

## **Urban change and transformation of sociability**

*Social practices, networks and spaces in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Helsinki*

### **Abstract**

The paper deals with changing forms of urban sociability in 20th century Helsinki. It is based on ongoing dissertation work in which I am aiming to analyse changes in everyday sociability in Helsinki, that is, in the informal, habitual practices through which people have met each other as well as in the spaces and networks in which this urban sociability has taken place. The material settings of social life, social practices (such as visiting-, courtship- and pub-life patterns) and personal networks of city-dwellers are studied in two cross-section periods ('industrial' late 1930s and 'postindustrial' 1975-1990). While the dissertation will be based on a combination of ethnographic and oral history sources, time-usage studies, diaries, questionnaires and some comparative sources from UK, the main aim of this paper is to assess some of the earlier theories and empirical findings on the changes of social relations in urban context.

### **1. Studying urban sociability**

In a way, informal everyday-interaction between people has been re-discovered in historiography and the social sciences through concepts of social networks and social capital. Often, these discussions have been connected to implicit assumptions about the nature of social relations their historical change. 20<sup>th</sup> century changes such as the rise of the professional middle-class, growth of physical and social mobility, institutionalisation of social security in the welfare state, rise in the affluence of most social groups, but especially rapid urbanisation have been seen deteriorating old communal- and kinship ties. Cities, particularly western ones, have been seen as focal points of privatization, individualization and instrumentalization of human relationships. Along with new technologies such as the TV and the Internet, urban form itself has been suggested to strengthen these tendencies, as the city-space has restructured social interaction.

Although the notion of this kind of profound historical transformation in social relations in the modernised world has been often repeated in central sociological and historical texts<sup>1</sup>, the direction and meaning of these changes remains debated and somewhat unclear.

Contradictory views on the nature of these changes have also been used to argue for different political ends<sup>2</sup>. In the context of these debates, it becomes interesting to study concrete historical changes in patterns of sociability in the urban context<sup>3</sup>. How, if at all, have practices that bring people together changed during the last century? How have successive waves of urbanisation, industrialisation and de-industrialisation affected everyday social interaction?

In my thesis, these questions are mainly looked at in Finland's capital city Helsinki, where the study is further narrowed into Kallio, formerly a working-class neighbourhood of about 18 000 inhabitants. Rapid and largely uncontrolled urbanisation and industrialisation in the northern periphery of Helsinki gave birth to this neighbourhood in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in an extremely crowded and distinctively working-class area. Today, after several phases of rebuilding, growth and gradual decline in the number of inhabitants, Kallio is characterised by high proportion of single-person households, high residential mobility as well as social and ethnic diversity. As an area that has undergone radical transitions between urbanisation, industrialisation and de-industrialisation, it is a good place to study urban forms of sociability and their change.

## **2. Urban isolation? Theories of social fragmentation**

The idea that city space and urbanisation have changed the way in which human relationships are organised is actually quite old and has been repeated by classical social thinkers from Marx to Tönnies and from Weber to the Chicago School of sociology. Georg Simmel was one of the early theoreticians interested on how city life affects sociability. According to Simmel, big city environment produces forms of individuality and modes of interaction that are characterized by indifference, aversion and reservedness. For Simmel, this urban mentality is a necessary defense mechanism that protects the subject from psychological overload caused by constant influx of new stimulus and new people. The urban mentality creates spheres of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Bauman 2001, Elias 1978, Giddens 1992, Maffesoli 1996, Putnam 2000, Sennet 1986.

<sup>2</sup> The social fragmentation theory has been connected to a neo-liberal critique of welfare state and a call for a 'return' to presumed communal grass-root level solidarity preceding it. See Bellah et al. (1985), Etzioni (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Defined at this stage loosely as the more or less voluntary, intentional, informal and un-instrumental social interaction between individuals.

personal freedom that is negative in its essence: freedom from, not to something. But while this negative freedom could according to Simmel easily turn into loneliness, it would be wrong to characterize Simmel's view of urban sociability as pessimistic. For Simmel, the tendencies of aversion and indifference were only a logical following of the enlargement of the sphere of interaction in big cities. Enlarged urban sociability was necessarily dependent on a complex system of sympathies, indifferences and aversions that actually worked to connect rather than to isolate the inhabitants of a big city.<sup>4</sup>

Simmel's thesis of the urban indifference is in some respects compatible with another, more pessimistic discourse that I am calling here the *theory of social fragmentation*. It can be seen as one of the “grand narratives” of various modernisation theories, and emphasises a strong break between rural and urban sociability.<sup>5</sup> According to social fragmentation theorists, variety of factors from growing incomes and increasing distance between relatives to institutionalisation of social security abolished many of the traditional functions of kin and community, making people less dependent on them. Traditional communities characterised by tight social interaction, solidarity as well as shared norms and values were dispersed and superseded by more anonymous neighbourhood- and workplace sociability. At the same time, importance of kin decreased as many of its functions were taken over by new kind of privatised nuclear family, no longer merely a unit of production. The result was a fragmented social environment, consisting of small isolated units that were connected by contractual relations and self-interest rather than communal status and reciprocity.<sup>6</sup>

Theory of social fragmentation has also been linked to the introduction of certain new consumer durables during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In countless text, radio, television, and more recently internet as well as mobile telephone have been found more or less guilty for

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<sup>4</sup> Simmel 1971.

<sup>5</sup> The theory of social fragmentation can be linked to the long intellectual tradition that has concentrated on the negative aspects of urbanisation and modernisation since 19<sup>th</sup> century, seeing city life as unnatural or somehow corrosive to human relations. Premises of the theory can be found in the writings of many conservative thinkers, but also of social radicals such as Engels and later marxist critics. The theme of declining communities has more recently been echoed by communitarian theoreticians such as Bellah et al. (1985) and Etzioni (1996) and most recently by the discussion of deterioration of social capital, initiated by Robert D. Putnam (2000).

<sup>6</sup> As noted above, this fragmentation-theory has been connected to a neo-liberal critique of welfare state and a call for a “return” to communal grass-root level solidarity presumably preceding it. See for example Bellah 1985, Etzioni 1996 and Robert D. Putnam 2000.

substituting active human contacts with passive entertainment, real-life communality with electronic illusions. This discussion is still going on.<sup>7</sup>

The social fragmentation discourse is not only an academic, but connects to a widely accepted generalization about “communal” past and “individualized” present in Western societies. But while the bleakest pictures offered by social fragmentation theorists might be dismissed off-hand as moralism or sheer nostalgia, a profound historical change in the way human relationships have been organized still appears a reasonable hypothesis in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century changes. The next section deals in miniature with some of the historical factors that make this hypotheses plausible in the case of Helsinki and Kallio.

### **3. Visiting, neighbourliness and courting: changing patterns of sociability**

There have been a number of fundamental material and institutional changes in Helsinki during the 20<sup>th</sup> century that can be seen as having potentially changed social relationships in the city and in Kallio. On the most basic level, growth of urban population and economic wealth radically transformed the city. Growing from 50 000 inhabitants in late 19<sup>th</sup> century to over 500 000 by 1970s, Helsinki was throughout the century characterised by successive waves of movement from countryside to the city, that were especially visible in Kallio and the surrounding high-mobility working-class areas. Economically, change from absolute poverty and rigid class-positions into a relatively wealthy post-industrial city during the century transformed the ability of Helsinki’s inhabitants to engage in non-economic activities. Along with this new affluence, the rise of the welfare state and growth of professional middle class after the second world war also meant lowered risks of life and reduced dependency on informal institutions such as the extended family and neighbourhood.

After the second world war everyday life was rapidly technologized, as new wealth was used to adapt new consumer technologies that became increasingly important mediators between people. At the same time, improvement of urban infrastructure, development of public

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<sup>7</sup> One recent example of seeing technology causing social fragmentation is Robert Putnam, who attached fears of social isolation on rising figures of tv-spectating (2000). Bauman, maybe the most pessimistic of the social fragmentation theorists, holds that “...*the cellular telephone, offering independence even from wired networks and sockets, delivered the final blow to the claim physical proximity might have had on spiritual togetherness.* (2001, 38) On the other hand, Maffesoli (1996) has seen electronic media and especially TV as the mediators of new kind of postmodern communal gatherings detached of space.

transportation and increased use of personal transport facilitated spatial differentiation of residential and commercial/ industrial/ administrative areas, as people could live further from their workplace. This also enabled social differentiation of space and the birth of new kinds of residential suburbs and intensified social segregation of the city space, as greater mobility gave the upper strata of urban society possibilities to isolate from the working classes.

In the following, I am taking a brief look at how these changes affected two practices or spheres of social life in Kallio, visiting and courtship.

### *Visiting practices and neighbourliness*

The practice of visiting was a form of social interaction that, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, regularly took place in the homes of the working-class people of Kallio. According to oral testimonies, it was an important form of socialising; relatives and neighbours could just drop by, and doors were actually often kept open for spontaneous visitors to enter. Coffee-drinking formed an important social ritual, around which the visiting practice was organized. Besides coffee, information and material aid could be exchanged during these visits, acting as a kind of informal, reciprocal form of social security.<sup>8</sup>

Partially, the importance of homes as social arenas in Kallio can be explained by the scarcity of other kinds of social spaces during the first part of the century. In Kallio, considered as a “dangerous” working-class part of the city, restrictive official policies reduced possibilities for going out to pubs, gathering outside and even going to cafés, restaurants and social gatherings.<sup>9</sup> The visiting practices were also a traditional form of sociability in the Finnish countryside, and familiar form for most of the inhabitants in Kallio, most of whom were migrants from the countryside.<sup>10</sup> In the conditions of relative poverty and uncertainty of life, the movement from countryside to city itself created a strong need for supportive neighbourliness and extended family sociability. However, extremely crowded housing and close proximity of life in the working-class neighbourhood also created tensions between privacy and sociability, as efforts to maintain social distance were also made in working-class

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<sup>8</sup> For this informal economic support between neighbours, see Saaritsa 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Wacklin 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Sarmela 1974.

areas. With only thin walls separating apartments and tenants lodging even in the smallest households, this kind of forced sociability could lead to conflicts between neighbours and concerns about privacy, reflected for example in the judgemental attitudes against “gossiping” – that is, female sociability and interest in other people’s lives.<sup>11</sup>

After the second world war and particularly from late 1960s onwards, economic growth, rise of the welfare-state, a new wave of mass-urbanisation and decline in the average size of families started to change forms of neighbourliness and working-class sociability. Oral sources and statistical time-usage data indicate an apparent decline in the practice of visiting. Reasons for this could be manifold. Greater affluence permitted the inhabitants of Kallio more space and privacy, and the material need for neighbourly help became less pressing. At the same time, loosening of official restrictions and growth of consumer power led to rise in the number of social spaces outside the home, such as pubs, cafés, restaurants, cinema-theatres, parks and amusement-parks. There was more leisure time that could be spent in more diversified ways. Free time spent in home started also to be arranged increasingly around new standard household item, the television. At first its appearance increased visiting to households that had it, but once television started to be widely common, it strengthened the tendency of privatisation and nuclear-family-centered sociability. The fact that housing tenements became larger with a new wave of construction, with more people living in them, along with constant mobility of the inhabitants also worked to make the neighbourhoods more anonymous and privatized. There are numerous oral testimonies, how spontaneous visiting between relatives, neighbours and friends became less frequent and conditional on invitation from 1960s onwards. The division between private and public sphere became stricter, thus conforming to the pattern that the middle classes had adapted already earlier. Even inside the nuclear families, there was further privatisation, as the living space was separated and specialized between socialising space (the livingroom) and individual bedrooms.<sup>12</sup>

### *From courtship to dating culture*

*Courting* or dating is one of the social practices that have enough temporal continuity to be termed a ‘structure’, as each generation have formed their own courting practices and rituals. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, courting was still quite formal business. From high-class

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<sup>11</sup> Koskinen 1990, 82, Åström 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Åström 1990, 221-222, oral testimonies from ”Urban memory”-project.

socializing to the “respectable” portions of working-class cultures, the connection of courting and future marriage was ideally quite tight, and the correct order of proceeding (from the first contact to marriage) was clearly and straightforwardly established by a set of tacit rules. Marriage rates in Kallio were high and the marriage age relatively young.<sup>13</sup>

For both sexes, courtship was regarded as more fun than the marriage, and it was this ‘fun’ aspect that was taking more emphasis in the dating practices along the 20th century. While the reasons of what was seen to be a process of ‘laxing of manners’ is beyond the scope of this paper, the observation was repeatedly made in the inter-war period and particularly after the second world war.

As Giddens argues, one of the shaping factors in the modern courting patterns has definitely been the popular cult of romance<sup>14</sup>. Being increasingly selective about the partner made new demands on the courting partners, and the individualist and informal idea of (irrational) romance worked to loosen up older courting rituals.

Whatever the reasons, by the 1960s, the potential possibility of marriage started to be further separated from courting/dating. Although the two were still closely related, couples increasingly broke up and found new partners. As the age of marriage rose and the age of reaching sexual maturity fell, the period of courting before marriage was gradually getting longer and somewhat less serious, often involving more than one partner.<sup>15</sup>

These changes - prolonged period of dating before marriage, new selectiveness about the partner, and increasing emphasis on informal and affectionate character of dating, together with the steadily growing consumer power of young people set the stage ready for influx of material novelties in dating cultures. At the same time, it was through material developments that the transformation from marriage-oriented courting to dating culture was actualised. New structures in the urban form facilitated greater mobility as transportation improved, thus giving potentially more room for choice in selecting partners. Perhaps more important was the increase in number and diversity of social spaces, such as dance halls, discos, cafés, parks, amusement parks, music venues, nightclubs and particularly cinema theatres, that became a

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<sup>13</sup> Koskinen 1990, 77-79, Waris 1973, 89-93.

<sup>14</sup> Giddens 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Koskinen 1990.

new standard setting for dating after the second world war. Greater wealth and mobility also made holiday resorts an important setting of the dating scene. Similarly important was the arrival of new consumer technology, mediating relationships and creating new practices of interaction: the telephone, the wristwatch (needed as the timing of the dates was getting more precise) the record-player, personal transports such as bicycle, car or scooter, and later on mobile telephone and internet. Thus with courtship, social change intertwined with material change and technologisation of everyday-life even more clearly than in the case of visiting-practices.

#### **4. Transformations of sociability**

Sociability has often been approached as something situated in an autonomous and sphere of culture or “local habits”. However, many of the changes in sociability during the 20<sup>th</sup> century seem to be international rather than local in scope, and connected European-wide processes of de-industrialisation and social change. Moreover, I am suggesting, that the transformation of social practices cannot be explained only on the level of “cultural” or “social”, but that material change has to be also brought in. Adaptation of new social spaces, influx of new technology and restructuring of physical urban space have throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century had profound impacts on social practices and sociability and the whole way that human relationships have been organized. For example, the participants in courtship practices have within a century been extremely quick to make use of new spaces of social interaction and to adapt technical innovations from dancehalls to cinema-theatres, from discos to the internet, from scooter drives to text-messaging, and from amusement parks to ethnic restaurants, thus re-making the whole practice of courtship.

The transformation from industrial to post-industrial cities in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has apparently accentuated many processes that were already actualising in urban sociability in the first part of the century. It has been argued that social relationships have become more voluntary and that formal relations between people, such as kinship ties, no longer produce a self-evident basis for human interaction.<sup>16</sup> According to many researchers, the ideal of informal friendship, produced partly in opposition to roles of self-control and reservedness that are demanded from professional middle class at their work has become to dominate

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<sup>16</sup> Melkas 2003.



sociability.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, families have become smaller and habitual forms of “communal” sociability such as the old visiting-practices have declined. Less steep or at least less visible social barriers in highly specialised service societies have also loosened formal rules of socializing and communication. For example, use of a-hierarchical, informal speech (“sinuttelu”) became socially acceptable in Finland during the 1960s, indicating laxing of manners and more subtle social hierarchies.

While the theory of social fragmentation seems to capture some aspects of these historical changes in the ways human relationships function, many of its premises seem to be problematic and open for criticism. Firstly, it implies a picture of traditional communality that is often idealised beyond recognition. Far from being unproblematic idylls, life in the "traditional communities" was historically characterised by tensions, hierarchies and conflicts as much as by mutual aid or harmonious interaction. Secondly, numerous studies have shown that it is difficult to speak of abrupt break between rural and urban (or "traditional" and "modern") sociability, and that old social forms and practices could not only persist, but actually gain new importance in the industrial cities. Kinship and family strategies have been crucial for families coping with economic uncertainties in new urban environment<sup>18</sup>, while old communal forms such as visiting practices, work-bees and common festivities continued to have importance well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup>

Disappearance of self-evidencies in human relationships has lately led to renewed fears of anonymity and social isolation in urban life<sup>20</sup>. However, some recent findings suggest exactly the opposite: based on time-usage research, Tuula Melkas has found rapid rise in the intensity with which young people meet and interact with each other. The change has been so fast and so significant, that it has led Melkas to talk about rise of new generation, characterized by socially oriented personality type<sup>21</sup>. Thus, simplistic modernisation schemes fail to grasp the complexity of social transformations in 20<sup>th</sup> century cities. Still, it remains open to assess the degree into which grand narratives such as the social fragmentation theory are myths, and to what degree reflections of actual historical change.

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<sup>17</sup> Barcellos Rezende 1999, Melkas 2003.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Fontaine & Schlumbohm 2000, for situation in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Finland: Saaritsa 2001.

<sup>19</sup> For the continuity rural sociability and its connection to social class in Helsinki, see Castrén and Olsson, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> For example Bauman 2000, Putnam 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Melkas 2003.

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