

In the past few decades, a number of European cities have experienced social disorder, sometimes in the form of (more or less peaceful) protests, other times in the form of riots. This article analyses the events that took place in Paris (2005), London (2011) and Stockholm (2013) from the perspective of social policy, focusing on three elements that appear to be similar in each of the reported episodes: location, the rioters' age and their ethnic background. The countries are extremely different in terms of their social, welfare and economic patterns, thus raising interesting questions: why did riots follow the same dynamics in such different countries? How can social cohesion be achieved in these contexts?

Three vignettes

Husby, Stockholm, May 2013. A 69-year old man of Portuguese origin is killed after the police break into his apartment. The activist group Megafonen organizes a peaceful protest asking to demand clarification of the causes of the man's death. From 19 May to 27 May riots occur in Husby and spread to the rest of Sweden, resulting in about 150 vehicles being set on fire, several buildings being vandalized and total damage of some 63 million Swedish Kronor.

Tottenham, London, August 2011. A 29-year old black man, Mark Duggan, is killed by the police during a targeted vehicle stop procedure. His friends organize a peaceful protest asking to clarify the causes of his death. From 6 August to 11 August riots spread to central London and elsewhere in the UK. Figures by Parliament report 5,175 offences and four deaths.

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Clichy-sous-Bois, Paris, October-November 2005. Bouna Traoré (15) and Zyed Benna (17) die by electrocution in an electrical substation where they were hiding to avoid a police patrol. The events trigger 20 days of riots in Paris and another 274 French towns, with about 9,000

torched vehicles, dozens of buildings vandalized and total damage amounting to over €200 million and two deaths.

The centre/periphery division

Each riot was geographically and socially very circumscribed: it broke out in a suburb of a capital city and eventually spread to the city centre and the rest of the country. In all three cases, the neighbourhoods involved in the riots differ from the rest of the country in terms of levels of unemployment, ethnic composition, housing deprivation, levels of crime, etc. Originally built to host a migrant working class who would eventually move to better neighbourhoods, with deindustrialization suburbs have become a permanent condition for many of their inhabitants, who often feel they are missing out on chances of mobility—both geographical and social. This belief is particularly common among the young. Indeed, the place where we live affects our living conditions and opportunities. For instance the reputation of a place can prevent the opening of new businesses or can shape identities – rioters are unified by a “neighbourhood identity” which fosters a “those from the suburbs (us) vs. society (them)” mentality.

The generational division

Rioters are mainly young people, often minors. Due to a combination of unemployment, rising house prices and the retrenchment of welfare state provision, in each of the cases younger generations suffer from severe deprivation rates, far worse than the national average (e.g., the unemployment rate for people under 25 was 40% in Clichy-sous-Bois, 21% in Tottenham; 24% in Husby). It should be noted that riots do not break out just because of poverty and lack of opportunities. But why does dissatisfaction result in riots, mostly in the forms of vandalism, instead of leading to political protest? One reason can be identified in the absence of a “culture of legality and law compliance”. Many of the rioters have previous cautions or convictions. The suburbs where riots took place report high levels of juvenile delinquency, often fuelled by youth gangs, who take control of the streets. Another reason is that youth are losing trust in institutions and in their own capability to change the society—[“poverty, unemployment, lack of confidence in government. Young people feel let down, they have no hope”](#).

The ethnic division

The third element analysed is rioters' ethnic background. All of the victims whose death triggered the explosion of riots are immigrants, people of foreign origin or belonging to an ethnic minority: Malian and Tunisian in Paris, "blacks" in London, Portuguese in Stockholm. Furthermore, the suburbs where these incidents occurred are highly multicultural. First and second generation immigrants were the most numerous component of Swedish and French rioters, while in the United Kingdom [figures recording ethnicity](#) vary significantly and ethnicity is not considered as a central explanation of riots, even if minorities complain about police harassment.

To understand the differences between the cases it has to be considered that they are at different steps in the "immigration-to-integration" process. The French one is the most complex. Although immigration is a historical phenomenon, according to several researchers immigrants have not been successfully integrated into the French community. Moreover, people of foreign origin are mostly Muslim and their integration involves the broader Islam-West conflict. In the months before the riots, several episodes exacerbated the tensions between Muslims and the indigenous French community, such as radical Islamist declarations, declarations about banlieues and their inhabitants by then-Interior Minister Sarkozy and other politicians, police harassment and a grenade thrown at the Clichy mosque.

In Sweden, immigration is a recent but rapidly growing phenomenon and even if immigrants are better off than in many other European countries, immigration is less and less popular among the Swedish population, who have started asking themselves whether their social model can survive with so many immigrants continuing to arrive in the country. Such feelings are fostering xenophobic parties such as Sverigedemokraterna, which has grown from 2.9% in 2006 to 12.9% in 2014. So while on the one hand concerns about immigrants are growing, the share of first and second generation immigrants is growing as well. Still, these minorities often grow apart from the rest of the nation, with potentially dangerous consequences.

The welfare state and social conflict

As explained so far, the three cases show clear similarities, even if they relate to three different social and welfare worlds: "Neo-liberal" in the UK, "conservative corporatist" in France and "social democratic" in Sweden. The UK has "a long history" of social conflict due to several factors: a markedly industrial system, a widespread conservative culture, an

extraordinarily multicultural society and medium-high dependency to the market generated by its “neo-liberal” model of welfare.

Even if we cannot identify a single reason for such polarization, welfare state retrenchment seems to be a significant factor, losing its ability to balance social, economic and geographic inequalities and to mitigate the impact of economic hardship.

France also has a long experience of social conflict. Its welfare system is classified as typical “conservative corporatist” and since levels of social benefits are related to prior employment, earnings and family situation, it produces significant inequalities amongst insiders and outsiders. In “social democratic” Sweden conflict is far less familiar since its successful “third-way” has been able to produce desirable levels of equality and inclusion. However, since the 1990s crisis, the country has switched to a more “market-friendly system”. Even if the Swedish standard of living remains among the highest in Europe, Sweden is the country in which income gap has widened the most since 1995 (OECD).

Despite attempts to avoid over-simplistic explanations, it emerges that social conflict is affecting different social and welfare models. Regardless of their characteristics in terms of generosity and universality, none of them has been able to prevent the countries from developing social conflict and inequality. Moreover, welfare retrenchment is particularly affecting suburbs, which already presented higher rates of deprivation.

What can we learn?

Drawing from the present analysis, it can be concluded that rioters are a section of society living in a sort of “limbo”: they do not study nor work, they are not foreigners but nor do they feel like citizens of the country they live in. However, rioters’ marginalization is not the only explanation and riots cannot be considered as simple protests.

Moreover, the analysis highlights that in contemporary societies several divisions are coming to the fore: centre-periphery, youth-adults, rich-poor, migrants-indigenous population. Even if

we cannot identify a single reason for such polarization, welfare state retrenchment seems to be a significant factor, losing its ability to balance social, economic and geographic inequalities and to mitigate the impact of economic hardship. To deal with these issues, we need to invest in programmes that integrate different policy areas (i.e. urban planning, housing, employment, poverty, education) and to improve inclusive democratic institutions. This could be also a significant help in tackling populist xenophobic movements that are boosted by social discontent, and in dealing with religious radicalization that often recruits its fighters in these suburbs.



This article is an abridged version of a paper prepared for the project Percorsi di [Secondo Welfare](#).

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