales, 8-9 July, 2005

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Gender and Finnish Traditions of Agrarian Historiography

In 1910 the first survey book presenting the history of the peasantry and agriculture in Finland was published. The introduction discusses the connection between agriculture and societal development. The author, the historian Antto Laiho, emphasizes that agriculture has to be understood in relation to societal development. In the summarizing chapter he stresses the connection between citizenship and the peasant society.¹ In this book, and in other similar texts, the peasantry is ascribed civic values and duties.

The peasant concept represents positive aspects in a Nordic context. During the late 19th and early 20th century the peasant image, partly a creation of the nationalisms of the 19th century, was constantly used and reconstructed in Finland and the other Nordic countries. The idealized peasant was generally described in terms of freedom and independence, and peasant society was often depicted as both egalitarian and homogenous.²

This paper discusses the traditions of agrarian historiography from the perspective of masculinity. It studies the connection between the understandings of the peasantry and masculine ideals that emerged in the decades around the turn of the century. How was the history of the peasants and the peasant society written during the period of democratization and agricultural modernization in the beginning of the 20th century? What was the role of historiography in redefining the understandings of citizenship? This period saw an expansion of both male and female citizenship; in Finland this expansion was rapid. A radical parliamentary reform, creating a Diet to be elected through universal and equal suffrage, was carried out quickly in 1906.

The new and highly gendered understandings of citizenship shaped and was shaped by, the growing

¹ *Suomen maatalouden historia. Piirteitä maamme pääelinkeinoon kehityksestä.* Antto Laiho. Mustiala 1910.

² For an overview of the Finnish literature on rural questions, see Mylly 1985, Granberg & Nikula 1995. For Nordic studies see Sørensen & Stråth 1997; Witoszek 1997.

historiography.³ The paper argues that the image of the peasant was used in the construction of masculinity; it gave meaning to the understandings of male citizenship and to the position of men in a society formed by modernization and other processes of change. In her most famous work Joan Scott (1988, p. 2) assumes that history's representations of the past help construct gender for the present.

Evolving traditions

Two highly gendered figures are associated with the history of the Scandinavian countries. The image of the free and independent peasant is, as mentioned above, a construct of the 19th century. The image of the strong and equal peasant woman is probably a later construct. It seems to be used less frequently than the male counterpart in the early 20th century.

Questions about rural women and women's work in agriculture were discussed within the evolving Scandinavian tradition of women's history during the 1970's and 1980's. These themes were rather important within the writing of Norwegian and Danish women's history. Also ethnologists from these countries dealt with these questions (cf. Lövkrona 1990). Surprisingly, there seem to be a polarization between different ways of depicting the history of peasant women. Norwegian historians focused less on question of power and hierarchy, whilst several Danish historians used the concept of patriarchy. For example Brigitte Possing discussed subordination, sexualized work and (de)valuation of women's work. To a larger extent, the Norwegian colleges stressed the importance of women's work, and thus emphasizing the good societal position of women in the agricultural society. Many of the studies dealt with 19th century and the early 20th century. (For an short overview of Nordic studies, see Östman 2000, 10-16) Overall, there is a remarkable difference between the historiographies in the two neighboring countries.

In Sweden and Finland there were fewer studies on this topic. There are still very few Finnish historical studies focusing the gender order of the agrarian society.⁴ Nevertheless, many scholars doing gender studies, especially in the field of social sciences, have discussed the position of peasant women in the past and a gendered order within rural societies. The agrarian past is used to explain the position of women in contemporary Finland. In the early 1990's some scholars tended to depict the gender order in terms of harmony and collaboration. The importance of women's work and the hard fate of women in a poor country have also been emphasized. (Cf. Östman 2000, 14-16) Critical voices have pointed at the effect of Finnish nationalism on historiography and social sciences. These ways of interpreting women's history has been seen as a move to formulate equality. (Honkanen 1997) Thus, it is closely connected to understandings of women's citizenship.

³This paper is a part of my project "Peasant Figure and Masculinity - Gender, Class and Societal ideals in descriptions of the peasantry 1900-1950". The project examines peasant (*talonpoika/bonde*) idealization and understandings of the peasantry in Finland ca. 1900-1950. It analyses historical and ethnographical texts about the peasantry and the peasant society from the perspective of gender. In addition, the project will compare Finnish traditions of historiography with academic histories of the peasantry written in other Nordic countries during the same period.

⁴ Using the concept of patriarchy the sociologist Pirjo Siiskinen compared the role of women in the "old" rural society with the role of women in agriculture in the period after the war. In her early work Pirjo Markkola (1989) studied the work of women in landless rural households. My doctoral thesis (Östman 2000) addresses the work done by women and men in an agrarian community ca. 1870-1940 in order to understand how gender was formed on an everyday level.

The early traditions of depicting rural and agrarian history were strongly connected to nation building processes. Although the peasant is a key figure in Nordic history there are few studies of the uses of peasant idealization. The peasant image within literature and politics has been studied by some Finnish (e.g. Mylly 1985; Sahlberg 1995, 43-47, 60-65) and Nordic scholars (e.g. Meidal 1993; Sörlin 1993; Spring 2000). The importance of peasant idealization is often touched upon in theoretical discussions of nationalisms (for examples, see Spring 2000), but there are only few analyses of the peasant-image from a gender perspective.⁵

The rural and agricultural society became the object of intensive research at the turn of the last century in the Nordic countries. The early studies of the peasantry were conducted within other disciplines than history. Several scholars have discussed nationalism and the construction of the peasantry within early ethnology (Sääskilähti 1997). Agricultural history was however a secondary field of study at the turn of the last century; many scholars focused on explicitly political themes. The field of agricultural history was – and is often still today – conducted within a national framework of analysis. There was a growth of research interest on the early 20th century. Survey books and summarizing works were published in Finland and in the other Scandinavian countries. The book “The freedom fights of the Swedish peasantry” (*Svenska allmogens frihetsstrider I-III*) was published in Sweden in 1918-1920. A similar Danish book was titled “The Danish Peasant and Freedom” (*Den danske bonde og friheden* 1912). This tradition was maybe strongest in Norway. In Sweden agricultural history saw a growth of research interest in Sweden in the interwar years.

However, only a few researchers have studied early 20th century historiography of the peasantry and peasant society. Matti Peltonen (1992, 25-32) has discussed Finnish agrarian historiography and its emphasis of homogeneity. May-Britt Ohman Nielsen (2002) has studied the uses of history within the different Norwegian farming organizations, and Janken Myrdal (2004) has analyzed the establishment of agricultural history as a separate field. Danish historians have touched upon the aspect of agency and interpretations of agricultural change and land reforms (cf. Kjærgaard 1979).

Pieces of historiography

The paper will shortly and tentatively examine how traditions of agrarian history were evolving in the early 20th century. The material analyzed here includes three different types of books: one textbook presenting the history of Finland written by the famous historian Yrjö Koskinen and Väinö Voionmaa; early textbooks and survey books presenting the history of the peasantry; scholarly work on rural history by Väinö Voionmaa. Firstly, the study will discuss how the historical accounts depict the position of the male peasant. How do the texts make use of specific themes and events? Furthermore, the paper will search for interpretation of special processes and statements about the basic social structures. Here I am above all presenting texts about the middle

⁵ Few historical studies have examined articulations of agrarian masculinities at the turn of the last century (for examples, see Freeman 2001). The theme is touched upon in some Finnish studies: Jan Löfström (1999) has addressed the meaning of sexuality and masculinity at the turn of the last century, and Pirjo Markkola (2003) has studied youth in rural Finland from the perspective of gender and masculinity. Marilyn Lake (1986; 1987) has analyzed the meaning of yeomanry in the construction of nation and citizenship in late 19th and early 20th century Australia.

ages.

All these texts and books were written and published in Finnish, while few of the Swedish-speaking historians in Finland focused on agrarian history. Here I will shortly compare traditions of historiography with ethnographic work written in Swedish – but in Finland – during the same period.

Finnish-speaking historians put a strong emphasis on social and cultural history. Using the approach of the collectivist school of cultural history presented by Karl Lamprecht, these historians tended to stress collectivistic and holistic methods, while the Swedish-speaking historians were more inclined towards individualism and positivism (cf. Engman 1999). Influenced by Karl Lamprecht, especially Voionmaa was emphasizing collective history and the study of structural causality.

Western cultivation

“During the middle ages the area of farming was limited to South-Western Finland and the coastal districts. There farming had turned the burn-beating and wandering peasant into a farmer. Fields and arable land, which new generations could inherit from older ones, made the work of the peasant easier and increased the value of the land. Dairy on a regular basis kept the land fertile and gave important products. Also women and children could own and inherit farms. They stopped wandering and stayed at their farmhouses and took their names from the farms.” (*Suomen historia kansakouluja varten*. Yrjö Koskinen and Väinö Voionmaa 1915/1920p. s 59; Finnish history for the elementary schools. First published in xx-)

In this book, presenting the history of Finland for young pupils, the introduction of agriculture is said to be the most important event taking place during the middle-ages. Agriculture and arable land were the basis of a stable and ordered society. Slash-and-burn cultivation or burn-beating, usual in all parts of Finland but especially in the eastern regions, is compared to regularly farming.

The new way of cultivating the land is, as in the first survey book written by Antto Laiho in 1910, connected to Swedish speaking areas and to the period when Finland was taken under Swedish rule. This process is, on the one hand, interpreted in terms of occupation and loss of freedom, and on the other hand described positively. Two important aspects are associated with the so called Swedish colonization of Finland: firstly, the introduction of agriculture and new and stable forms of land uses and, secondly, the introduction of a firm and more organized societal system. These aspects are seen as interrelated. Now Finland had become a part of a kingdom, and more developed society could be built. Furthermore, Christianity and Western traditions were brought into the country. At this time, the authors stress, the different Finnish tribes were united.

However, this new society is said to be built on the basis of older Finnish and pagan societal structures. Firstly, the basis of the society – the family, the village and the *kihlakunta* (*häräd*, cf. hundred in English) – was also found in pagan Finland. Secondly, the freedom among the peasantry is seen as extremely old, but this ancient freedom was secured within the new type of society organized within the Swedish realm. The authors stress that the preservation of the peasant freedom was the most distinctive mark of the Swedish society.

In 1915 Väinö Voionmaa, who had written extensively on the middle ages and on economical history, published his most famous book, *Suomen karjalaisen heimon historia* (The history of the Karelian Tribe). By writing the book he wants to widen the circle of the “historical people”; he wanted to ascribe this group a history based on developed forms of government. This was not just aimed to be history of the people; it was also aimed to read as the history of the Finnish state and societal system. Voionmaa is discussing his intentions in an article published in Swedish in 1916. His work, and all the other texts presented here, is characterized and formed by the intention of understanding the Finnish history in terms of civilization and development. In his book about the Karelian people, Voionmaa describes the system of land use, taxation and village formation. The Karelian tribe is compared to its eastern neighbors, but Voionmaa also points out that similar societies also are found in Sweden, for example in Dalecarlia.

Also the development of agriculture is measured in terms of civilization. In Antto Laihos understanding agriculture is connected to Germanic culture. Several authors stress that the new knowledge of agriculture was learned while encountering people from Western or Germanic areas. In one text barley, the most important crop in the middle ages, is mentioned as a kind of corn also cultivated in other civilized areas. But cultivation of rye is described as a Slavic tradition.

In different ways the old Finnish peasant society is described as different from the Slavic areas. The peasant freedom is often mentioned, but usually shortly as a given assumption. The position of women is sometimes used in a similar way; the Finnish people are said to rather undeveloped, especially in the middle ages, but also later. But they are said to distinguish themselves from other undeveloped groups by treating the women fairly well. Women are seldom described in these texts, but their position is used to show that Finland was a civilized society. (Cf. Lindeqvist 1906, p. 32)

Understandings of landownership and work

Many of the studied texts stress the egalitarian traits of peasant society. In the school book Yrjö Koskinen and Väinö Voionmaa are emphasizing equality and egalitarian values among the peasantry and within the class of peasants. In the peasant village there were no leasing of land and very few hired hands. In areas where the crown, the church or the nobility was strong the situation was different. (C.f. p 41) Although the peasant society has its form of social stratification, there seems to be a tendency to emphasize social homogeneity. The depictions of a seemingly undifferentiated group can be compared to the understandings of a democratic society in the past, where the peasants are ascribed societal agency.

At the heart of the histories lay an emphasis on the peasants' self-consciousness as a societal group. The peasant is described as the backbone of society. The depictions of the male head of the household can surely be related to early 20th century formulations of citizenship. Especially the landowning man is understood in terms of responsibility, good husbandry and authority. Here, the landowning peasant is the ideal.

How is the position of men in burn-beating areas understood? As many of the authors mention there were villages in the eastern parts of the country where there were no fields – no arable land - at all. In these areas no system for individual landowning had been developed. The wood was burnt

down, the area was cultivated for some years and then the family moved. But also the landless and wandering man was made a decent “citizen”; many of the texts are marked by extensive writing on different taxation system.

The word man, mies, is often used when describing the early ways of gathering taxes. This is seen as the first sign of an ordered society. In this context two different figures – the man with the bow (jousi) and the man with the axe – are discussed. In areas where hunting was prevalent, the “jousiman” (the man with the bow)⁶ was supposed to pay taxes, and taxes – this is emphasized - is said to be gathered according to number of bows. The axe man is appearing in tax rolls from beat-burning areas. With the spread of beat-burning the “axe-men” or “axe-peasants” took over the land used by the “men with the bow”. In several of his texts, Väinö Voionmaa is stressing that the societal ideal in these areas was not settled peasant, but the wandering “axepeasant”, who alone or together with his comrades in a company burned vast areas of wood lands. (Cf. Voionmaa 1915, 1922, s.168; 1936, 9-10).⁷ In these descriptions the term peasant is used and connected to the word axe.

The men without fields were here made decent through descriptions of the hard work with the bow or the axe: “The wealth of the house was dependent in the number of “axes” and “bows”, that’s is the number of men capable of taking part in burn-beating and hunting. Women’s work was of less value, and that’s why they had no right to inherit, they were usually given cows as share of inheritance. Regardless of where they lived, the family used the same name.” Suomen historia kansakouluja varten, p. 58)

The position and status of men is here related to, and explained by, their work. Few of the descriptions of the peasantry focus on women, but women’s subordinated position is connected to their work. It is said to be less valued.

Väinö Voionmaa stresses that the system of owning burn beaten-land replaced the rights of hunting at a certain place. In both cases he uses the word “omistus”, ownership. (Cf. Voionmaa 1922, p. 168) But he also writes that the society was not based on individual ownership, but on the work done by men – here he explicitly writes about men - with bows or axes. (Voionmaa 1922, p. 169) However, the peasant with arable land represented the ideal in Voionmaas texts about the Middle Ages. This understanding is forming the description of other economical systems.

The question of ownership was central for this historian and he wanted to show that collective ownership, which meant that all the masters of houses in a village own the land the used (in one way or another) together, was not the oldest type of landowning. He strived to show that individual landowning was old, also in the burn-beating areas. Also when describing the villages and the uses of common land he stresses that the peasants used some of the land individually.

6 The first textbook published in English, which presented the history of Finnish women, was titled “*The Lady with the Bow*”. (Otava, Helsinki 1990).

7 In 1922 a book called Finnish Agriculture (*Suomen maatalous*) was published. Väinö Voionmaa wrote a chapter called “The period of progress in Finnish Agriculture”. Somewhat rewritten this text was published as different chapters in book called *The history of the Finnish peasant class and agriculture* in 1936.

The integrated village was discussed both in positive and negative terms. The regulated land use rendered progress and new initiatives more difficult, but at the same time the complicated way of land division guaranteed support for everybody in the village. Thus, it prevented poverty and made the society stable. (Voionmaa 1922, p 179-180, Voionmaa 1936) On the one hand the peasants become elements of collective communities and, on the other hand, the peasants are described as free and individual. Taken together these elements form a decent man.

At the beginning of the 20th century the independent peasant represented stability and responsibility. The contemporary terms *maamies* (in Finnish) and *lantman* (in Swedish) were often used (cf. the term *yeoman* or *yeoman farmer*) in contemporary texts. (Mylly 1985) The yeoman was landed and he was seen as a respectable societal agent. To some extent this image, which was politically important in the early 20th century Finland, is to be noticed in the history written by Voionmaa and others. When describing the past, Antto Laiho often uses the term *lantman*, a term which both in both Swedish and Finnish is very specific for this period. The *maamies* or the *lantman* (in both languages the word *man* is a part of the term) was seen as a good citizen, and this idea was given added signification after the Civil war. In this understanding citizenship was very closely associated with men and masculinity.

It is noteworthy that also the Swedish-speaking scholars doing work in peasant society tended to describe individualism. Especially in the texts written before the civil war the negative aspects of individualism is described; these men were unable to work together with others and thus to some extent seen as not responsible enough.

Unruly or loyal and humble?

In a survey text about the development of Finnish agriculture Väinö Voionmaa (1922) starts with describing the nature as the body and the people as the mind or the spirit. How have the people been able to use the land, he asks. How are the texts depicting the position of the peasantry?

In positive way the simplicity and the common sense of the people is described. The peasant is also said to love freedom and to be egalitarian. Although the taxpaying peasant is said to be the axis of the society, he was not civilized enough to use his societal position. The peasantry was firstly, according to Voionmaa (1922, 1936, p.11), a passive class. The burden of the taxes made it difficult to act and there were also the danger of the growing influence of the nobility.

But the peasant was not just victimized, he was also ascribed agency. In the end, according to this account, the peasants did not take any more taxes and responsibilities: they rose in rebellion. And thus they grew up to be men, but not unruly men.

Rebellion and violence is, this is written after the civil war, understood as something bad. Voionmaa is emphasizing that peasants in both Sweden and Finland reacted against the king and the authorities; violence and war was thus not just associated with the Finnish people. Also in an early textbook he and the co-author Yrjö Koskinen are stressing that rebellion and the violence need to be understood and explained. The love of freedom made the peasants act, and their power of resistance saved the liberty and the societal structures. Otherwise, the peasants would have become slaves. (Cf. *Suomen historia kansakouluja varten*, p. 112)

Peasants are seen as active agents, but also as responsible men guaranteeing the liberty of the people. The studied texts can be compared to earlier representations of the peasantry. In Sweden the image of the peasant was to a great extent influenced by the historian and poet Erik Gustaf Geijer; his poems from the early 19th century depict a passive and hard-working peasant filled with a will to defend his land (cf. Hall 2000). In Finland the 19th century image of the peasant was influenced by the Finnish national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg (cf. Mylly 1985). But the peasants depicted in the early historiography were not as humble as the man peasant described earlier.

The questions of agency and subjectivity are central when discussing the connection between construction of masculinity and different traditions of historiography. Various concepts of the agrarian and agricultural history were evolving in the Nordic countries in the beginning of the 20th century. There seems to be a polarization between different ways of depicting the peasantry. Perhaps the depictions of the free and autonomous peasants are most apparent in histories of the Swedish province Dalecarlia and the Finnish province Ostrobothnia. In early Danish historiography there was a tendency to depict the small farmers as conservative and as victimized, as victims of a suppressing upper class. In Swedish historiography the peasants have been described as unruly men, unwilling to obey, or as humble or loyal subjects (e.g. Kjærgaard 1979, Salomonsson 1999). Both these tendencies are also seen in Finnish historiography. These contradictions can be related to prevalent traditions of historiography. Furthermore, the different concepts of agrarian and agricultural history have been deployed in different ways. The Finnish peasantry are described as both active and loyal, but they are not too active and not too violent. Self-control was characteristic for the peasants described.

Different uses of the agrarian past

Different notions and practices of agrarian history can be related to the formation of gender relations. The peasantry was represented and categorized according to certain gendered norms. The values attached to agrarian masculinity - independence, individualism, responsibility - can be seen as key elements in the construction of an ideal manhood at the turn of the last century (for examples from Swedish studies, see Ekenstam 2000; Tjeder 2003, 199B230). The characteristics stressed in the depictions of the peasantry are important for understanding the construction of masculine ideals. The idea of manhood and the idea of citizenship were linked.

In its analysis, the paper pays attention to how the peasant image is developed through comparisons of various kinds and how it is formed by conjunctions of numerous differentiated discourses. Theories of gender emphasize that gender is relational; gendered categories are constructed through different social relations and norms. In texts by Swedish-speaking ethnographers like Gabriel Nikander and K. Rob. V. Vikman the peasant are ascribed somewhat different ideals; the meanings attached to agrarian manhood are connected to aspects - e.g. physical strength, freedom, individualism, warlike ideals - seen as masculine. In the light of a contemporary biologist and racial thinking, the peasant seems to have been given some elements of a natural and untamed masculinity. Such ideas were more stressed in the texts describing the Swedish-speaking peasantry in Finland. With regard to this peasant idealization

can be understood – with a term used by the historian Gail Bederman – as a way to reformulate masculinity.⁸ But this peasant was not associated with a self-controlling subjectivity.

The ethnographic texts written in Swedish ascribe the peasantry other values and characteristics than the upper classes. The Swedish speaking classes in Finland were often described with the terms “the educated and the peasantry”. For the former, the civic virtues and rational ideas were important. When analyzing their role in society they saw themselves as bearing responsibility for the whole community. Thus, the peasant was seen as some kind of countertype, being described as less responsible and less rational and more individualistic. In this context the educated man represented the ideal citizen.

Issues of class are central in the analysis of the formation of masculine ideals. At this time the social composition of the countryside and the role of agriculture in the Finnish society as a whole changed. The peasantry is generally represented as a seemingly undifferentiated group. This aspect seems to come out more clearly in texts describing the Finnish-speaking peasantry. Although class differences are described, ideas of a harmonious community seem to be central to many of the descriptions. Thus, the peasant-image could be used in the construction of homogeneity: it made the differences between different social groups less visible and the depicted characteristics – self-control, individualism and responsibility - were ascribed all men. By stressing common values, the peasant image created more homogeneous understandings of masculine ideals. Furthermore, the texts played a role in the masculine (re)gendering of citizenship.

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⁸ In a study (written together with Sigridur Matthiasdottir 2003) I compare values ascribed to the upper classes and the peasantry in Iceland and in a Finland-Swedish context.

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