

The Life and Fall of Local Working-Class Communities In and Outside of Helsinki in the 1900s

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 Esikaupunkien vuosisata. Paikallinen yhteisöllisyys Helsingin seudun vanhoissa työväen esikaupungeissa 1900-luvulla. [A century of suburbia. Local community life in the old working-class neighbourhoods in and outside of Helsinki in 1900s]. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Publications of the Department of Social Research, 2015, 311 pp. ISBN 978-952-10-9161-2.

Erkko Anttila's doctoral dissertation is an ambitious and impressive historical analysis of the formation, life, and fall of the working-class communities that were formed in the early 1900s at the outskirts of Helsinki. The studied neighbourhoods include Malmi, Tapanila, Oulunkylä, Pakila (formerly Pakinkylä), Pirkkola, Puistola, and Pukinmäki, currently in Helsinki; Jupperi, Laaksolahti, and Lintuvaara (formerly Harakka in Leppävaara), currently in Espoo; and, finally, Asola, Hämeenvaara, Tikkurila, and Vapaala, currently in Vantaa. These neighbourhoods were formed during the second wave

of suburban development when working-class communities were formed outside the city of Helsinki that in the beginning of the 1900s had only 80,000 residents. These neighbourhoods had wooden houses from simple cottages to larger villas and were formed freely without any city planning initiatives or regulations, which in fact enabled working-class people to build cheap housing for their families.

Anttila's work asks three interconnected questions concerning the local community life of the neighbourhoods. Firstly, it inquires about the significance of local social bonds and networks for residents at different times during the 1900s. Secondly, it examines the everyday practices and local forms of action of the residents in the studied working-class communities. Thirdly, it asks about the relationship the residents have had to the world outside the neighbourhood. All these questions are examined from the beginning of the 1900s when these communities were formed, until the very end of the century, by which the most forms of strong local interdependencies had disappeared. The study is divided into three time periods: the early 1900s (before the wars), the time during and after the wars, and the last decades of the century.

Theoretically, the dissertation draws on both Finnish and in-

ternational, mainly American, studies on urban and suburban communities. It avoids the main problems of community studies, that of nostalgia, normativity, and idealism, by studying the local community life relationally focusing on various sides of local interdependencies without conceptually relying on the value-laden concept of community. A more neutral, or multisided perspective is enabled by Norbert Elias's theory of local community that was published in 1974 as a foreword to Colin Bell and Howard Newby's book *The sociology of community: A selection of readings*. At the heart of Elias's theory is the notion of local interdependency between the residents, without any valuation of its quality. In his theory it is natural that residents both value their community and are at the same time bothered by gossip or non-voluntary dependence on neighbours. His theory is historical, stressing the evolution of communities from fully local interdependencies to a situation in which people rely on non-local social systems to meet their needs. The question of how widely people rely on their local communities is an empirical one. The way Anttila's work draws on Elias does not lead to a rigid theoretical framing, but for him Elias rather provides a sensitive theoretical gaze that helps him to notice rich empirical details testifying to various local interdependences.

Anttila's research materials include archival data, neighbourhood histories, memory data, newspaper articles, statistical information, neighbourhood and association papers, and leaflets, among others. The different kinds of data are used appropriately, each contributing to different aspects of the analysis.

The most delightful part of the analysis, I find, is the rich description of the local working-class life in the early 1900s. Anttila writes so lively about the working-class life in the early decades of 1900s that one can almost see, hear, and sense what it felt like to live there. The main focus is on the local relations and practices, and on the related material aspects, such as housing, the railroad, road maintenance, house construction, housework (such as laundry), domestic animals, living conditions, local exchange and material resources, neighbourhood shops, traffic, and so forth. Local life is depicted from various perspectives, concerning the mundane aspects of life, local associations, political affiliations, activities and conflicts, as well as, the poverty that forces neighbours to rely on each other. Anttila's main line of argument is material: local communities with strong interdependencies are formed due to the fact that the residents *have*

to find local solutions to most everyday issues and problems.

In the early 1900s, the studied neighbourhoods resemble more rural villages rather than urban neighbourhoods. Neighbours help each other, because they have to. Their interdependence is not just social but economical as well. Reciprocity is an expectation. Firefighting, road maintenance, bus lines, electricity, and phone lines are all started by local residents. Local initiatives that first serve the local needs paradoxically contribute to the loosening of those needs by enabling wider mobility and connections across the city. As the neighbourhoods are integrated into the growing city non-local infrastructures take over.

In studying the post-war life, the focus is on the economic boom, increased prosperity, and individualization of working-class lives that draw people to their homes and to the wider city to live their lives. The city takes charge of most necessary functions that started as local initiatives. Growing prosperity enables less dependency on the neighbours and the connections to the outside world expand. By the last decades of the century the local communities have shifted from tight entanglements of necessary collaboration, material sharing and community sentiments (exemplified by

“talkoot”) to a much looser figuration of communal interests in safety and cleanliness of the neighbourhoods. Working-class living conditions and lifestyles resemble the middle class, and the collective local endeavours have mainly to do with lobbying for the neighbourhood interests (for example, trying to stop transit traffic). Despite some efforts to revive the community sentiments, by the end of the century local connections are thin and voluntary.

As the people disappear from the public life of the neighbourhood, the local histories and memory as a source of data disappear as well. Thus the book tells no longer about fascinating local figures and interesting incidents, but about general developments. As someone who ethnographically studies extraordinarily active urban neighbourhoods today, I found the last part of the analysis thin in comparison with the first one that is by far the most intriguing part of the book. Anttila’s scope of analysis is so ambitious that some richness of detail is inevitably lost.

In all, Anttila does, however, an incredible job in keeping the package together without losing too many particular aspects of the life he studies. He manages to paint a flesh-and-blood picture of the rise and fall of the working-class communities. It

is, in fact, strangely apt that the local figures disappear as time passes. This is exactly what happens in the neighbourhoods. There are no longer people left to write the local stories. There are no local figures to write about.

After such a powerful analysis, I would have loved to read conclusions that dig deeper, but all in all I congratulate Anttila for work well done. His dissertation is a recommended reading for wide audiences in sociology and beyond.

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