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# Reading the Stockholm riots – a moment for social justice?

CARL-ULRIK SCHIERUP, ALEKSANDRA ÅLUND and LISA KINGS

*Abstract:* This article examines the 2013 riots in Stockholm in the context of other urban rebellions across disadvantaged metropolitan neighbourhoods in the North-Atlantic region over the past three decades of neoliberal transformation. The authors discuss the consequences of securitisation and police repression, institutional racism, the corrosion of citizenship and the structuring of inequality in Swedish cities. Beyond the violence of the recent riots, contemporary Sweden reveals the emergence of an autonomous, non-violent and organisationally embedded movement for social justice among young people contesting urban degradation and reclaiming the nation in terms of an inclusive citizenship, social welfare and democracy. The article asks whether the Stockholm uprising could possibly be read as a sobering moment of self-examination in Swedish politics that could open space up for new political voices.

*Keywords:* Husby, Megafonen, neoliberalism, policing, racial profiling, REVA, riots, social movements, Stockholm, suburbia, Sweden

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore? ... Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes, 1951

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### 'Riots', 'uprisings' or the rebirth of civil society?

'I have a dream', declaimed Reverend King at his March on Washington fifty years ago. It was a vision of a truly inclusive American nation. Yet, King soon found himself pondering whether the dream was not turning into that very 'nightmare' that Malcolm X had insisted continued to be the reality of the American Dream for black citizens. 'I watched that dream turn into a nightmare,' King admitted in his last Christmas sermon in 1967, 'as I moved through the ghettos of the nation and saw my black brothers and sisters perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity, and saw the nation doing nothing.'<sup>1</sup> Two years earlier, tension in the ghettos had exploded in the Watts rebellion; subsequently, following years of repression of Black and Latino struggles, the Los Angeles uprising of 1992 struck the nation with awe. This was a sobering moment in American history;<sup>2</sup> but the window of opportunity was lost in the euphoria over the fall of the 'Evil Empire', promises of 'The End of History' and seemingly limitless financial pyramid games, or Ponzi-style investment scams.

There was a 'Swedish Dream' as well. A dream of changing an ethnocentric 'People's Home'<sup>3</sup> into a cosmopolitan home of peoples, merging extended rights of citizenship with a political framework divorced from nativist obsession. In the booming reformist spirit of the mid-1970s, new policies were conceived in terms of 'Equality, Partnership and Freedom of Choice', boldly rephrasing the revolutionary 1789 trinity into the credo of a liberal multicultural welfare society,<sup>4</sup> a particular Swedish 'exceptionalism'.<sup>5</sup> It was for long a dream of hope shared by subaltern others, but, by the 2000s, a nightmare for many of the country's inhabitants, who are experiencing institutional racism, social disadvantage, securitisation and police repression.

Nevertheless, at the time of the rebellion of *les exclus* in French suburbia, in 2005, Sweden was, on paper, still depicted as a positive liberal multicultural welfare state. But just four years later, in the late summer of 2009, Sweden was to experience its own urban rebellions in suburban districts on fire in the cities of Malmö, Gothenburg and Uppsala. In the spirit of the official denunciation of 'multiculturalism' by leading European politicians like Merkel, Sarkozy and Cameron, these Swedish riots were largely read by government and media as an expression of cultural deviancy, deficient socialisation of youngsters of migrant and, in particular, Muslim, background, and as a provocation to the European heritage and its 'liberal core values'.<sup>6</sup> Internationally, the 2009 Swedish riots passed relatively unnoticed. Domestically, they were already sinking into public oblivion when, on 14 May 2013, the killing of a 69-year-old man by the police in Husby, a socially disadvantaged Stockholm suburban neighbourhood of 12,000 inhabitants, sparked, from 19 May, five days of rage among young rioters. Cars, schools, youth centres, local shops, a kindergarten and a police station were set on fire. There were, as well, five days of clashes between rioters and police across the suburban neighbourhoods of the north-western and southern metropolis, and minor incidents in other Swedish cities. According to the acid judgement of one journalist, 'violence and racism within the police organisation was exposed as clearly as a

skeleton on an x-ray slide'.<sup>7</sup> Although hardly more violent than the 2009 events, but taking place in the capital and more widespread in urban areas, these riots were widely interpreted in the international press as revealing a deep crisis in the 'Swedish model', which had mutated into a hazardous neoliberal experiment. It was a crisis 'more about economics than immigration' commented the *Financial Times*; and more about social inequality than culture.<sup>8</sup> Another difference between 2009 and 2013 is the role that politically articulate new urban movements of young Swedes (predominantly from migrant backgrounds) have played in producing alternative readings of the riots in terms of their claims for social justice.

If the riots of 2009 were a Swedish Watts, Stockholm 2013 could be read as its LA-92 – a 'dream exploded', a crisis of neoliberal politics, a sobering moment of truth. But will it be more than a window of opportunity closing? This is the question we focus on in this article. Our title alludes to *Reading Rodney King*;<sup>9</sup> a classic work on race, urban segregation and the structure of cultural, political and economic power in the United States. But we also use the term 'reading the riots' – a title used by the *Guardian* and the London School of Economics for their study into the UK riots – to hint at similarities between the London 2011 riots and Stockholm 2013.<sup>10</sup> Both countries have recent histories of neighbourhood gentrification, welfare retrenchment and the proliferation of privately organised social services and education institutions taking place over three decades of neoliberal politics. It is an art which Sweden first learnt from Thatcherism and Tony Blair's 'Third Way', but in which it now, in some respects, excels to such a degree that it has (depending on your point of view) become the example to follow or, alternatively, a dire warning. Thus, behind the dramatic clashes of May 2013 lay another drama just as shattering – as a local Stockholm politician commented, 'long before Swedish media or the political elite had any idea of the existence of Husby and of what kind of area it is. [It is] a drama of discrimination, poverty, stigmatisation and deep social as well as political cleavages. About a city and a society getting torn apart.'<sup>11</sup>

We therefore see Stockholm 2013 as one of a series of instances of urban unrest across disadvantaged metropolitan neighbourhoods in the North Atlantic region over the past decades of neoliberal transformation; a development we shall relate, with a focus on urban policing, to the corrosion of citizenship and the structuring of inequality in Swedish society and its larger cities. Our point of departure is an understanding of contemporary riots as uprisings that are claiming social justice. We see them as 'unarticulated' urban justice movements.<sup>12</sup> For, behind the smoke-screen of conspicuous violence, the contemporary Swedish scene also reveals the emergence of an autonomous, non-violent, 'articulated' and organisationally embedded justice movement contesting urban degradation and reclaiming Sweden in terms of an inclusive citizenship, social welfare and democracy. With this backdrop, we attempt to question here whether Stockholm 2013 could be read, not as signifying the irrevocable passing of a Swedish dream, but as a high point in the creation of a new movement among young people – a movement with a vision that looks beyond the threat of a 'state of exception', with government arrogating ever more unchecked power to itself. We illustrate in the

following section how local activist movements – and in particular The Megaphone (*Megafonen*), situated in Husby – relate to the Stockholm riots, and suggest the emergence of new, urban, justice movements.

### **A state of exception**

Urban rebellions, like Brixton 1981, Los Angeles 1992, Paris 2005, Tottenham 2011 and Stockholm 2013, all appear to be sparked by alleged police brutality and the excessive use of force, when general tension – built up through systematic surveillance and daily humiliation – bursts. In each case, this combines with a perceived lack of official democratic channels for a just investigation of these ‘police incidents’. And the commonsense representation of events, at the end of the day, pushes the blame for fatal police action on to the victims or their communities. This may be mediated through racial phantasmagoria, as in the court case following the brutal roadside beating of citizen Rodney King, which provoked the Los Angeles uprising,<sup>13</sup> or through post-colonial exoticism as in the case of the police killing in Husby, Stockholm. Read how the local community organisation, The Megaphone, reported on the media coverage of the police’s inexplicable action in storming a flat and shooting an elderly man in the head:

... in all dailies ... [there are] pictures of the balcony where he waves a knife. The ‘machete man’ ... this is a label created so that we the readers shall think: ‘oh, he sounds crazy, just as well that the police shot him’ ... [W]e make him a monster. Then he is not worth shit ... [M]achete sounds jungle. Sounds non-Swedish. Even better.<sup>14</sup>

For the locally-based movement for social justice, the killing was experienced as an instance of the excessive use of force that carried a strong disciplinary message to the inhabitants of a stigmatised neighbourhood:

How can a team of SWAT-police break into a flat against a sixty-nine year old man and kill him?? ... If this had happened against Karl-Erik,<sup>15</sup> sixty-nine years, in Kungsholmen<sup>16</sup> it would have been a scandal. Now it will become another story about a mad man in the hood ... [L]isten. This is neither the first nor the last time. The police does not exist to serve common people, the workers, the community, the kids ... the police is present to protect the political and economic elite: terrify us, discipline us ... The police teach us in practice what the school teaches us theoretically: as a poor working man and non-white you are worth less, in Sweden and in the entire world.<sup>17</sup>

A neighbour has been murdered: a view reinforced by the fact that the police initially delivered patently false information about the circumstances surrounding the death. This led to the calling of peaceful protests in the local community and, later, demands for a public explanation from the police and for an



**Figure 1.** The Megaphone supporting local people in the neighbourhood of *Risingeplans* in a campaign against the inferior renovation of flats accompanied by a high raise in rents (photo: © The Megaphone)

independent investigation (outside the purview of the Swedish police force).<sup>18</sup> Six days later, the first reports emerged of a violent uprising in Husby. The tragic death and suspicion of unnecessary police violence were identified, in retrospect, as the sparks that lit the flames. The morning after the riots began, The Megaphone invited the media to a press conference that was broadcast on national television.<sup>19</sup> In a statement that was read by one of its representatives and supported by two eyewitnesses, the organisation condemned the police's brutality and their racist comments in their encounters with the youth. But, allegedly, no dialogue with the police or representatives of the government ensued; a fatal closing down of democratic avenues for the expression of legitimate grievances. According to a BlogSpot on The Megaphone homepage:

What the police and the large media will brand as general chaos ... this, what is always written about suburbia and its people is, in reality, a protest against the murder on Monday ... [It is] definitely not a coincidence, an isolated riot. This remains the only way of expressing frustration when other democratic avenues are closed. Here is organisation, peaceful demonstrations have taken place, but initiatives for dialogue have been left unanswered. The police investigate their own people and will say that no mistake has been made ...<sup>20</sup>



The feelings of injustice and lack of dialogue were hardly repaired when prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt blamed the riots (at a press-conference on 21 May, two days after the start of the riots) on 'angry young men' who needed to overcome 'cultural barriers' and come to terms with the rules in a democratic society for expressing dissatisfaction and making claims. He spoke of the government's persistent efforts to support the development of disadvantaged urban areas and the important role of the local suburban community itself in reinstating order. In response, Jimmie Åkesson, the chairman of the nationalist-populist party, the Swedish Democrats, compared premier Reinfeldt, in a Stockholm on fire, with the Emperor Nero fiddling as Rome burned<sup>21</sup> and demanded stronger security measures against young hooligans. But critical voices from the Left blamed the premier for neglecting 'angry young men's' cries for respect and help; for avoiding any government responsibility for the social problems underlying the suburban crisis;<sup>22</sup> for pushing responsibility for solving the crisis on to local communities themselves; and for closing his eyes to the deeply problematic Americanisation of Swedish society.<sup>23</sup>

In an account in the daily *Aftonbladet*, the Panthers, a community-based justice organisation in Gothenburg, acting in solidarity with The Megaphone (their sisters and brothers in 'the eye of the storm'), described the premier's initial statement as alienating disadvantaged citizens in that it delegitimised their place in the nation:

Here we stand together. The Panthers and The Megaphone. If we did not exist, who should have taken the responsibility of trying to understand the shadows moving in our streets with stones in their hands? These shadows born in Swedish hospitals, registered with Swedish tax-authorities, who went to Swedish schools, spent their time hanging out in Swedish youth centres, and who wish to work in this country, to pay taxes and to die, but whom our prime minister still manages to fabricate into 'foreigners', depicting their action as the result of 'cultural barriers' ... angry young men who need to overcome some cultural barriers and become part of society.<sup>24</sup>

This pinpoints the 'irregularisation' of citizenship,<sup>25</sup> through official and popular discourses, through legislation, as well as through the everyday practices of security personnel, including the police, military and bureaucrats. We see this as linked to a 'state of exception',<sup>26</sup> understood as the extension of state power through which the rights pertaining to citizenship can be reduced, overridden or denied by governments; in the process, the boundaries between the status of citizen and non-citizen become increasingly blurred. More specifically, while the processes of irregularising citizenship may formerly have been part of how a politics of exception operated, such processes can now be observed as part and parcel of the 'normal' working of most states.<sup>27</sup>

Like other North-Atlantic societies, Sweden has, during the last decade, taken essential steps towards a state of exception, in particular in its so-called 'urban

development areas'<sup>28</sup> which are poor, suburban neighbourhoods in larger cities with a high proportion of citizens from Africa and the Middle East. In other words, visible minorities are being stigmatised in terms of 'race', 'national origin' or 'immigrant background'. These neighbourhoods have become security hot-spots with their inhabitants under continuous police surveillance,<sup>29</sup> and subject to multiple identity checks and stop-and-search raids. The surveillance was ramped up in 2008 by the REVA-project (*Rättssäkert och effektivt verkställighetsarbete*, i.e., Legal Certainty and Effective Enforcement). This collaboration between the police, the migration service and the Swedish prison service, partly financed by the European Refugee Fund, aimed to combat irregular migration through increased identity checks and deportations. As REVA broadened its regional impact to Stockholm in 2013, it was criticised by anti-racist activists<sup>30</sup> as a step towards the setting up of a 'police state'.<sup>31</sup> Racial profiling, in connection with identity checks taking place at transport hubs (e.g., Metro stations), has been criticised for targeting not just the 'undocumented', but numerous Swedish citizens of colour. It represents, in effect, a fusion of capillary migration control with surveillance of the stigmatised 'accidental citizen'.<sup>32</sup>

In the social media, young activists describe Husby and similar neighbourhoods in Swedish suburbia as forgotten reservations of joblessness, poverty and lack of a future, in which the police act as a counterinsurgency force rather than as protectors of the local population:

I think about Husby ... Black and Blue policemen with gold embroidered crowns come when the state is under threat, not when people die. The police come when people without a passport try to survive; the police come when resistance has passed into desperation. And then we talk about the 'security of the police'. Exclusion from the social security system, deportations and violence ... What to do when you never become a part of non-surburbia. Of non-invisibility.<sup>33</sup>

From the police's perspective, they view Husby and the Stockholm suburbs as perilous no-go zones 'where the next murder of a policeman will happen', rather than being inclined to talk about the Husby police killing on 14 May.<sup>34</sup> In line with this view, a major study of 'discriminatory policing' in Sweden<sup>35</sup> concludes that the suburbs are described by the police as potentially threatening places, inhabited by youth of 'other ethnic backgrounds', with a low trust in the authorities. Ethnic minorities are the focus for a growing apparatus of surveillance and securitisation; socially marginalised places have become stigmatised and criminalised and it is enough to live in or to be present in a certain area to be subject to control.

In effect, the idea of 'policing the crisis' is as relevant as ever.<sup>36</sup> A permanent tension between the police and young people has built up across the disadvantaged Swedish suburbs. This perhaps explains the silence of the police when faced with demands to explain their behaviour and debate with the community



following the Husby 'incident'. What results is fertile ground for rebellion.<sup>37</sup> Changing the meaning and quality of police work appears then to be a prerequisite for any political reform. The police are not in themselves the deepest source of the conflict, nor its solution. But the 'bluejackets' are the symbol of a society perceived as racist; they are the most visible targets of resentment and hatred as the praetorians guarding speculative financialisation, welfare retrenchment, the seizing of public land and assets, and the segregative processes of urban transformation. Such practices are producing new geographies of inequality and undermining trust in the promises of a nation that still represents itself as the custodian of liberal democracy, prosperity and equal opportunity.

In 2009, thirty youngsters stood on a Backa square in Gothenburg holding up a handmade placard on which they had written, on a flattened cardboard box, the reasons they were throwing stones at the police. It sums up how the young dispossessed still feel:

We stand here every day. Poseidon, the tenants' association, the police, the authorities, see us standing here, but do not care about the matter. Jobs or some effort from the municipality or the social welfare service is needed. The authorities have seen us growing up and standing here for five or six years, but nothing is done ... [T]his is our only way to be seen ...<sup>38</sup>

### **Economic restructuring, welfare retrenchment and urban transformation**

The post-second world war 'Swedish model' enjoyed an international reputation for combining a dynamic economy and an active labour-market policy geared towards occupational upgrading and free access to education.<sup>39</sup> Its extended, tax-financed public service sector aimed at the abolition of poverty, the forging of social mobility for the working class and, not least, stimulating female labour-market participation and gender equality. In effect, this resulted, from the 1950s to 1970s, in a seemingly stable trend towards diminishing social inequality, making Sweden one of the most equal societies in the OECD area.<sup>40</sup> Since the mid-1970s, this reputation has been merged with the fame of harbouring one of Europe's most successful policies for integrating immigrants, appearing to promise a development of what has been laid out as the ideal model of a multicultural welfare society.<sup>41</sup> It involved an easy access to naturalisation, unconditional access to full social rights and equality concerning employment based on residence,<sup>42</sup> fast access to political participation and the recognition of claims in terms of ethnic and cultural identity. To this was added Europe's most welcoming policy of asylum. (In some ways, for immigrants and new ethnic minorities, the promises of the model were not actually realised. Most significantly the dogma that a strong welfare state and an active labour-market policy would *as such* guarantee equal treatment and equal opportunities in the labour market – a stance long argued by unions and employers – meant the absence of sturdy anti-discrimination legislation. Nevertheless, prevailing

institutional practices did guarantee even the most disadvantaged a basic social security.)<sup>43</sup>

However, from the beginning of the 1990s, both the political playing field and basic social conditions have changed substantially. A recession at the threshold of the 1990s was followed by austerity policies. A new 'Third Way' social democratic regime favoured neoliberal monetarism over Keynesianism and full employment. Unemployment rose to levels unknown since the great depression of the 1930s; from 1.5 per cent in 1989 to 8.1 per cent in 1993, but among the 'foreign born' from 3.5 per cent to a stunning 24 per cent during the same period, and with disproportions in the *level of unemployment* particularly striking for those born in Africa, Asia and European countries outside the EU, and their Swedish-born children.<sup>44</sup> This condition essentially still prevails today, with an unemployment that is, in particular, concentrated among youth.<sup>45</sup> A parallel reorientation of Swedish labour-market policies along the lines of US- or UK-style workfare regimes and more restrictive access to supplementary welfare benefits and (with the rise to power from 2006 of centre-right governments) stringent limits to public health cover, has contributed to the production of a marginalised reserve army of labour. It is exposed to the market discipline of precarious low-wage niches, and, pushed from the centre to the periphery of the welfare system, into a casualised secondary labour market and a degraded informal sector.<sup>46</sup>

The burden of this change was felt disproportionately in disadvantaged suburban neighbourhoods in large cities, officially designated as 'urban development areas',<sup>47</sup> which had a large proportion of new immigrants and citizens with ethnic backgrounds from outside the pre-2004 EU-15. Participation in the formal labour market is significantly lower in these areas than the Swedish average, or the average in large cities, and the average income among those who do have work is significantly lower.<sup>48</sup> In Husby, for example, the employment rate is close to 24 per cent lower than in the greater Stockholm region, and most of those who work hold low-income jobs.<sup>49</sup> What has caused most worries among politicians and social workers is, however, the large number of young people who neither hold any type of formal employment, nor are involved in education.<sup>50</sup> Whereas the national average is 20 per cent among youth between 20 and 25 years of age, in urban development areas the average of young people neither in work or education is double, with rates close to 50 or 60 per cent in certain disadvantaged areas. The child poverty rate in these areas varies between 28 and 62 per cent.<sup>51</sup> Added to this, a sweeping deregulation of the public school system (launched from the early 1990s with the explicit rationale of stimulating 'diversity' and civil society initiatives) has created an open field for speculative risk capital and insider deals. This has caused a widening gap in educational opportunities and school results, between high-income and deprived suburban areas.<sup>52</sup>

For some, the brighter side of this rapid transformation was the stunning rise in corporate profits from the mid-1990s. Together with a marked redistribution of income, it was to bestow on Sweden the dishonourable position it has held to this day as the OECD member state with the fastest growing index of inequality;<sup>53</sup> a

trend exacerbated by consecutive tax reductions introduced by centre-right governments from 2006 onwards. This, and Sweden's coming out of the 2008 recession in better shape than most of its fellow travellers in a crisis-ridden European Union, has been a favourite theme of the international business media. As late as February 2013, the *Economist* referred to Sweden as 'The next supermodel' in terms of reduced public spending, the cutting of marginal and corporate taxes and introducing publicly financed, but privately organised, social services across a broad range.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the 2013 riots appear to have tarnished Sweden's glorious reputation in the corporate world. While the *Economist* found the riots 'A blazing surprise'<sup>55</sup> disrupting the Scandinavian 'idyll' by 'arson and unrest', and wondered whether the 'integration of immigrants' was failing,<sup>56</sup> the *Financial Times* pondered that it was time for Sweden to question the range of privatisation and market-driven development. Sweden went too far, from a social democratic display window to a neoliberal experiment, and needs to find a balance. The Husby riots were a symptom. Politicians must understand and address the causes for a galloping inequality, both in terms of income distribution and deregulation of public services, with the consequences of school reform for deprived suburban neighbourhoods being seen as particularly worrying.<sup>57</sup> The *Wall Street Journal* found that the riots spotlighted a growing socioeconomic rift, 'dealing Sweden's reputation for equality and tolerance a severe black eye'.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, the Stockholm riots set the international focus on the geography of urban inequality, most conspicuously in larger cities like Malmö, Gothenburg and Stockholm. Increasing social polarisation is a general contemporary trend in cities across the world, though with an immense variety of configurations. In the United States and the United Kingdom the term 'suburbia' denotes, for example, urban decongestion, lower residential density and private home ownership. In Sweden and France, in contrast, suburbia (the Swedish *förorten* and the French *banlieue*) signifies deprived municipal housing areas inhabited by a majority of poor immigrants and their offspring, together with members of other disadvantaged groups.

In effect, it is essential to relate Swedish urban development to the historical contexts and the origins of segregation. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the ambitious suburban municipal housing programme 'The One Million Dwellings Programme' (*Miljonprogrammet*) was targeted at raising the general standard of living and providing affordable housing. Newly built suburban neighbourhoods, including Husby, were meant to symbolise the 'pinnacle of Swedish modernity', but soon came to represent the shortcomings of modern social engineering. Particularly since the 1990s, several of these suburban areas have been transformed from 'mixed neighbourhoods' to low-income areas where the majority are from 'migrant backgrounds'.<sup>59</sup>

From this perspective, the riots of 2009, followed by those of 2013, signify a disastrous set-back to decades of Swedish urban policy, including the national large-scale 'Metropolitan Policy' adopted by parliament in 1998.<sup>60</sup> The Metropolitan Policy was marked by significant flaws, including the omission of a

focus on racism and discrimination, linked to the wider political economy and structure of power in the larger cities.<sup>61</sup> More conclusively, grand plans for urban restructuring and moves to combat growing urban segregation and social inequality have largely been quashed by the major policy trends of the 2000s – from ‘welfare’ to ‘workfare’ and from public sector and civil society partnerships to market-driven projects. Under these forces, the understanding of marginality has been displaced from institutional and structural causality to a focus on individualised problems and solutions.<sup>62</sup> This has taken place in tandem with the emergent politics of securitisation and the representation of suburbia as the breeding ground for religious fundamentalism and a threat to democracy and liberal ‘core values’.<sup>63</sup> Reflecting on this shift in the contemporary Swedish cityscape, Ove Sernhede, a professor of social work, argues that what were earlier seen as problems to be addressed through social policy, today tend to become matters for police intervention.<sup>64</sup>

Police violence is indeed referred to by youth as a continuous pattern that triggered the riots – but there is, too, the backdrop of a structurally contingent urban geography of inequality, expressed in ethno-racial terms. Nor is it just the concentration of poverty and unemployment that is the background to youth unrest, but feelings of neglect and injustice, as here summarised in a video message by Emory Douglas, former minister of culture in the Black Panthers, sent to its present-day sister organisation, the Panthers of Gothenburg:

[A] valid request turned into a nightmare and ignited the many decades of frustrations and neglect that imploded into the destruction of the community ... frustration borne from a long train of abuses and neglect from an unjust system which has never shown equal respect for all of its citizens. You must join together to correct injustice, heal the community, and educate the young people to the real power they have because they are the future right now.<sup>65</sup>

### **Advanced marginality and its contestation: from ‘noise’ to ‘voice’**

A new, vigorous trans-ethnic mobilisation of suburban youth is emerging out of the changing Swedish cityscapes of the third millennium. Movements of young suburbanites spell out, in word and deed, their anger over their ghettoisation, their concerns about social inequality, racism and the need for justice. This can be designated as an *urban justice movement*. Their distinguishing mark is that place is the basis for mobilisation. The notion of ‘suburbia’ (*förorten*), imagined and lived, is used as a collective identity to raise consciousness about processes of marginality and to mobilise to influence politics through accepted as well as unconventional modes of action.

From this perspective, we see the contemporary city as constituting a strategic terrain for conflict and contestation, with ‘advanced marginality’ (Wacquant’s term)<sup>66</sup> as the starting point for exploring the causes and implications of contemporary urban geographies of poverty and the making of the precariat. Mustafa Dikeç



**Figure 2.** Group photo of The Megaphone activists in Stockholm (*photo: © The Megaphone, photographer, Bana Bisrat*)

significantly deepens the meaning of ‘advanced marginality’, in emphasising that deprived neighbourhoods may be actually teeming with collective grassroots activism.<sup>67</sup> Reflecting on French urban policy, Dikeç argues that space and place cannot be considered as given, but are produced by multiple practices and discourses. Suburban multi-ethnic districts are, on the one hand, increasingly constituted as ‘badlands’ in public discourse and, related to this, exposed to repressive forms of state intervention. But they are also potential or actual sites of political mobilisation driven by democratic ideals. He sees contemporary youth rebellions in France, but also in European cities in general ‘not merely as intrinsic acts of violence’,<sup>68</sup> but as responses to structurally embedded processes of segregation, unemployment, ethnic discrimination and the restructuring of welfare. Urban revolts are, he argues, ‘justice movements’; that is movements questioning spatially and socially pronounced injustices, embedded in wider political contexts. Dikeç emphasises the importance of recognising activist groups as a public ‘voice’ – articulate movements aiming for deliberative dialogue – often rendered inaudible in public discourse, because of the attention paid to the ‘noise’ of spectacular revolts.

A pilot study in 2012, conducted through examining internet sites, participant observation at local gatherings, conferences and demonstrations, individual interviews and interactive group discussions,<sup>69</sup> exposes a variety of orientations and forms of organisation among new urban justice movements in Sweden. They range from strictly local initiatives and spectacular cultural events to the



long-term building of activist platforms with local, national and international ramifications. FORIX (*Förorternas Riksdag*, the Suburban Parliament) was among the more spectacular initiatives. It functioned as a forum for critical debate, a scene for alternative suburban cultural expression and a rallying point for urban justice movements across the country. In the wake of FORIX's ambition to gather organisations, activists and network under a single umbrella, a new think-tank, *För Orten* (For the Local),<sup>70</sup> was launched in 2013. *Miljardprogrammet* (the Billion Programme) is another broad suburban initiative, which attempts to build a national network for grassroots mobilisation among inhabitants of the Million Dwelling Programme aimed at neighbourhood renewal.

Among numerous, new, locally-based community initiatives and activist networks, the Megaphone and the Panthers (referred to earlier) stand out as the most organised, politically articulate and influential. The Megaphone originally started its activities in Husby, Stockholm, where the 2013 riots took off. It uses the slogan inspired by past Latin American anti-imperialist struggles: 'A united suburb can never be defeated'. The Panthers took off in the deprived neighbourhood of Biskopsgården in Gothenburg. While deriving their name from and linking their identity to past Black struggles in the United States, living legends like Bobbie Seal and Emory Douglas are also contemporary sources of inspiration in their work.

Both The Megaphone and the Panthers combine local rootedness with national and international networking. They forge alliances with other civil society actors, and articulate goals and visions in broad public contexts. During the past five years, both have expanded geographically and in terms of numbers of supporters, activists and participants. The Megaphone has spread its activist network to wider areas in suburban Stockholm and The Panthers have extended their activities to Malmö, connecting to similar urban initiatives in Copenhagen. Education through individual assistance, study groups, movie seminars and discussion meetings – directed towards both local youth and adults – are basic to their work. Both The Megaphone and The Panthers provide critical voices in the media, and are present at public demonstrations and take part in conferences on urban issues. They act as watchdogs and pressure groups concerned with political and administrative decisions at local, city and national level. For them autonomy from party politics, other civil society organisations and the state is seen as essential, both in terms of legitimacy and their actual capacity to carve out independent agendas.

For the purposes of this article, The Megaphone is of particular interest, due to its location in Husby, Stockholm, and as an example that exposes the interconnection of place-based livelihoods, emergent modes of civic agency and their wider structural contexts, not least in connection with the 2013 riots. It was formed during winter 2008/9 as a community reaction to the reporting on the fatal assault on and death of a Husby resident, Ahmed Ibrahim Ali, nicknamed 'Romário'. Romário was a well-known football player in the area, but because of the way the media reported the murder, deploying stereotypical imagery about young suburban males, he was portrayed as a criminal and a gang member. At the same time,

another spectacular assault caused the death of a young man, Riccardo Campogiani, in central Stockholm. Media reporting on this murder, where victim and perpetrator came from better-off backgrounds and lived in a more prosperous area, conveyed completely different messages. It resulted in a public outcry and a demonstration against street violence by over 10,000 people. It was out of frustration over what was perceived in the Husby youth community as a discriminatory representation of the murder of Romário compared to that of Campogiani, that the Megaphone took off as the voice of Husby, challenging the dominant media's stigmatising stereotypes of suburbia – a new 'megaphone' for voices seldom heard.

Defining itself as part of Sweden's 'new popular movement' (*den nya folkrörelsen*), The Megaphone formulates its objectives as: 'working for social justice in Sweden through organising young people in the suburbs in a society where everyone has equal opportunities and are included in all important political decisions; a society with collectively owned municipal services as opposed to a massive clearance sale of public property; the making of a society for all free from racism, sexism and class oppression' through 'mobilising the power that repression in suburbia gives birth to'.<sup>71</sup>

This awareness of being a 'new popular movement' was also reported by the Swedish journalist Karin Elfving, focusing on the attraction of The Megaphone for suburban youth in relation to symbolic power and identity formation.<sup>72</sup> She concludes that belonging and identity have different meanings for youth in Husby than for their immigrant parents. This is exemplified in quotes taken from her dialogue with young people in the community. 'What am I – Kurd, Swede or Eritrean? This we have all gone through and this is what unites us', explains Ailin Moaf, a young activist from Husby. 'I do not, as my parents do, feel at home in the Persian association, and many more wouldn't in the Somalian or the Kurdish. I guess The Megaphone is what we feel as a home for us.' She goes on to explain that it is the very experience of injustice and a common interest in Husby that forges a strong sense of community and belonging focused on The Megaphone, together with the feeling of the power to effect change. Elfving goes on to quote another Megaphone activist, Basar Gerecci, who finds that what he experiences as the forging of deepening socioeconomic rifts between people and between urban neighbourhoods, may summon up similar movements of contestation elsewhere. But for a movement to succeed, it needs an organisational platform and serious work, as well as people prepared to commit themselves.

The popular educational programme *Harakat*, run by The Megaphone in collaboration with the Red Cross in Stockholm, is a case in point. Support from established organisations, as well as participation by prominent researchers and politicians, have lent it legitimacy. Moreover, The Megaphone's activities include demonstrations against the closing down or the subcontracting of public health and care services in the suburbs of Stockholm to corporate entrepreneurs, interventions in arguments over redevelopment and privatisation of municipal housing,<sup>73</sup> along with debates with politicians on urban renewal – often against heavy odds. Currently, its activities have broadened from local community issues to

engagement in national campaigns to support asylum seekers and irregular migrants, which involves a solidarity network against the REVA police action against the undocumented.<sup>74</sup>

Altogether, in spite of a controversial public image, the development of The Megaphone demonstrates basic elements in the making of a social movement: an organisational platform, continuity, collective identity and legitimacy. Its public profile was significantly enhanced in connection with the Stockholm 2013 uprising where The Megaphone took a major step into the national and international mediascape. Its members managed to capture noticeable space in the national media, stubbornly working to make the public and politicians look beyond the burning cars to see the reality of unequal citizenship and the structural issues to explain what was taking place.<sup>75</sup> The day after the killing on 14 May, The Megaphone issued a critique of the bias in media reporting of the incident, organised a peaceful public demonstration, and invited the police for talks with the local community. After calling a press-conference the day after the riots began, the organisation became recognised as the tribune of suburbia.<sup>76</sup>

The Megaphone stresses its mission is democratic and non-violent:<sup>77</sup> 'We in the Megaphone together with others from the area have ... taken advantage of our democratic rights in order to gain a hearing and making the police answer for their action.' And 'We claim social justice, but they answer with batons and dogs.' A detailed report from the homepage reads:

As a fusty smell of poisonous smoke spread across the neighbourhood many of us went into the streets of Husby to find out what had happened. There we were met by masked police in armour with dogs and batons. The police went on the attack against local people who had gathered on the square. Defenceless people were beaten by batons and chased from their domiciles. We simply did not have any right to be there ... outside of our own homes. We also did not have a right to question the methods of the police as their response was to run after us again from different directions with their dogs and batons. Indiscriminately, the police went on to beat young people, parents who had gathered on the spot and social service field-workers from the community. People who had chosen to discuss, argue and demonstrate against police violence now had batons hurled against them. Then it became obvious that the violence of the police was directed against all in Husby.<sup>78</sup>

A public statement from the police force over the killing of the 69-year-old man in Husby on 14 May came only on 7 August, after the police investigation had closed. The verdict on the incident was that it was an act of 'self-defence' on the part of the police officer who had pulled the trigger. Currently, the director of the public prosecution authority, who officially closed down the investigation, has been reported to the Ombudsman for Justice over what is described as a flawed investigation.

### From 'exceptionalism' towards a 'state of exception'?

Sweden's handling of its urban question, though criticised for being 'Americanised', still looks a far cry from the mass incarceration invested in the transformation of America's 'hyper-ghettos' into the 'surrogate ghetto'<sup>79</sup> of its huge prison-industrial complex. And compared with the United Kingdom, the legal aftermath to the Stockholm riots appears restrained. In Sweden, about 90 per cent of the reported incidents that, according to the Swedish police, were related to the riots of 2013, have been dropped. Only a handful of suspects have, at the time of writing, been brought to court and have received comparatively mild sentences.<sup>80</sup> This is compared to 2,700 persons brought to court across England after the 2011 riots, many of whom received long prison sentences.<sup>81</sup> It is a difference in scale that is hardly explicable by the larger extent of the London riots, nor by the fact that the Stockholm riots did not involve looting as in the UK. While in the UK the dominant political reaction following the riots pointed to more and tougher policing, this has not been the case in Sweden. Violence as a means of expressing social grievance was certainly universally denounced as 'completely unacceptable' by speakers across the entire Swedish political spectrum. But, apart from the populist Sweden Democrats demanding tougher police action, the political debate on the riots has not been dominated by arguments for solving the urban crisis through police repression or criminalising the young. Finally, the official line on Sweden 2013 is hardly on a par with the UK's branding of the London 2011 riots: 'blaming the breakdown of families and lack of character in the young, rather than structural issues'.<sup>82</sup>

The dominant political understanding of the 2013 uprising does appear to signal a sobering moment of self-examination. The tone was set by, among others, the chairman of Sweden's powerful social democratic party, Stefan Löfven. Commenting on Facebook on the first night of the Stockholm riots, he saw them as a reminder of a 'responsibility resting heavily on all of us, who are working politically', implying that the discussion of the riots should focus on finding 'concrete solutions to the real problems' – getting to grips with youth unemployment, providing educational opportunities for all and creating sustainable housing and urban milieus.<sup>83</sup> Although the Right and the Left differ in terms of their concrete policies for redressing poverty and urban marginality, this is the general position that has resonated across the political left-right divide, even permeating a major debate on the riots in parliament, held on 31 May 2013.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the political reception of the Swedish 2009 riots, in 2013 there has, with some exceptions, been an absence of references to the 'problem of immigration'. There has also been an absence of interest in 'deviant cultures' and 'deficient socialisation'. This made premier Reinfeldt, talking the talk of 'cultural barriers' in his initial comment on the riots, appear beyond the pale by current Swedish political standards. The rioters are read, across the political spectrum, as 'youngsters' or 'young men' rather than 'immigrant', 'ethnic minority' or 'Muslim' youth. Rather than further fuelling the existing stigma of 'suburbia', there has been a general

political re-appraisal of an engaged local civil society in Husby and other Stockholm suburbs for its important role in resisting violence.

Despite this apparent shift in Swedish political discourse, what seems to have escaped notice is the detrimental impact of existing structural racism and institutional discrimination on Swedish suburbia and on the legitimate rights of its residents; the widening polarisation between metropolitan livelihoods in centre and periphery; and the way that the most disadvantaged are losing faith in democracy and state-delivered social justice. The deafening silence across much of the mainstream political spectrum that was the reply to The Megaphone's outspoken demand for an independent investigation into the Husby killing, bodes ill. The closing of the investigation on this 'police incident' by 7 August, with the total exoneration of the policeman who shot 'the man with the knife' in the head at close range on 14 May, indicates that Sweden has some way to go before recognising its impending 'state of exception'.

Unrest in Stockholm's suburbia has calmed down, but beneath the surface bubbles a constant frustration. We argue that the root causes of rebellion lie not in city districts like Husby or in the fact of segregation in cities such as Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg *per se*, but in social polarisation – where conflicts over space, race, income and power intersect. There is a need now to contextualise community activism and relate it to the social forces in which it is embedded. It demands that we look at ethnic and residential segregation, the marginalisation and social exclusion of racialised minorities, the polarisation of income distribution related to neoliberal restructuring and welfare retrenchment, the securitisation of the police and the force's increasing brutality. Given all these factors, there is an obvious lack of democratic space in which the 'alternative voices'<sup>85</sup> of suburbia can be promoted. For it is the voices of the excluded and marginalised that, in Sweden as in other EU countries, challenge the mainstream and call into question the 'flattering and valorising picture of superior European values and a democratic, open and tolerant way of life'.<sup>86</sup>

The Megaphone of suburbia, despite being muffled by or stigmatised in the national media, has, nonetheless become a symbol of resistance, of popular will and of belonging. Civil society activism, such as that exemplified by The Megaphone, has become a source of identity, solidarity and resistance, particularly among youth in multiethnic suburbia. By creating numerous links to sister organisations, the short history of The Megaphone indicates the birth of a new networked popular movement (*folkrörelse*) or justice movement. Thus, we have argued these new autonomous actors within civil society are demanding their place among Swedish popular movements. Through their focus on urban social justice, their active presence as critical public voices in the mass media, and through knowledge production and public demonstrations, they have proved themselves to be a new political subject, different from established civil society actors. In the process, emergent youth justice movements have created new agendas for reclaiming the city as well as rights of citizenship.



In conclusion, Stefan Jonsson's reading of the Stockholm riots<sup>87</sup> enunciates the radical challenge that uprisings now present to us all.<sup>88</sup>

That we live in the age of riots means that we do no longer – or still do not – live in the age of democracy. Therefore it is also not meaningful to combat or to crush rebellions. The best to do is to leave them space in politics, so that the silence and the noise can be converted into words.<sup>89</sup>

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