

# Subaltern Political Subjectivities and Practices in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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Between Loyalty and Resistance

Edited by Karen Lauwers, Sami Suodenjoki,  
and Marnix Beyen

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## Chapter 4

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*Sami Suodenjoki*

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## 4 The municipal assembly as a scene of local democracy and subaltern political experiences in Finland, 1865–1917

*Sami Suodenjoki*

Let us enter a municipal assembly. Even from farther off you can feel that one is taking place here. Horses are standing next to a fence, rugs on their legs, hay scattered all over. Old men are standing along the walls with their pipes and worn-out caps. [...] Step in and encounter the stale, sweaty heat in the hall [...]. Encourage yourself and push yourself into the meeting room. Screw up your eyes to find the chairman through the smoke. On the benches and along the walls, fat and skinny-legged local decision makers are smiling self-assertively and enjoying the sweet warmth [...]. Each one has a responsible, self-important face. Here they are, the men who carry the burden and the swelter, understand their difficult position.<sup>1</sup>

This satirical depiction was published in a Finnish regional newspaper in 1907 as part of an article about the current state of local government in the countryside. By caricaturing the smoky atmosphere and the shabby but self-important attendants of a municipal assembly, the author sought to underline the outdatedness of the meeting as an institution of local self-government. In doing so, the author tapped into ongoing debates over the need to democratize and rationalize the system of municipal administration that had been outlined four decades earlier by the municipal reform act of 1865.<sup>2</sup> This act had solidified the idea of local self-government in the Grand Duchy of Finland and thereby contributed to Finland's privileged status in the Russian Empire. While Tsar Alexander II's government reforms had also boosted local self-government elsewhere in the empire at the same time, Finland diverged from the core of Russia in that local self-governing bodies developed into a true counterforce to the state bureaucracy. A cornerstone in this development was the introduction of municipal assemblies in over four hundred rural municipalities, whose inhabitants formed 87 percent of Finland's population in 1900.<sup>3</sup>

The municipal assembly was an organ of participatory democracy that convened several times a year. The assemblies were open to all local inhabitants who paid municipal taxes, but these people only formed a minority

of the local adult population. Those who were considered subordinate to their master or who did not reach the income limit for taxation were formally excluded, as they were not eligible to vote in the assemblies. In addition, even the eligible participants were not equal, as their votes were weighed according to their assessable income. This concentrated local power in the hands of wealthy landowners. However, this system of limited census suffrage did not totally shut out people in the lower echelons of society from local decision-making. In fact, lower-class people's ability to exert influence on municipal assemblies eventually became a reason for the persistence of these assemblies despite growing public criticism against them. It is to these developments that this chapter now turns.

In this chapter, I trace subaltern people's political agency and their experiences of local democracy in municipal assemblies in Finland between 1865 and 1917.<sup>4</sup> I treat the municipal assembly as a "scene of experience," where a significant segment of people was familiarized with democratic political practices such as voting and elections. The municipal assemblies were also events that, in interaction with the contemporaneous print media, generated emotions related to mistreatment, oligarchy, corruption, and social discrimination. These emotions and experiences were different among people from different social strata and from different parts of the municipality. I focus on the experiences of landless men and women, whose formal influence in local politics was non-existent or minuscule and who can therefore be regarded as subalterns.

The notion of "scene of experience" serves in the chapter to highlight the situational and spatial character of local government and of subaltern political practices. It coheres with Peter Burke's (2005, 44–49) idea of "occasionalism," which encourages historians to look closer at occasions and situations and the ways in which interactions, roles, and audiences shape them. The notion of scene of experience also links up with the ideas of historian Benno Gammerl (2012) concerning the connectedness of emotions and spatial constellations. Gammerl's concept of "emotional spaces," like Mark Seymour's (2020) term "emotional arenas," underlines that emotions always take shape in a spatial setting within networks involving bodies and artefacts. It also draws attention to the factors that permeate actors from outside, like the emotions of other participants in the same place, the material properties, or the atmosphere of a meeting (Pernau 2017, 14). The notion of scenes of experience works similarly, emphasizing the dynamics of participants and the material and spatial aspects of the event, but not requiring an explicit focus on emotions. In addition, it directs the attention to the temporal layers of experiences and to the socio-cultural preconditions that shape contexts of possibilities for social agency and experience in the scene (Harjula & Kokko 2022).

Archival sources on the operation of local self-government in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finland are plenty, but few of these sources shed light on how people outside the circle of local notables

experienced local government and democracy. To circumvent this evidence problem, I turn to contemporary Finnish newspapers, and especially to the readers' letters published in them. These letters appeared by the thousand every year, and many of them discussed local politics. The writers of readers' letters represented the whole spectrum of rural society, from landowners, priests, tradesmen, and teachers to tenant farmers, craftspeople, servants, and itinerant workers. Lower-class people most likely formed a minority among the writers, but historian Heikki Kokko (2021) has observed that letters by lower-class writers had appeared in the hundreds already in the 1850s and 1860s. As for later decades, most reader correspondents to newspapers appear to have been middle-class people (Sorvali 2019), but the share of lower-class authors likely grew alongside the contemporaneous spread of literacy. Working-class contributors were particularly numerous in socialist newspapers, the circulation of which grew rapidly at the beginning of the twentieth century (Suodenjoki 2010, 128–31).

Using Finnish digitized newspapers as a data set, I have collected a sample of 147 readers' letters that cover local government in a single municipality or more generally in the Finnish countryside.<sup>5</sup> These letters do not provide unmediated access to the experiences of ordinary readers, since the published readers' letters were selected and often also heavily edited by news organizations, which had their own ideas about valuable contributions to the debate (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, viii; Sorvali 2020). Nonetheless, I consider readers' letters as the best available instrument to piece together popular conceptions of the municipal assembly as a scene of democracy and local self-government. This is because their authors were usually first-person witnesses to what had happened in municipal assemblies, and they depicted the dynamics of these assemblies often far more graphically than the laconic minutes of those meetings. Readers' letters covering local politics are also far more numerous and geographically more extensive than the preserved ego-documents of rural people, which might also shed some light on subaltern views of local government. This said, further case studies on this topic deploying other source materials would be highly valuable.

### **The politically marginalized as subalterns in the Finnish countryside**

The concept of subaltern social groups, proposed by Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, can be applied to the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finland in various ways. Gramsci himself used the concept loosely and equivocally, identifying subaltern groups with peasants, slaves, religious minorities, different races, women, and the proletariat (Green 2011, 69). One perspective to subalternity in the context of Finland opens through the linguistic division between the Finnish-speaking majority and the Swedish-speaking minority. Until the late nineteenth century, the Finnish-speaking people represented subalterns in the sense that they

lacked opportunities to use their mother tongue in official circumstances; Swedish was the language of the administration, education, and the cultural and economic elite in Finland (see Pekonen and La Mela in this book). This situation changed gradually in the late nineteenth century as the burgeoning Finnish national movement reinforced the position of the Finnish language in public and cultural spheres. Nevertheless, the tension between the Swedish-speaking elites and the Finnish-speaking people continued into the twentieth century and manifested itself also in the municipal assemblies in many regions.

Besides the language relations, subalternity in local politics concerned ethnic minorities. In recent decades, researchers have devoted attention especially to the colonization of the Sámi people and the discrimination against the Roma in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finland (e.g., Lehtola 2015; Tervonen 2012). Some of this research has touched upon the role of municipal bodies in ethnic discrimination, but Lehtola (2012) has also highlighted Sámi people's strong involvement in municipal government in northernmost Finnish Lapland. However, as my sources do not address the inclusion or exclusion of Sámi or Roma people in and from municipal politics, this perspective on subalternity requires further study.

In this chapter, I define subalternity most of all in terms of political citizenship. In other words, I associate the term subaltern with people who lacked the right to vote in a municipal assembly or whose formal influence on the assembly's decisions was marginal. From the municipal act of 1865 to the next major reform in 1917, the right to vote was confined to taxpayers and the number of their votes depended on their tax rate. This system of limited census suffrage allowed wealthy landowners to have enormous influence on local politics, even if the maximum vote number of one voter was initially restricted to one-sixth and later, after 1898, to one-fifteenth of the total votes of the constituency. To take just one example, landed farmers could have as many as 80 votes, whereas tenant farmers had four, male workers two, and unmarried female workers one vote.<sup>6</sup> In addition to private persons, companies were also eligible to vote, and they often did so actively to advance their local interests.<sup>7</sup> This stood in stark contrast to the number of local inhabitants who did not have a municipal vote at all. Besides itinerants with no taxable property or income, those excluded from voting included married women,<sup>8</sup> adult children living with the head of the household, and servants and farmhands, who were considered subjugated to their master (Soikkanen 1966, 243, 436–38). While it is virtually impossible to provide precise figures on the share of the disenfranchised people, they formed a great majority of the adult population in all municipalities.

In addition to associating subalternity with a lack of voting rights, it is possible to extend the idea of subaltern groups also to taxpaying itinerant workers, cottagers, craftspeople, and tenant farmers. While these groups had the right to participate in municipal decision-making, they formed the

lowest census classes and thereby had minimal influence on affairs that required voting. The same is true even for many independent smallholders. However, I consider landownership a dividing line between subalterns and those in power since it was a formal criterion for national suffrage. This was because only landowners had the right to vote in the indirect election of peasant representatives to the Diet of Finland (Alapuro 2006, 44). In other words, even the right to participate in the municipal assemblies did not grant full political citizenship to tenant farmers and rural workers, because they could not vote in the election of the Peasant Estate. One can even claim that the reconvention of the Diet of Finland in 1863, which is discussed by Pekonen and La Mela in this volume, essentially served to crystallize the divide between the landowning and the landless population also on the municipal scene.

### **Popular responses to the introduction of municipal assemblies**

The culture of local self-government had developed in Finland during the long period of Swedish rule, which ended with the annexation of Finland to Russia in 1809. The traditional arena of local decision-making was the parish meeting (see Viitaniemi 2016, 63–67), which retained its form and functions also during the first 50 years of Russian rule in Finland. The parish meetings addressed both religious and secular issues, and they were chaired by the local minister. This was changed by the local government reform of 1865, which separated secular local government from religious governance and introduced new municipal bodies in Finland. The reform was modeled after a preceding reform in Sweden but it was also linked with Alexander II's contemporaneous *zemstvo* reform that led to the creation of *zemstvos* as new organs of local self-government in many parts of the Russian Empire (see Zakharova 1994; for Sweden, see Østerud 1978, 224–25; Mellquist 1974). However, the Russian *zemstvos* were typically under the firm control of the local nobility and operated more as extensions of central government than the municipal bodies in Finland, especially after the counter-reform of local government in Russia in the early 1880s. In Finland, the long tradition of local self-government and the lack of a history of serfdom (except in some parts of Eastern Finland) provided the development of local democracy a far more favorable context when compared to the core of Russia.

The new local bodies introduced by the municipal government act of 1865 included the municipal board and the municipal assembly. While the former prepared and executed decisions, the latter convened taxpaying inhabitants to decide on important issues such as elementary schools, health care, and poor relief. The assembly also elected the members to the municipal board, taxation board, and other auxiliary boards. Moreover, it named the local electors of peasant representatives to the diet, thereby having an indirect influence on national politics.

The act of 1865 allowed the parishes a transition period to introduce the new municipal government, and it took several years for most of them to adopt the new system. One reason for this was the devastating famine of 1865–69, which killed around ten percent of the population of Finland and paralyzed local self-government in many regions (Voutilainen 2016, 175). During the transition period, the pros and cons of the new system of local government featured as a topic in readers' letters to newspapers. Most writers welcomed the new system, hoping that it would improve the effectiveness of local decision-making. Some also noted with pleasure that the reform limited clerical influence on local politics; instead of the local minister, it was now often a local landowner who chaired the municipal assembly.<sup>9</sup>

However, many writers to newspapers also underlined that the introduction of the new municipal bodies often met considerable grassroots-level opposition. The opponents included not only local elites, who sought to guard their dominant position, but in many regions also farmers and landless people. For both these groups, a key reason for opposing the new municipal government appears to have been the fear that the operation of the new bodies would raise municipal taxes. As one writer put it, the Finnish peasantry had for centuries suffered from oppressive taxation by the government and the elites, which is why they now used their newly acquired freedom to oppose all taxation.<sup>10</sup> Lower-class people were also concerned about the equality of municipal taxation, as one editorial observed. This editorial compared tax rates in municipalities that had adopted the new government and argued that some of these municipalities had started to tax tenant farmers and workers too harshly in comparison with landowners. This served as a reason for poor people in other municipalities to oppose the new municipal government.<sup>11</sup>

Besides financial burdens, the reader-contributors paid attention to defects in the operation of municipal assemblies. The assemblies were often blamed for being chaotic, as their chairmen failed to keep the shouting crowd in order. Moreover, the atmosphere of the assemblies too often turned quarrelsome because of bad planning and because the chairmen of the municipal board and the assembly failed to work towards a common goal.<sup>12</sup> The criticism concerning the quarrelsomeness and noisiness of municipal assemblies continued in readers' letters until the early twentieth century, which testifies to the wide scale of these problems.

Especially during the early years of the new municipal government, the language of municipal assemblies featured as an important issue in readers' letters. In many municipalities with a Finnish-speaking majority, Swedish continued to be used besides Finnish in the assemblies. Moreover, the assembly minutes were sometimes written only in Swedish. This irritated reader-contributors, who had often adopted Finnish nationalist ideas. A case in point is a writer from Somero, who expressed his satisfaction when the minutes of the municipality finally began to be written in

Finnish in 1886. According to the writer, this change had been part of a local revolution, during which “gentlemen” had been replaced by “peasant men” – that is, landowning farmers – on the municipal board.<sup>13</sup>

While the readers’ letters of the late-nineteenth century typically viewed the transfer of local power from the nobility and clergy to the landowning peasantry as a key element of municipal government reform, they did not yet conceptualize this process as democratization. The word *kansanvalta*, the Finnish equivalent for democracy, was not used at all in these letters, even though it was gradually entering the vocabulary of Finnish nationalists and the Finnish-language press during this period (Hyvärinen 2003, 72–73, 83–85).<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, some writers did tackle questions of inequality and democracy quite explicitly as they criticized the voting qualifications or the dominance of wealthy landowners in the municipal assembly.<sup>15</sup> For example, Karl Snäll of Eura, who submitted a letter to a newspaper in 1869, took a strong stand on the socio-economic bias in local decision-making. According to Snäll, local landowners had decided in a municipal assembly that the “side-people” (*sivu-väki*) – that is, tenant farmers, craftspeople, and landless workers – should also pay for the expenses of the local poor relief. Snäll considered this decision unjust in the current circumstances of famine and poverty, arguing that it was impossible for “a poor man to maintain another poor man.” He also wondered if the landowners wanted to place all the side-people in a poorhouse.<sup>16</sup> Especially interesting in Snäll’s letter is his use of the term “side-people” as a metonym for people who did not own land and who therefore stood on the side or on the margins of the municipal assembly. This term appears to have been a contemporaneous Finnish equivalent for subaltern people.

Karl Snäll’s letter and his distinction between the landowners and the “side-people” were soon criticized by another local reader-correspondent, who used the pseudonym “Enthusiast of communal affairs.” This author described himself as a landowner, but he underlined that even many landowners in Eura suffered from deep poverty and could be called “side-citizens” (*sivu-kansalaiset*). To explain this, the author highlighted a personal experience of exclusion in a municipal assembly. According to him, he had once been denied a voice – that is, the right to vote – in the assembly without anyone giving reasons for this procedure. Apparently, he had even been pushed outside the meeting scene and “cornered under the dark birches and firs.” The author regretted his ignorance and hoped that the newspaper editor, if no-one else, would inform him about the voting qualifications in municipal assemblies. This hope remained ungratified, since the editor only responded to him by joking that “they seem to have confined the voice only to the trotter people (*sorkkaväki*), as they did not give it to You.”<sup>17</sup> The editor’s term “trotter people” was probably a nickname for wealthy farmers who owned pigs or sheep, but it also served as a playful opposite of “side-people” or “side-citizens.”



Most of the reader-contributors who covered municipal self-government between the 1860s and 1890s were likely landowners or upper-class people, although confirming this is difficult as many writers used a pseudonym and did not describe their social position. One of the few writers who with certainty represented the landless “side-people” was Johan Hänninen, the son of a tenant farmer from Rautalampi, Eastern Finland. According to Kokko (2016, 311–12), Hänninen had been to a farming school and had acquired the skill of writing in his youth. Owing to these skills, Hänninen was elected as a deputy member of the newly elected municipal board of Rautalampi in 1867 despite not having the right to vote in the municipal assembly. In the following years, he also contributed actively to newspapers and commented on municipal affairs. Hänninen believed that the transition to the new municipal government had activated far more local inhabitants to engage with local affairs than had been the case previously during the parish meetings. However, he criticized municipal assemblies for being disorganized. The attendants did not speak one at a time in alternating turns but shouted and chattered inchoately like “thoughtless fools.”<sup>18</sup> According to Hänninen, the municipal assembly of Rautalampi had tried to improve order by threatening to fine those participants who refused to fall silent when ordered to do so. However, Hänninen saw this solution as insufficient, as it did not affect the spatial order in the meeting room. He believed that the order could be improved simply by providing benches for eligible participants, whereby each person who wished to speak would stand up and ask permission to speak from the chairman.<sup>19</sup> Hänninen’s underlying argument was that local inhabitants needed edification to be able to behave and make smart decisions in municipal assemblies.

Based on readers’ letters, it was not highly unusual to see voteless “side-people” in or around municipal assemblies. Occasionally, they could even appear in numbers, as is indicated by a letter from Nummi published in 1873. According to its anonymous author, the municipal assembly of Nummi was usually able to decide on all affairs peaceably and without voting. However, the decisions on one position of trust – concerning the supervision of a local distillery – always mobilized a great number of inhabitants. At the time of those decisions,

the meeting place is filled with those eligible to vote and those who are not, familiar and unfamiliar, healthy and lame, who, after deciding on this affair of so great importance to them, are ready to step out of the meeting room, leaving all the other far more important affairs of the municipal assembly to be decided by only a few members of the municipality.<sup>20</sup>

The author from Nummi viewed the mobilization caused by this specific issue as harmful, because it not only created disorder but also forced the municipal assembly to take a vote. For him, as for many contemporaries,

voting contradicted the ideal of unanimity and was therefore something that municipal assemblies should avoid. The ideal of unanimous decisions dated back to previous centuries, during which the parish meetings needed to be unanimous to decide on new tax burdens. In practice, this “unanimity” did not necessarily mean that all participants agreed on the issue at stake. What counted was the opinion of the local elite, who then framed the decision as unanimous in the minutes (Viitaniemi 2016, 85).

When a municipal assembly took a vote, those who lost the vote often questioned the lawfulness of the assembly’s decision. Sometimes they also sought to revoke the decision by petitioning the state authorities. In doing so, they tapped into a traditional form of popular politics that had a long history in Europe and other parts of the world and which was transformed into an instrument of mass politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Miller 2019). In Finland, petitioning had long been an established means for peasants to voice their grievances against local authorities (Karonen et al. 2021, 306–9), and the new municipal bodies did not avoid becoming the targets of such grievances. The complaints concerning the alleged wrongdoings of municipal bodies were addressed especially to provincial governors, and the complainants included not only landowners but also tenant farmers and landless workers. Based on newspaper reports, many of the complaints were successful, as they led to the governor’s intervention, particularly during the first years of the municipal government.<sup>21</sup> The frequency of these interventions, in turn, implies that municipal bodies quite often made decisions based on inadequate knowledge of the legislation – and most likely many illegal decisions were enforced without anyone noticing their illegality.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, petitioning the state authorities functioned as a safeguard for local democracy, and this instrument was accessible also to subalterns.

The municipal act of 1865 and its amendment of 1898 confined the vote to taxpayers on a graded scale. This system of limited census suffrage required the use of voting lists, which indicated who had the right to vote and with how many votes. However, the statutes did not include instructions on how the vote was to be cast. This led to varying local practices – different methods of voting could be used even in the same municipal assembly. Some assemblies occasionally employed a one man, one vote system and a vote by voice or by show of hands instead of using a voting list.<sup>23</sup> This simplified the counting of votes and saved time, but at least one correspondent associated the system of one man, one vote also with greater equality.<sup>24</sup>

In principle, the municipal assembly represented direct democracy, as it allowed all the eligible attendants to personally participate in decisions. In practice, the system also had elements of representation, because local inhabitants could use their voice indirectly by authorizing a proxy. For example, it appears to have been common that the inhabitants of the same village named a representative from among them to attend the municipal

assembly and to guard village interests there with the help of proxies. This practice stemmed from the period of Swedish rule, during which the government had even passed regulations on village government (Soikkanen 1966, 63–67). The village representation mattered, for example, when the municipal assembly was to decide on positions of trust. In many municipalities, the assembly assigned a fixed number of positions for each village or otherwise acknowledged village interests when distributing the positions. This was not questioned by reader-correspondents, many of whom vehemently pursued village interests themselves.

People from different regions and from different social strata had unequal opportunities to attend municipal assemblies. These opportunities depended partly on when and where the assemblies were held. In Tammela, for example, the decision by the municipal assembly to convene on Saturday morning instead of the afternoon dissatisfied the workers of the industrial village of Forssa. The workers were unhappy because the change made it impossible for them to travel to the assembly after their workday. Some workers apparently suspected that the schedule change was a deliberate attempt to weaken the influence of the Forssa villagers on municipal affairs. Interestingly, a reader-correspondent of a conservative nationalist newspaper *Lounais-Häme* admitted that this was indeed the case. According to him, the inhabitants of Forssa only had themselves to blame for the change as they had long behaved arrogantly towards the farmers of other villages in the municipal assemblies. The correspondent believed that the tension between the industrial village and the agricultural population had been a defining feature of local self-government since the start of the Forssa cotton mill in 1857.<sup>25</sup>

Especially in the early years of the municipal government, the municipal assemblies could take place in a local church after a divine service or at the parsonage. This indicated that secular and religious local government continued to be intertwined despite their legislative separation. Other common venues for the assemblies were schools, clubhouses, or the main rooms of manors or farmhouses (Soikkanen 1966, 237). The meeting place undoubtedly influenced the social composition of the attendants. For example, if the assembly was held in a local landowner's manor, a cottager living as a tenant of the host may have thought twice before stepping into the meeting room among the landowners, not to mention presenting contesting views there. The need to convene on more "neutral" ground was also recognized by many local power holders. As a result, most municipalities opted to construct a municipal hall during the period under examination. These halls made it easy for municipal bodies to convene, and they often functioned also as a venue for the meetings of various civic associations. At the same time, the building of municipal halls standardized the spatial setting of the municipal assembly and added to its prestige.

Sometimes municipal assemblies were held outdoors, especially in summertime and when the attendants were numerous. In principle, outdoor

meetings made it easier for the “side-people” to join the crowd and follow the events. It could also be easier to cool heated feelings outside than inside. An extreme example is a brawl that broke out among the hundreds of attendants to a municipal assembly in Urjala in 1903. The assembly had convened to decide on whether the municipality should conform to organizing a draft to the Russian army, and this hot issue had mobilized numerous voteless rural workers to the assembly. Some of these workers also participated in thrashing dissenting landowners. To end the brawl and to sort the attendants for a vote, the chair of the assembly eventually ordered the crowd outside to the yard of the municipal hall. The events were later dealt with in court, because a group of landowners sued the chair for a procedural fault and some of the workers for disturbance and assault (Suodenjoki 2010, 193–96). Being linked with high politics and the formation of organized political parties on a local level, the brawl served as proof to some locals that the municipal assembly poorly suited the needs of modern mass politics.

### **Introduction of municipal councils stirring debates on local democracy**

The problems of the municipal assembly system, recognized in readers’ letters already in the early years of the new municipal government, became increasingly evident as the nineteenth century closed. Municipalities were consigned with new tasks in schooling, poor relief, health care, road building, grain supply, and the maintenance of law and order. These tasks required ever more expert knowledge and they were increasingly difficult to handle for local inhabitants, most of whom attended municipal assemblies irregularly. Therefore, politicians and press commentators began to speak in favor of the establishment of municipal councils that would take on some of the duties of the municipal assembly. The election of municipal councilors for a fixed term had been enabled already by the municipal act of 1865, but only a few municipalities had tried this. To encourage municipalities to voluntarily introduce the new body, the diet facilitated the establishment of municipal councils in the amended municipal act of 1898 (Soikkanen 1966, 435–39). Following this, around one-third (150) of all rural municipalities chose to establish a municipal council, most of them after 1906. However, the municipal assemblies and limited census suffrage remained cornerstones of local decision-making up until the municipal law reform of 1917, which finally ended the municipal assembly institution, made municipal councils obligatory, and extended municipal suffrage (Suodenjoki 2019).

The establishment of municipal councils provoked mixed responses among reader-contributors to newspapers after 1898. Some writers considered the new institution a necessity, claiming that the municipal assemblies were too unorganized to handle the increasingly complex tasks.<sup>26</sup> For them,

the municipal assembly represented a venue of disorderly shouting, where loudmouths dominated discussions and muzzled rational arguments with phrases like “you are lying” or “keep your mouth shut!” In their view, municipalities should opt to rationalize decision-making and spare taxpayers’ money by establishing a municipal council.<sup>27</sup>

Some writers claimed that the introduction of the municipal council would improve regional equality, because the councilors would be elected from every corner of the municipality, whereas municipal assemblies mostly gathered attendants from the vicinity of the meeting place.<sup>28</sup> Other authors emphasized that the municipal council would better ensure the representation of different socio-economic groups. In their opinion, a key problem with municipal assemblies was that they represented the interests of wealthy landowners and shut out people of modest means.<sup>29</sup> One contributor also stressed that the municipal councilors were formally equal to each other as they voted following a “one man, one vote” principle. For this reason, the municipal council would intrinsically be more democratic than the municipal assembly.<sup>30</sup>

Not all rural correspondents were convinced of the superiority of the municipal council system. Some feared that the introduction of the council would raise municipal expenses, whereas others emphasized the harmful influence of the councils on local democracy. According to the latter line of thought, the introduction of the council would transfer power to an even smaller number of people than was the case in the municipal assembly. Moreover, the meetings of the council would be closed to ordinary local inhabitants, leaving them without any arena to voice their opinions. This would nourish people’s disregard for municipal affairs.<sup>31</sup> Participatory democracy had become deeply embedded in the popular idea of local self-government over the course of decades and centuries, and many local inhabitants were reluctant to switch their right of direct participation to a representative system of local government.

The newspaper debate on the need for municipal councils became louder especially after the General Strike of 1905 and the ensuing suffrage reform of 1906. As a result of this reform, the Grand Duchy of Finland was a pioneer in Europe by introducing universal and equal suffrage for both men and women in parliamentary elections (Alapuro 2006). However, the suffrage reform did not apply to municipal elections, even though this had been a common demand in mass meetings. Therefore, when the first unicameral parliament started its work in 1907, it was expected to rapidly reform the municipal legislation in Finland. Practically all political parties supported the extension of municipal suffrage, and despite heavy disagreements on the details, the parliament passed a new municipal act in 1908. However, this act was never confirmed by the Russian tsar, whose interest in integrating Finland more closely into the empire conflicted with the Finnish attempts to promote self-government. It was only after

the tsar abdicated in 1917 that the new municipal legislation was finally enacted in Finland.

Meanwhile, the burgeoning socialist press took the local government reform onto its agenda. Beginning in 1906, many local labor activists provided socialist newspapers with readers' letters that proposed solutions for the problems of local government. Their key solution was to extend universal and equal suffrage to municipal elections, but they also expressed support for the old municipal assembly institution and mistrust of municipal councils. According to socialist contributors, the municipal assembly was fundamentally an undemocratic institution due to limited census suffrage, but the establishment of municipal councils without a preceding suffrage reform would only weaken workers' influence on local affairs.<sup>32</sup> This stance set the socialist commentators against the bourgeois ones, who spoke for the municipal councils as a means to rationalize local government. Hence, the introduction of municipal councils became an issue of class politics in the press.

The most important explanation for the Finnish socialists' willingness to stand up for the municipal assembly perhaps lies in their experience of the mass mobilization in 1905–6. When the workers had mobilized in municipal arenas during and after the General Strike, they had often succeeded in influencing the decisions of municipal assemblies. Even though landowners still held hegemony in the assemblies in terms of vote numbers, the mass appearance of franchised and non-enfranchised workers in those assemblies had pushed the powerholders to make concessions (Alapuro 1994, 139–41). As a result, power relations were profoundly shaken in many rural municipalities. A crucial part of this rupture was that more and more people who lacked the right to vote began to appear in municipal assemblies. Despite formally lacking a voice in decision-making, they could indirectly affect the decisions with their presence. Noting this, socialist activists came to consider the municipal assembly to be a more *de facto* than a *de jure* democratic institution. However, while the municipal assembly was clearly susceptible to mass pressure, the municipal council as a closed representative organ was less so. This was a reason for labor activists to oppose the introduction of the councils, at least before the realization of universal and equal municipal suffrage.

The socialists' suspicions of municipal councils were further fed by the bourgeoisie, who adopted an increasingly positive stance toward the municipal council institution after the General Strike. In a political climate increasingly marked by a left-right divide, the socialists interpreted the upper-class eagerness to establish municipal councils as a plot to curb the growing socialist influence in local politics.<sup>33</sup> However, due to census suffrage, the socialists alone were often too weak to overturn municipal council plans, despite mobilizing their supporters at decisive municipal assemblies. Where they succeeded, it was often because they found allies

among the bourgeois camp, for example, among conservative landowners who feared taxes.<sup>34</sup>

Irrespective of local party configurations, the municipal assemblies that decided on the establishment of the municipal council were often preceded by intense agitation, and they gathered far more participants than was usual. An illustrative case was the geographically large and sparsely populated municipality of Kemijärvi, Northern Finland, where more than a hundred people, defying snow and frost, convened to vote on the municipal council in January 1914. The opponents of the council, some of whom voted by proxy, were better mobilized and won the one-third of the votes required to reject the council plan. This was a shock to the plan's proponents, who soon responded by complaining to the governor, arguing that the assembly's vote had been crucially affected by fallacious agitation. Disappointingly for the complainants, the governor confirmed the assembly's decision as valid.<sup>35</sup> This was a blow against the lumber companies, who were actively involved in local politics and who backed the establishment of the municipal council. The voting list of the Kemijärvi assembly also reveals that the proponents had, on average, 25 votes per capita, whereas the less wealthy but more numerous opponents had only 15. However, both parties consisted mainly of landowners, and nothing implies that the assembly involved disenfranchised people or socialist mobilization.<sup>36</sup> In this respect, Kemijärvi was different from many other rural municipalities, where organized labor had a powerful presence in municipal assemblies in the 1910s.

Class divisions manifested themselves in municipal assemblies not only in the vote numbers and party affiliations of the participants, but also in their habitus. This is illustrated in Figure 4.1 depicting a municipal assembly in Närpes, where the Swedish People's Party dominated local politics.<sup>37</sup> The photograph was taken in a municipal hall, but the setting is clearly staged, as the participants are placed cheek by jowl, facing the camera. The staged nature of the photograph is underlined also by the wearing of hats inside. The hats and other garments reveal a great deal about the social composition of the assembly. One of the sitting men appears to be a gentleman owing to his bowler hat, scarf, and umbrella, whereas the men on the right wear hats that imply they are civil servants. The fur caps on the left might serve as identifiers of farmers. One can also speculate that the flat-capped men in the back row were workers or craftsmen, because this kind of cloth cap had become commonly associated with the proletariat in Finland, as in many parts of Europe, by the 1910s (see Hobsbawm 1983, 287). Overall, the photograph shows that the municipal assembly was a setting where clothing was characteristically used to show one's class, wealth, and senior status. It also implies that the placing of the participants in the room may have varied according to their social standing. These issues could be further elucidated by analyzing photographs of municipal assemblies from across Finland, especially if the pictures include



Figure 4.1 A municipal assembly in the Swedish-speaking municipality of Närpes, 1914. The chairman, elementary school teacher J. E. Norrholm, sits on a platform. Photo: Gösta Carlsson, *Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland*.

information on the identities of the depicted people. However, it appears that strikingly few photos of municipal assemblies have been preserved.

### Women's subalternity in municipal arenas

While only a small segment of rural women had the municipal vote, the documents of municipal assemblies imply that women's involvement in them was not totally unusual. For example, the voters who decided on the establishment of the municipal council in Kemijärvi in 1914 included as many as five women.<sup>38</sup> However, not all of them were necessarily present in the assembly, since enfranchised widows and unmarried women may have opted to influence the decisions indirectly by proxy, as had happened already during the parish meetings (cf. Karlsson Sjögren 2009, 73). On the other hand, some women may have even been expected to occasionally participate in municipal assemblies because of their formal position – poorhouse directresses and female members of the poor relief or school boards are cases in point. In addition, the assemblies could also involve the wives and other female family members of legitimate participants as hostesses and waitresses.<sup>39</sup>

Against this backdrop, contemporary newspapers paid strikingly little attention to female agency in municipal assemblies. The reader's letters under examination totally neglect gender in their discussions on local democracy



and self-government, which is indicative of the priorities of the supposedly all-male writers of these texts. However, one chain of events did momentarily raise women's participation in local self-government as an issue of public interest. This chain started when the municipal assembly of Loimaa elected a female representative to the municipal council in 1915. This new councilor was elementary school teacher Miina Penttilä, who was active in many civic associations and had already held smaller municipal posts (Suodenjoki 2019, 139; Laakso 1994).

Some writers to newspapers responded enthusiastically to Penttilä's election to the council, praising it as a sign of progress and naming Loimaa as a pioneer of women's suffrage.<sup>40</sup> However, the socialist press either stayed silent about or sneered at Penttilä's election. A few socialist papers wrote about the rise of "petticoat rule," mocked Penttilä for being a heroine of "emancipated bourgeois women," and hoped "for their sake that she would at least be a pretty girl."<sup>41</sup> These comments indicate irritation at Penttilä's middle-class background and political affiliation; socialist commentators would likely have reacted differently if the first female municipal councilor in Finland had been a socialist. Nevertheless, their responses also imply a larger trend in socialist politics, that is, their inclination to fight primarily for men's, not women's, municipal suffrage. Hence, the case accords with historian Geoff Eley's (2002, 23) claim about the European Left being fundamentally indolent in promoting women's rights, always viewing their cause as secondary to that of male workers.

Not long after the news about Penttilä's election, the story received a new twist in Loimaa. Some locals noticed that electing female representatives to the municipal council was against the prevailing legislation, after which they threatened to complain to the governor about Penttilä's election. This forced the next municipal assembly to replace Penttilä with a male councilor, even if the decision required a vote and some participants filed their dissenting opinion in the minutes (Laakso 1994, 318–19). The assembly had a quarrelsome atmosphere, and it was attended also by socialist workers, but their stance towards Penttilä's replacement is unclear. If Penttilä herself was present, she certainly experienced a unique scene where local men across the political divide fervently debated for and against her removal from the council.

Some newspaper writings viewed Penttilä's removal as a counterstrike of anti-progressive countrymen or as a glaring example of the need to reform municipal legislation.<sup>42</sup> Yet, her case did not turn the question of women's municipal suffrage into something more than a thin current in the debates on municipal democracy. It took two more years until the municipal law reform of 1917 finally granted women the universal right to vote and stand for election in municipal elections. The marginality of women in local politics continued even thereafter, since the number of female members in municipal councils remained minuscule in the 1920s.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, female voter turnout in municipal elections remained considerably lower than that

of male turnout (*Kunnallisvaalit vuosina 1918–1922* 1924, 24). This meant that subalternity in local politics continued to be a strongly gendered phenomenon in independent Finland, which prided itself as a pioneer of female suffrage.

### **Conclusion: mobilization of “side-people” into the scene of “trotter people”**

The municipal assembly was a scene of participatory democracy, which had its roots in the early modern period, but which was reshaped by the municipal reform act of 1865 to better mirror local power relations. As a result of the act, secular local government was separated from religious government in the Finnish countryside, and local power was increasingly handed to independent farmers, who formed the core group of taxpayers. At the same time, the introduction of municipal assemblies kept landless people on the margins of local politics and thereby consolidated rural class divisions. From the beginning, these assemblies were accused of being oligarchic and disorderly bodies dominated by obstreperous loudmouths. Nevertheless, the municipal assembly institution proved adaptive to changes in local social relations and democratic ideals, and this adaptability explains why the institution persevered up until 1917–18. Even the lowest strata of society found ways to influence local politics through municipal assemblies so that eventually, it was the socialist labor movement that most tenaciously entrenched its support for the institution.

This chapter has approached municipal assemblies as scenes of experiences, illustrating how these assemblies had considerable local and temporal differences in attendance, power dynamics, and spatial settings. In the beginning, the assemblies often took place in provisional venues, until gradually municipalities started building municipal halls, which served to standardize the material and spatial context of the assemblies. However, variable factors – such as weather and economic fluctuations – continued to affect the atmosphere of the assemblies and even the preconditions for subaltern people’s participation in them. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the organization of modern political parties came to characterize municipal assemblies, but the party configurations varied in different municipalities. While the socialist movement echoed subaltern voices powerfully in some regions, one rightist or centrist party or village interests continued to dominate the municipal arenas in others.

The municipal assemblies were significant venues for the formation of the municipality into an “imagined community” among the local population. While only a small minority of local inhabitants attended these assemblies, the attendants mediated the idea of the municipality as an object of belonging also to a wider community. They did so, for example, by transmitting information on the decisions and events of the assembly in their word-of-mouth networks or through readers’ letters to newspapers.

These exchanges also involved subaltern people, who were thereby invited to give meanings to municipal self-government and assess the decisions made by municipal bodies. Nonetheless, the limited census suffrage effectively curbed the voices of workers, servants, and married women in the assemblies themselves, depriving them of full membership of the municipality. This affected their experiences of democracy and may have stunted the development of their sense of belonging to the self-governing regional entity in which they lived. This lack of “municipal consciousness,” in turn, may have been a reason why socialists sometimes struggled to mobilize their supporters in municipal assemblies after 1906, despite having great local success in parliamentary elections.

The availability of sources always sets limits on tracing the political subjectivities and practices of subaltern people of the past. What can sources produced by the authorities and elites reveal of lower-class people’s experiences and agency? This problem is also evident in this chapter because the readers’ letters to newspapers used as a primary source rarely provide direct access to subaltern voices. Most of them shed light on the operation of local self-government from the vantage point of landowners, educated professionals, and, in the case of socialist newspapers, from the perspective of local labor activists, whose views may have reflected the party line rather than the sentiments of local workers. Nevertheless, these writings do contain revealing remarks and expressions like “side-people” and “trotter people,” which were used to describe subalterns and wealthy landowners. The letters also inform us about the ways in which opinions and emotions were articulated in the assemblies. They show that shouting and the denigration of opponents were common practices, and that the most vociferous individuals often came from the ranks of wealthy farmers – at least in the late nineteenth century. However, the material also implies that the auditory environment of municipal assemblies changed in many localities after 1905. Influenced by the rise of organized labor, more and more “side people” – men and women not entitled to vote – made themselves visible and audible and pushed power holders into making concessions.

## Notes

- 1 *Turun Sanomat*, November 21, 1907, 1–2.
- 2 A corresponding municipal reform act concerning urban communes was passed in 1873.
- 3 In 1900, a total of 2,370,960 people lived in rural municipalities and 341,602 in urban communes. *Annuaire Statistique de Finlande* 1910, 7.
- 4 This study has been supported by the Alfred Kordelin foundation and the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences, HEX.
- 5 These writings are found with the search term “mundem1865” among the clippings of the digital collections of the National Library of Finland, [https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/clippings?set\\_language=en](https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/clippings?set_language=en).
- 6 *Sanomia Turusta*, March 11, 1870, 2.

- 7 For an example from Kemi, see *Pohjolan Sanomat*, November 5, 1915, 4.
- 8 Widows and unmarried adult women who managed their own property and paid municipal taxes were enfranchised in local elections.
- 9 *Aamulehti*, March 16, 1886, 2; *Pohjan-Tähti*, September 19, 1866, 1–2.
- 10 *Sanomia Turusta*, March 11, 1870, 2.
- 11 *Pohjan-Tähti*, September 19, 1866, 1–2.
- 12 *Karjalatar*, January 10, 1879, 1–2.
- 13 *Sanomia Turusta*, February 3, 1887, 1.
- 14 The word *kansanvalta* appeared in the Finnish-language press occasionally from 1874 onwards but it was not until the 1890s that this word became established in the media. This can be traced with the KORP tool of the Language Bank of Finland by confining the search to digitized newspapers and periodicals, <https://korp.csc.fi>.
- 15 *Kaiku*, October 22, 1881, 2.
- 16 *Sanomia Turusta*, January 29, 1869, 2.
- 17 *Sanomia Turusta*, March 12, 1869, 2.
- 18 *Tapio*, January 4, 1868, 2.
- 19 *Tapio*, April 4, 1868, 1–2.
- 20 *Sanomia Turusta*, February 7, 1873, 2.
- 21 *Tapio*, May 15, 1869, 2; *Ilmarinen*, January 28, 1870, 1–2; *Suomalainen Wirallinen Lehti*, February 27, 1869, 2.
- 22 For ignorance of the illegality of a decision by a municipal assembly, see *Tampereen Sanomat*, July 20, 1867, 3.
- 23 *Tampereen Sanomat*, January 4, 1870, 2–3.
- 24 *Karjala*, February 11, 1908, 2.
- 25 *Lounais-Häme*, October 30, 1908, 1–2.
- 26 *Suomalainen*, December 10, 1906, 1–2; *Folket*, November 12, 1904, 1.
- 27 *Suomalainen*, June 3, 1907, 3; *Västra Finland*, August 22, 1907, 2; *Ilkka*, February 18, 1908, 3.
- 28 *Kaleva*, October 26, 1900, 1–2; *Karjala*, February 6, 1908, 2.
- 29 *Lounais-Häme*, January 3, 1908, 3–4; *Salmetar*, November 2, 1911, 1–2.
- 30 *Kaleva*, October 26, 1900, 1–2.
- 31 *Itä-Häme*, February 27, 1906, 4.
- 32 *Kansan Tahto*, January 28, 1908, 2; *Sorretun Voima*, September 25, 1908, 4; *Raivaaja*, April 19, 1909, 3.
- 33 *Savon Työmies*, April 4, 1907, 2; *Hämeen Voima*, January 23, 1908, 3; *Sorretun Voima*, September 25, 1908, 4.
- 34 *Kansan Tahto*, September 30, 1912, 2.
- 35 The Governor's decision on the petition of Matti Kostamo et al., June 10, 1914, Eb:1174, Petitions 1914, Archive of the Administrative Department of the County Government of Oulu, National Archive of Finland (NAF).
- 36 A copy of the minutes of the municipal assembly of Kemijärvi, January 31, 1914, Eb:1174, Petitions 1914, Archive of the Administrative Department of the County Government of Oulu, NAF.
- 37 For municipal government in Närpes, see Nordlund 1931, 311–35.
- 38 A copy of the minutes of the municipal assembly of Kemijärvi, Eb:1174, Petitions 1914, Archive of the Administrative Department of the County Government of Oulu, NAF.
- 39 For the presence of women in municipal arenas, see the images in Soikkanen 1966, 308, 381, 402, 463, 493, 816.
- 40 *Turun Sanomat*, September 18, 1915, 4; *Työkansa*, September 17, 1915, 5.
- 41 *Sosialidemokraatti*, September 14, 1915, 2; *Vapaus*, September 16, 1915, 3.
- 42 *Keski-Suomi*, September 23, 1915, 3; *Ilkka*, September 25, 1915, 3.

- 43 In 61 rural municipalities located in Swedish-speaking regions, the share of female members in municipal councils was only 0.8 percent (8 out of 981) in 1929. *Kommunalkalender 1929*, 7–131.

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