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‘YOUTH RIOTS’ AND THE CONCEPT OF CONTENTIOUS POLITICS IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

The Case of the 1948 Stockholm Easter Riots

This article analyses European ‘youth riots’ as a social phenomenon after World War II. It also uses a specific riot – the 1948 Stockholm Easter Riots – in order to discuss the limits and potential of some theoretical assumptions underlying the field of historical contentious politics studies, primarily ‘contentious politics’ and ‘claims’. Using police reports and newspapers, the article shows that the riots were part of a European repertoire of post-war ‘youth riots’, but that they also bear similarities to an older popular repertoire of contention in Sweden. However, the riots do not really fit into the concept of ‘contentious politics’, as this concept is built on ‘claim-making’ as a key aspect and the participants did not make explicit claims. This leads to the conclusion that other theoretical tools, inspired by the concept of ‘moral economy’, are better suited for understanding the motivations of the rioters, whose actions are interpreted as a way of defending a perceived moral right of access to the urban public space.

Keywords youth riots, contentious politics, modern Swedish history

In the spring of 1948, Stockholm was shaken by the so-called Easter Riots. For almost a week, 3,000–5,000 people clashed with police in the district of Södermalm. In the press coverage, these events were described as ‘youth riots’, indicating that the main actors were adolescents and hinting that the riots were a symptom of ‘youth problems’; a perceived societal problem hotly debated at the time. The riots were not unique. In Stockholm, they were the first of a series of ‘youth riots’, including the riots in Berzelii Park in 1951 and 1954, the New Year’s Eve Riots in 1956, and the riots at Hötorget Square in 1965. Similar riots took place in other Swedish and European cities at approximately the same time. With a few exemptions, ‘youth riots’ are understudied in Swedish historiography; somewhat surprising, as for many decades there has been a thriving Swedish research tradition focusing on street-level conflicts such as riots and other public protests.

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In this article, we study the Easter Riots with a twofold ambition. First, we want to analyse youth riots as a social phenomenon of collective contention; an important undertaking in itself, due to the general lack of in-depth research on Swedish as well as European ‘youth riots’. Second, and most importantly, we want to use the Easter Riots as a case study, enabling us to discuss an important problem present in the theoretical assumptions underlying much of the above-mentioned Swedish historiographical tradition on street-level conflicts; a tradition that we ourselves are a part of. Thus, we deploy a method not commonly used in Scandinavian historical research: namely analysing a historical event as a case study in order to problematize theoretical concepts.

Which concepts? To understand that, it is necessary to examine the tradition more closely. It can be traced back to the 1967 publication of Rolf Karlbom’s study of food riots in the 18th and 19th centuries, a ground-breaking work, albeit lacking theoretical perspectives. In the following decades, social and labour historians, often influenced by the works of Eric Hobsbawm, Georges Rudé, and E. P. Thompson, carried on the tradition. In the last decades, several historians have revitalized this tradition with a number of theoretically ambitious studies. Among many examples, we can mention Karin Sennefelt’s thesis on the Swedish 1743 Dalarna uprising, Stefan Nyzell’s study of violent labour conflicts in the 1920s, and Mats Berglund’s book on urban popular protests in 1719–1848.

Historians working within this tradition have drawn theoretical inspiration from a number of works on public protests, such as James C. Scott’s concepts of ‘everyday resistance’ and ‘hidden transcripts’, and the concept of ‘moral economy’ originally coined by Thompson. A common denominator for many of the most recent studies is that they are influenced by the theoretical field of Contentious Politics Studies (CPS). In particular, theoretical tools formulated by scholars such as Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam have been widely used. Thus, today there is a tendency among Swedish historians analysing street-level conflicts to study so-called ‘contentious performances’ that coalesce into ‘repertoires of contention’. Furthermore, conflicts are often understood not only as contentious performances as such, but as a specific form of ‘contentious politics’: collective confrontations during which participants raise ‘claims’ directed toward the government or a third party. It should be mentioned that this is not unique for Swedish historiography. Theoretical inspiration from the CPS field plays a great role in the works of, for example, Danish historians Renée Karpantschof and Fleming Mikkelsen, who have studied the changing forms of contentious performances in Denmark over long timescales.

As the CPS field has begun to gain theoretical influence in Swedish historical research, we argue that it is important to examine the possibilities of this field as well as its limits. This is particularly important because the field was originally established not by historians but by sociologists and political scientists (although often with an interest in historical conflicts). It is not self-evident that concepts from political science can easily be used in studies of historical events. Their usefulness in historical research should be critically tested, and the aim of this article is to do exactly that.

Following Tilly’s own call for empirical verification, modification, or falsification of the central concepts of the CPS field, we set out to discuss which kinds of historical episodes are best described as ‘contentious politics’ and which are not, using the Stockholm Easter Riots as a case study. The Easter Riots are well-suited for such a
test, as they contain aspects that (as we will show) do not easily and automatically fit into the theoretical models of the CPS field. The most important aspect is that the participants in the Easter Riots never really raised explicit claims, and this lack of claims is something also characterizing other ‘youth riots’ in the first post-war decades. Hence, we argue that, while the concept of repertoires of contention is fruitful for the systematic study of ‘youth riots’ in this period, the concept of ‘contentious politics’ is less fruitful when it comes to understanding the underlying motivations of the participants. At the end of the article, we explore some other possible concepts available for use in historical studies of ‘youth riots’, drawing inspiration from the above-mentioned concept of ‘moral economy’ as well as from geographer Mustafa Dikeç and his recent works on contemporary suburban European riots. Thus, we are contributing to the theoretical development of the conflict-oriented research tradition in Swedish as well as Scandinavian historiography.

**How to analyse a ‘youth riot’**

When we write about ‘youth riots’ in this article, we do not primarily refer to riots in which young people have participated. The fact that the participants in a riot have been young is not what makes it a ‘youth riot’. However, in several European cities in the early post-war decades, events took place in which the participants were categorized by observers primarily as ‘youths’ and/or ‘teenagers’ (and not as, for example, ‘men’, ‘workers’, or any other possible category), and which were related to a perceived ‘youth question’ in need of ‘youth politics’ in order to be dealt with. This distinguishes ‘youth riots’ from, for example, the widespread riots occurring in Stockholm as well as other European cities in the late 1960s. Young people then participated in dramatic and sometimes violent demonstrations and riots protesting the Vietnam War and bourgeois society in general. These riots, however, were interpreted as Leftist, political actions and not as a symptom of a ‘youth question’ as such, and the young people who took part in them were not primarily depicted as ‘youths’ but as Leftists and political activists, albeit young political activists.

In this article, we therefore define the term ‘youth riot’ as a contentious performance distinguished by two criteria. First, a ‘youth riot’ was understood as a ‘youth riot’ or in similar terms (such as ‘teenage riots’) in the contemporary media coverage, and the participants were categorized as adolescents, ‘youths’, or ‘teenagers’. Second, ‘youth riots’ lacked explicit claims, at least claims clearly discernible for adult observers. This criterion can be clarified using a concrete example. In the summer of 1964, teenagers staged a sit-down blockade of a street in Hamburg’s Reeperbahn district in order to protest the government-enforced closure of a pop club. We would not see this a ‘youth riot’ because the young protesters undoubtedly made an explicit claim.

Such ‘youth riots’ are known from several north-western European urban centres in the 1950s and 1960s, including the 1956–1957 ‘Rock & Roll Riots’ in Britain, West Germany, and in the Nordic countries, the 1962 riots in Munich, and the 1964–1966 ‘Mods and Rockers Riots’ in Britain. The Stockholm Easter Riots were thus only one of a series of ‘youth riots’ in post-war Europe. They were, however, one of the first known, a fact we believe makes them suitable as a case study, as well as a starting point for future research.
The debate on exactly how and when specific ‘youth cultures’ emerged is extensive and need not be discussed in detail here. Suffice to say that ‘youth’ and ‘adolescence’ emerged as a field open for socio-political intervention, as well as scientific and psychological studies, in the years around 1900. The category of ‘teenagers’ emerged gradually in the period of around 1930–1960; a process intertwined with economic and demographic changes, such as rising wages for young employees and more time available for leisure due to shorter working hours. The emergence of ‘youth riots’ was a sign of this process, and we would argue that the political reactions to these were part of the construction of this new field and of socio-political categories such as ‘teenagers’ and ‘juvenile delinquents’. 

The Easter Riots started on the evening of Good Friday, on 26 March, when large numbers of primarily working-class youths gathered on Götgatan, the main street in the urban district of Södermalm, shouting, brawling, and stopping traffic. Following a number of harsh police actions, the area saw close to a week of unruly behaviour, including running battles between gangs of youths and the police. In order to answer our questions of whether the riots can be seen as a form of ‘contentious politics’, we have studied the events in detail, mainly through news articles and police reports from the Stockholm police department. While both types of material are second-hand descriptions, they still contain many first-hand accounts by journalists, witnesses, police officers, and suspects. We have, in particular, studied descriptions of how the riots took place, and if any participants stated a reason for participating in the riots.

We soon present our results, but before we can do that, it is necessary to put the episode of the Easter Riots in a wider historical perspective. We do this by using the term ‘repertoire of contention’, arguing that the Easter Riots were part of a post-war European repertoire of ‘youth riots’, and that they, in some respects, were also related to an older Swedish repertoire of urban contention.

The Easter Riots: part of a strong repertoire of contention

In the works of Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam, the concept of ‘repertoire of contention’ is used to convey the idea that participants in contentious performances ‘adopt scripts they have performed, or at least observed, before. They do not simply invent an efficient new action or express whatever impulses they feel, but rework known routines in response to current circumstances’. The notion of historically relatively stable repertoires, with a rather ‘limited set of routines’ acted out during contentious performances, enables us to identify individual episodes as part of a larger system of contention. Repertoires change: demonstrations, squatting, and tar-and-feathering are actions that have been performed in some periods, but not all. They emerged somewhere and sometime, and some have faded from the repertoire and are no longer used. Nevertheless, repertoires tend to change slowly and as a result of the experiences made through the interaction between participants in confrontations and the police, other authorities, and bystanders.

Not all contentious performances are widespread, part of a distinguishable repertoire, or stable during a long period of time. But when they are, they can be termed ‘strong repertoires’. Tilly proposes a number of criteria indicating the existence of a strong repertoire. First, that performances cluster into a limited number of recurrent types. Second, that these performances change relatively little over time for a given set
of actors. Third, that they have clear boundaries; some performances are acted out while other performances never occur, even though they are technically possible. Fourth, that participants indicate that they are aware of the existence of a repertoire and have a shared understanding of how a certain type of collective confrontation is carried out. We would argue that the episodes taking place during the Stockholm Easter Riots show that these events were part of a repertoire of European ‘youth riots’ and that these events meet Tilly’s criteria for what constitutes a ‘strong repertoire of contention’.

In order to do so, we have to start by examining what happened on the streets of Stockholm in the dramatic spring of 1948. First, a short background. During the years 1940–1950, the population of the Swedish capital rose from c. 590,000 to 744,000 inhabitants, which means that the city was undergoing a rapid population growth in 1948. The city was strikingly segregated, and class was an important factor in its social geography. The Easter Riots took place on the island of Södermalm in southern Stockholm. In the early 1950s, many of the island’s inhabitants would start to move out to the then newly built near suburbs. However, in 1948, Södermalm was still a densely populated, predominantly working-class area with a population of more than 143,000 people. Adolescents living there had few possibilities to spend their leisure time at home, as most families lived in cramped small apartments. There were no communal youth centres or other non-commercial leisure facilities on the island, and the creation of such centres had long been an issue in local politics. Instead, adolescents spent their evenings in the alleys and the street corners. The long street of Götgatan, with its many movie theatres and cafés, was a meeting point for young people. Sometimes, small-scale brawls broke out among the crowds walking up and down the street, and when the police arrested trouble-makers, large crowds of spectators tended to gather around the combatants.

The outbreak of the riots has to be seen against this background of recurring brawls and police interference. Exactly how they started is unclear, but many adolescents were out in the streets on 26 March, an evening on which movie theatres were closed as it was Good Friday. Something happened that had happened many times before: two gangs of adolescents started a brawl and when a police patrol arrived, spectators gathered at the scene. However, this evening events took a more confrontational turn. When the police arrested a young man, others rushed forward and tried to free him. The officers used their radio to call for back-up and soon police reinforcements were trying to clear the corner of Götgatan and Katarina Bangata of people. This did not disperse the crowd. Instead, more people gathered and started to shout at and insult the police officers. Some rocks were thrown and a window of a passing bus was smashed. The unrest was not over until after midnight. The following day, the events were widely reported in the press and the rioters were depicted as ligister (roughly translatable as ‘hooligans’, a pejorative word used to label unruly, working-class youth).

Easter Saturday was quiet, but the peace did not last long. For four consecutive days, starting on the evening of Easter Sunday and continuing until 31 March, large confrontations took place between, on the one hand, the police and, on the other hand, adolescents and even some adults from Södermalm and southern suburbs within walking distance. All confrontations took place in the relatively small area around Götgatan and followed a similar pattern (see, for examples of photographs showing
some of the confrontations, Figures 1 and 2). Thousands of people gathered in the streets and in nearby public spaces, blocking traffic, particularly at the square of Medborgarplatsen and in the park of Björns Trädgård. Night after night, there was a build-up of tension between the police and the crowds, which mainly consisted of young men as well as young women. The police met the crowds with radio patrol cars, officers armed with sabres, and mounted policemen armed with crops. After a while, the police would order the crowds to disperse via loudspeakers. The crowds tried to stand as close to the officers as possible, refusing to leave when asked to do so or dispersing at a demonstratively slow pace. Adolescents also mocked officers and shouted insults. There were, however, only a few attempts to vandalize physical property and very little use of violence against individuals, even though the crowds...
threw some stones and bottles at the police. On some occasions, firecrackers were detonated.

Every night, the police eventually decided to disperse the crowds. But each time they did, it became the spark that turned the events into full-scale riots. When this happened, the police, and not the rioting adolescents, were the ones behind most of the actual violence (for an example, see Figure 3). Indeed, the events could very well be described as ‘police riots’, in the sense that the police not only seem to have been the primary instigator but also the most active party during the confrontations. Some newspapers criticized the police for their brutality, and even papers that generally sided with the authorities acknowledged that the police had attacked many ‘innocents’. In fact, such allegations were made even by other public agencies. In memoranda never released to the press, social
workers from the Stockholm Board of Child and Juvenile Welfare reported that they too had been beaten by police officers at Götgatan, and that people had been chased ‘like wild animals’. 23

It was not over until 1 April, when the police adopted different tactics. Instead of violent charges, they now sealed off Götgatan and all nearby public places. Moreover, a drizzling rain had begun to fall. The Easter Riots were over. Several individuals had been injured, and 82 people had been arrested. The majority of these were charged with minor offences, mostly for insulting officers and obstructive behaviour. Two police officers were reported as having suffered minor injuries, but only a very limited number of people were actually arrested for violence against the police or for destroying property. 24
The events taking place during the Easter Riots bear a strong resemblance to other ‘youth riots’ taking place in Sweden and other parts of Europe in the early post-war period. As mentioned before, we would argue that it is even possible to speak of a European strong repertoire of ‘youth riots’, of which the Easter Riots were a part. We now elaborate on this argument, following Tilly’s four criteria of what constitutes a strong repertoire of contention.

First, ‘youth riots’ like the Easter Riots can quite well be described as performances clustering into a limited number of recurrent types. In Sweden, ‘youth riots’ occurred in Malmö around New Year’s Eve in 1946 and in Landskrona in 1956. In Stockholm (as mentioned earlier), the Easter Riots were the first in a series of similar events, such as the riots in Berzelii Park in 1951 and 1954, in the central parts of the city around New Year’s Eve in 1956, and at Hötorget Square in 1965; a year when ‘youth riots’ also took place in Gothenburg and Malmö. After that, the Swedish cycle of ‘youth riots’ seems to have ended: the next event that can be described as a major ‘youth riot’ in Sweden took place as late as 1987, in the Kungsträdgården Park in central Stockholm. After 1987, the suburbs rather than the inner city have been the most important space for riots in Stockholm. However, Swedish suburban riots have never been primarily categorized as ‘youth riots’.

Although we lack systematic research on European ‘youth riots’, we know that in the years 1956–1957, a cycle of riots broke out in big cities such as London, West Berlin, Oslo, Copenhagen, and Helsinki. In West Germany, no less than 81 such episodes were reported. Some of them were described as ‘Rock & Roll Riots’, occurring when the film Rock Around the Clock premiered in movie theatres. Another relatively well-known cycle occurred in seaside resorts in southern England in 1964–1966. This cycle started in Clacton during the rainy Easter holidays in 1964, and similar disturbances then recurred in places like Brighton and Margate in the following two years. All of these riots commonly followed a similar pattern. For some time, adolescents had engaged in small-scale confrontations with the police over access to particular public spaces. When confrontations escalated into large-scale riots, the trigger was usually the decision by the police to clear the spaces by force. Furthermore, the main confrontations took place between adolescents and the police. During the 1964–1966 cycle in England, there are indications that groups of youths confronted each other as well, as the press depicted the events as clashes between ‘mods’ and ‘rockers’. However, these assertions were often exaggerated, and some of the clashes might even have been the result of a polarization between the groups created by the press reports themselves. The most frequent performance acted out by participants was of a surprisingly passive kind: Just like in the Easter Riots, adolescents simply stood around or danced, and refused to leave when asked to do so. Mocking and insulting police officers seems to have been another recurring performance.

Second, due to the lack of in-depth studies, it is at this point hard to fully answer the question of whether ‘youth riot’ performances changed over time. However, according to the research carried out so far, continuity rather than change seems to have been the defining trait in the period 1945–1965. Of course, different generations participated in different riots, and different events were related to different youth cultures in the public debate. Nonetheless, as is evident from the examples in the previous paragraph, the set of performances acted out by these different adolescents were of a similar kind. We would also argue that one might in fact stretch this
continuity even further back in time, at least in Sweden. ‘Youth riots’, as we define the term, is a 20th-century post-war phenomenon. But we know of similar events taking place in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in cities such as Eskilstuna and Malmö. These events were not described as ‘youth riots’, and although the participants were relatively young, the category of ‘youth’ was seldom used when contemporary observers discussed the riots. Rather, they were related to an allegedly undisciplined artisan, journeymen, and urban working-class culture. However, not focusing on how participants were labelled but on their set of performances, we see similarities. The conflicts were often related to the efforts of artisan workers to uphold what they considered their traditional rights; for example, the right to take a day off when they wanted to, to party, and to be drunk in public. When the police intervened, journeymen tried to rescue arrested comrades and brawls sometimes escalated into riots in a manner resembling ‘youth riots’. Perhaps the last of these events took place as late as 1937. During a market fair in Eskilstuna, the police arrested a drunken man, which led to others rushing forward to ‘free’ him. All night, crowds gathered around the police station, demanding that everyone arrested for drunkenness should be released. This time, there seems to have been some kind of political conflict as well, as some participants sang ‘The Internationale’. But besides that, the similarities are striking and the confrontation was even described as an early form of ‘youth riot’ in the press. These temporal links could be examined more closely. Here, it is sufficient to state that although ‘youth riots’ represented a specific form of contentious performance in the post-war decades, they did not emerge in a vacuum. At least in Sweden, the phenomenon had links back to an older urban repertoire of popular contention.

Third, ‘youth riots’ had clear boundaries, although, of course, no ‘youth riot’ was exactly alike. Destruction of property seems to have been relatively limited, even if there were variations. For example, adolescents in Malmö in 1946/1947 rocked cars, and in Helsinki in 1956, adolescents were reported as having tried to turn cars upside down. However, other forms of property damage found within an older popular urban Swedish repertoire of contention was absent, such as the systematic smashing of windows in houses in which the urban elite lived. Violence against individuals was also quite rare, although it sometimes occurred when the police tried to arrest people. When this happened, it was rarely more violent than the throwing of some rocks and bottles. In fact, ‘youth riots’ in general were not at all as violent as we might perhaps expect a ‘riot’ to be.

Fourth, we have to acknowledge that, due to the present lack of research, it is difficult to know to what extent participants in youth riots were aware of the existence of a shared ‘youth riot’ repertoire. In some cases, however, one might tentatively argue that the extensive press reports on ‘youth riots’ at least created a potential for such knowledge. Most evidently, during the cycles of ‘youth riots’ in 1956–1957 and 1964–1966, several similar riots occurred in different cities and countries in a short period of time. The easiest way to explain this is by assuming some kind of diffusion, although we do not really know how this happened: through personal contacts or by young people being inspired by press reports. As mentioned before, many of the riots in 1956–1957 started when Rock Around the Clock premiered in movie theatres. This cycle of film-related riots started in London in September 1956 and was extensively reported in European newspapers. When the movie premiered in a city, local adolescents knew what had happened in other...
cities thanks to the press reports. Police authorities knew that as well, and boosted their resources in preparation for the expected riots. Some kind of transnational diffusion seems to have taken place in the mid-1960s as well. We still do not have the full picture, but we know that the British press described the riots as conflicts between ‘mods’ and ‘rockers’. At the same time, in the summer of 1965, the riots at Hötorget Square in Stockholm broke out. These riots were also labelled as ‘mod riots’. As mentioned earlier, diffusion then took place within Sweden, as ‘mod riots’ soon occurred in Malmö and Gothenburg as well.

What did they want? The question of ‘claims’ and ‘contentious politics’

Hence, the ‘youth riots’ taking place in north-western Europe in the years c. 1945–1965 were part of a strong repertoire of contention. But does this mean that this repertoire was also a repertoire of contentious politics? That question, as we shall show, is a tricky one to answer.

Tilly defines the concept of ‘contentious politics’ as a form of confrontational interaction, ‘in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims or third parties’. This means that if we are to describe ‘youth riots’ such as the Easter Riots as a form of contentious politics, we have to show that the participants made some kind of claims. But what should be counted as ‘claims’? In a narrow sense, a claim has to involve articulated political demands or efforts to achieve a political goal. Undoubtedly, many historical riots and public protests have involved such claims: people have gathered in the streets to demand suffrage reform or lower bread prices, and so on. In a broader sense, all kinds of collective action ‘bearing on some else’s interests’ may potentially be seen as claims. One important question is whether this broad interpretation involves spatial claims, and how that concept should be understood. As several scholars working within the CPS field have noted, contentious performances such as demonstrations and public rallies are a form of spatial claims, as participants are using public spaces and places (and thereby hindering others from using them at the same time). But, according to the CPS tradition, if spatial claim-making is to be understood as a form of contentious politics, the spatial claims have to be made in order to achieve a more explicit claim directed toward another collective agent or institution; such as when protesters vow not to leave a public square until the government meets their demands of suffrage, political reform, or something else.

Should we choose a narrow or a broad interpretation? We would argue that both interpretations involve problems. If all sorts of implicit or spatial claims were to be counted as contentious politics, then the term would cover almost all kinds of contentious action; revolutions as well as football hooliganism. This problem does not occur if we choose the narrow interpretation, but this brings other problems. Is every contentious performance without explicitly stated claims to be disregarded as completely ‘unpolitical’, and how should we understand terms such as political and unpolitical in the first place? Our analysis of the Easter Riots elaborates on this problem, as we show that it is not easy to tell exactly what should be seen as a claim when it comes to ‘youth riots’. At the end of the article, we even discuss the possibility of seeing confrontational use and misuse of public space as something that
can be political in itself, even if it would be improper to see it as a form of ‘contentious politics’ as the term is understood in the CPS field.

However, let us start with testing the concept of ‘contentious politics’ against the case of the Easter Riots. First of all, it has to be noted that not only the researchers of today have struggled to make sense of riots void of explicitly stated claims. In fact, the apparently claimless ‘youth riots’ of post-war Europe also puzzled contemporary observers, and often led to confused debates in mass media. To borrow the words of US sociologist Gary T. Marx, they were regularly seen as ‘issueless riots’. Politicians, journalists, and social workers were surprised, as the riots occurred in democracies at a time of rising economic wealth. Accordingly, they asked what these young people were protesting against. Were they even protesting against anything at all? This confusion is noticeable in the debate following the Easter Riots as well. In 1948, large-scale riots had not occurred in Stockholm for 17 years. And when the last time riots had occurred, in 1931, the participants had made very explicit claims, namely protesting the so-called Ådalen massacre in northern Sweden, where the military had shot five people dead during a march of striking workers. Thus, it is not particularly surprising that when riots occurred in the capital for the first time in 17 years and, on top of that, the rioters did not raise explicit claims, the following debate became an open field for speculation.

Some observers stated outright that they saw the riots as issueless; writing that they were ‘stupid’ and ‘meaningless’ and had no cause other than ‘the riot itself’. The youth organization of the ruling Social Democratic Party interpreted the riots similarly in its magazine: ‘the young people on the streets did not demonstrate for or against anything. The excitement of being chased by police cars and mounted police was obviously a sufficient motive’. Such statements denied the participants the status as political actors and described their behaviour as irrational and inexplicable.

In some cases, we see an indication of what Stanley Cohen has described as a ‘moral panic’. Cohen has argued that media sometimes depicts an imagined group as ‘folk devils’, blaming them for a variety of problems in a stereotypical and exaggerated way. Moral panic often evolves around reports involving certain youth or subcultures.

Although the majority of newspapers simply described the participants in the Easter Riots as ligister, or as ‘youth’, some labelled them swingpjattar (roughly translatable to ‘swing kids’). The ‘swingpjattar’ was one of the first Swedish youth cultures disseminated and mediated through national press and popular movies, characterized by a style of clothing partially inspired by the ‘zoot suit’ style of African American and Latino youth in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. There were, however, also significant differences between these two youth cultures, and the public image of the ‘swingpjattar’ was never racialized in the same way as the public image of American ‘zoot suiters’. There is no way of knowing whether any participants in the riots described themselves as a ‘swingpjatt’, but the notion of the riots as linked to the ‘swingpjatt’ culture appeared in the press.

Some speculations had political undertones. In the spring of 1948, Europe was in shock after the communist coup d’État in Prague, and anti-communist sentiments were strengthened in Sweden as well as in other countries. Some observers feared that the Easter Riots, if not part of a communist scheme, were at least an attempt to destabilize Swedish society and make it vulnerable to future coups. Some newspapers even reported on rumours of cars owned by the Soviet embassy driving around
Södermalm during the riots. There is absolutely no proof of actual links between the Easter Riots and any communist activity, let alone foreign powers, but these statements provide a striking image of how contemporary observers struggled to make sense of the riots.

Nevertheless, most observers sought social explanations. Many thought that the most important explanation was the lack of organized leisure activities for adolescents in Stockholm, especially adolescents who did not belong to mass organizations, such as sports clubs, churches, or the labour movement. These so-called ‘non-organized youths’ had been seen as a problem in the Swedish debate on youth politics for years. After the riots, many pointed to the lack of youth centres and leisure facilities on Södermalm. Without such centres, they said, the only option left for young people was to take to the streets. Many explanations also adopted a ‘psychological’ approach, denying the young participants the status of actors capable of making rational choices. Some observers used concepts such as ‘mass psychosis’ and ‘mass suggestion’, linking the events to a socio-psychological understanding of riots originating from Gustave Le Bon and his influential work from 1895, The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind. Others saw ‘adolescents’ or ‘teenagers’ as biological categories, characterized by certain psychological patterns of behaviour, such as an ‘incline for aggression’, ‘disposition for opposition’, and ‘urge for adventure’. These qualities were seen as natural, but had to be directed into constructive activities (such as organized sports), or else they risked taking on violent forms, such as rioting.

A very different sort of explanation was of a conservative kind, dismissing social and psychological explanations. Instead, young Swedes were said to be spoiled and in need of a stricter upbringing. Observers promoting this view painted a picture of a Swedish society in which morals and manners were in freefall: parents let their children hang around in street corners without supervision, and nobody had any respect for teachers and priests anymore. Apparently, these statements were quite vague, and most debaters could not really explain how morals and manners were to be re-established. In general, they only stated that adolescents had to be supervised more strictly and that parents had the overall responsibility for their rioting teenagers.

All these explanations had one common flaw, as they did not take into account what actually happened in the streets during the riots. They asked questions like ‘what are the riots a symptom of?’ instead of asking ‘which mechanisms started them?’ or ‘what did the participants try to achieve?’ But these are the types of questions we need to ask in order to examine whether the participants raised any ‘claims’; a criterion that, as we mentioned earlier, has to be met if a contentious performance is to be understood as a form of contentious politics.

It is not hard to imagine, for instance, that many Södermalm adolescents thought that more leisure facilities and youth centres were a good idea. In fact, a couple of days before the riots, about 300 adolescents had arranged a meeting and passed a resolution demanding youth centres on the island. But there is no evidence in newspaper articles or in police reports that any participant actually demanded any of this during the riots, or that participants made any other explicit demand directed toward local politicians or government agencies. This does not mean that the riots were irrational. But we would argue that in order to understand the rationale behind the riots, we have to look at what was actually said and done at the street level. It then becomes possible to discern some claims, but only if we choose the broadest possible, as well as spatial,
interpretation of the concept. It is also evident that these claims, if they are to be understood as such, were not directed toward politically elected leaders, but toward the very institution restricting the everyday use of public spaces: namely the Stockholm police corps.

The few available sources with information concerning verbal expressions among the participants show that adolescents met the orders to disperse with words such as ‘we have paid our taxes and have the right to be wherever we want to’, or (as one young woman shouted) ‘shut up, go home to bed, we’re out having fun’. The notion of ‘rights’ of access to public places was present in other utterances as well. One young man, arrested on 29 March, argued with the police and said that everybody had the same right ‘to walk in the street’. Several individuals also argued with the police, and said that as long as they did not do anything illegal, the police had no right to disperse them. Such allegations were made by people who claimed that they were in the area only to visit friends and relatives, and by one man who refused to leave before he had finished the hot dog he had just purchased.

Other adolescents used more derogatory words in the arguments, calling the officers ‘thugs’, ‘pigs’, ‘faggots’, or ‘damn peasants’. In one case, the hostility was formulated in a more political way, when a 62-year-old sailor (one of the not-so-very-young participants in this ‘youth riot’) called the officers ‘bloody Gestapo’. On one occasion, animosity toward the police was expressed in writing as well, as someone put up a placard at the park of Björns Trädgård with the following message: ‘Bloody cops! […] Blood will be shed tonight. Now it’s our turn to draw the sabres’. People cooperating with the police also risked being seen as collaborators. When a local youth leader tried to calm the situation by giving a speech, using the speaker of a police radio car, people in the crowd shouted protests, such as: ‘How much have you been paid for doing that?’

In fact, a handful of contemporary observers presented explanations of the riots similar to ours and stressed the fact that the confrontations were neither irrational nor aimless, but clearly directed at the police. Without defending the rioters, some journalists noted that confrontations between adolescents and local police had been taking place on Södermalm for a long time and that the riots had to be seen in that context. A few observers even emphasized that the mechanism actually starting the riots was the initial escalating police tactics involving mass arrests and violent charges. The liberal tabloid Expressen provides us with one example of this interpretation, writing that the riots ‘were at least to some degree provoked by the police’.

To sum up this part of the analysis: if we choose a narrow interpretation of the term, it is not possible to talk of ‘claims’ being made by the participants. However, if we choose a very broad interpretation, it becomes possible to say that ‘claims’ were made, and, accordingly, it could be valid to designate the riots as a form of ‘contentious politics’. If we choose the broad interpretation, we have to stress the spatial character of the actions and verbal expressions of the participants. The Easter Riots certainly represented a spatial struggle in the sense that it was a conflict over the right to be at certain places on Södermalm, over when you had the right to be there, and over how you were allowed to act when being there. We would also have to stress that these spatial claims were made directly toward the institution responsible for upholding the everyday control over the city’s public spaces, namely the police, and not toward political leaders.
But is this perhaps too broad an interpretation of the concept of ‘claims’ and ‘contentious politics’? In our concluding remarks, we answer this question. We also elaborate on our main findings and open up for a wider discussion on the usefulness of the theoretical concepts of the CPS field in historical analysis.

The spatial rights to the city

We have now shown how several ‘youth riots’ occurred in Sweden as well as in other parts of Europe in the period c. 1945–1965. We have used one of these events, the Stockholm Easter Riots, as a case study in order to test and problematize a central assumption of the theoretical field of Contentious Politics Studies, a field with a growing influence on the Scandinavian historical tradition of research on street-level confrontations.

‘Youth riots’ such as the Stockholm Easter Riots were prevalent in post-war north-western Europe for at least two decades. We have argued that they formed a strong repertoire of contention. But should the ‘youth riot’ repertoire of contentious performances also be understood as a form of contentious politics? Of course, the concept of ‘politics’ is very complex. Which forms of collective action should or should not be seen as ‘politics’ is a question that can be addressed from many theoretical perspectives, and it can be argued that the question is in itself a most political one. Therefore, it is important to underline that we have not tried to answer whether ‘youth riots’ were political in any sense of the word. The question at stake in this essay is whether they can be seen as a form of contentious politics in the way that the concept has been defined in the theoretical field of CPS studies.

The making of ‘claims’ is a central criterion for such an understanding. That makes the question complicated, as it is far from easy to determine whether ‘youth riots’ actually involved claim-making. If we define ‘claims’ in a narrow sense, as the articulation of explicit demands or as efforts to achieve clearly expressed political goals, then ‘youth riots’ such as the one taking place in Stockholm in 1948 cannot be classified as contentious politics. The concept is obviously more fruitful when we analyse events in which participants have made clear demands, such as ‘higher wages now’ or ‘women should be able to vote’. It is, we believe, also easier to use this concept in research on modern-day contentious performances, in which the researcher has the possibility to, among many methods, conduct interviews with participants and ask them about their motives. This method is much harder to use when dealing with historical contentious performances, and especially events about which the sources are scarce and participants did not make explicit, verbal demands.

At the same time, the physical struggle for access to public spaces, the freeing of arrested comrades, and the heated arguments during which young people told the police that they had the right to walk wherever they wanted can be described as ‘claims’, if, and only if, we choose to interpret the term broadly. We then have to focus on their spatial character and acknowledge the fact that they were directed toward the police responsible for the everyday supervision of public spaces (and not, for example, toward politicians making laws restricting access to public spaces). But this interpretation brings other problems: if all kinds of collective, spatial ‘claims’ can be termed ‘contentious politics’, then almost every collective action can be described as such, making this theoretical concept less distinct and meaningful.
Hence, ‘youth riots’ are hard to designate as ‘contentious politics’, but this does not mean that we have to take the position of totally divesting them of political meaning and dismissing them as ‘meaningless’ or irrational. It does mean, however, that if we are to make the meaning of the riots visible, we have to seek another understanding of what is ‘political’ than the one that is common in the field of CPS studies. Instead, we have to transcend the boundaries of the CPS field and instead look for inspiration from other theoretical approaches. We now suggest some ways of reaching such an understanding.

One way to do this is to draw theoretical inspiration from geographer Mustafa Dikeç, who has studied contemporary riots in the suburbs of modern Paris. Dikeç argues that these suburban conflicts have to be understood in relation to ‘politics’ as well as social power relations, even if they seldom involve explicit political demands. He describes the riots as ‘the ultimate form of dissent by citizens who are not recognized as legitimate or equal political interlocutors in the processes that effect their everyday lives.’ In his argument, these riots are political not because they involve explicit claims but because the participants are denied status as political subjects and suffer from inequalities based in politics. Thus, the riots cannot be discarded as ‘irrational’, however they also do not form an organized repertoire of political claim-making. Instead, Dikeç sees them as ‘unarticulated justice movements’, manifesting social antagonisms. They often occur after events perceived and experienced as injustices; for example, many suburban riots have started after the police have killed local residents. However, they may also involve spatial claims over the right of access to public spaces.56 ‘Youth riots’ such as the Stockholm Easter Riots, we would argue, in some aspects represent a parallel to the events described by Dikeç. The participants in the Easter Riots might not have articulated political demands directed at the government, but they articulated something else instead. As we have shown, they told police officers that they had certain spatial ‘rights’ to walk in the streets, to gather in public places, and to use public spaces in a certain way, whether it was walking in the streets, chatting with friends, or eating hot dogs. And, as we have also shown, many of the contentious performances acted out during this and other ‘youth riots’ were directed against what was perceived as violent and unjust police actions.

The significance of perceived injustices and collective ‘rights’ is emphasized in another, more historically oriented, theoretical tradition in relation to riot studies, namely the one originating from E. P. Thompson and his concept of ‘moral economy’, mentioned in the beginning of this article. Thompson coined this concept in his classical study of British ‘bread riots’ in the 18th and 19th centuries. Such riots, he argued, did not emerge when bread prices were high per se. They emerged when people thought that the authorities failed to live up to their ‘moral’ obligation to keep bread prices reasonably low. Thus, the aim of the riots was not to revolutionize society, but to defend traditional rights and to protest against what was thought of as the failure of the authorities to live up to their part of a social contract.57 In combination with Dikeç’s works, we see the concept of ‘moral economy’ as a way to elucidate the meaning of ‘youth riots’; although the concept, of course, has to be broadened, as 20th-century ‘youth riots’ had nothing to do with bread prices. However, as recently underlined by criminologist Magnus Hörnqvist, ‘bread riots’ and ‘youth riots’ have one important thing in common: they are hard to describe as contentious politics due to the absence of explicit,
political claims.\textsuperscript{58} We would add that both phenomena also had a moral character and were closely related to the defence of ‘rights’, namely the moral principle that people had a spatial right to access public spaces in their own city, and that the police officers who denied them this right were breaking their part of a social contract.\textsuperscript{59}

In conclusion, the Stockholm Easter Riots, and the repertoire of ‘youth riots’ in general, were neither irrational nor as impossible to understand as contemporary observers thought. It is, however, hard to describe them as ‘contentious politics’ in the sense that the concept is defined in the field of CPS studies, as they did not really involve ‘claims’, at least not in the narrow sense of the word. Instead, it is more fruitful to understand them by using a modified version of E. P. Thompson’s concept of ‘moral economy’ and by drawing inspiration from scholars analysing contemporary, ‘claimless’ suburban riots, stressing the importance of perceived spatial rights to the city and of notions of unjust and immoral police actions.

Such a theoretical course solves some problems, but also raises new questions. Above all else, it becomes necessary to discuss the very meaning of a term such as ‘political’; a concept that will always be complex, regardless of whether we work in the tradition of CPS or any other theoretical tradition. Here, we believe that historical scholarship would benefit from entering into a dialogue with political philosophy and modern-day political science. That is not to say that historians should uncritically adopt concepts originating from these disciplines. In fact, we have shown the limits and risks of doing so. But engaging in such a dialogue would enable important discussions on what it means to act politically and who should be classified as political actors and who should not, in itself a most political question, important for our understanding of past societies as well as the ones in which we live today.

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Notes
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We have systematically examined the following Stockholm newspapers in the period 27 March – 1 April 1948: Aftonbladet, Aftontidningen, Dagens Nyheter, Expressen, Ny Dag, Morgon-Tidningen, Stockholm-Tidningen, Svenska Dagbladet and Svenska Morgonbladet. The police reports are kept in vols. D1a:237–38, D1c:41, Police Precinct 8 (Katarina) and vol. B3b:15, Criminal Investigative Department, Stockholm City Police Authority Archives, Stockholm. The Easter Riots have been mentioned in earlier Swedish research, but has never been subject of any in-depth academic study. See, for example, Nilsson, ‘Kravaller i folkhemmet’, 231.

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18 Vols. D1a:237–38, Police Precinct 8 (Katarina), Stockholm City Police Authority Archives.

19 For photographs and reports highlighting the participation of women (something that contemporary observers considered strange and unexpected), see ‘Tårgas och vattenbesprutning’ in *Aftontidningen* 30 March 1948; ‘5.000 i vilda upplopp’ in *Dagens Nyheter* 30 March 1948; ‘Polismästaren lämnar sin syn’ in *Expressen* 31 March 1948; ‘8.000 i nytt Söderbråk’ in *Morgon-Tidningen* 30 March 1948; ‘Har polisen “hotat” fram kravallerna?’ in *Ny Dag* 31 March 1948; ‘Blod, svett och tårar’ in *Se* no. 15 1948; Journal entry no. 2468, vol. D1a:237, Police Precinct 8 (Katarina), Stockholm City Police Authority Archives.

20 Journal entries no. 2418–72, vol. D1a:237, Police Precinct 8 (Katarina), Stockholm City Police Authority Archives.

21 Journal entries no. 2470 and 2474, vol. D1a:237, journal entry 2480, vol D1a:238, journal entries no. 2446 and 2465, vol. D1c:41, Police Precinct 8 (Katarina), Stockholm City Police Authority Archives. Compare with Abby Peterson, and Mikael Oskarsson, ‘The Police Riots in Gothenburg’, in *Policing Contentious Politics in Sweden and Denmark*, eds. Micael Björk and Abby Peterson (Maastricht: Shaker, 2006), 110–5.

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23 Memorandums by Melin and Bornby, 1 April 1948, vol. A1ab:1, Stockholm Board of Child and Juvenile Welfare, Stockholm City Archives.

24 ‘5.000 i vilda upplopp’ in *Dagens Nyheter* 30 March 1948; ‘Mera bråk på Söder’ in *Dagens Nyheter* 1 April 1948; ‘Ligisterna från alla stadsdelar’ in *Expressen* 1 April 1948; Journal entries no. 2480 and 2501, vol. D1a:238, Police Precinct 8 (Katarina), Stockholm City Police Authority Archives, Stockholm.

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43 ‘Södertumultet’ in Aftonbladet 27 March 1948; Editorial in Aftonbladet 30 March 1948; ‘Brist på förströelser’ in Aftontidningen 30 March 1948; ‘Polislöfte om hårdhandskar’ in Expressen 30 March 1948; ‘Söderungdom’ in Ny Dag 31 March 1948.
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45 Editorial in Aftontidningen 30 March 1948; ‘Föräldrafrågor’ in Dagens Nyheter 12 April 1948; Interview with psychiatrist Jonsson in ‘Polislöfte om hårdhandskar’ in Expressen 30 March 1948.
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55 ‘Kläderna gör ligisten’ in Expressen 8 April 1948. See also ‘Söderungdom’ in Folket i bild no. 19 1948.
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57 Thompson, Customs in Common, 195–258.
58 Magnus Hörnqvist, ‘Riots in the Welfare State: The Contours of a Modern-Day Moral Economy’, European Journal of Criminology 13, no. 5 (2016), 575, 587.
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