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A Sense of Place: Understanding the 2013 Stockholm Riots

Jorg Kustermans

Abstract

In May 2013, Stockholm was shaken by six days of riots that started in one of its Northern suburbs, Husby, but soon spread to other parts of the city and country. This essay reports on a field trip to Stockholm and sets the riots within the Swedish urban context.

On May 22, 2013, The New York Times reported on the riots that had broken out in Stockholm three days prior, on May 19:

Hundreds of young people burned cars and attacked police officers this week in three nights of riots in immigrant neighborhoods of Stockholm, Sweden's capital. On Tuesday night, a police station in the Jakobsberg area in northwest Stockholm was attacked, two schools were damaged and an arts center was set ablaze, despite a call for calm from Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt. The riots appear to have been started by the police killing of a 69-year-old-man wielding a machete in Husby this month, which prompted accusations of police brutality. The riots spread from Husby to other poor parts of Stockholm suburbs. (NYT, A10)

The riots continued across Stockholm for another few days, spreading to other cities large and small, until they petered out by May 28. From their original outburst in Husby—a district which the popular imagination long associates with poverty, “multiculturalism” and (petty) crime—on Sunday night, May 19, violence first spread to neighboring Northern Stockholm suburbs on May 20, to then jump across town to Southern Stockholm suburbs on May 21. Three days later, reports came in about unrest in Orebrö, a smallish city to the West of Stockholm and three days later still from Lysekil, a small town of 8,000 inhabitants on Sweden's Western coastline. National and international media teams overwhelmed Husby, with two Swedish TV stations covering the events 24/7 even though there was little to report during the day. International reactions to the riots included initial surprise—that such violence should happen *even in Sweden* (Pred)—and ready-made analyses from the Left, the Right, and social science.

Caught in limbo between surprise and scholarly self-assurance, I travelled to Stockholm's Husby in the Fall of 2013, when the dust had begun to settle, to spend two-and-a-half weeks there. During my stay, I was hoping to learn about the place and its riots, from local people and first hand observation. I managed to talk to local politicians, civil servants, police officers, social workers and a handful of residents. Many were eager to talk, mostly because they had an articulate, but necessarily particular, perspective on the problem and how to solve it. Ordinary residents were more difficult to access (although it did help that I understood and spoke Swedish, clumsy though my grammar and pronunciation were). The socially conscious among them had become wary of foreign researchers and their academic concerns. But most were simply living their lives. The riots were remembered with a mixture of grief and embarrassment. It was not a topic that they necessarily desired to return to. Moreover, although Stockholm is a relatively large city, Husby is not a big neighborhood. Especially the circle of politically engaged people is not very large. Indications of professional position or political commitment would easily allow local people to identify my interlocutors. Thus, every person that I interviewed, was promised anonymity. For this reason, I will not mention names in this essay.

To explain a riot demands that we appreciate that every riot happens somewhere. To explain a riot we must account for the *space* in which it unfolds and how that space is always laden with meaning and charged with emotion. It is a *place*. Some residents' refusal to be interviewed anymore, their refusal to further explain the riots, emerges from a same sense of place. It is expressive of a posture too, of a way-of-being-in-Husby, much as the riots were.

Modernism's Legacy

Sweden is a country of 9,600,000 inhabitants, 1,250,000 of whom live in and around Stockholm (CIA). The city boasts an urban culture—when you step out of its central station, aptly named *Centralstation*, a small bar offers you “urban coffee” with its beans certified to be fair trade, its bartenders—baristas.



Fig. 1: “Urban Coffee”: A café in the center of Stockholm, just outside its central train station and right across its *Kulturhus*. Photo credit: Jorg Kustermans.

Facing that bar is Stockholm’s *Kulturhus*, a vibrant cultural center hosting dozens of events every year. On a weekday at noon it will be buzzing with people taking lunch, eating shrimp salads, salmon toast, or—at a different food court—sushi and sashimi. Stockholm’s urbanites will be drinking a large cup of coffee, a glass of mildly sparkling water, or *chai*, and they will, basically, be looking good. The building houses a library with a fine selection of books and has very convenient reading spaces, where people actually come and sit and read—men and women, often with push-chairs. Stockholm’s material and symbolic culture breathe urbanity.

Urban culture is not new to Sweden. Stockholm has been a city since at least the high Middle Ages, but more directly relevant to today's developments has been the push to modernize the city during the 1960's and 1970's in the context of the so-called "Million Homes Programme" (*Miljonprogrammet*) (cf. Ekbrant; Särnbratt 22-28, 39-47). This was a housing program adopted by the Swedish Parliament that aimed to have one million houses built within ten years. Across the country, both in Sweden's three major urban regions (Stockholm, Malmö, and Gothenburg) and in more distant places and smaller towns, one million buildings of various types were quickly erected. In my interviews on the May 2013 riots in Stockholm's Husby, the *miljonprogram* was constantly referred to by my interlocutors as an important historical backdrop to the events that unfolded. The dwellings that house the rioters were built in the context of that program. Already at the time of their construction, criticism was voiced. There were complaints about the aesthetics of the new environments, about the lack of servicing by the public authorities in the new neighborhoods, and also about the sense of alienation that many feared could not help but develop in these new urban spaces.



Fig. 2. A typical Husby block, with three or four five-story buildings organized around a shared lawn with a small playground and a bicycle shed. Photo credit: J. Kustermans.

While this is probably too harsh a verdict for the Million Homes Programme in its totality, the way it presents itself—above all today—in Husby (and similar places) does seem to prove that fear right. As I walked around the neighborhood, I did indeed see “uniform, large-scale housing estates with buildings of grey pre-cast concrete slabs,” as Swedish art historians Thomas Hall

and Sonja Vidén (304) summed up the dominant image left by the Program in the public mind.

There is an irony here, considering how well-meaning were the ideas behind the Program. Whatever the precise architectural theory inspiring the planners—structuralism according to some, functionalism according to others—the *miljonprogram* was a large-scale, social-democratic planning project initiated to meet an urgent need for more and better housing. An economic boom was going on, coupled with an expanding migratory flow from the Swedish countryside to the bigger cities. Sweden was rapidly urbanizing and it was understood that the new arrivals needed a place to live. More than a mere place to live, they needed a *good* place to live, and the housing projects were intentionally designed to ensure that. The English Wikipedia asserts that the ultimate purpose of the Program was to create “good democratic citizens”: but if that is so—and indeed the market squares at *Husby torg*, *Rinkeby torg*, and so on may be seen with good will as potential democratic spaces—the layout of these neighborhoods expresses more the aspiration of commodious, or pleasant, living than democratic involvement. Husby, for instance, is designed in a way that cars, by and large, cannot enter the housing areas. It is a two-level neighborhood, where small bridges run across the car roads and connect the pedestrian walkways. On this pedestrian level are the buildings, high-rise, with ten or more apartment blocks sharing the same street name, grouped together around an open space with, typically, a playground, bicycle sheds, and shared laundry rooms. The latter were originally located in the basements but have now often been refurbished and moved to detached buildings.



Fig. 3. The Million Homes Program was inspired by modernist ideas in architecture, which, amongst other things, found expression in the separation of roads for motorized vehicles and roads for pedestrian use. Photo credit: J. Kustermans.

Today all buildings are locked with an electronic system so that no outsider can enter them, not even the hallways, without a key. In a way, these electronic locks symbolize, and repeat, the irony of the *miljonprogram*: what was intended as a modern and functional solution ends up in alienation and an atmosphere of insecurity—in the past, as well as today. Even if, as one of my interlocutors recounted from a bygone meeting, their architects would produce a beaming grin when complimented about the *modernity* of Husby, the buildings have by now lost their shine and polish. The site has become “decrepit”—a description I often heard. “The dirt has become inherent to the environment. Clean as you may, it can’t be rubbed off.” The materials that were used (including a lot of asbestos), because of the way they age, are in large part to blame.

Europe’s urban riots often play out in the ruins of architectural modernism. Just think of the uprising—it is important to vary vocabulary because words have their connotations and the meanings of events remain contested—in France’s *banlieues* in the autumn of 2005. Or think of the skirmishes and revolts in Britain’s housing estates in the summer of 2011. But while their modernist background, with its inherent shortcomings, lingers on in these neighborhoods and has played its part in the unfolding of the riots (by facilitating the cat-and-mouse game between youths and police), it is their present condition, and the present social and political-economic configuration they belong to, that is more immediately relevant. A short reflection on three significant public places in Husby can clarify the point: Husby’s metro station, its ICA supermarket, and Husby Träff, which organizes cheap lunches from Monday to Saturday.

Husby’s Metro Station

In principle, the metro station connects Husby with the rest of the city. It lies on the subway system’s blue line (T11), which runs from Kungsträdgården in the city center to Akalla in the North. Husby is the penultimate stop and it takes about 35 minutes to travel to the center. In a city which consists of multiple islands, where bike-riding and walking are not realistic options if one is to cross long distances, and even more so in a suburb where few people own their own car, public transportation is key. I would often ask my interlocutors how the well-functioning public transport system related to the “segregation”—with non-white, poor immigrants living in suburbs like Husby, rich Swedes living elsewhere, and virtually no interaction among them—that almost everybody recognized to be one of Stockholm’s main ills. I got few positive evaluations in reply. Some were neutral. People, it would be pointed out, are simply too poor to afford the fare, and even if it were not too expensive, many of the suburb’s inhabitants simply have no reason to leave their neighborhoods. They have their acquaintances and their support systems there, and because they are often unemployed, work does not get them out of the neighborhood either; they are literally locked in.



Fig. 4. Husby is the penultimate stop on the blue line. Few people from the center have occasion to travel here and neither do many people from Husby have occasion to travel into the center. Photo credit: Mr. BuriramCN/My_subway_gallery#Sweden

A few interlocutors hinted at a negative relationship, as if the metro station—as an urban locale—worsens the *sense of* segregation. One of my informants described the “strange experience” of working in a government department in the center, but arriving home to her one room flat in Husby. Having now moved, she recalled how “different the two worlds had felt.” Travelling northbound, from the center to Husby, the crowd gradually thins out and its social-economic and ethnic status changes visibly. Most Swedes never make it to the suburbs, a fact that residents of the latter cannot but notice. If this process of mutual withdrawal results in limited interaction, it is still on the metro line and in the metro station that encounters happen. I was told stories about black women being pushed aside on the subway, always by white men. When confronted with their behavior the men would get angry, threaten to hit the woman. Thus it is on the metro line that Stockholm’s segregation—the fact and the effects of which geographers have repeatedly drawn attention to (cf. Harsman)—becomes most tangible.

ICA Supermarket

Husby’s metro station situates the suburb within the surrounding city. It ensures consciousness of the world outside, even if many of its inhabitants choose not to engage that world. The local ICA supermarket, because it is part of a larger chain, further illustrates the relationship between suburb and city; but because all its customers are locals, it also offers a glimpse of social life inside the neighborhood. One symbol of the former relationship is the condition of the fruit that is being sold there. I saw awful-looking pumpkins with mold on

them and I saw bananas being sold that one could never buy in other ICA branches.



Fig. 5. Moldy pumpkins for sale in Husby's ICA supermarket. Residents complained that their "fresh" fruits and vegetables would often be less fresh than in ICA franchises in other parts of town. Photo credit: J. Kustermans.

The store had little or nothing of the design touches that managers elsewhere introduce to make their customers feel at home. It looked cheap and dirty—very different from the image ICA usually signals in advertising, including, at the time of my stay, in the subway cars on line T11. Workers in the store, except the branch manager, would typically come from other parts of town, and the world, for that matter. Indeed, they shared an immigrant background with the great majority of Husby's people but would generally be better off than Husby's residents. Non-European migration into Sweden is largely a function of foreign wars and the refugee flows that these cause (Westin). As a result, it happens in waves. Husby's residents are the newest arrivals, from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia; the shop personnel came in with an earlier wave, from Chile, Kurdistan, or the former Yugoslavia, but did not particularly sympathize with the newcomers' plight. On the contrary, ICA staff had a reputation, according to some, for behaving in a brusque manner towards the local customers. Staff and residents, it appears, through deeds and gestures as much as words, are claiming and defending (and being showed) their place in what Les Back and Shamser Sinha have called the new "hierarchies of belonging" (143) of the world's post-colonial cities. Status insecurity induces condescension and precludes what one could have fancied to be natural

solidarities, i.e. immigrants sticking together just because they share the common status and experience of being migrants.

Among the customers, low-intensity aggression was alleged not to be uncommon either. Partly this would be because the store is under-staffed, so that lines would always be long. But partly it is also because local animosities exist, where the few poor white people living in a place like Husby—and they will often be very poor—will sometimes be on the receiving end. A group of Muslim women, in the context of a long supermarket line, might push the fragile, sickly Swede aside. The supermarket thus reveals both society's overall inequality as well as Husby's own, local inequalities. Husby, and places like it, might be Swedish society's Other, but they do not constitute a coherent, self-confident Self. If anything, these instances of aggression are born from vulnerability. As coping mechanisms, they result from the same impulse that makes Husby's residents take care of the homeless person begging outside of ICA's entrance, who is allegedly very well supplied by local people with food and clothes.



Fig. 6. A woman sits begging at the supermarket entrance. Interviewees attested to a particular local sense of solidarity. Photo credit: J. Kustermans.

Husby Träff

Husby Träff (Husby Get-Together) is a small organization, staffed by a chair and a cook, which offers cheap lunches except on Sundays. From 11 am to 2 pm, people can come to their premises to share a meal, to sit together and chat. There are two parts to the building: one, which houses the “restaurant,”

and the other—a big room with a stage that the organization rents out for cultural and political events. People also celebrate weddings in that second room. (It is worth noting, when addressing the local context of urban riots, that in many ways life in Husby is very normal and does include celebrations. I mention this explicitly because one of my interlocutors wondered, rhetorically perhaps, to what extent certain people really *lived* there, beyond *being* physically present.) Husby Träff is a Red Cross initiative, which, by organizing food and companionship, clearly intends to address important material and social needs. Its aim, one of their staff told me, “is to help people in the community,” but the organization’s existence is precarious due to uncertainty about subsidies. Its recent history has been tumultuous too. Recently, it moved between buildings, approximately 50 meters across the square. Svenska Bostäder, a housing company, had organized the move within the context of a regeneration plan, *Järvalyftet* (Priftis) for the entire Järva area (wider than Husby). The original plan had met protest—1000 people gathered on *Husby torg*—because local people had not been consulted about the direction of the plans. The protest led to a consultation process, *Järvdialogen*, intended to buy in support from the people. Some of my interlocutors were positive about this development, and the project overall, but others felt that the “dialogue” was not genuine. When the decision was made to move Husby Träff in 2012, a week-long occupation of its buildings ensued. Svenska Bostäder did not cave in, however, and the organization was moved.

Among the activists occupying the building was Megafonen, a local youth organization, which had already complained in 2010 that *Järvdialogen* was an incomplete dialogue because it did not include the voices of the young. At the time, they had organized a study to represent these voices, but now they joined forces with other activists to occupy Husby Träff. The Red Cross themselves did not join the occupation. While they might have been unhappy with the move, and while they obviously regret the pending loss of subsidies, they do not participate in the struggle. They are—in the eyes of some—an outside organization. And I write “struggle” advisedly. Among the processes happening in Husby is a certain politicization of the suburb. During one interview, my informant was flipping through stacks of documentation. She suddenly held up a document—“Ah, this was interesting too,” she remembered. It was a Swedish translation of a text by geographer David Harvey, *The Right to the City*, with notes and exclamation marks in the margins. From what I have understood, some of the politicization now happening has emancipatory intent and local roots, while some of it is more sinister and led by outside actors. Shady entrepreneurs, aspiring to popular fame, would stoke up youthful resentment and preach violent resistance. In the same vein, religious proselytizers of various stripes were seen moving into the neighborhood in the immediate aftermath of the riots. They too understood that local resentments were ripe to be mobilized and exploited.

Besides the metro station, the supermarket, and Husby Träff, which are all sites of public interaction, a fourth place merits attention: the single apartment, where people live their—more or less—private lives. I cannot meaningfully say what the “average” Husby flat looks like, because I visited only

two. From the outside, the flats testify to the transnational nature of the suburbs. Satellite dishes help many of its residents tune in to their home countries. Many of them are political refugees from war zones, whom Sweden has a history of receiving liberally. They have their roots in, amongst other places, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia. From the outside, the problem of overcrowding is apparent too.



Fig. 7. Satellite dishes help people tune in to their countries of origin. Photo credit: J. Kustermans.

Many of the balconies are packed with goods—not rubbish!—for which there simply is no room inside the apartment. I have seen couches and cupboards being stored on them.



Fig. 8. A balcony serves as storage. Overcrowding is a serious problem in neighborhoods like Husby. Photo credit: J. Kustermans.

Whether for cultural or economic reasons, and both were mentioned to me, too many people end up living in too small a space. This not only entails poor hygienic conditions and deteriorating infrastructure, but also means that there will often be too few beds for the number of people living in the same flat. They have to take turns sleeping. Children often have no place to do their homework. They cannot go to sleep until a bed frees up. They are often forced to spend time outside.



Fig. 9. A mattress that says it all. With too many people living in too small a flat, people must sometimes take turns sleeping. Photo credit: J. Kustermans.

The two flats that I visited were small. One could reasonably house a family with two children, but not much more. The other was a one-room flat in a building that used to be a home for the elderly; but because of cutbacks there were no longer any staff to care for them, so increasingly families with two or three children had moved in. It was difficult to imagine how they could live there. Concretely, flats such as these leave no room for washing machines or dryers. Clothes can be washed in shared laundry rooms in relatively new, shed-like buildings in between the apartment blocks.



Fig. 10. Shared laundry rooms. Washing facilities used to be located in the dwellings' cellars but have now been relocated into above-ground sheds. Photo credit: J. Kustermans.

A booking system ensures that everybody has the opportunity to get his or her clothes washed. One of the worst things that can happen is that a neighbor steals one's washing time, because it means that the clothes will remain dirty for another week, and they will pile up. Mundane as this problem may sound, it is a serious one in an already crowded flat. I was told, moreover, that sometimes the system is subverted. At a certain point, a large Chinese community had moved into Husby and apparently they had organized an illegal business where they would do the laundry of university students in Husby laundry rooms on residents' washing time. The story, whether rumor or not, demonstrates again the complex ecology of a place like Husby, where power is constantly being exerted both from outside and within the community. It also illustrates how living in a flat in Husby guarantees no privacy. People there live "more or less private" lives. The flats are too small to sit inside together if the family is too big, and thus people go outside. The walls are paper thin, and some of the most basic chores (including reproductive ones, which Hannah Arendt situated in the private realm (22-78)) cannot be done without being reminded of the kind of public environment that one is living in while supposedly being in private.

Seeing the same place in the winter or summer can make the world of difference. The days were warm when the riots broke out in Husby at the end of May. People would spend a lot of time outside. Perhaps a festive mood prevailed and perhaps the riots were a carnivalesque occasion, as some historians have argued about the French Revolution (Bakhtin 119). But this would beg the question how such a mood intersected with that other mood, the sadness of a neighborhood in mourning because one of its people had been shot. Would no riot have happened if the 69-year-old man had been shot during a police intervention in December? Counterfactuals such as these could be multiplied, but it is unclear if they can ever yield more than conjecture and speculation. It is very difficult to establish the precise causes of a riot. One could conclude, from the hopelessness of establishing a riot's causes, that the search is futile. Or one could argue that the search is irrelevant. Riots can be said to matter only to the extent that they lay bare underlying problems. It is those underlying problems that we ought to focus on, and those that are the real challenge.

Whether hopeless or redundant, the desire to explain *why* something happens, especially when it involves violence, does not subside easily. I have come across many explanations of the Husby riots, more in fact than I have heard or read descriptions of the precise unfolding of the events. Some were curt, as if—given the circumstances, given the place—the riots need no real explaining. Some were stern, and would have "cause" coincide with responsibility and blame. Typically, in these accounts, *cliques* of criminal youth or Muslim immigrants would play lead parts, although this explanation was mainly expressed online and never in my interviews. Some were forgiving. They would mention boredom and insist that what had happened was no more than a game, even though the game admittedly ran out of control.

Curt—stern—forgiving: it is important to remember that explanations are not detached assessments. Explanations are judgments too, and proper

judgment requires attention to detail (Suganami). Circumstances, for instance, certainly matter, but without a careful and non-dogmatic account of those circumstances, that is an idle observation. Criminal youth, for instance, may well have participated in the violence, but riots—as events proper—cannot be reduced simply to the violence that happens. Most of the time, there will be bystanders, crucially contributing to the riotous atmosphere. And there will be people trying to intervene or restrain. Counter-events will be organized. They are part of the event too, and part of what one should try to explain. Similarly, violence during riots is rarely random. Specific people are attacked and specific property is destroyed in specific ways. “Criminal” does not begin to describe the “meaning” of the riots, even in the event that the perpetrators were mainly criminal youth. Because, surely, criminal action is human action—purposeful, meaningful, moral—too. A game, finally? Maybe, but this only elicits questions about the rules of such a game, the involvement of its audience, and the “bounded realm” or space within which games typically occur. Explanations, both because they imply judgment and because they require precision, should not be ventured lightly.

Let me nonetheless end with one causal claim about the Husby riots. Denying the relevance of the shooting incident, as official police discourse did, does not make sense. In interviews, representatives of the police pointed to the time-lag of one week between this incident and the start of the riots to argue that the incident had been invoked by agitators as an excuse for their violent impulses. But from what I have understood, Husby was buzzing with rumors during that week, fueled by the discovery of blatant lies in original police statements about the shooting incident (the man had not wielded a machete but a normal knife; the man had not died in the ambulance but was shot in the head and had died immediately; his wife was not in imminent danger but had begged the police to leave their house and let them sort things out). Husby’s informal social relations, which develop in the particular material and political urban context that marks the place, favor the circulation of rumor—as well they might in this case. At least in this particular respect, and in this particular instance, an appreciation of place is key to our explanations of urban riots.

An appreciation of place is more generally important because without a proper understanding of *where* riots occur, there is a great chance that we will simply be baffled about them or, precisely the opposite, that we account for them in ready-made theoretical terms. A *sense of place* render riots particular, much more than a *sense of time* does. It roots riots—this riot and that riot—in their particular environment. The aggression that occurs during riots becomes less arbitrary as a result. We observe its targets and soon understand that there are meaning and feelings attached to them. We can perceive directionality in the violence (a deliberate spatial metaphor). Moreover, *place*, much more than *time* does, elicits a bodily posture from us. We—visitors, visiting researchers—*experience* place, and may feel sympathy for the uprisings as a result. We have felt the place and we understand, or we can imagine, the mixture of meaning and emotion that led people to adopt a violent posture. At the same time, however, a *sense of place* entails an appreciation of topography and relief. We observe the central square and imagine it functioning as a *stage* for resistance.

But we also observe the small *balcony* and the woman peering from behind the windowpanes and her half-closed curtains. Hers is a posture responding to a sense of place as well. Her action forms part of the events that we call riots too. The fact that she refused to talk to me, and many with her, and that we cannot know precisely what the meaning of *their* posture is, does not rule out its importance. It underlines again the impossible necessity of understanding the meaning of urban riots.

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