

Sophie Body-Gendrot, Magnus Hörnqvist, [Tim Newburn](#) Introduction to the special issue

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Introduction to the special issue

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Social unrest in a range of large European cities over the last decade has reignited public, sociological and criminological debate on the nature and importance of these social events. More particularly, urban riots have drawn attention to new and old social divisions, to the changing nature of and relationship between class, ethnicity and identity, and to our understanding of security. Moreover, the responses of the police and the courts, local communities, the media and the political establishment have been seen by some commentators as a further indicator of significant shifts and new patterns emerging in our systems of policing and punishment.

Although individual outbreaks of disorder have been studied in some detail, it is relatively rare for them to be studied in an international comparative context. This special issue brings together eight papers from across Europe with a view to examining the cross-national similarities and differences between some recent outbreaks of urban disorder.¹ Cross-national comparison is vital (Tonry, 2015) for it has the potential to offer new ways of illuminating issues such as variations in the aetiology of rioting, differences in their spread and diffusion, and, importantly for criminology, diversity in the range of criminal justice and penal responses to such events. Additionally, considering experiences of urban violence in different national contexts may also throw light on what might be taken to constitute a riot. Although sharing some similarities, the studied cases illustrate a full spectrum of violent street-level interaction, which can be seen to articulate a variety of political tensions in current European society.

The volume opens with contributions from the three editors, each of which, in different ways, seeks to explore the conceptual dimensions of social unrest. Tim Newburn sets out a model for comparative analysis that he refers to as ‘the life-cycle model of riots’.

The model encompasses the lead-up to rioting, its development and diffusion, and the reactions of the state and others in the aftermath, which he then uses as a basis for contrasting recent experiences in England in 2011, France in 2005 and Sweden in 2013.

In her article, Sophie Body-Gendrot also experiments with a new model of analysis. Beyond structural explanations, institutional dysfunctions and the dynamics of agency, she points to the modification of routine relations between youths and police through the operation of multiple forces that, in the course of fluid and indeterminate situations, came together to produce a particular type of spatial and social disorder. Her analytical framework takes into account the mobilization potential, the quality of integration, the role played by the media and the local diversity of sites of unrest and other factors that then interact. She indicates that the long and contagious unrest in 2005 did not ultimately shake the stability of the French political regime and that institutions were not reformed in depth after this upheaval.

Magnus Hörnqvist's article examines the tacit politics of the 2013 Stockholm riots, suggesting that the post-war Swedish welfare state generated commonly shared conceptions. These ascribed a temporary legitimacy to the riots within the community by conceptualizing poor living conditions and police racism as government infractions. This modern moral economy was endorsed by the political establishment, with a cynical twist. Whereas the classical notion of moral economy successfully directs attention to the normative conceptions that propel riots, Hörnqvist argues that the notion must be extended to encompass a more varied, racialized conception of citizenship, as well as formations of government infraction.

The fourth contribution, from Germany, offers a distinctive and unusual comparison. Daniela Hunold, Dietrich Oberwittler and Tim Lukas investigate the impact of community police behaviour, in particular stop and search practices, on the quality of interactions between the police and young people in Germany. In contrast to experiences in a number of other European jurisdictions, they offer qualitative and quantitative evidence to suggest that the absence of discriminatory practices by the community police focusing on the ethnic background of adolescents, together with broadly positive police–adolescent relations, help to account for the relative lack of riots in Germany. The particular way in which authority is negotiated on the streets is of central importance. Anything equivalent to the police insensitivity that triggered urban unrest in several other North European countries appears to be missing in the two German cities studied.

The next three contributions shift the focus to Southern Europe. In Turkey, Kıvanç Atak and Donatella della Porta examine the Gezi Park uprisings, another example of disorder that broke out in the context of the use of excessive force by the Istanbul police against a handful of peaceful activists in Taksim Square. The authors pay particular attention to the aftermath of the mobilizations, in which they show that there has been a drift towards a 'zero-tolerance' approach rather than alternative protest control strategies. They argue that the chances of greater dialogue-oriented policing were hampered by two 'predicaments'. The first was the negative biases in police perceptions about protests and protesters, which served to justify and perpetuate a conflict-driven understanding of policing. The second predicament was rooted, they argue, in the institutional and policy realm and stemmed from the prevalence of a law-and-order approach to crowd control and public order.

In Italy, Rossella Selmini shifts the focus to immigrants as victims of violence rather than participants in it. Here, and in some respects paralleling elements of the argument outlined in the article on Germany, the violence in Italy arose despite not being in any way provoked or exacerbated by the police. Italy's distinctive features, being a country of relatively recent immigration and with distinct local political and cultural factors, illustrate the importance of *context* in our understanding of disorder.

In the case of Greece, a country that has experienced very considerable, and frequent, disorder in recent years, Sappho Xenakis and Leonidas Cheliotis point to the importance of the international, indeed global, context in understanding urban violence in Athens and beyond. Their case study, they argue, is illustrative of the fact that global, national and local dimensions of unrest may be more diverse than hitherto recognized, and that there are significant 'glocal' properties in many instances of disorder beyond those where international issues are explicitly involved.

Finally, in his study in the Netherlands, which will appear in the next issue, Abdessamad Bouabid offers an analysis of what he takes to have been a shift away from riots with a clear or explicit political component to unrest where such political motivation appears largely to be absent. He delineates the societal reactions such recent 'riots' evoke and examines the processes through which the rioters are 'othered'. More particularly, he looks at the 2007 Slotervaart riot as an exemplary case in the Netherlands, suggesting that the focus on demarcated groups of Others during the riots has allowed broader social problems to be placed outside of the 'normal' or 'pure' societal body, thus enabling the authorities to avoid paying attention to the complex problems in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in which such 'riots' have tended to occur.

Riots have become a recurring feature of many European societies in recent years. It is the task of scholars to seek to acquire a deeper understanding of the political processes and of the waning legitimacy and failing integrative power of existing social institutions that find expression in urban disorder. In their different ways, the eight contributions to this special issue shed light on the nature of civil unrest in particular national contexts and specific urban locations. They display commonalities but mostly important divergences, and, in so doing, further the case for greater comparative analysis in this field. The major challenge now is to move beyond national and small-scale cross-national studies, and to stimulate truly comparative research on the 'life-cycles' of riots and urban disorder. In this we seek not only to understand the antecedents and unfolding characteristics of such events, but equally to focus attention on the response of the state and civil society in their aftermath.

Note

1. For reasons of space, seven of the eight papers appear together in the print issue. The eighth, by Abdessamad Bouabid, will appear in a subsequent issue. All eight are available together online.

Reference

- Tonry M (2015) Is cross-national and comparative research on the criminal justice system useful? *European Journal of Criminology* 12(4): 505–516.