



SPECIAL ISSUE:
CONSIDERING POLITICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Can Ex-Parliamentarians Tell Political Counter-Narratives?

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Telling counter-narratives has sometimes been exclusively reserved for marginal and minority groups. This article asks, instead, whether such elite group members as veteran parliamentarians will also tell counter-narratives in their oral history interviews. When the telling of counter-narratives is understood as a communicative strategy, open to various actors, the decisive question concerns about how to recognize these narratives. Previous literature provides such criteria as the stance toward some other narratives and illocutionary intent, which are helpful but not yet decisive. This article suggests that the limits of counter-narrative are and will remain negotiable since there is no easily recognizable participant orientation or speech act of telling a counter-narrative. This article proceeds to study empirically the possible markers of narrative countering.

Keywords:

counter-narrative, politics, oral history, vicarious voices, illocutionary intent, evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Who is supposed and able to tell counter-narratives depends on how we understand master narratives. The wide range of different versions of master and

counter-narratives is well documented in the contributions in Lueg and Wolff Lundholt (Eds, 2021) and Frandsen *et al.* (2017). For the Oxford dictionary, master narrative is a synonym for Lyotard's grand narratives, a name for "the totalizing narratives or metadiscourses of modernity" (Chandler and Munday, 2016). Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed (2016) write that "(m)aster narratives are culturally shared stories that tell us about a given culture, and provide guidance for how to be a 'good' member of a culture; they are a part of the structure of society" (p. 320). Halverson *et al.* (2013), in turn, suggest that "a master narrative is a transhistorical narrative that is deeply embedded in a particular culture" (p. 14). Likewise, Hanna Meretoja (2021) suggests that a "master-narrative is typically implicit because it can be construed from public discourse but it is rarely told in explicit form" (p. 37). From this perspective, it is primarily the work of critical scholars and marginalized groups to reveal and resist these master narratives and tell the emancipatory counter-narratives (Mutua, 2012; Nelson, 2001, p. 22, 155).

These kinds of theories tend to privilege the theory-driven, top-down approach and ignore the requirement of close attention to the details of narrative language and interaction suggested by sociolinguistic and narratological studies. Nevertheless, Rebecca L. Jones (2004, pp. 175–179) already foregrounded participant's orientation to locating counter-narratives, inviting the "double-hermeneutic" perspective of Anthony Giddens (1982). Michael Bamberg (2004) has equally expressed his "attempts to demystify master narratives (as automatically hegemonic) and personal narratives (as automatically countering)" (p. 368). To take one step further, I suggest that counter-narratives should not be understood as a privilege of marginal and oppositional groups but should rather be considered a communicative and rhetorical strategy open to various actors (cf. Nurminen, 2021; Rasmussen 2017, 175). Within this frame, counter-narrative "refers to a narrative that takes on meaning through its relation with one or more narratives" (Lundholt *et al.*, 2018, p. 421). In line with this, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) already point out that "what is dominant and what is resistant are not, of course, static questions, but rather are shifting placements" (p. x). Consequently, master narratives are not seen here as transhistorical but constantly changing and situational (Clifton & Van De Mierop, 2016, 204; Kivimäki & Hyvärinen, 2022).

Hyvärinen (2021) has emphasized the asymmetric nature of master and counter-narratives. While counter-narratives tend to be tellable, detailed and fairly prototypical narratives, master narratives tend to be abstractions of previous stories, lacking tellability and failing thus to be proper narratives. Clifton and Van De Mierop (2016) seem to come to the opposite conclusion in their work on slave narratives, by explaining that "we offer some explanation as to why these particular

master narratives are, in various forms, more or less omni-present in the data and why there are so few counter-narratives” (p. 13). However, in summarizing their results, the authors come to say: “*The white supremacy master narrative does not exist. Rather, it is a conglomerate of slightly different versions within a similar, abstract frame of understanding that may easily co-exist*” (p. 203). While the master narratives seem to miss the “authoritative text” (Kuhn, 2017) and are seldom told as such, the different *versions* of them can still be perfectly tellable. More to it, Van De Mieroop et al. (2017, p.179) explicitly poses the question about “how [...] master narratives may be mobilized.” Master narratives seem therefore to be hegemonic resources to be mobilized, drawn from or situationally occasioned, rather than told in the way counter-narratives typically are.

To test and elaborate the idea of counter-narrative as a communicative strategy, I will read oral history interviews with former Finnish MPs with the purpose of locating master and counter-narratives. The interviews were collected within an oral history project by the Library of Finnish Parliament between 1988 and 2020. Since the ongoing project has collected more than 400 long interviews, the entire data set is too large for systematic analysis. Therefore, an algorithm built in a previous research project was used to detect narratives and report narrative-like text passages (Hatavara et al., 2024). The use of the algorithm narrowed down the search remarkably but still rendered such a large corpus that only a few examples from the interviews can be discussed here. With these examples I hope to demonstrate, firstly, how such elite members as former MPs and cabinet members can indeed tell counter-narratives, and secondly, how using a counter-narrative differs from using a master narrative. It is worth noticing that understanding counter-narratives from this communicative perspective does not exclude the possibility that marginalized groups and actors may resort to counter-narratives more typically than those representing the cultural and political majority, but considers it an empirical issue.

Oral history interviews, as a genre, establish challenges to the study. The interviews are typically conducted some years after the MP has left the parliament, rendering the interviews rather reflective than parts of immediate political debates. Therefore, the interviews tend to be reflective as regards previous political events, and most distinctly as regards the career of the former MP. The given assignment is to look backward, while countering obviously indicates a stance towards the future. The interviewees actively build their identities and identity stories, and they differ greatly from each other in terms of problematizing current political issues. For this reason, oral interviews may not be the most probable site of counter-narratives. Furthermore, these interviews forcefully verify Monika Fludernik’s

(1996) observation on elicited stories. According to her, the “structure of long, elicited stories appears to relate to the fact that no real turn-taking frame is in place, with the consequence that the speaker does not necessarily feel the need to be relevant, or to be brief, or to provide a really good story. Elicitation therefore easily slides into a report scenario” (p. 76). The predominance of the report mode or chronicle in the material is clear and the narrative sections rather exceptional.

DETECTING COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Having voiced these reservations, the crucial question remains: How to categorize a found narrative as a counter-narrative? Jerome Bruner (1990) argued that narratives are constructed “only when constituent beliefs in a folk psychology are violated” (p. 39). As he characterizes folk psychology in terms resembling strongly the terms used to characterize master narratives, his narratives may correspondingly resemble the counter-narratives. However, Bruner also maintains that the function of the story “is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern” (p. 49–50). The functional difference may reside in the way the counter-narratives leave the mitigation and soothing endings insufficient or interrupted.

Be it as it may, counter-narrative “takes on meaning through its relation to one or more other narratives” (Lundholt et al., 2018, p. 421; cf. Andrews, 2004, p. 2), even though we should not presume an inherent dichotomy between master and counter-narratives (Rasmussen 2017, 174). The relation needs not be oppositional, the authors continue, but it “involves a stance toward some other narrative(s).” Michael Bamberg and Zachary Wipff add the distinctive feature of “illocutionary intent” to master and counter-narratives. The authors characterize “counter-narratives as uniquely distinguished by the aim to transform background assumptions, which typically support a master narrative.” They also make a distinction between counter-narratives and “parallel, alternative, and intersecting” narratives, since the last ones do not exhibit the “illocutionary force” (Bamberg & Wipff, 2021, p. 79).

Bamberg and Wipff’s proposal is interesting in focusing on the intentional aspect of narratives. However, the idea remains purely heuristics, since no clear criteria for illocutionary intent or force are not provided. Furthermore, and what is more alarming, the article contains no reference to previous, largely language-philosophical literature (e.g., Austin, 1975; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985; Alston 2000). From the perspective of this philosophical tradition, Bamberg & Wipff’s proposal is problematic. These philosophers have studied illocution

primarily on the sentence level, and the extrapolation of the analysis on the more complex level of narrative would require further analytic investigation and precision. What is more, illocutionary force is not understood to be an exceptional feature of sentences. For example, Searle and Vanderveken (1985) point out that “Every complete sentence, even a one-word sentence, has some indicator of illocutionary force; therefore, no semantical theory of language is complete without an illocutionary component” (p. 7). Everything that is intentional and expresses intention and performativity, includes, at the same time, its illocutionary force. As a result, all proper narratives exhibit illocutionary force, and thus the aspect cannot work as a distinctive marker for counter-narratives. Surely, the intent of countering is a relevant element of counter-narratives and exhibits one kind of illocutionary force. However, much further analysis is needed before illocutionary force can work as a distinctive feature of counter-narratives.

This article addresses counter-narratives as communicative moves and tries to find markers indicating the “stance” or the particular “illocutionary intent” suggested above. In addressing the question of how the narrators express the countering in the studied examples, the article endeavours to proceed from the theories of counter-narrative (e.g. Bamberg & Wipff, 2021; Hyvärinen, 2021; Meretoja, 2021) to empirical analysis (Hyvärinen et al. 2021). It argues that more empirical analysis is needed to limit the metonymic extensions of the concept of narrative (see Reisigl, 2021) and to be able to focus on the narrative language and the effects of actual storytelling. The examples I will next survey are selected for the purposes of theory-building, not to give any representative description of any political party or representative.

In what follows, I will explore the participants’ orientations to telling a master or counter-narrative, the marking of counter-narratives and the expressions of the countering intent in narratives told by the ex-parliamentarians. The first two chapters on the Finnish Civil War of 1918 show the difference between telling a master or counter-narratives on the topic. Next, while analysing two different accounts of the roles of two recent presidents, I introduce “making delicacy” and construction of the master narrative as markers of counter-narrative. In the chapter on haircut and budget cuts I show how extensive use of evaluative markers of expectation (Tannen 1993) can also mark the intent of countering. In the final analytic chapter on James Hirvisaari, I discuss a comprehensive, right-wing counternarrative to media, judiciary, and political institutions. By using example cases from politicians from left, centre and (far) right, I show how counter-narrative is a communicative strategy easily available to all kinds of political agents.

CIVIL WAR STORIES

The first teller is the Social Democratic MP (1983–2015) and previous Minister of Interior (2003–2007) Kari Rajamäki. A long-time Member of Parliament and Cabinet cannot, obviously, represent a marginal position in the society, and Rajamäki himself emphasizes his strong position in the parliament and its committees. While accounting his background in the beginning of the interview and telling about his childhood, he also recounts a story told by his grandmother. She had lived in Tampere, where Rajamäki spent several summers as a boy, and had told him about the events of the traumatic Civil War of 1918.

Tampere probably impacted the life of the young boy in such a way that I experienced the brutality that was in Tampere in 1918 quite strongly. [...] Grandma told a lot about her friend who was wounded on the steps of the city hall. This young girl was treated and walked to Pyynikki ground the next day, and then in the Pyynikki hospital [...] she heard machine guns singing every morning. When she asked the nurse what this was about, the nurse simply said that the Reds were being shot [...] So I only mean that *this kind of history, which was kept silent*, and the things related to the birth of the history of Finland became very familiar to me. (italics added)

Rajamäki marks his story as oppositional by emphasizing the “history, which was kept silent.” This mention about the silenced history is a crucial part of the evaluation of the story (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). The story also includes and recounts the vicarious voice and stories of some other person, in this case the voice of Rajamäki’s grandmother. It seems to be noteworthy how often these vicarious voices and stories reappear in the selected counter-narratives.

The temporal layers of this counter-narrative are interestingly complex. Rajamäki was born in 1948, thus the time when his grandmother told the stories to Rajamäki is obviously in the end of the 1950s and in the beginning of the 1960s. In those days, the hegemonic White narrative of the war was about the patriotic “War of Liberation” against the Russians, ignoring its nature as a civil war and the mass killings and harsh prison camps faced by the defeated Reds. Over the 1970s, the official history writing increasingly started to prefer the term “Civil War” and consider the crimes committed by both sides of the war (see Peltonen, 2007; Alapuro, 1988; Tepora & Roselius, eds., 2014). In 2016, when the interview was conducted, the oppositional nature of the narrative was no longer

as self-evident, yet the story and its contesting spirit is an important element of Rajamäki's own identity.

What is more, Rajamäki brings his story to the present time by first describing events taking place in the late 1970s and his later attempts at organizing, in his hometown Varkaus, a seminar with historians to discuss the events of 100 years ago in a spirit of reconciliation. In the middle of this report about his proposals and the political resistance he faced, he adds another vivid story, now about the "Huruslahti lottery." In arguing for the seminar, he firstly maintains that "It has to be opened eventually," and continues:

But how [the reason why] this issue has been difficult to open even later was the well-known and most dramatic incident in Varkaus that had a lot of impact, called the Huruslahti lottery. Once the Whites had occupied Varkaus, the arrested Red Guard members were taken to Huruslahti, onto the ice in front of the Huruslahti sawmill, and the system was that every tenth in the line was shot. I have personally met a man whose father was the tenth in that line as a youth. The ninth next to him was an older man who grabbed him by the shoulder and told him he was still young. (italics added)

Arguably, the framing "how this issue has been difficult to open" continues the theme of silencing and marks this story as counter-narrative, and is again a vital part of the evaluation of the story. The issue is not yet open, at the time of the telling, but by (re)telling the story Rajamäki expresses his keen intent to open it. Again, there is the voice of the other man, a witness, whose story Rajamäki recounts. The story is intently used to argue for local acknowledgement and remembrance of the austerities of 1918. Rajamäki also tells how, in 1978, a Lutheran minister mentioned how he had met a man who still woke up sweating in the night, in the fright of being the tenth one. With these constant moves between further and closer history, further and closer experiences and different voices, Rajamäki builds the topicality and the intentional force of his narrative.

THE TOUCHING BANDSMAN IN THE WAR OF LIBERATION

Political history is an obvious field of contested narratives, and definitely so in the studied interviews. How the stories told by Rajamäki are still contested emerges interestingly in the interview with the former Minister of

Education (1991–1994) and Speaker of the parliament (1999–2003) Riitta Uosukainen from the conservative Coalition Party. At the beginning of her interview, which was conducted in 2014, she talks about her youth and family members and then declares:

But Aunt Jenny, now there's a treasure. Since she was born in the 19th century, she already remembered a great deal, and besides, my father was also in the War of Liberation¹. *Let others be in whatever war they like*, but father was in the War of Liberation. He was in a military band, such a small, short-haired boy sitting in the picture, that is so touching. (italics added)

Uosukainen draws on the old master narrative of “War of Liberation”, which was the account advanced by the winning, White side of the war. It is characteristic that she does not tell an explicit, detailed narrative but instead triumphantly repeats the code words “War of Liberation.” What is more, she does not simply use the term, but adds the defiant, evaluative remark about using a questionable term. Telling any proper story would risk drawing in the memories of harsh prison camps and such arbitrary killings as Rajamäki was telling. The war can be heroic, and the photo of the small bandsman can be just touching and adored as far as the war only appears in the packaged form of its idealized name.

Meretoja (2021) might now argue that this mention of War of Liberation is still “an implicit narrative” since a narrative “can be construed from public discourse” (p. 37). This proposal would indicate the passing of narrative language and its relevance. Alas, one could also construe a plethora of contradicting narratives of the war, while the code word crystallizes the ideological meaning and lets the receiver imagine the content. The way the master narrative is used indicates that the whole point is in using the charged code word without ever opening the can of worms, the disturbing narratives. Rajamäki and Uosukainen build their accounts in different linguistic ways; Rajamäki using narrative form in his counter-narrative, Uosukainen a politically charged keyword to transmit the meaning of the master narrative. The speakers attach different emotions and attitudes to the war: for Rajamäki it is a matter of mourning, justice, and reconciliation, for Uosukainen it

¹ The Finnish term is “vapausota” (literally “War of Freedom”). “War of Liberation” characterizes the war as a war against Russia and liberation from the new Bolshevik-led power. In research literature, the term currently used is “Civil War”.

is an issue of celebration. Different ways of using language carry along different communicative effects.

Within Uosukainen's interview, there are examples of mobilizing elements of what we may call the "background". While defending her individual right to talk about War of Liberation and "Gypsy boys", she is strict in demanding others' observance of the proper decorum and dress codes. She characterizes her influence in the parliament as follows:

Buttons are also closed, I'm talking about women, collars have already risen fairly high compared to the beginning, when they were like wet nurses there [...] When Eva-Riitta Siitonen once went to work as the lord mayor [of Helsinki], someone was there wearing jeans and whatnot, so she asked whether they were on vacation or at work, and this person answered that at work, so it would be good if they went home and came back dressed the way people are dressed at work [...] And yes, I've regretted all my life that I did not undo the beret of Velto Virtanen [a well-known cultural figure, who later joined the Finns Party], since this Speaker by right of seniority did remark on that but Paavo Lipponen, as a temporary Speaker, allowed it. And I did not go on to remove it, and it was no longer possible later, but I really regret it because he gave an example, for instance, for people to say in schools that they wear hats in the parliament, too.

Again, it is worth noticing how Uosukainen echoes other voices in this and the previous passage. It is certainly far-fetched to argue that the story above *is* a master narrative, since it is clearly too particular and chaotic for that, but we can arguably talk about *drawing on* several master narratives of conservative decorum. The prestige of Helsinki City Hall and the Parliament requires a fixed and conservative dress code, but permits name-calling female MPs as wet nurses and malicious comments on Virtanen's head Uosukainen had once happened to see. These stories do not present "the authorial text" (Kuhn, 2017) of the master narrative of correct dress and decorum, but draw on a self-evident, conservative code that does not require any explanation. In this way, stories drawing on master narratives can well be tellable and exist in narrative form, even though it is most likely impossible for master narratives as such. As Hyvärinen (2021) argues, master narratives "rather resemble abstractions of narratives than real, tellable, and recognizable stories" (p. 27.)

CRITICAL STORIES OF PRESIDENCY

Ever since the Constitution Act of 1919, Finland used to have a semi-presidential constitutional system with presidents who had relatively much power due to the right to dissolve parliaments and directly influence the formation and dissolution of governments. This gradually increasing power became a major problem during the exceptionally long term of President Urho Kekkonen (1956–1982). After the Second World War, Kekkonen established close and trusted relationships with Soviet leaders, and since then he was also presented as the guarantee of good and safe relationships with the Soviet Union. Because the trade with the Soviet Union was remarkably profitable — Finland selling industrial products and buying oil and gas — even many prominent leaders of the business sector supported Kekkonen at the same time as some of the right-wing politicians were his fiercest critics. This dramatic tension is depicted in the interview with Tuure Junnila, who represented the right wing of the conservative National Coalition Party. With a few breaks in term, Junnila served as MP from 1951 to 1991, and was interviewed in 1989, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

After the victorious election of 1968, President Kekkonen made it known that he would no longer take part in presidential elections. However, in 1972 he announced that he was still interested in the office if the majority of the people supported him. Gradually, this contradiction led to the proposal of electing Kekkonen by the parliament, through a derogation law. This obvious stretching of the constitution was made possible by the deeply held and widely propagated belief in the irreplaceability of Kekkonen as the leader of Finnish foreign policy. Tuure Junnila, instead, was a consistent critic of Kekkonen, the Soviet system, and the Finnish foreign policy of the time. In his interview, Junnila argues quite credibly that the whole derogation law was unnecessary, since Kekkonen would have won normal elections “in those circumstances,” by having the support of all major parties. The political dilemma with the derogation law concerned the required four-fifths majority in the parliament, which positioned Junnila’s party in the decisive role. At first, according to Junnila, the majority of the parliamentary faction resisted the proposal, but gradually the party leadership, particularly the new chairperson Harri Holkeri, persuaded the faction behind the derogation law. Junnila’s story accounts for the persuasion of the members of the faction:

Well, *I’d rather not mention [the name of the persuading person] because* he was indeed a well-known mate of Kekkonen and a well-known mate of [MP] Hetemäki but I’ll tell how he

behaved. He had invited a couple of members of the faction who opposed the derogation law — not me, because I was considered to be a hopeless case, because indeed I was — but a couple of others, who were not considered as hopeless. He had invited them there to [the restaurant] Motti for a good dinner. There he persuaded and made it clear that these two MPs who had remarkable positions of trust, not solely in the parliamentary faction but also in the parliament, that sure enough, if they didn't yield to this, they would lose these positions when they were filled again [which happens annually]. In other words, he exercised blatant pressure. *And that's why I'm not going to bring up his name here.* This was indeed pretty rough behaviour. (italics added)

By opening the story by an omission and by emphasising what he leaves out of the orientation, Junnila creates delicacy (Nijnatten & Suoninen, 2014) and marks this story sensitive and as a counter-narrative. His story is not merely about his own experience, since he quite clearly recounts the experience and story of the other, manipulated MP. His narrative is a counter-narrative to the official versions of the political culture of the Kekkonen era, but also a counter-narrative of the story of his own political party. In 1989, this story was possibly not as radically oppositional as ten years earlier, yet Harri Holkeri was the prime minister at the time, and the systematic critique of the Kekkonen era politics was still to appear. Nevertheless, Junnila's example demonstrates how even a right-wing politician, economist, and a board member of a major bank can tell counter-narratives. While we cannot claim that he comes from a marginal social group, he clearly positions himself in the margins of Finnish political life during the Kekkonen era.

President Kekkonen represented the Agrarian League, which later changed its name to Centre Party. Some of the interviewed representatives of this party seemed to still have a defensive and apologetic attitude towards Kekkonen's time. One way to do this was to argue that his successor, the Social Democrat Mauno Koivisto was neither different nor as competent as Kekkonen. This is the core of the presidential counter-narrative of Kauko Juhantalo, Centre Party, who was an MP from 1979 to 1993 and from 1995 to 1999, and a Cabinet member from 1991 to 1992. He critically comments on Koivisto in his interview from 2010:

Koivisto became president as a very, very big opinion leader. He was a greatly liked and charming person. *The media built a fine*

magic circle around him, which was related subtly and later factually to opposing Kekkonen. Then, when he became president and grew familiar with those issues, he must have read and studied the notes of his predecessors, he became very Kekkonen-like. He just changed in a modern form... Kekkonen was active, Koivisto became a defender, such an unassuming guardian of secrets. He had no capacity for initiative. Then happened this collapse of the Eastern bloc, the Soviet Union, so he sure had a pretty difficult role. People had expected a new orientation in foreign policy, and he ended up in the middle of the real world. He had to act there as carefully and skilfully as Paasikivi and Kekkonen and their predecessors. (italics added)

In the orientation part of this story, Juhantalo outlines the charismatic and idealized image that media built about Koivisto before his era as a president. In so doing, he builds the presumed master narrative he then proceeds to counter in his story. This story is soon followed by an anecdote about Koivisto's slowness in recognizing Estonia. In Juhantalo's counter-narrative President Koivisto studies the records of his predecessors and eventually becomes like a new Kekkonen, except being passive and unenterprising in comparison with the original. Instead of introducing new foreign policy, Koivisto had to study and follow Kekkonen, Paasikivi and their predecessors. This central claim about the strong presidential continuity is based on rather speculative mind-reading. This rhetoric of continuity downplays both Kekkonen's political exceptionality and the factual changes introduced by Koivisto. Elsewhere in the interview, Juhantalo explicitly announces: "To my mind, President Koivisto, who earlier reproached President Kekkonen, suddenly changed into Kekkonen." What Juhantalo does not mention is Koivisto's larger respect for the role of the parliament. In contrast to Kekkonen's habit of dissolving parliaments and changing governments, Koivisto never resorted to that power, and finally accepted the constitutional changes that narrowed down the president's rights to dissolve the parliament. With Koivisto's affirmation, the number of presidential terms was also limited to two, to preclude such concentration of power that took place and turned out to be a problem during Kekkonen's many terms (see Jyränki, 2006). Juhantalo builds strong continuity between Kekkonen and Koivisto, downplaying the differences between these presidents, and proceeds to extend the critical evaluations of Kekkonen also to his follower. In that sense, this is a counter-narrative with respect to both Social Democratic success stories of Koivisto and the increasingly critical story about Kekkonen's time as a president.

FROM BUDGET CUTS TO A HAIRCUT

Claes Andersson, a poet and jazz musician, was the first chairperson of the new Left Alliance (1990–1998), a party established after the dissolution of the old Communist party. He was an MP from 1987 to 1999 and from 2007 to 2008. From 1995 to 1998 he also served as the Minister of Culture, and was interviewed in 2001. One of the questions concerned power:

Interviewer: What does the word pair “politician and power” make you think of? Surely you experienced yourself also as an exerciser of power. It is almost useless for a party leader to claim otherwise.

Andersson: So, what I enjoyed most in politics was the feeling of being kind of in the centre of things, when things happen and it is easy to get information. [...] *But this power itself was often such that you had to take part in decisions that were generally difficult. Whether cost cutting and saving decisions or nominations, whatever. So for sure I did not enjoy that, at least, because then I got so much flak for exercising this power [...] On the contrary, it [life as a minister] was a bit like parole, imprisonment, that I always had to report where I was and where I was going. Once I went to a barber’s without first asking permission from my secretary, and a huge scandal followed, how dare you and how can you go to the barber’s without telling me (laughs), something like that. It’s quite nice when you can go even to a barber’s without somebody coming to nag about it. (italics added)*

Andersson does not openly resist the way the interviewer positions him as an “exerciser of power,” reminding how it would be “useless for a party leader” to claim something else. In the beginning of his answer, Andersson seems indeed to comply with the instructions as he outlines the enjoyable aspects of his role. Next, he resorts to a series of contrasting expressions like “but *this* power itself,” “I did not enjoy,” “On the contrary,” and a couple of negatives in the abridged part of the answer. Interestingly, he does not accept the interviewer’s offer to talk about “power” in realistic terms, but adds the small word “this,” referring to “the power” the interviewer is talking about. Then he describes the use of “power” as less than

enjoyable, even troublesome. He manages to describe the situations of using power in a way that signifies actual lack of power; he had to be along in making the decisions, but still he did not have actual power over the contents of the decisions. Guido Parietti (2022) notices the connection between power and modalities, and it is precisely with the recurrent modalities how Andersson outlines his actual lack of power.

Andersson finishes his discussion on power by portraying the “conveniences” attached to his life as a Cabinet member and characterizing them as a form of “parole, imprisonment.” This is an extreme image of the lack of power over one’s own life, comically illustrated by the story of an unauthorized visit to the barber’s and getting rebuked by his secretary. Not indeed a fabulous story of using power over issues of great national relevance. Negative expressions, contrasting connectives, recurrent modalities and evaluative language (“parole”; “got the flak”) are typical expressions informing of expectations that are broken in this story (Tannen 1993, pp. 41-51; Hyvärinen 2016). However, Andersson never explicitly mentions the master narrative he is resisting. He does not need to, for it is the interviewer’s challenging question that crystallizes the (populist) master narrative of power and the expectations about Cabinet members’ power. Within such a frame, Cabinet members are always powerful and exercise their power willingly.

AGAINST THE MEDIA

Several interviews contain career stories about disappointments, typically directing the critique towards the media. However, few cases are as critical as the story told by James Hirvisaari, who represented the right-wing populist Finns Party since 2011, until he was expelled from the faction in 2014 for continuous scandals. The first bigger crisis concerned a blog text written by his assistant, Helena Eronen. In her “satirical” text, Eronen suggested armbands for foreigners to make their identification easier. “It was, it was a completely astonishing issue that an assistant posts a satirical piece on her blog, so a huge cloud of dust emerges. And then I’m suddenly again in some spotlight, and of course it was misreported in that way, the whole thing, and entirely deliberately in my view.” Normally, political satire is directed to phenomena one resists, not to things one playfully suggests.

Nevertheless, Hirvisaari’s account of the media is deeply contradictory. On the one hand, the media was malicious towards the Finns Party, on the other hand “I have deliberately also provoked... media”. The following story is equally about intentional provocations:

Interviewer: Then came the spring of 2013 and Seppo Lehto came to visit you in the parliament and also gave the Nazi salute in the chamber. Tell me first of all, how did this whole episode proceed?

Hirvisaari: I got interested in Seppo Lehto because he had got an unconditional prison sentence for his social media writings and other troublemaking there. And I have considered this unconditional sentence excessive, an overreaction. I don't defend his deeds, he could as well receive some fine for them, for example, just as well, but that went to total absurdity. The judicial system, that was a judicial murder of sorts. The complainants were awarded insane damages for emotional distress, on average 7500 euros per person, and there were many of them, so he and his mate ended up jointly paying about 100000 euros in court costs and damages for emotional distress. I considered it wrong, and then I also went to see him in prison at some point. [...] So, then I invited him to the parliament. And in the exact same week when this was discussed I gave a speech about it too, about this issue in the Legal Committee, where it was being discussed. So the criminal code was kind of fine-tuned a bit towards freedom of speech, then I mentioned this Seppo Lehto in my talk. [...] However, it was in connection with this process that Seppo was then in the parliament at that time. Well, then he wanted me to take a picture of him there, too, as the guests want generally, so I took it then. He wanted, then, he got inspired to upload it online. I did not see, I mean, *my sense of humour is quite enough* for that. (italics added)

By protesting the court's decision and promoting a "victim" of miscarriage of justice, MP Hirvisaari violates the constitutional tripartition of power. Far-right activist Lehto received his sentence for slandering and persecuting a MP, a few public prosecutors and judges, and many others over a period of several years. Long before the told episode Lehto was known in Tampere University for trying to silence critical researchers by his harassment campaigns. Hirvisaari, in his story,

expresses his compassion for Lehto, not for the victims of harassment. In Hirvisaari's account, Lehto is just a great humourist who "is himself as if joking by his salutes [morotus]." This rather awkward formulation verifies Hirvisaari's great difficulty to pronounce the critical expression "Nazi salute." He presents the Nazi salute as a mere expression of humour and ends up accusing media: "then they had to raise a sensation in the editorial office, a totally shocking sensation". This sensation — and obviously not the Nazi salute in the parliament — gave Timo Soini, as the leader of the Finns, "a reason to finally get rid of me". Gradually, the story grows as a counter-narrative to judiciary system, to media that always persecutes the Finns Party and to the (old) Finns Party led by Timo Soini². While Riitta Uosukainen protected the prestige of the parliament by commenting and correcting the way MPs were dressed, Hirvisaari presented the Nazi salute given in the parliament as just a humorous gesture. Thus, he framed his action as protection of the freedom of speech, and attacked the media as a part of his project.

The paradox with Hirvisaari's story is that it faithfully follows the "formula story" (Loseke 2007) of right-wing populism but goes just too far and becomes too obvious; first he presents a provocation, names it satire or humour, waits for a media reaction and then positions himself as the victim of an attack by the media and liberal politicians. The purpose of the Nazi salute, according to Lehto and Hirvisaari, was only to treat Communism and Nazism on an equal basis. An ill-founded sensation was raised and the case was used as a pretext for expelling him. Later in the interview he directly reproaches the Finns Party for not exploiting the case and attacking the media and critical politicians for limiting the freedom of speech. By drawing on this master narrative of right-wing populism he managed to make a parody of it, since the Nazi salute in the parliament in 2014 is a far too outrageous gesture to be rendered, as in the master narrative, as a harmless case of humour. He became a risk and had to be expelled.

Hirvisaari was and remained a rather marginal figure in Finnish politics, yet his case shows that even the most right-wing, Nazi-sympathizing MPs use counter-narratives, particularly in attacking democratic institutions. In his case, it is easier to recognize the countering than any specific master narrative. However, the widely shared media reception of the Nazi salute and the official reactions by the Speaker establish a discursive whole Hirvisaari fights to counter.

² In 2017, the party was split following the right-wing victory in the election of party leadership. But Hirvisaari got into a conflict even with the new chair, Jussi Halla-aho.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The investigation of oral history interviews with former Finnish MPs confirmed that even Members of Parliament and Cabinet can use counter-narratives in making sense of their careers and crucial political issues. This observation corroborates the idea of counter-narrative as a communicative and meaning-making strategy that is available for different actors in different contexts. One does not need to be in any margin to be inclined to tell counter-narratives.

The methods of marking one's story as counter-narrative vary from story to story. Kari Rajamäki emphasized history "which was kept silent", and the difficulty of opening the issue of arbitrary killings in the civil war. In the case of Tuure Junnila, the story was framed so sensitive that he still preferred not to mention the name of the culprit of the inappropriate political pressure. In Kauko Juhantalo's case, the narrator contrasts his story with the "fine magic circle" that the media had built around President Mauno Koivisto. In Claes Andersson's story, the turn to counter-narrative is expressed by providing a background of several contrasting and negative sentences that counter the message of the interviewer. James Hirvisaari, in his story, contrasts his sense of humour to the "shocking sensation" raised in the editorial office, and the reaction of his party leader who "got a reason to get rid of him". The studied counter-narratives endeavoured to re-politicize (Palonen, 2003) critical issues of Finnish political history: the Civil War of 1918, the problems of presidency in the 1970s and 1980s, the participation of the radical left in the governments, and the far-right challenge to the democratic institutions in the 2010s.

Importantly, the use of counter-narratives was not exclusively connected to the political stance of the former MP. Counter-narratives could be found in any part of the political spectrum, yet not all veteran MPs were equally inclined to tell counter-narratives.

This article was able to document several strategies of marking the countering. One recurring feature in these counter-narratives was the echoing of other people's or media's stories and voices. This highlights the way counter-narratives are systematically situated within the frame of narrative competition and the social life of narratives. Remarkably, the narrators also used several aspects of the Labovian evaluation of stories to accentuate their intent to counter. Despite these observations, the recognition of the act of countering cannot be based on purely formal or clearly distinctive interactional features, but requires a modicum of (partly) shared cultural understanding. At the same time, the remarkable linguistic and communicative differences between telling master and counter-

narratives became evident. It is entirely possible to activate master narratives merely by mentioning, or even repeating, coded keywords such as “War of Liberation” without ever telling a proper narrative. However, and to relativize this claim, it was possible to find a very tellable story that was *drawing on* a master narrative, which was a particular *version of* the master narrative without being its “authoritative text” (Kuhn, 2017). Master narratives as such are general, abstract, and often coded into non-narrative form, whereas individual and specific narratives may be versions of master narrative, alternative narratives – or counter-narratives.

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