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Urban Uprisings

Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe

Edited by
Margit Mayer, Catharina Thörn and Håkan Thörn

Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology

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Editors

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Part I

Urban Uprisings, Social Movements and Neoliberal Urbanism

1

Re-Thinking Urban Social Movements, 'Riots' and Uprisings: An Introduction

Håkan Thörn, Margit Mayer, and Catharina Thörn

> Whatever the intellectual sources of error, the effect of equating movements with movement organizations—and thus requiring that protests have a leader, a constitution, a legislative program, or at least a banner before they are recognized as such—is to divert attention from many forms of political unrest and to consign them by definition to the more shadowy realms of social problems and deviant behavior…. Having decided by definitional fiat that nothing political has occurred, nothing has to be explained, at least not in the terms of political protest. (Piven & Cloward, 1977, p. 5)

Urban Uprisings in Contemporary Europe

During the last decade, European cities have been shaken by a wave of urban collective action. In this book, we argue that this wave needs to be understood in connection with the structural context of neoliberal

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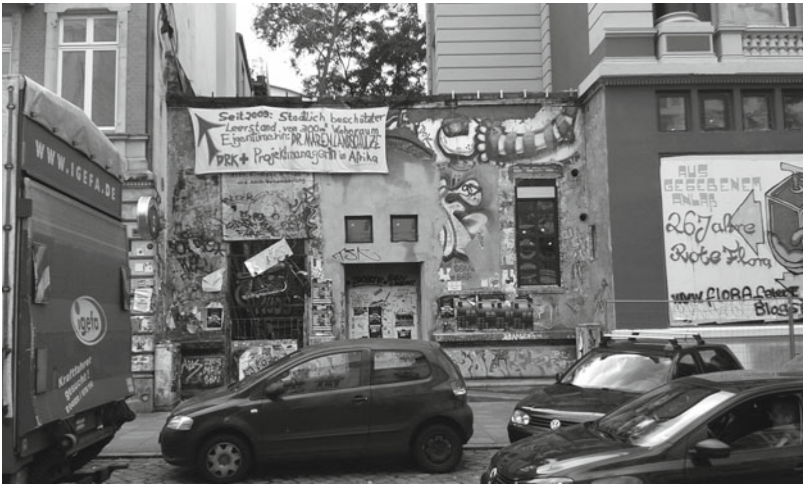
urbanism, and that it can be analysed using the concept of 'urban social movement'. This means that we go against conventional approaches to some of these collective acts, which researchers and media have labelled 'riots'. Considering the intensity, spread, duration and social dimensions of the 'rioting' that occurred in a number of Europe's major cities in this period, we prefer to describe them as 'urban uprisings', referring to a moment of rapid spread of collective action in an urban context, from district to district and/or city to city, which may or may not include violence, looting and torching. Consider the scale of the urban uprisings in the following brief introduction of the cases dealt with in this book, and the difficulty of making a conventional distinction between (disorganised) 'riots' and (organised) movement protest:

In October 2005, an urban uprising began in a Parisian poor suburb (*banlieue*) after police had chased boys with immigrant backgrounds into an electrical substation, where two of them died. The uprising spread to more than 300 cities and in the process hundreds of public and commercial buildings were destroyed and more than 9000 vehicles torched. In November, a state of emergency was declared and was extended for three months by parliament (Dikeç in this volume). In March 2007, an uprising turned central Copenhagen into a battleground between police and protesters for four days, after a combined military and police-force action against the Youth House, an autonomous cultural centre. Solidarity actions were performed in 13 Danish cities and in at least 46 cities in 22 other countries (Karpantschof & Lindblom, 2009, p. 15; Karpantschof & Lund Hansen in this book). In December 2008, an uprising began in Athens after a police shot a student in the Excarcheia district (Vradis in this volume). It lasted for three weeks, and included repeated violent clashes between police and protesters and the torching of public and private buildings. During the first week, a one-day strike against the government's economic policies involved 2.5 million workers. In Athens and Thessalonica, universities were occupied. The uprising spread to all major Greek cities and solidarity actions took place in at least 26 other countries. Two years later, a major national uprising began in Greek cities, involving a series of general strikes, demonstrations and violent clashes with the police. On 12 February 2011, buildings all over Athens were burning (Vradis & Dalakoglou, 2011).

In May of the same year, a massive demonstration against the Spanish government's austerity policies took place simultaneously in 57 Spanish cities—with Madrid and Barcelona being the nodes—and introducing the Indignados movement, which would have a strong presence in the public squares of Spanish cities in the years to come. It did involve some occasions of rioting and violent clashes with the police, but in general the movement was committed to peaceful direct action, such as major labour strikes and the occupation of public spaces with tents, sit-ins and public assemblies (Martinez in this volume). The Indignados were inspired by the Arab Spring that same year, and, in turn, they inspired the Occupy movement beginning in autumn 2011, and eventually spreading to 951 cities in 82 countries (Castells, 2012, p. 4). At the same time, in August that year, a major uprising started in London after police shot and killed a man in Tottenham (Slater in this volume). Lasting six nights, it spread to a number of poor districts in London and was described by Kawalerowicz and Biggs (2015, pp. 2–3) as 'the most widespread and prolonged breakdown of order in London's history since the Gordon riot of 1780'. The uprising, which spread to eight other major cities in England, included looting of shops, torching of public and private buildings and violent clashes with the police, who eventually took 3100 people to court. In May 2013, an uprising began in a poor suburb of Stockholm after police shot and killed a man of immigrant background. More than 100 cars were burnt during the first night, and the uprising continued for five more nights, spreading to other poor Stockholm suburbs and eight smaller cities around Sweden (Sernhede, Thörn and Thörn in this volume; Schierup, Ålund, & Kings, 2014; Thörn, 2013). A few days later, another uprising broke out in Istanbul, beginning as a small Right to the City demonstration against the planned demolition of Gezi Park. After the police responded with harsh repression, the demonstration grew into a major urban uprising. Six days of violent clashes between police and protesters followed, spreading to all major cities of Turkey. On 2 June, 235 protests were held in 67 cities across Turkey (Lelandais in this volume, Farro & Demirhisar, 2014, p. 12). In December of the same year, a three-week long uprising began in Hamburg after the police attacked a demonstration. The uprising was primarily about the impending eviction of the autonomous cultural centre Rote Flora, but also involved the broader Right to the City movement formed in Hamburg in 2009. In response to the uprising, the municipality declared a curfew and the police established a ‘danger zone’, enforcing ‘stop-and-frisk’ rules (Birke in this volume).

In all of the cases in which ‘rioting’, i.e., violent clashes, looting and torching, occurred, it was triggered by violent police action that in four cases involved deaths as a consequence. But there are also other and more significant similarities between these cases, providing a more thorough explanation of events and processes. The uprisings in Paris, London and Stockholm share a racial dimension, which played a role in the deaths that ignited the uprisings, as those killed were black and/or had an immigrant background. In all cases, the killings occurred in urban areas subject to territorial stigmatization (Wacquant, 1999), i.e., districts where a majority of the inhabitants belong to the working class or the precariat, and are poor and non-white. While these uprisings were reminiscent of events in Britain in the 1980s, most notably in the London district Brixton in 1981 (Gilroy, 1987), but also in Parisian *banlieues* in the same year (Duprez, 2009), the scale and intensity of the 2000s uprisings make them, in a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Eigentümerin: DR. MAREN LANDSCHULZE
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Fig. 1.1 The 2013 urban uprising in Hamburg in 2013 began after the threat of an eviction of Rote Flora, a squatted building that had functioned as a centre for urban activism for more than two decades. Photo: Håkan Thörn

Western context, comparable only to similar events in the US: the so-called 'race riots' from the 1960s to Ferguson in 2014 (Abu-Lughod, 2007; Schneider, 2014).

Contemporary urban segregation, however, also involves, and is driven by, urban restructuring processes such as gentrification. A number of collective actions occurring in Europe during the last decade address the social effects of inner city 'upgrading'. This was the case with Gezi Park, where the initial demonstration involved activists from the Right to the City movement, which has also during the last decade developed a strong presence in German cities such as Hamburg and Berlin. The Copenhagen municipality's decision to sell off the centrally located Youth House, culminating years of clashes between police and activists around the issue, is also related to inner-city upgrading. Anti-gentrification action has also been an important element in urban movements emerging in Eastern Europe, where a wave of urban movements has emerged during the last decade (Jacobsson, 2015). While our book mainly focuses on Western Europe, Polanska's chapter provides insight into how an alliance of squatters and tenant associations has challenged Polish urban policies (Polanska in this volume). If these collective actions were clearly driven by activists with an articulated political agenda, this was also true of the uprisings in Athens, Barcelona and Madrid. The 2008 uprising in Athens may be seen as the first major manifestation of the emerging anti-austerity movement (Flesher Fominaya, & Cox, 2013; Mayer, 2016), escalating into Greece and Spain in 2010–2011, and spreading to a number of other European countries in the years to follow.

While there are many crucial differences between the collective actions just mentioned, primarily related to their differing national and local political contexts and socio-economic conditions, the links between them are equally important. In exploring such links, we have found the conventional distinction between 'riots' and movement action unhelpful. This is related to the emphasis the chapters of this book place on how collective actions that may look different on the surface share an urban dimension: They are all in different ways reactions to the developments and effects of neoliberal urbanism. While this urban dimension does not exhaust these phenomena analytically, as they also involve elements of structural processes that go beyond the urban dimension, it is an important and revealing one. Therefore, we first and foremost analyse how the different forms of collective action articulate and resist spatialised social inequalities produced by processes of segregation and gentrification. The production and deepening of such spatialised inequalities is a key dimension of contemporary neoliberalism worldwide (Brenner, 2014), and also of urban collective action (Mayer, 2013a).

The empirical case studies and analyses in this book address three inadequacies in contemporary research that have been made particularly apparent by urban developments in the 2000s. *First*, considering the wave of urban collective action recounted above, it is curious that research on contentious politics and social movements rarely addresses the urban dimension (as highlighted by Hamel, 2014; Jacobsson, 2015; Nicholls et al. 2013; Pickvance, 2003). *Second*, the distinction made in contemporary research between urban riots and urban social movements, which may even be said to represent different research fields, is unsatisfactory for an adequate analysis of contemporary urban collective action. The fact that there are two entries relating to riots in the recent *Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (Snow et al 2013) may seem to contradict our claim that such separation exists. However, on the topic of 'Urban riots in Europe, post 2000', leading riot researcher David Waddington draws the following conclusion from the events in Paris, Athens and London mentioned above:

> Though unquestionably driven by profound political grievance, they did not constitute the type of 'insurrection', 'uprising', or 'upheaval' that is generally more synonymous with enduring, bona fide social movements. (Waddington, 2013, p. 3)

Third, while contemporary analyses of neoliberal urbanism have begun to take an interest in urban collective action (e.g. Harvey, 2012), such analyses rarely draw on social movement research. Against this background, this book constitutes an attempt to bridge the gap between these relatively separate bodies of research by providing a structural analysis of urban uprising that focuses on processes of large-scale urban transformation in the shape of what has been called 'neoliberal urbanism'—and explores to what extent, and how, these developments involve the formation of new urban social movements in Europe. It contributes to a rethinking of the relations between social movements, 'riots' and neoliberalism, a rethinking that has been made urgent by urban developments since the 2000s. In the following sections, we will discuss key themes in these three research areas, further developing our own points and conceptualisations.

We begin by recapitulating the debate between those who emphasise macro- and micro-perspectives on riots because, in contrast to the 1960s and 1970s, micro-approaches today dominate research in the field. However, the recent developments discussed in this book seem to us to call for revisiting structural theories, and particularly Marxist-oriented perspectives that emphasise the link between crises and opportunities for collective action, be they violent or non-violent. As the distinction between riots and 'movement events' is less significant in structural approaches, they provide a logical starting point for diminishing the gap between such related collective phenomena. In the following section, we will first take a closer look at the major conceptions and findings of the field of 'riot research', then move on to social movement theory, and conclude the section by presenting the analytical approach we propose for bridging these two research fields. The next section will link this analytical approach to urban theory to provide an understanding of the specific way in which urban social movements are urban. Finally, we provide a thematic overview of the chapters of the book, focusing on how their analyses of urban uprisings and social movements relate to the themes highlighted in this introductory chapter.

Riots, Resistance, Uprisings and Social Movements

On a purely descriptive level, there seems to be relative consensus in contemporary research (e.g., Myers, 2013) that 'riot' signifies a temporary collective act taking place in an urban context, and involving damage to property and violent clashes between groups of actors, most often rioters and police (or other representatives of authorities, such as fire squads), but in some cases also between different 'ethnic' groups (such as, e. g., in the 1992 Los Angeles uprising when Korean shop-owners were attacked).

With the exception of rioting in connection with political demonstrations, most researchers do not consider riots as social movement phenomena.[1]

In understanding how riots are conceptualised today, and why such acts are often held separate from social movements, we need to go back to the early phase of social science and the notion of 'crowd behaviour'. This concept was largely inspired by social-psychological thinking on 'the mob' by Gustav Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde and Sigmund Freud. This involved the idea that the participants lose their individual selves when drawn into a crowd. While such a process may involve rational behaviour on the part of demagogic leaders with charismatic capacity, the core idea in this mode of thinking is that the crowd is constituted by irrational behaviour. This perspective became an integral part of the structural-functionalist social movement theory associated first and foremost with Neil Smelser's theory of collective behaviour (Smelser, 1962), a category including 'panics' and riots ('hostile outbursts'), as well as more organised political collective acts, which all could be structurally explained by 'grievances' caused by 'structural strain' and 'deprivation':

> Real or anticipated economic deprivation, in fact, occupies an important place in the initiation of hostile outbursts, reform movements, revolutionary movements, and new sects as well. (Smelser, 1962, pp. 15–16)

The current separation, or under-theorised relation, between research on riots and social movements is related to the fact that the dominant schools of contemporary social movement theory more or less take their starting point in a critique of Smelser's approach, particularly the way it linked social movements to 'irrational crowd behaviour', and explained them with reference to deprivation, whether absolute or relative, real or anticipated. In opposition to this, the use of 'collective action', rather than collective behaviour, as a fundamental analytical category in contemporary social movement theories, most often involves an assumption that social movements are goal-oriented, rational and strategic.

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[1] In *Riot, Unrest and Protest in the Global Stage*, the editors David Pritchard and Francis Pakes (2014) do not make such a distinction. On the other hand, they do not provide any theoretical framework for linking these phenomena either. *From silence to protest: International perspectives on weakly resourced groups* (Chabanet & Royall, 2014) does not operate with a distinction between social movements and 'riots' either, as the editors seek a renewal of social movement theory and link to the dynamics of contention perspective (Tilly, 2008). In addition to, e. g., chapters on the World Social Forum and political mobilisation by Muslims in Europe, the volume includes the chapter 'Urban riots in France and Britain: Arguments in favor of political analyses', by Didier Chabanet (2014), who provides an analysis emphasising the political nature of these events in a manner similar to the authors in our volume. However, while the dynamics of contention perspective undoubtedly have opened up the mainstream social movement research paradigm in an interesting way, and partly work as a way of bridging riot research with a social movement perspective, we still find it insufficient in order to grasp, and analyse as political, those collective acts that do not make explicit political claims and/or do not target the government (see further in footnote 5 below).

Post-War Riot Research

As already mentioned, the uprisings in Paris, London and Stockholm discussed in this book are similar in the sense that they took place in territorially stigmatised urban areas, where a majority of the population belong either to the working class or the precariat (Standing, 2011), and are subjected to structural racism. Such a type of uprising has, in the decades following the Second World War, mostly been a US phenomenon. Beginning in the 1980s, however, similar uprisings started to occur in deeply segregated European cities, where boundaries of class dominance and racialisation intersect, predominantly in Paris, Lyon (Dikeç, 2007a) and London (Gilroy, 1987). It is basically these historical experiences on which US/UK riot research, which has been dominant for the past decades, is based.

A standard reference in this research on riots is the report by the Kerner Commission (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968) that examined 75 riots in predominantly black urban districts in the USA between 1964 and 1967. In accordance with the dominant sociological terminology at the time, the commission listed 12 'grievances' at three 'levels of intensity' as causes for the civil disorders it had studied. The list is worth citing in its entirety because all of the factors it contains have resurfaced in the academic and media debates following the urban uprisings in Paris, London and Stockholm in the 2000s.

First Level of Intensity

1. Police practices.
2. Unemployment and underemployment.
3. Inadequate housing.

Second Level of Intensity

4. Inadequate education.
5. Poor recreation facilities and programs.
6. Ineffectiveness of the political structure and grievance mechanisms.

Third Level of Intensity

7. Disrespectful white attitudes.
8. Discriminatory administration of justice.
9. Inadequacy of federal programs.
10. Inadequacy of municipal services.
11. Discriminatory consumer and credit practices.
12. Inadequate welfare programs. (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, pp. 7–8)

Research on US riots that followed the Kerner Commission (see Schneider, 2014 for an overview) has questioned its broad range of explanations on certain points, while emphasising the relevance of others. More important, however, is that the discussion has tended to centre on the notion of deprivation as an overall explanation. For example, using statistical data, both Lieberson and Silverman (1965, examining 75 riots in black districts between 1913 and 1963) and Olzak and Shannan (1996, examining riots in 204 cities between 1954 and 1993) have questioned the conclusion that riots were caused by extreme deprivation, based on the finding that a commonality for districts where riots occurred was that the situation for blacks was improving.[2] There are, however, different ways of interpreting these data. Modifications of the deprivation perspective, such as Eisinger's (1973) and Gurr's (1972), have emphasised the notion of *relative* deprivation. An improving situation for the poor may cause rising expectations, a situation which risks being turned into increasing frustration if the actual gaps between blacks and whites remain or even increase, which has been the case since at least the 1970s. Other researchers have discussed structural inequalities in terms of class rather than 'grievances' and 'deprivation', drawing on theories of an urban underclass (Massey & Denton, 1993), and more recently on 'urban outcasts' (Wacquant, 2008). Farley and Allen (1989) and Wilson (1987) have shown that improved conditions also involve a process of 'internal differentiation' among the urban poor; while a minority start to climb upwards, others remain, and may feel their situation has even declined, increasing their frustration.

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[2] In search for such mechanisms, Olzak and Shannan (1996) use a problematic, economistic competition theory, and an equally problematic interpretation of riots in terms of 'ethnic conflict', to argue that it is the combination of increasing opportunities for blacks to compete for job opportunities and a shrinking job market that is the most important factor behind riots, making moments of rising unemployment particularly explosive.

Critics of deprivation theory and other structural approaches argue that these: (1) cannot explain why rioting does not occur in all deprived areas; and (2) do not provide any explanation in terms of the mechanisms through which a deprived social condition or profound structural inequalities give rise to a riot (e.g., Olzak & Shannan, 1996). This has led riot research in the direction of focusing on micro-processes, particularly the interaction between police and groups of youth that are most often in the forefront of rioting (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 2007; Schneider, 2014; Waddington, 2007). Responding to the series of British riots beginning in Brixton in 1981, a group of researchers developed 'the flashpoint model' (Waddington, 2007), which involves six factors.[3] *One* of these is a structural dimension lumping together unemployment, relative deprivation and racial discrimination. The focus of the empirical research, involving participant-observation as an important tool, is, in the manner of symbolic interactionism, on different groups' interactions with one another, including, as an important element, their different interpretation of events. Based on this research, Waddington has argued that urban rioting could be analysed as an interaction ritual, with a distinctively patterned scenario, involving a 'triggering event' ('the precipitating incident') as an important element. In a similar manner, combining a structural perspective with an emphasis on a micro-perspective, Schneider's *Police Power and Race Riots* (2014) is a comparison between the 1964 New York uprising and the 2005 Paris uprising, emphasising similarities between them. Drawing on Lieberson's and Silverman's (1965) as well as Abu-Lughod's (2007) research on US riots, Schneider focuses on police action as the most important cause of riots. This research has shown how the so-called 'triggering event' is merely a culmination of a long series of police actions, such as frequent 'stop-and-frisk' actions, ID-controls, use of violence and targeting the residents of a stigmatised district. Building on Tilly (1998), Schneider's key concept is 'categorical inequality', signifying an overlap between power hierarchies and political identities, the latter based on boundaries drawn by states defining, e.g., who is a citizen and who is not, or classifying citizens according to ethnicity or race. According to Schneider, the most important explanation for riots such as those in New York and Paris is a sustained and brutal policing, involving a racist dimension, of such boundaries, which in the context of urban segregation also has a geographical dimension.

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[3] The six factors are, in brief: (1) structural—poverty, unemployment, relative deprivation and racial discrimination; (2) political/ideological—a group's political legitimacy, power and influence; (3) cultural—the rules, norms and self-definition of a group and their relation to those of the police and society at large; (4) contextual—history of negative interactions between a minority group and the police; (5) situational—spatial and symbolic characteristics of the site of conflict; and (6) interactional—miscommunication and misreading of particular actions (Waddington, 2007, pp. 49–59).

It is clear that scholars such as Waddington or Schneider *do* recognize the significance of structural inequalities and poverty as a fundamental condition for the occurrence of rioting, and their research into micro-processes undoubtedly improves our understanding of the dynamics of conflicts emerging from power inequalities and urban segregation 'on the ground', which eventually erupt in urban uprisings. Nevertheless, in their search for the micro-mechanisms to explain why riots occur in some cases and not in others, paired with a strong criticism of scholars who emphasise structural factors, they tend to lose sight of relevant structures. While it can hardly be denied that a violent uprising may spread from district to district, and from city to city, through the social-psychological mechanism of mimicry, actively facilitated and fuelled by spectacular media images, we believe it is more important to pay attention to revealing social-structural patterns in the districts involved in the uprisings. After all, what all research on post-war riots in the USA, France and Britain surveyed in this section confirms, irrespective of analytical perspective, is that without exception these riots begin in, and spread to, urban districts inhabited by people belonging to the working class or the precariat, who are also subjected to structural racism. To us, this dictates that structural factors need to be in the foreground of the analysis. While those who emphasise the micro-dimension pay careful attention to the particular context of each riot on the micro-level, they tend to pay less attention to the fact that structural dimensions are also context-specific and need careful and systematic analysis. Schneider accounts for the differing historical dynamics behind structural racism in the USA versus France, but dismisses explanations of the Paris uprising that refer to neoliberal developments (Schneider, 2014, 20ff.), such as the one presented in Wacquant's *Urban Outcasts* (2008).

Beyond Classical Riot Research

Our approach starts from the view that territorial stigmatisation, 'deprivation', social inequality and structural racism describe social situations that are profoundly political in the sense that they are defined by power inequalities, and thus by social tensions and conflict (Mouffe, 2005). Some of the 'riots' discussed in this section may be defined by the fact that they are not political in the narrow sense, meaning that those who participate in the uprising planned and staged them to make political demands or to bring about social change (although statements along those lines are not unusual in media interviews with rioters), but that they are *politicising* events (Miller & Nicholls, 2013; Thörn, 2015) in the sense that they act on, and make manifest, social inequalities and conflicts that constitute social relations under different phases of modern capitalism. Without exception, the urban uprisings occurring in poor urban districts discussed in this book have given rise to major public debates on social inequalities and structural racism. As discussed in detail by Slater in this volume, such processes of politicisation are met with efforts to de-politicise the events as defenders of the social order seek to turn the events into a moral issue. Common arguments are that participation in an uprising is first and foremost to be defined as a criminal act, initiated by youth who lead criminal lives in urban districts beyond social control; a situation ultimately to be explained by the failure of those individuals and institutions who have the obligation to teach the young