Finnish Cottage Industry and Cultural Policy: A Historical View

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English abstract

Cottage industry is a part of both economic and cultural history, and in its institutionalised form it comprises an interesting part of the history of cultural policy as well. I discuss Finnish cottage industry with regard to the research on the history of cultural policy and apply the microhistorical approach in examining its cultural political history.

I closely read a report of a Finnish cottage industry committee from 1949 studying the meaning of cottage industry. In this way I indicate the cultural political relevance of Finland’s national Cottage Industry Department and the Central Organisation of Cottage Industry Associations, because these bodies claimed the administrative and controlling power over the field of crafts, including the everyday craft making, craft education and craft heritage. Cottage industries were chiefly justified as economic activity that fostered an entrepreneurial and self-sufficient way of life in the countryside. As such, cottage industry can be seen as a historical initiative that combined economic and cultural political efforts within an institutionalised framework. The microhistorical approach applied in the article displays how an elaborated reading of historical sources can lead to a wider analysis of the historical traditions and the nexus of ideas underlying cottage industry policies.

Keywords: Cottage Industry, Cultural Policy, Microhistory, History of Ideas, Folk Culture

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In cottage industry we trust

After the Second World War, Finland, like many other countries, suffered from material deprivation. People sought to come to terms with the post-war confusion and settle down to everyday life again. Along with other third sector actors, the Central Organisation of Cottage Industry Associations (Kotiteollisuusjärjestöjen Keskusliitto, KKL) organised various courses for making everyday necessities from the scarce materials available. Moreover, cottage industry was generally thought to be a crucial solution to the post-war hardship that the society was facing. At the time, according to Yrjö Laine-Juva, the chief editor of the magazine Kotiteollisuus (Cottage Industry), «the significance of cottage industry has been realised in ever larger circles»¹ (Laine[-Juva] 1948, p. 2). For the active leaders of cottage industry, the post-war dearth was analogous to the previous times of difficulties that Finland had been through in the past. As Laine-Juva puts it in his editorial: «The wounds inflicted by the great famine years were then effectively healed by extending cottage industry work substantially. To heal the wounds inflicted by the war and the economic depression it is wise to draw upon the same aid» (Laine[-Juva] 1948, p. 2).

Indeed, after WWII the usability of cottage industry was reasserted at the official level. A state administrative department for cottage industry had already been established in 1908, but for KKL, the year 1945 was a turning point. With the state funding received at the time, the organisation could afford a permanent head office with an executive director along with other office workers (Ylönen 2003, p. 47, 118). An overhaul of the organisation’s membership increased KKL’s delegation from 5 to 20 members, and an executive board of five persons was established. This led to wider collaboration between different parties, with the central organisation, together with the state department, forming the uniting centre for cottage industry promoters. In addition to reforms in the central organisation, the constitutions of the regional cottage industry associations were to be standardised (Ylönen 2003, pp. 124-127). So, the cottage industry delegation, which had been founded in 1913 and first registered as an association in 1934 confirmed its activities and sought to strengthen its hold nationally over all cottage industry.

These measures, taken to stabilise operations, indicate that for these cottage industry leaders, the meaning of the term was by no means limited to handicraft courses organised for those in material need. Generally referring to small-scale making of crafts in the countryside, Yrjö Laine-Juva saw that cottage industry would be nothing less than an essential part of organising working and living in agriculturally intensive Finland (Laine[-Juva] 1948, p. 1). Cottage industry would create a source of extra income for the new tens of thousands of smallholders scattered throughout the Finnish countryside that would not be able to support their families solely from farming: «It is most natural that those means of livelihood are sought first and foremost among the trades of cottage industry that have, for centuries, been a natural part of agriculture as its subsidiary trade» (Laine[-Juva] 1948, p. 1).

Cottage industry was not only a matter of creating sources of livelihood, but a question of cherishing age-old culture – a matter of authentic Finnish culture and cultural heritage, and most of all a matter of craft culture. In my discussion of historical research on cultural policy, I develop a view of cottage industry as a part of the history of Finnish cultural policy. This is done by examining how cottage industry was outlined by the Cottage Industry Production Committee in its report from 1949. Applying the microhistorical angle to the analysis, I seek to demonstrate how just one historical source can offer a basis for wider research on the idea of cottage industry.
The history of cultural policy or the evolving political processes?

Longitudinal research on the history of cultural policy has been a popular topic among researchers. According to Kangas (2004), most Finnish studies emphasise the post-WWII era, with interest lying especially in the changes of forming and practising cultural policy in relation to the general forming of welfare policy (Kangas 2004, pp. 24-27). Meticulous research on the origins of the Finnish cultural policy has also been done (Sokka 2005; Helminen 2007). A general map to the past of Finnish cultural policy would consist of the three long lines (Kangas 1999, pp. 159-167; Kangas 2004, pp. 26-27). For example, in their article «The Roots of Finnish Cultural Policy», Sokka and Kangas (2007) give a general description of the history of Finnish cultural policy, with an inclination towards administering institutions and especially the State Art Boards that were, along with many associations, another forum for advocating culture. Their members had and used the governmental, official power to legitimise the idea about what was good and genuine Finnish culture. The writers note that the boards’ perspective on culture tended to be rather highbrow. The State Art Boards regularised in 1918 had visual arts, music, architecture, drama and literature in their scope (Sokka & Kangas 2007, p. 191). It was not until the 1960s that cultural policy transmuted from nation building «into an articulated sector of the welfare state» with cultural democracy and democratisation of culture as the current ideals (Sokka & Kangas 2007, p. 186).

Since that time, the scope of cultural political discussions has widened tremendously. Continual scholarly analyses and redefinitions of the concept of culture have led to a situation where it could include practically anything. When discussing the slippery nature of the concept, Eräsaari (2009) has suggested that cultural policy, or rather those working on it, should avoid «imagining about and speaking in favour of» centred or hierarchical structure of cultural policy and instead see itself rather as «a range of practices and assemblages obeying the idea of some sort of polyphonic complexity of cultural voices [sic]» (Eräsaari 2009, p. 57). In an earlier article about cultural policy changing place, he has stipulated that «the cultural political context cannot and should not be re-organised leaning against any conventional backrest» (Eräsaari 1999, p. 147).

Hierarchies and administrative structures have nevertheless created a natural point of departure for many political analyses. The politological concepts that Kari Palonen (2003) has stratified according to their temporal and spatial dimensions help to categorise politics as actions and as spheres, the latter of which is often recognised as the Habermasian public sphere, which creates a conceptual forum for analysing institutionalisations of cultural policy (see Sokka 2007, pp. 69-71). However, the claim for reviewing cultural policy beyond certain hierarchies underlines the need for considering also the history of cultural policy in the context of evolving semantics of culture and the contingency of political activity. As Sokka and Kangas note in their historical summary of the evolution of cultural policy, it should rather be seen as an accumulative process than as a series of sharp changes in ideas about the purposes of cultural policy (Sokka & Kangas 2007, p. 187). However, auspicious as it is to interpret the history of cultural policy as an accumulative process, more attention should be paid to the parallel and intersecting historical processes. If we insist on making completely new cultural policy that does not lean on the past, we should nevertheless have understanding of what there was in the past. Furthermore, if we are supposed to conceive of cultural policy as a range of practices, this implies that we should learn to understand also the history of cultural policy as a range of practices.

In the contemporary context of the late 1940s, cottage industry was not a likely topic of cultural political debate in the same sense as literature or the visual arts were, as cottage industry was
administratively a part of the agricultural sector. Despite changes in the conceptualisation of culture, the administrative conventions tend to influence also what themes are seen relevant for the historical accumulation of cultural policy. As Sokka (2007, p. 72) has put it: «In cultural policy studies, cultural policy has tended to be contextualised in relation to those forms of culture which have been central to a certain society.» In order to have a more vivid picture of the history of cultural policy, also other readings of the past are worthwhile. From this stance it is interesting to pay attention to the history of cottage industry as a part of cultural political history, especially because the culture of the common people (kansanomainen kulttuuri), referred to as folk culture in this article, was the centrepiece of cottage industry activities.

The microhistorical approach

One way of studying history empirically is the microhistorical approach. This approach could be characterised as a frog-eye’s perspective: seemingly trivial details are studied in regard to larger dimensions, with the focus shifting between the detail and the panoramic view. Microhistory is often thought to be history of the margins, of people less heard, but this leads to ask a question, how big can small people be? In her article about microhistorical research, Cerutti (2004) discusses the microhistorical use of sources. She criticises the tendency of some microhistory researchers to use non-institutional sources and instead points out the usefulness of, for example, notary acts. She does admit, however, that this would imply «a different degree of authority» (Cerutti 2004, pp. 28-29). The authors of documents that are of more official character are nevertheless persons whose thinking and action are of historical and political interest. However, the proportionality of the micro-level is a seminal point in the case of cottage industry, because the theme can all too well suggest an inclination to study the past of cottage industry practitioners, which is not the aim of this study. Instead, as Cerutti points out (referring to Boltanski 1990), it is useful to read institutional documents through the microhistorical lens without losing sight of the historical person (actor). The analysis should not therefore be about «correcting actors’ versions of the facts, or of revealing to actors the reality which they were presumably not aware of» but to sincerely decipher their actions and to make them understandable (Cerutti 2004, p. 29).

Another essential point that Cerutti (2004) discusses critically is the understanding of the term strategy within microhistorical research. She demonstrates how characterising some individual behaviour as strategy can be problematic, because it might not be appropriate in all cases. She calls for accuracy of interpretation, whether the actors saw their own action as intentional and therefore strategic, or, whether the researcher is calling the action strategic as a way of depicting human behaviour. Yet from the point of view of political analysis the composition of the above mentioned way of analysing documents with sincerity towards their authors and assessing activities as strategies are not necessarily contradictory, because the strategic (i.e. political) activity is the focus. The microhistorical approach offers a sensitivity towards the past with its actors to which the shifting focus should be anchored, instead of explaining the actors’ intentions away with ideologies or by paralleling them with other phenomena.

Sensitivity towards the past and anchoring one’s point of view are better expressed as contextualisation. That is also the leitmotif of Cerutti’s article in which she discusses the so called social and cultural viewpoints to microhistory and suggests research should be done with both views included. For example, for the report analysed in this article, it is useful to consider the wartime context (the Lapland War continued until the spring of 1945) as well as the backgrounds and statuses of the committee members. A more cultural contextualisation that Cerutti accentuates is to analyse
the actors’ «activities of choice and selection from within the cultural traditions» (Cerutti 2004, p. 35). From the point of view of political history this means, firstly, paying attention to the past actors with their own and shared experiences. Secondly, it means remembering that they too were thinking, feeling and acting persons. As Finnish historian of ideas Markku Hyrkkänen has noted, «instead of biographies of ideas one should examine the actions of thinking and feeling people, [and] the conceptions and beliefs supporting that [action]» (Hyrkkänen 2002, p. 62). Thus, microhistory can give an apt framework for working with questions about the ideas, strategies and conceptions of cottage industry.

The past present as it was written

To more fully understand the idea of cottage industry it is useful to look at different aspects of it. Instead of building this understanding on an arbitrary collection of pastoral images about bygone life in the countryside involving knitting and carving, I have chosen to read closely the report authored by the Cottage Industry Production Committee (CIPC) which was active from 1944 to 1949 under exceptional post-war circumstances. Cottage industry became a matter of official interest during the 19th century, and through committee reports, the first one published in 1873, it is possible to follow how discussion on the matter developed. This includes not only how cottage industry was defined and detailed, but also how it was justified as a subject for development and administrative measures. Although the committee worked temporarily, there is a sense of continuance in the background. An earlier cottage industry committee was established in 1936, but its work was later interrupted by the war. The work of this committee is referred to by its successor, the CIPC. For example, the definition of cottage industry is based on the one proposed by the committee appointed in 1936.

Cottage industry was promoted essentially by two bodies: the Central Organisation of Cottage Industry Associations (a third sector organisation), and the state’s administrative unit under the National Board of Agriculture, the Cottage Industry Department. The work of these bodies was remarkably intertwined, a fact exemplified by the membership of the CIPC. The committee, which began work in November 1944, approximately two months after a truce was called between Finland and the USSR, included two members from the Cottage Industry Department (Toivo Salervo and Hulda Kontturi) and two from the central organisation (Yrjö Laine-Juva and Yrjö Koskinen). Salervo, the cottage industry counsellor, and Laine-Juva, industrial counsellor and editor-in-chief of the magazine Kotiteollisuus had both been trained as architects. Hulda Kontturi, holding an MA in history, worked as a cottage industry inspector, and Yrjö Koskinen worked as cottage industry consultant. Clearly, the committee members represented the highest cottage industry expertise. First-hand knowledge of agriculture was strengthened by the committee chair Mikko Tarkkanen, a farmer and an MP from the Agrarian League, a centrist political party. He was regarded a leading politician of the Agrarian League's right wing, and he was also a member of the supervisory board of the Finnish Cultural Foundation from 1939 to 1964 (Marjomaa 2007).

Appointed in 1944, the committee report released in 1949 can also be read as a summary of the actions the committee had carried out right after it had begun its work. Among other things, the committee commenced arranging funding for the central organisation and its regional associations, and began collecting statistics about the post-war situation of cottage industry production. It had also suggested that the state should assume control over the collections of the Cottage Industry Museum as well as the range of cottage industry schools in the country. These examples make it
clear that instead of only giving administrative recommendations and legislative suggestions, the committee took many practical initiatives.

Even though the committee report is an official document, it should be noted that it is written in natural language, not in legal-technical jargon, and thus it can be analysed as the thought of the text’s authors. It is reasonable to read the report with consideration of how those active in cottage industry legitimised their ideas instead of reading the document as an objective account of how to promote the strictly economic action of cottage industry production. Foremost among these ideas is how the committee report explains the meaning of cottage industry: how the committee defined it and how they suggested developing it.

The meaning of cottage industry

One of the striking elements in the history of cottage industry in Finland is the difficulty in defining the concept itself. The definition in the 1949 report is complicated and further explained in an appendix that includes the earlier committee’s reflection (KM 1949:34, mon., App. 1). The concept of cottage industry is based on crafts made in homes. This alone makes the scope of the concept very broad, as especially in the post-war context of the agriculturally intensive Finland making crafts was more or less an axiomatic part of everyday life. The inherent role of making crafts led the committee to categorise the subject. A salient categorising measure is the division of cottage industry into two sub-categories. The first category includes products meant for personal use to create savings. The second includes selling crafts for income. A third form of cottage industry could be described as subcontract work, in which a firm delegates a part of its manual production to homeworkers. Clearly, cottage industry was defined in economic terms.

Defining crafts from the economic point of view was problematic, because there were also other concepts that referred to handmade and/or small scale production of objects and products. A clash can even be seen between various efforts at definition, because the committee points out that a definition of the handicraft industry (käsiteollisuus) given in 1944 «had not led to any actions» (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 3). This is seen as a justification for defining income-generating cottage industries as a part of cottage industry. The rather non-economic peculiarity is that this type of craft manufacture is tied to cultural heritage:

Hence the committee sees it to be necessary to treat practitioners of income-generating cottage industries as practitioners of traditional folk crafts and thus belonging to the sphere of cottage industry, because they otherwise could be left without care. (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 3)

In the explicit definition given in the report, cottage industry refers to «(...) crafts produced by people’s work (kansan työnä).» Crafts produced this way should have «individual character», they should be made of «selected materials», and over half of the making should be done by hand (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 5).

At the time there were other similar Finnish terms ending in the word industry (teollisuus) that referred to small-scale production of objects and products. Besides cottage industry (kotiteollisuus), such terms included handicraft industry (käsiteollisuus), small industry (pienteollisuus) and industrial arts (taideteollisuus). On the other hand, the word käsityö, literally handwork, was also used to refer to objects made by hands and tools that generally did not include mechanical power. Naturally the question arises of why there were so many almost synonymous terms in use. Why was it so important...
to call cottage industry expressly cottage industry instead of, say, handicraft industry? Clearly, further clarification of the definition is needed: Who were the people that were supposed to produce crafts? What were the crafts they were supposed to make and what exactly did «individual character» mean? Answering these questions, based on further reading of the 1949 committee report, can also help in determining the essence of cottage industry.

The practitioners of cottage industry

According to the definition in the report, cottage industry covers all crafts that are made in homes for personal use or to be sold. Yet, especially in post-war Finland, making crafts was quite general in all households, whether rich or poor. Thus, the core of the definition necessarily lies in the word *kansa* (translated here both as people and folk) and the question follows: what does it refer to?

There is a short analysis of the economic and societal position of the practitioners of cottage industry in the report (KM1949:34, mon., p.12). Here the economic value of cottage industry is set against the land property of the «practitioner». It is pointed out that cottage industry is practised in the countryside and even more so on the smallest farms that have less than five hectares of tilled land. The underlining of this relation is supposed to clarify «the close connection» between farming, especially of smallholdings, and cottage industry. In other words, the people working within cottage industry were the dwellers of small or extremely small holdings. Against the backdrop of the agro-political landowning history of Finland these included the previous land tenants or landless people of the inferior social and economic standing compared to landowning farmers (see Vihola 2004, pp. 356-369). In the final section of the report, headed as Actions on Edification, cottage industry is explicitly described to be the occupations of the weak or the underclass: «Practitioners of cottage industry are of that part of the people (kansanosa) that tries to the last to get by on their own means and avoids falling on society’s liability» (KM 1949:34, mon., p. 67).

The settling of people was a key issue in post-war Finland, and it led to an exponential rise in the number of smallholdings. In the report, the settling process is noted, saying that the settlement process would bring 40,000 new smallholdings that would not be able to supply their families year round. The committee sees it as necessary to «guide» this «part of the population» in creating a better standard of living and generating income for themselves through cottage industry (KM 1949:34, mon., p. 15). The committee sees that the tendency of people moving to cities should be hindered, because they form a useful source of labour for the country-side: «Hereby possibilities for gaining extra income would be ensured for larger masses than at the present, which would keep them at the service of the countryside and its need for seasonal workforce could be better fulfilled» (KM 1949:34, mon., p. 15).

To put it mildly, the concept of cottage industry has valuing and argumentative connotations. As a practice, cottage industry is justified through its income generation for the weak and the poor. The description of the poor striving to get along on their own suggests that the socio-economically poor engaged in cottage industry are seen as the decent poor reflecting repressing through praise: instead of indicating austerity or distress, poverty turns into a virtue that proves good citizenship. In this way «people» does not really refer to democratic and competent members of the society, but to the decent folk, the well-behaving underclass in the Finnish countryside.
The crafts of cottage industry

According to the report’s definition, to be considered as products of cottage industry, crafts should have «individual character», they should be made of «selected materials» and over half of the work should be done by hand. An appendix to the report includes a list of fields of work that are considered as cottage industries. The list includes woodwork, ranging from building houses to making «modest sculptures»; bath whisks and brooms; smithery, including making knives and fixing bicycles; weaving, spinning and knitting, including piled rugs and lace making; sewing, and also for example pottery, ropemaking and shoemaking (KM 1949:34, mon.: App. 2).

Cottage industry could thus be considered as the production of handicrafts. On the other hand, it is worth noting that there are explicit limitations, such as the insistence on modesty in making wooden sculptures. Compared to industrial arts where piled rugs and pottery were essential fields of design and manufacture as well, the list of cottage industries lacks, among other practices, glassblowing, which at the time was becoming the flagship of Finnish design (see Kalha 1997, pp. 139–143). By the 1940s glass manufacturing had grown into work-intensive factory communities, such as the one in Nuutajärvi (Salo 2007, pp. 11–17). Probably the glassblower’s trade, bound to the glass works, did not fit the small, entrepreneurial cottage industry with its more traditional and mundane crafts and their makers. All in all, the cottage industry products can be described as modest everyday objects, a description that is well in line with the supposed modesty of their makers. The committee recommends, for example, that the state should order cottage industry products such as boots and mittens for the Finnish army. A trace of modesty can also be seen in the suggestion of organising the collecting of material from state timber areas for making brooms, because this would «enhance the possibilities of living for the smallholders and would alike increase the residents’ tax-paying ability» (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 16).

What should the crafts look like?

The report also states that cottage industry products should have an individual look. The look of products is discussed widely in the document under the heading «The Model Questions,» which could also be read as «the design questions». At the beginning of the section, the committee notes that the question about models has turned into one of the most critical issues. A long wished improvement would be a permanent exposition of the best folk crafts that would introduce designers to «the folk cultural development» of items and models of cottage industry. This way the «traditional understanding» would be further developed and the creation of new models would be built on «a sound basis» (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 39). The need for an individual look is justified as being to the benefit of foreign trade. Products for export should be based on «national culture» because «uniqueness» would be the only way to discern «our» products from those of other countries. Uniqueness would secure the sales through the expression of «the Finnish national nuance.»

The dichotomy between the traditional and the new is distinct in the document. On the one hand, it is claimed that everything cannot continue «narrowly on the traditional basis», which is the case «when creating new fields of work», and the same applies to «those fields, on which folk art is very primitive» (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 40). On the other hand, simplicity is seen as the original basis of all folk art, which is interesting considering that simplicity probably met well with the idea of functionalism that reigned in the fields of architecture and design at the time. The need for new design is evident in the committee’s proposition that «cottage industry should attempt to use models particularly designed for it and those should be available widely from as many fields of cottage
industry as possible." In these suggestions the committee sees it as necessary to develop traditional crafts in accordance with contemporary needs and wishes.

Yet the committee pays special attention to those traditional objects that are not intended for mass production. Their models should remain traditional, but quite interestingly, also here the need for contemporary design professionalism is brought in: «For the development of models and items intended for the use of each generation, persons are needed with artistic education who are versed in the national production of their field [of speciality]» (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 40). The professional task applies especially to the Central School of Industrial Arts in Helsinki as the committee presents its wish that students of the school would be acquainted with the «designs of the folk culture of their own country.»

It is worth considering why the design of the cottage industry crafts was considered so important when at the same time the manufacture of these crafts was thought to be a secondary occupation or an avocation that produced such humble items as brooms and mittens to help their maker put bread on the table. Or to put it more frankly: how does one fix a bicycle in a way that complies with folk culture? Obviously the worry about the design of the craft products reflects an interest in controlling not only the products’ national aesthetics but also good folk culture and related taste in general. The cottage industry institution also aspired to dictate the norms for good countryside way of living, because it claimed that especially smallholding families should stay in the countryside as workforce seeking extra income in making modest crafts of good national taste without using too many modern tools.

Cottage industry as a line of education

A concrete outgrowth linked to cottage industry is the establishment of cottage industry schools. Some of the schools that were started in connection with cottage industry or other bodies that had crafts instruction as part of their basic purpose still continue their activities as a part of the Finnish education system on the vocational, polytechnic and university levels (Klemelä 1999, pp. 146–148). To be sure, the entire system of cottage industry education forms a branch for further research, though some studies related to it have been done (Anttila 2003; Liedes 2004; Seddiki 2010).

The establishment of cottage industry schools is intriguing when looking at how intertwined the administration of the educational and cultural matters is. This intertwined nature can be seen, for example, in the updated name of the respective ministry in Finland (since 1 May 2010, the Ministry of Education and Culture). One link between education and culture is described as cultivation or edification. These are seen as the improvement of not only practical skills and the broadening of individuals’ knowledge, but also the practice of cognitive and intellectual skills, including learning to discern good from bad, be it in matters of justice or taste (Ahponen 2004, pp. 223–225).

Sometimes the efforts of both education and cultural policies have been categorised as cultivation policy, known as sivistyspolitiikka in Finnish (Häyrynen 2006, p. 81). From the cultural political point of view, it is therefore remarkable that education is an essential part of the history of cottage industry. Hence, it is reasonable to give a short description of what cottage industry education meant and how it was developed by the CIPC.

In the committee report, the history of cottage industry schooling is divided into three waves, the first being 1740–1770 and the second 1810–1860. The start of the third wave is put at 1875, and it can be seen as still underway in the 1940s, because no ending year is given for it. The first schools
in the 18th century focused on processing linen, spinning and weaving, and the first school giving instruction in carpentry is said to have been established in 1871 in Helsinki (Veistokoulu, later Central School of Industrial Arts, which later grew into the Aalto University School of Art and Design). Between 1887 and 1908 there was also a school for woodwork in Sortavala, Karelia. The State Cottage Industry Institute for Men, established in 1944, is introduced as the first and only state-run cottage industry school. In 1945, this school relocated to Lahti. The great majority of the schools were owned by local associations and societies (e.g. cottage industry associations, supporters’ associations, foundations, women’s associations, agricultural societies) and by municipalities. According to the report, the state funding for cottage industry schools was legislated in 1930. The 1949 report mentions there were 115 cottage industry schools and two higher institutes that qualified for teaching in cottage industry schools (Fredrika Wetterhoff’s Cottage Industry Institute for Women in Hämeenlinna, and the above mentioned State Cottage Industry Institute for Men in Lahti) (KM 1949:34 mon., pp. 19–23).

Table 1. The years of establishment for permanent cottage industry schools. Based on the statistics in the Cottage Industry Production Committee’s report (KM1949:34, mon., pp. 20–22).
Table 2. The years of establishment for itinerant cottage industry schools. Based on the statistics in the Cottage Industry Production Committee’s report (KM1949:34, mon., pp. 22–23).

The report gives several ideas and details on how to develop the cottage industry schools. The schools should provide possibilities for the indigent pupils to start their enterprises at the school until they can «manage fully as independent entrepreneurs» (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 27). The schools should have a piece of tilled land and some forest in order for the schools «to carry out their duty in conditioning the pupils to use and process homely materials, on which basis all healthy cottage industry teaching should be built.» Along with practical skills, the committee proposes that the schools should provide instruction about Finnish language and in «local knowledge», about which a book should be produced. The book should be «historical-ethnological-geographical» and introduce its reader to cottage industry workers, typical cottage industry items and regions (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 34). This all explicates the cultural political nature of cottage industry and how the values of local culture, cultural heritage and certain entrepreneurial citizenship were resolutely put forward in educational measures.

The committee gives syllabi both for the schools and the institutes. Formed by the authorities governing cottage industry education, it is highly probable that the syllabi were also more or less put into practice. Thus, it can be said that the idea of cottage industry was effectively spread to the equivalent schooling system. In addition to setting regulations for the schools and institutes, the committee proposes that «all teaching and advising, course programmes and teacher qualifications referring to cottage industry should be subordinated to the supervision of the state’s cottage industry officials. This relates to all public cottage industry school teaching, advising, guiding and private course instruction that is planned to be presented in statistics» (KM 1949:34 mon., p. 48). In other words, the cottage industry institution claimed for its control all craft activities, from the making of them to the teaching of them.

When looking at all the aspects of cottage industry together, it is evident that the economic advantage cottage industry work would yield was only one facet of the whole, though it was likely a major motive in justifying the meaningfulness of the activities. The institution of cottage industry, the Cottage Industry Department of the National Board of Agriculture and the Central Organisation
of Cottage Industry Associations, claimed for itself all the power to define, initiate, control and monitor the field that included all private and small-scale crafts as well as craft-based sources of livelihood. The economic advantages of craft work were intertwined with the idea of people living in the countryside according to some ideals that were supposed to represent genuine Finnish folk culture. Here we can see both the cultural and the political (both as a sphere and as activities) aspects of cottage industry. In Finland, the locus of cultural policy has also resided substantially with the agricultural sector administration, with a collaborative connection to the centralised interest group of the cottage industry organisation. The history of cottage industry forms an interesting chapter of cultural political thought and action with diverse aspirations to govern and control not only folk culture but also those people supposed to live it and maintain it – the folk itself.

Cultural political history for history of cultural policy

The fact that cottage industry was promoted through a national administrative office in close cooperation with a third sector organisation exemplifies the institutionalised status that cottage industry had achieved at the level of politics as a sphere. However, the existence of this political status of cottage industry is better understood with consideration of the temporal aspect, politics as action. Humble craft courses arranged by the Central Organisation of Cottage Industry Associations are interesting for the reasons why crafts were supposed to be humble, and for who, how, and why anyone should make them. As Eräsaari (1999, pp. 145–146) suggests, structures and institutional frameworks as such are not the crux but the principles that create the political dynamics in a society. So even though the cultural political aspect of cottage industry would lie at a minimum in its institutional framework of promoting Finnish folk culture, in studying the history of cottage industry, a contextual understanding of both culture and policy making should be inherently present in the analysis.

In cultural policy analyses, Raymond Williams’s conception of culture as «a realized signifying system» that is to be seen in parallel with, for example, economic and political systems, is often used as a conceptual viewpoint on culture (Williams 1983, p. 207). To conceive of the history of cultural policy as a range of practices, on the other hand, more attention should be paid to the interrelations between different systems, widening the focus of study from the core of «manifestly signifying institutions» to the «relations between these and other institutions, practices and work», as Williams suggests (1983, pp. 208–209). To enlarge the realm of cultural policy research, Eräsaari (2009, p. 64) has called for an «expanded concept of cultural policy» which would result in the «epistemetic and interpretative approach between cultural analysis and cultural policy», including historical reflection. This kind of initiative can be seen in Sokka’s (2007, p. 75) suggestion for «sensitivity towards historical socio-political context» in researching the history of cultural policy. His notion of how contextualising sheds light on the relation between a policy and the prevailing view of culture brings us back to the public sphere, to see the linkage between political and instrumental developments: «Because of the inherent interconnectedness of politics-as-action and politics-as-sphere, the institutionalisation of culture can be related to the (re)production of cultural meanings in social action» (Sokka 2007, p. 71).

However, although Williams’s conceptualisation is also suitable for analysing the cultural aspect of Finnish cottage industry, it ought to be applied in the context of local economic and cultural developments. With regard to the institution of cottage industry, it is quite clear that instead of solemnly realising cultural significance it was rather a junction for craft culture, the economy and the agrarian production system, which was then in upheaval. Due to the nature of cottage industry
as a compound of different cultural, social and economic aspects with a basis in agricultural sector administration, it is relevant to give special thought to the cultural political essence of cottage industry and to ask how cottage industry can be seen as cultural policy. Is it interpreted as cultural policy by delivering the current concepts to the past – in other words, was it cultural policy from today’s point of view? Or was it also cultural policy for the coevals, to the ones who were actively promoting it?

In his article about the relations of Romantic intellectuals and cultural policy Oliver Bennett (2006) brings up the temporal disparity of cultural political thought and the concept itself. He notes that despite the novelty of the expression, «the idea [sic] of cultural policy is much older» (Bennett 2006, p. 124). Hence, writings preceding the actual conceptualisation of cultural policy should be studied as or as relevant to cultural policy, but with attention to related contexts. Indeed, to better figure out the history of cultural policy we need cultural political history that not only concentrates on institutional developments, but also pays attention to the temporality of thought and action. Explicating the cultural political thought underlying the idea of cottage industry would also reveal the institutional and structural frameworks that in the case of cottage industry were not at all insignificant. One should only recall the range of cottage industry schools and their partial merging into the Finnish educational system. It is therefore important not only to depict the ways cottage industry made itself visible in the political spheres as an institution but to give sincere thought to how contemporaries themselves saw their institutionalising practices as culturally significant. Following the advice above by Cerutti, one should take seriously the efforts the leaders of cottage industry took in developing and promulgating their ideas instead of «teaching the past its true actions» or moulding the past to fit our current understanding of certain concepts.

Ideas in the details

The above close reading of the 1949 committee report displayed the many-sided and partially even contradictory contents of cottage industry that not only referred to craft trades but to folk culture, heritage and national aesthetics. Of course, one committee report hardly explains the whole of the cottage industry phenomenon, neither has it been written for that end, but the 1949 document offers a possibility to apply the microhistorical lens also in another sense to explore the idea of cottage industry.

A distinctive term that motivates the microhistorical approach in studying cottage industry is the notion of the typical exception or the exceptional typical. By this is meant an obtrusive detail in the sources that can function as an opening for the clue method supported prominently, among others, by Carlo Ginzburg (see Ginzburg 1989). As documentations of official committee work, committee reports are written in a formal style that follows certain conventions. Concepts are defined and suggested improvements are justified with regard to the prevailing circumstances (Hovi et al. 1989, p. 29). Deviations from this style easily draw attention. There is a textual detail in the CIPC’s report that can be interpreted as a typical exception, a clue that serves for studying the historical foundations of cottage industry. The section on education, «Developing Craftsmanhip», opens with a presentation of the historical importance of cottage industry, listing certain renowned figures of Finnish state history:

Since earlier times, cottage industry has held a recognised economic and ethical position. Notable men in the lead of state’s monetary institution, such as Lars Gabriel von Haartman
and J. W. Snellman, worked for the elevation of cottage industry just as Agathon Meurman and Uno Cygnaeus did. The great years of dearth and famine in the late 1860s gave impulse for the emergence of the questions of men’s cottage industry work. The civilised of the country and those in leading positions, with J. V. Snellman and Z. Topelius at the head, took notice of the national heritage hidden within cottage industry and began to enhance it. Even before this, cottage industry teaching was given great significance in the national economic life and in education. (KM 1949:34, mon., pp. 16–17.)

In the context of an otherwise typical committee report, this kind of a list is striking: a conservative aristocrat, the so-called prime minister of the Grand Duchy of Finland L. G. von Haartman (1789–1859); the main driver of the nationalist Fennoman movement, J. V. Snellman (1806–1881); another conservative and religious nationalist, Agathon Meurman (1826–1909); a writer and professor of history, Zachris Topelius (1818–1898); and the father of the elementary school in Finland, Uno Cygnaeus (1810–1888). The list at first seems to reassert a conservative and nationalist, even Fennomanian character for the 1949 report, and hence for cottage industry. But considered again with the exceptional typical in mind, the detail looks a bit too obvious. The committee backs up its recommendations by lining up a group of renowned historical names. The exceptionally apt selection of persons makes this detail interesting for researching the political and ideological background of cottage industry. It requires an examination of the role these men had in developing cottage industry – or whether this citation reflects the committee’s action of interpreting the past in the manner that best served the aims and values of cottage industry in the post-war situation.

This detail gives impetus for studying the ideological contexts of cottage industry, but also brings the committee itself into a new, historical light. Traditions, especially in the form of the folk tradition, were admittedly important in cottage industry policies, but it seems that the committee was also continuing certain political traditions. To say the least, craft culture appears to have been subject to cultural political ideas long before the conceptualisation of cultural policy. Microhistorical research on one committee, gathered both as a part of an institutionalised system and as a group of contemporaries doing their best in the post-war trouble, can uncover the history and the idea of cottage industry more deeply than other longitudinal studies might do. Details in documents not only reveal problems of definition but can offer a look at the cottage industry world-view, at the ideas, attitudes and values that were organised and put into action. To support the clue method analysis, the use of historical sources could expand from the report analysed in this article to the archives of the Finnish Craft Museum that hold the minutes of the 1944–1949 committee meetings and the personal archives of Yrjö Laine-Juva and Hulda Kontturi. Along with previous research and historical literature, articles in the magazine Kotiteollisuus would enable researchers to answer what cottage industry was about as an idea and as a cultural policy.

The fact that the word kotiteollisuus rarely appears in the everyday Finnish language anymore indicates a change in vocabulary. However, linguistic changes do not automatically imply changes in thoughts. The history of cottage industry offers a challenge about how to view contemporary conceptions of craft culture and the related policies, but also more generally about the juncture between the economy and individual creativity. Indeed, if we are to avoid accustomed ways of thinking about cultural policy, of «leaning against conventional backrests», then the rereading of cottage industry is essential, especially as it has remained at the margins of cultural policy research until now.

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References

Primary Sources


Research Literature


All citations from the original sources are translated by the author. Some of the essential Finnish terms appear in brackets or in italics to show the original expression.