

Vanessa Barker

Policing Membership in Husby: Four Factors to the Stockholm Riots

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The stones thrown in the Stockholm riots were large granite blocks, stones that are used in the cobblestone pathways that grace the city, a sign of the relatively high standard of living in these residential neighborhoods. Husby is a long way away from the burned out hyperghettos of absolute deprivation. Despite the common media refrain about high rates of unemployment, economic grievances were not the primary motivating factor in these protests. After four nights of setting cars on fire and pelting stones at the police, we should note there has been no reported looting and only one commercial enterprise sustained any damage with one window knocked out. The police were the main targets of these protests and we should not lose sight of this critical point even as we develop broader explanations about underlying causes. As more information comes to light, commentators will no doubt have to revise these preliminary statements about the protests. But at this point I will say there were most likely four key factors that led to and help explain these violent confrontations: (1) a Security Gap, Legitimacy Gap, the over-enforcement of law and under-enforcement of protection; (2) Contested Membership, a fight for social recognition; (3) Spatial Stigmatization, the insistence that the suburbs are different and devalued; (4) Suburban Marginality, substandard education and high unemployment. While all four factors were at play, I think the riots were at their core about the policing of membership in Sweden, deemed to be illegitimate.

#### Security Gap: Legitimacy Gap

Growing resentment over the increased use of security and surveillance in suburban neighborhoods and a perception of unfair treatment of ethnic minorities by the police fueled these protests. Brewing distrust and frustration with punitive policing were set off not only by the proximate shooting death of a mentally ill man wielding a knife in his apartment but by the volatile spring of demonstrations against “racial profiling” used during identification checks on Stockholm commuters. Young people involved in the protests explained: “we’re doing this because we don’t want the police here,” “the police are racist, they are brutal,” “we have nothing to lose to do this” (quoted by Warsame Elmi on Radio Sweden 2013). Previous empirical work on policing in suburban neighborhoods has shown similar patterns of distrust and antipathy toward the police (Sernhede 2006; Pettersson 2013). Likewise, according to several witnesses, the police have been accused of hurling racial slurs at the residents while responding to the unrest. But since no official complaints have been filed, the Police Commissioner was doubtful about their occurrence, a blind bureaucratic move which further rocks these relations. These are troublesome developments. Policing in democratic societies depends upon the voluntary compliance with the law which itself depends on the perception of fairness as Tom Tyler has extensively documented. Without it, “dismissive defiance” is made possible (Braithwaite 2012). In Stockholm, Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt has been quick to blame these incidents on violent youth, laying on patronizing comments about how the riots make the suburbs look bad. Discriminatory policing makes Sweden look bad and has serious implications for maintaining public order. Megafonen, a civil society organization of suburban youth, has explicitly identified this security gap—how increased surveillance has increased young people’s sense of insecurity and vulnerability— as part of their platform for reform (Megafonen 2013; for more on security gap, see Lisa Miller 2013). They would like to see blunt instruments of criminal justice replaced with human security. In the aftermath of the riots, this is probably a first step to restoring trust, a necessary building block of society.

#### Contested Membership: Fight for Social Recognition

The insistence that Husby is an immigrant neighborhood, somehow separate and different than the rest of Sweden belies the one of the central points of the protest: social inclusion. Many of the young

people engaging in confrontations were born in Sweden and simply want to belong, to be recognized as part of the shared society, not separate. The violence directed at the police was a partial response to frustration over certain policing practices such as ID checks of “foreign looking” people, practices that treat fellow Swedes like suspects and criminals who are told they do not belong. While many of the young antagonists’ parents are likely to have been immigrants (from Iraq, Turkey, Somalia) to describe their children as second-generation immigrants magnifies rather than reduces this perceived social distance. The suburban youth conflict is not directly related to the migratory experience but to that of membership, particular how it is racialized in Sweden. Because of long-standing taboos on the use of race or ethnicity in the Swedish context, researchers, commentators, politicians, and common everyday discourse rely on the use of “foreign background,” “foreigner,” and “immigrant” to stand for ethnic differences even for those who have spent their entire lives in Sweden, reproducing if not cementing outsider status. So rather than a pluralist society made up of nationals with varying ethnic backgrounds, a false division is created between Swedes and others with foreign background. (Domestic and international media should consider how their own coverage exaggerates this false dichotomy.) Warsame Elmi, Swedish Radio reporter who grew up in Husby, recounted how several young people confronted journalists about being labeled “immigrant youth” when they were all born in Sweden (Radio Sweden 2013). They wanted to be recognized as Swedes not as foreigners. In response to the riots, the Prime Minister remarked that the best integration policy was to learn the language, a divisive remark since Husby youth speak Swedish and go to Swedish schools. It is membership itself that is being contested.

Contested membership has long historical roots in Sweden, going back to the building of the welfare state: the People’s Home. *Folkhemmet*, the people’s home, is based on two radically different notions of belonging: *demos* and *ethnos* (Trägårdh 2000). The People’s Home is at once highly democratic and egalitarian, the *demos*, the people who are free and equal, with a place for everyone; and conversely it is based on *folk*, a people, an *ethnos*, a people bonded by blood, exclusionary and essentialist (Barker 2013). This cracked foundation has major implications for how membership is perceived and legally constructed today. Blood ties rather than birthright are the main route to citizenship in Sweden and while *ethnos* does not determine social membership it informs how group ties are formed and made meaningful, and it may undermine various forms of structural discrimination present in the society. As Warsame Elmi concluded the riots were not immigrant or suburban problems but Swedish problems. It is telling that the Prime Minister has yet to make an appearance at the distressed neighborhood, missing a chance to provide support to those affected by the violence or express solidarity—this is Sweden and we will fix it. Instead civil society mobilized, parents and other neighbors got out on the street and put an end to the protest. Going forward, we can look to Megafonen’s first demand for increased political participation, a key to membership in democratic societies.

#### Spatial Segregation & Territorial Stigmatization

That spatial configurations fundamentally shape social relations is one of Loic Wacquant’s (2008) finest insights and is key to understanding the Stockholm riots. Just as Husby is a long way away from a hyperghetto, it is also a long way from American suburbia, the place of middle class prosperity and social affirmation. The suburbs in Sweden traditionally have been working class neighborhoods while the more exclusive areas of the city center remain the domain of the middle and upper classes, now home to bourgeois bohemians in David Brooks’ apt terminology. The suburbs, outside the city center, are still home to working class residents but are now primarily made up of residents with some kind of immigrant background. One of the important points here is not so much the ethnic composition of the suburbs but the spatial location: the suburbs are constructed as outside, detached, different from the city, some faraway place. They are not imagined as a quiet refuge, an escape from the hustle and bustle of the city as in the American ideal, but instead imagined as some kind of undesirable, devalued and stigmatized fixed place. Empirical research has examined how Swedish suburbs are subject to the process of territorial stigmatization (Pettersson 2013; Peterson

2013). It is the space, the place, and not necessarily the people as Wacquant defines it. Of course we should note that there are exclusive suburbs in Sweden but are usually called by name, Lidingö, rather than a suburb. Spatial stigmatization may have contributed to the underlying experience of social exclusion or partial inclusion that propelled the riots forward. Once underway, as noted above, several political leaders failed to quash this stigmatization and instead heightened it. The Integration Minister Erik Ullenhag, while expressing concern about integration policy reform, echoed the Prime Minister in pointing out how the riots would hurt the reputation of Husby. I would think that the riots would hurt the reputation of the government not the other way around. This discourse functions to shame the residents for the protest and shame parents for not controlling their kids, already dishonored because of their place.

#### Suburban Marginality

Last point. Although most of my analysis has focused on the policing of membership as key to understanding Husby, economic factors also played a role, particularly the dissatisfaction with the quality of education and the relatively high rates of youth unemployment in these suburban areas. (We should note though that youth unemployment is relatively high all over Sweden). Concerns about the quality of education are significant since there is growing concern that students are not meeting eligibility requirements for higher levels of education at the gymnasium or beyond. Megafonen, the suburban youth activist organization, makes access to fair and equal education central to their demands. These deeper structural issues contribute to diminished life chances of suburban residents, underpinning the experience of social marginality. More empirical work is needed to see if we can directly tie these issues with the concerns of the rioters. Magnus Hörnqvist and colleagues at Stockholm University have just begun to map the protest, following a similar approach to Tim Newburn and the Guardian's "Reading the Riots," interviewing as many participants and witnesses as possible to find out how and why. In time we will have a clearer picture about who actually participated in the riots, what they wanted, what they thought they were doing and why. For now we can say the reality and perception of unfairness (particular by the police) and lost opportunities in democratic societies generate sources of distress, discontent and sites of protest. Parallel trends have been identified in the 2011 London Riots and the 2005 riots in the French *banlieues*. This is not over.

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