

Half-gentlemen - Goal-Oriented and Rational Peasants**Eija Stark**

Konsta Kajander 2020. *Talonpoika, herra, puoliherra. Etnologinen tutkimus puoliherra-kategorioista ja talonpoikaisuuden kulttuurisista malleista suomalaisissa sanomalehdissä 1847-1870*. JYU dissertations 325. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän yliopisto. 220 pp. Diss. ISBN 978-951-39-8428-1 (PDF) URN:ISBN 978-951-39-8428-1 ISSN 2489-9003.

The doctoral study of Konsta Kajander, a Jyväskylä-based ethnologist, is an interesting approach to examining the Finnish peasantry in the mid-nineteenth century. Kajander analyzes social categories related to the term “half-gentleman” in the Finnish press during this time. Half-gentleman was a pejorative name for male members of the peasantry and the rural working class who, according to their critics, tried to look or behave like a member of a higher estate. Kajander considers the newspapers as a cultural space that not only conveys meaning, but also influences and changes contemporary social reality. Thus, Kajander’s premise is that the verbal expression of half-gentlemen signified change in the cultural expectations of the ideal peasant. The book has eight chapters. After presenting the research design, theory, source materials, and methodology, Kajander explores the discourse on half-gentlemen in various contexts.

The research is based on eight newspapers that contain different writings regarding peasants. For example, the topic of peasants was usually discussed in the newspaper sections related to rural letters, editorials, and dialogues. Each of these sections used distinctive styles as textual genres. Using these sources ensured that Kajander reviewed multiple discourses related to his main approach. As Kajander explains, many of the authors used pseudonyms in their writing and were presumably part of the peasantry. Consequently, their expressions and views on the image of the ideal peasant may be considered self-reflection. Furthermore, these newspapers were the platform for nationalist expression of thought. For example, newspaper writers argued whether civilization (i.e., literacy and numeracy) was needed by peasants and whether it harmed the peasants, their families, and more broadly, the social order.

In practice, the term half-gentleman referred to peasants or members of the landless working class who attended school, became literate, and started to wear clothes that some perceived as belonging to higher estates. Usually, half-gentlemen were officers, students, primary school teachers, artisans, and tavern keepers. Occasionally, “half-civilized” and “half-educated” were also used to describe these individuals, but these terms were embraced only superficial-

ly and were generally used in discussions related to education. Interestingly, Kajander finds various synonyms for half-gentleman, all of which are used in a judgmental and derogatory way.

Why then was there criticism? The focus of the study is to consider these calumnious expressions as a symptom of a growing dissonance between the *angien régime* and the new ideas and identity formations that emerged with the dawn of modernization. Especially interesting is Kajander's claim that some writers, many of whom were peasants that attended school, still supported the Lutheran values inherent in the estate society and interpreted reform and innovation as signs of moral corruption.

This study contributes to three scholarly discussions: (1) literary processes, (2) media anthropology, and (3) cognitive cultural research. Generally, Kajander uses press history to provide a framework for his discussion and uses media anthropology as source-critical vigilance to identify the epistemological pitfalls of the data. However, the dominance of oral culture in nineteenth-century Finland raises the question of whether early newspapers had a similar role of collective influence as in modern times and whether media anthropology theoretically fits into the material. Moreover, the loss in the latest debates regarding the concept of the vernacular is an obvious disadvantage. For example, the perspective of how *vox populi* manifested itself in the new newspaper format compared to traditional oral folklore of that time is now absent. On the other hand, Kajander's input regarding the processes of literature and the research on "reading and writing from below" is impressive. Both approaches have been extensively studied, at least in Finland and Sweden, and new research topics have been discovered. In this way, Kajander's work represents the paradigmatic research of our time.

Considering the three theoretical premises, cognitive anthropology in combination with contextual analysis provides the most crucial analysis. The cognitive tools and definitions that Kajander uses are convincing. He skillfully interprets the dominant cultural models regarding the ideal image of the peasantry and the alternative models. In addition to the descriptive and prescriptive cultural models that are borrowed from cognitive anthropologist Bradd Shore, Kajander acquires his theoretical inspiration from category analysis. Cognitive cultural studies is the field of study that traces people's collective ways of thinking and interpreting. In other words, although the research materials have allowed Kajander to trace the name, year of birth, domicile, and family background of individuals, he interprets their expressions as shared and collective. Kajander's study is impressive because of his breadth of knowledge in international cognitive anthropology and his use of this knowledge in his arguments.

Based on Kajander's analysis, there are four cultural models of an ideal peasant: (1) the hard-working peasant, (2) the Christian and virtuous peasant, (3)

the modest peasant, and (4) the frugal peasant. Newspaper writers highlighted and disputed how education “spoiled” peasants and made them lazy and idle. A common fear was that literacy and education made peasants behave like members of higher estates or gentlemen. Another critique addressed the children of the peasant landowners who abandoned their traditional way of life and lost the farm as an inheritance after receiving proper education. Most importantly, peasants were required to behave in a good Christian way, and providing education in math, history, and geography was considered as secular and harmful. As Kajander explains, the combination of Catechism instruction and new secular teachings caused confusion. The cultural model of the modest peasant referred to the peasant’s honesty and humility toward his peers but especially toward members of higher estates. Newspaper writings often expressed concern when peasants modified their lifestyle after receiving education about certain practices, such as using better hygiene and dressing well. The nineteenth-century newspapers feared that educated peasants would pursue a wasteful lifestyle and imitate higher estates.

The presentation and reflection of the results is insightful. The Finnish press and its various text genres, as well as the position of peasants as active subjects, were signs that the people had a voice. However, it was expressed in a new format. Kajander emphasizes not only the collapse of the mental basis of the estate society, but also the cultural history of the Nordic and Finnish democracy and more specifically, the growing understanding of a more democratic perspective. The newspaper writings were a manifestation of the peasants as a social class during the time that the middle class began to develop. These were subjects of history, and the rural letters published in the newspapers were examples of this history.

The study offers new insight into Finland’s modernization process and the individual discourses that occurred during this modernization. It is highly desirable for Kajander to publish parts of his research to a wider international audience. His analysis is rigorous and his approach of using old newspapers as the testimony of the common people is new within ethnology and folklore studies.

AUTHOR

Eija Stark is Docent in Folklore Studies at the University of Helsinki and works currently in the Finnish Literature Society. Her research interests cover the history of social class, critical approach to archives and intellectual history of Finnish and Nordic folklore studies and ethnology.