



What's Really Under Those Cobblestones? Riots as Political Tools, and the Case of Gothenburg 2001*

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Prelude: Våldsromantik

Riot – the unbeatable high! Adrenaline shoots your nerves to the sky. (The Dead Kennedys)

There's a great word in Swedish, one of those compound nouns of which the English language sadly is not capable: *Våldsromantiker*. Someone who is captured by the romanticism of violent struggle, by the exhilaration, fear, adrenaline, and existential positioning of physical confrontation. Predictably, most våldsromantiker tend to be men. So now, here it is: I, too, occasionally suffer from våldsromantik. Ever since getting involved in 'radical' activism I have relished most these moments when the boundaries of legality are crossed, where there is rapid movement, and where there is at least a potential for physical escalation. What a confession. Unsurprising – våldsromantik seems to be common among alienated middle class young men like myself – and politically unpleasantly incorrect. Mind you, not that I was ever much of a street fighter. I generally just hover around the edges of confrontations, tickled by fear and adrenaline, a spectator in a spectacle of violence, 'dissent', and oppression. But I did not write this text to confess my personal/political weaknesses. Rather, I write it to offer a (qualified) defense of them, not by extolling the virtues of 'rioting', or 'violent protest' in general, but by attempting to point out what I take to be the positive impacts (from a left-libertarian perspective) that one particular riotous event had, namely the riots that occurred during the protests against the European Union (EU) summit in Gothenburg, Sweden, in the summer of 2001, one month before the fateful events of Genoa.

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Gothenburg: Events, Interpretations, Motivations

Göteborgshändelserna: literally, the events of Gothenburg. The term denotes the protests, in particular those that escalated one way or the other, surrounding the Gothenburg summit. I was involved in these events (of which a timeline in the appendix) as an organiser in a group called 'Globalisering Underifrån' (GU – Globalisation from Below). Our planned action against the summit had been a 'non-violent' attempt to break through the police lines surrounding the meeting – back then it was not really called a 'red zone' yet, that term became fashionable only after Genoa – by decking ourselves out in the kind of padding, helmets, and trademark white overalls pioneered by the Italian 'Tute Bianche'. I put 'non-violent' in quotes above because, although all our public propaganda emphasised the non-violence of our planned action (i.e. our refusal to use what we referred to as 'offensive violence'; our plan to only use our [padded] bodies as weapons with which to force entry), many of us were aware of the fact that we were in reality operating in a kind of grey zone between violence and non-violence: would Gandhi have approved of our tactics?

As it turned out afterwards, these debates were moot: the police took the decision out of our hands. On Thursday morning, the day before the summit and the day before our planned action, the same day that George W. Bush landed in Gothenburg to meet the leaders of the EU, the police surrounded the school that most of the 'militants' or 'radicals' were staying in with a tight ring of sand-filled containers, locking us inside for about five to six hours, and finally, after a not much more than symbolic attempt to break out of the siege, storming the school and arresting almost all of us. Now, this action by the police did not stop the peaceful and, by Swedish standards, massive marches on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday from going ahead, but these were not the events that came to define 'Gothenburg' (just like the trade union rally in a stadium far away from the downtown area did not come to define 'Seattle'): rather, Gothenburg came to stand for a series of – again, for Swedish standards – extraordinarily explosive riots that culminated in the first use of live ammunition by the police against Western summit-protesters (cf. Olausson, 2002).

For many of those participating, these events were traumatic. As I will try to show below, they have had a deep impact on Swedish society, moments no less defining of a political culture than the miners' strike or the Poll Tax riots were in the UK: everyone knows about them, (almost) everyone has an opinion about them, and (almost) everyone knows someone who was there, who was affected, arrested, hit by stones, batons... And as with all such defining, grand moments: there are as many truths of them as there are participants and spectators. Here, I try to challenge a particular interpretation of what 'caused' the riots that quickly became dominant on a left which found itself under all-out assault from forces across the political spectrum, demanding that one disassociate oneself from the violent 'hooligans' who had 'raped' Gothenburg, had mindlessly destroyed its favourite shopping streets, endangered valiant policemen, and had, above all, attacked 'democracy' itself.

This latter understanding of what happened in Gothenburg, and why, has been effectively challenged by the left in Sweden,¹ and I do not here plan or need to take up questions again about whether or not the police's attack on the Hvitfeldtska school 'triggered' the riots,² whether the near-fatal shots on the demonstrator Hannes Westberg were fired in self-defense or not,³ etc. Rather, my target is the dominant left discourse that arose as a defense against the political onslaught from the right: here, it was alleged that the riots were 'caused' by the unjust treatment of what were primarily young protestors by brutal Swedish police, that none of the groups involved in the organisation of the protests really 'wanted' riots to break out, that 'we' were simply a bunch of 'young' idealists whom the police manoeuvred into a corner in which we could express our fear, frustration, and, yes, idealism, only through throwing stones. Why this focus on our 'youth', our inability to make other choices once pressed against a wall, the police's actions as 'cause' rather than mere 'trigger' of the riots? Because, I suggest, in a manner fundamentally in line with Swedish consensual (Social Democratic) political culture, these well-meaning advocates of our cause want to suggest that no-one in their right mind would, at least in Sweden, avail themselves of violent means to further their political goals. Violence, then, in this discourse is never a positively chosen means of struggle, but only ever one that is a means of defense, imposed by an outside attack:

When the first baton struck, I hardly believed that this was real.
When the second baton struck, I realised
that everything I had been taught to believe in
had been lost.
And when the third baton struck
and blood filled my mouth
all I could think about was defending myself.⁴

This is my favourite poem written in the aftermath of *göteborgshändelserna*. Tears fill my eyes even now when I read it. No doubt, there were many, maybe even the majority of those who rioted during those days in Gothenburg, that would not before or after the event justify their actions except by explaining them as reactions to police-brutality. But as an explanation of what happened, this position is simply not enough. And as a position on left 'rioting' in general it is unsatisfactory; we must not let the liberal proscription of violence cow us into arguing that any time we use violence as a political tool, we do so as a reaction, thus denying our agency, our ability to break out of the political and discursive boundaries that have been erected in order to define the state's violence as active and positive, and ours as reactive, and at best defensive. Our 'violence' is not simply the result of 'strains' in the system, of 'exclusion' leaving us no other space, of 'brutality' that forces us into corners. We, too, have agency; we, too, make political choices; we, too, sometimes use violence to further our political goals.

This, then, is what I hope to achieve in the text below: not a defense of rioting in general, for I take it as read that rioting can often be simply a manifestation of

1 Cf. Wijk (2002), Björk (2002a).

2 The Swedish high court decided that they did (cf. Erik Wijk's preface in Björk, 2002a).

3 The investigative TV-show *Uppdrag Granskning* demonstrated conclusively that they were not (cf. Sundell and Sundell, 2002).

4 Anna Eklund, in Katz (2002: 19). All translations from Swedish sources are my own.

våldsromantik, leading us into political dead-ends; but a qualified defense of the considered, occasional use of violent means of protest in situations where such protest may produce positive outcomes beyond what peaceful means could. Below, I will therefore try to argue this point: that the riots in Gothenburg had some effects that, from the perspective of those activists often put under the heading of ‘militants’ should be seen as positive. After some initial comments about issues of ‘rationality’ to frame the discussion, I will try to place my discussion in the wider context of long-standing disagreements between activists in the alterglobalisation movement in what is known as the ‘violence/non-violence debate’. In the main part, I will try to understand some of the many different kinds of effects the riots produced, focussing on their short-term representation in the media, and then their longer-term effects on Swedish political culture.

A final point by way of this long introduction: why Gothenburg? After all, we’re talking here about an event that occurred almost three years ago, a long time in politics, before Genoa, before ‘9-11’, before the massive global anti-war movement, before the wars this movement opposed... Why talk about it, except maybe to satisfy some desire for personal soul-searching (which is undoubtedly present)? Because the discussion about tactics in oppositional and radical movements never goes away. Because I still ask myself what would have happened on that fabled anti-war demonstration on the 15th of February if some of those one and a half to two million people who marched through London had not been content with marching from A to B. If some of those people had stopped outside Whitehall, the houses of parliament, or on Piccadilly Circus. And had started to kick off. Had started to engage, violently, the government that was about to engage, violently, defenseless civilians and near-defenseless soldiers in Iraq. Would anything have gone differently? Would a massive riot a la Poll Tax have furthered our cause? Would it have retarded it? We will never know – but discussions such as that below are necessary to give us the tools to make such decisions, since I strongly believe that “there are actually hardly any arguments for handicapping oneself [politically] by banning [riots as a means] to achieve results – there are, however, often tactical reasons to avoid them” (Pye, 2002: 105-6).

The Gothenburg Riots and Political Rationality

In this discussion I do not have many allies: after the events in Gothenburg, almost all ‘serious’ left intellectuals either shut up, or those that spoke chimed in to the general chorus of condemnation of the ‘vandals’ (cf. Karlsson, 2002). As for the rioters and their supporters, often less concerned than the left intelligentsia for their political and cultural capital – well, the threat of being done for rioting (likely to land one in jail for about one year) was enough to shut most people up. This, then, doesn’t leave many people: except for those who have already been sentenced, after being thoroughly demonised. Little concern here for political capital or legal consequences. Regarding the former, this is already spent; and the latter? Well, once sentenced, the legal consequences can’t get much worse. Like Jonathan Pye: a member of AFA (Anti-Fascist Action), sentenced to two and a half years in jail for rioting; he was angry and concerned that his actions, and those of many of his comrades, became so de-politicised.

Let us, then, listen to him for a while – for his is one of the few voices in this discussion that actually takes a stand to defend the politics of the rioters – to pick apart the complex questions of political agency and rationality that invariably emerge in a discussion about the ‘usefulness’ of a particular means of struggle. How far can we conceive of a riot as a premeditated political act, employed in order to achieve a particular goal?

As a member of that “part of the left where we don’t categorically rule out the use of certain [violent] forms of struggle” (Pye, 2002: 105), but use them pragmatically, Pye felt that in the aftermath of *göteborgshändelserna*, by generally justifying their use of violent means of protest – which in this context referred to both attacks on policemen and policewomen and property destruction⁵ (with reference to the ‘greater violence of the system’ or some such explanations) – his comrades made it appear as though there were no good arguments to support the use of riots as a political tool. This argument, though, is prefaced by a caveat: “First, I want to underline the fact that there were no preparations for, or plans to defeat the police in classical street fighting and thus stop the meeting” (2002: 106). This is to say that neither GU, nor AFA, or any of the other organisations involved in planning the protests were actively planning a riot – and in fact, it has even been asserted that GU and the Swedish AFA even managed, in the days leading up to the protests, to deter more militant groups of protesters from planning such escalations (Björk, 2002).⁶

However, to conclude from this actual lack of specific plans for a riot – as in ‘we will attack the police at point A at time B’ – that the riots were ‘caused’ by police brutality or ‘social frustrations’/tensions would be wrong. Such explanations tend to assume an “oppressed and frustrated but unconscious underclass in the suburbs that sometimes boils over”, a group bereft of agency, of the capacity to act and make reasoned political choices (Pye, 2002: 106-8). Rather, Pye suggests that most groups involved in the planning of the protests were aware of the fact that things were bound to escalate (*ibid.*, 109; cf. also Hörnqvist, 2002: 128; Karlsson, 2002: 194). Elsewhere, an anti-Fascist activist is quoted in an article written after the events with the words that “something had to happen in order to break through the consensus” (Kjöller, 2001: A2). And AFA mobilised for Gothenburg with a poster featuring Godzilla smashing up a city with the words: ‘Godzilla vs. Göran [Persson – Sweden’s prime minister] – act, blockade, sabotage.’

This suggests two conclusions about the ‘reasons’ behind the riots in Gothenburg: first, that we can at best look for ‘triggers’, not for ‘causes’ in the actual events. Second, questions of ‘agency’ become quite diluted: if everyone expects a riot (not only activists

5 This definition could of course be challenged (how can one be ‘violent’ against an inanimate object like a window?), but then, as could any attempt to formulate a general definition of violence. This is a specific, context-bound understanding, where in the Swedish political context attacks on property are seen as violent. It is also an understanding that takes seriously the fact that property in capitalist social relations achieves near-sacred status, and therefore attacks on private (esp. commercial) property take on a specific moral dimension.

6 I attended a meeting two days before our school was stormed during which several activists expressed their discontent over the lack of planning for a ‘proper riot’, but ultimately agreed to follow the relatively non-violent plans as drawn up by AFA and GU.

did, but also the police), and makes at the very least contingency plans for riots (in the case of activists, stocking up on helmets, shields, etc.), then who 'wanted' the riot? Who made it happen? Since it is this connection between intention, action, and outcome, that is the basis for standard conceptions of agency, then these certainly do not fully apply. Also, 'riots' – which, for the purposes of this discussion I take to be events where groups of protesters engage in collective property destruction, as well as being engaged in street fighting with the police – are events that develop strongly 'irrational' dynamics, in that whatever particular goals the agents entering into them might have had to start with, these goals may very well change, or get entirely lost during the event itself (Mueller, 2004; also Peterson, 2001: 23-67).

But to return to Pye. His point simply is to suggest that although militant groups' 'plan A' was not to have a riot, they were very well aware that a riot was likely to occur – and that this awareness, coupled with their assertion of the 'right of self-defense' in the face of a police attack, necessarily raises the question of the political 'usefulness' of confronting the police. After all, if there are frequently 'tactical reasons to avoid [riots]', then there must equally be tactical reasons to engage in them. It is these reasons that I want to draw out below. I will not – for intellectual, as well as legal reasons – argue that rioters planned riots 'in order to' achieve these outcomes. But, since we, as activists, do make choices about whether or not to riot, to fight back, or to smash this or that window, we must not shrink from the question: when are riots a useful political tool, when are they counterproductive?

For and Against Riots

That's why we're gonna be burnin' and looting' tonite. (Bob Marley)

Discussions about the pros and cons of rioting are of course nothing new. Every big riot has seen its share of ex-post rationalisations, celebrations, condemnations, from participants, journalists, well- or ill-meaning intellectuals, etc. Every social movement seems to have had its 'violence/non-violence' discussions, from the disagreements between Mohandas Gandhi and Nehru about the tactics of the Indian nationalist movement, splits between Martin Luther King and more militant factions in the struggle for black liberation, to disagreements within the German student/anti-imperialist movement that led to the formation of the Red Army Faction. And of course, in the alterglobalisation movement, ever since its 'coming out party' in Seattle, where a relatively small group of people engaged in limited property destruction, fundamental disagreements about tactics have existed: is it 'right' to riot? Is it 'smart' to riot?

What are the positions in this debate?⁷ There are more than the two one would expect, that is, the defenders and detractors of violent/confrontational actions: these two camps are further subdivided into what I call the 'principled' and the 'instrumental' positions. 'Principled' positions are those that claim validity independent of an action's outcome

7 For examples of this debate see e.g. on Indymedia, [<http://www.indymedia.org/front.php3?article?id=55654>], or the collection of essays on Genoa by various anonymous authors (Anonymous, 2001).

or concrete circumstances. 'Instrumental' are those statements that depend for their validity on a consideration of the outcome of the action. These positions are 'ideal types', in the sense that they are not so much intended to describe positions held by real actors, but rather to allow us to categorise the arguments in this debate according to whether they can be interrogated according to a contextualised analysis of an actual riot – in this case, the Gothenburg riots – and its outcomes, or whether they are insensitive to any such attempts at repudiation. Such a categorisation leads us to the following grid of arguments:

	Principled	Instrumental
Pro-Violence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The 'system's violence is worse – violence from demonstrators becomes 'self-defense', or legitimate 'acts of war' 2. Rioting is the legitimate expression of anger and frustration 3. Force is necessary to effect fundamental social change 4. Ethical norms do not apply to the police 5. Attacks on private property and police, which are expressive of capitalist social relations, are ends in themselves 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Riots lead to increased media coverage, thus raising issue salience 2. Riots frighten adversaries 3. Rioting disturbs hegemony and thus 'liberates' both discursive and action space, suggesting that other views exist and that resistance is possible 4. Violence draws out the force of the state, thus delegitimising it and radicalising sympathisers (reinforcing us/them identities) 5. Riots are the only tool the militant resource-poor wing of the movement has 6. Violence creates an incentive for elites to engage with the moderates in the movement
Against violence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Violence does not project the type of future that 'we' want 2. Violence is the method of the enemy – so using it blurs the us/them-distinction 3. Violence is always wrong 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rioting leads to increased repression 2. Rioting plays into the hands of the enemy who can use it to a) divide the movement, and b) justify repression and criminalise the movement 3. Violence both obscures the 'message' and communicates the 'wrong message': riots communicate only pictures of violence, thus scaring away possible sympathisers and third parties 4. Violence leaves no space for others, crowds out non-violent actions and people with lower risk-acceptance. This makes it both undemocratic and limits its mobilisation-potential 5. Violence is uncontrollable

I do not claim to be able to resolve the debates between the principled positions – it is, after all, a debate much older than the social movements I am involved in – but it seemed to me, after having this discussion for the umpteenth time, that it would be useful to inject some systematic analysis of the consequences of riots/violent protests into the discussion between the instrumental positions in order to move it forward a bit. And, for all its flaws, when it comes to systematic analysis, academia is still the place to look. Take William Gamson's *Strategy of Protest* (1975), which opened with the surprisingly evident but until then somewhat neglected question of whether or not social movements are actually effective in terms of achieving their stated goals (what a dreadfully old-fashioned, and yet indispensable way of thinking about political action). One of his key conclusions was that disruptive protests are a useful tactic for social movements – a finding that was strengthened by Piven and Cloward (1977), who argued, remarkably similar to militant activists, that disruptive and violent protests

disturb the normal functions of elites, thus eliciting concessions, and that they are a rational use of the movement's resources. These findings were soon challenged by a number of studies, using similarly familiar arguments: for example, that violent tactics give elites a mandate for increased repression, they tend to split movements, and scare potential sympathisers (cf. Tarrow, 1998: 93-8). As with so many academic debates, this one remains in a state of creative non-resolution, summed up nicely by Guigni (1999: xviii), who suggests a way out: don't ask whether or not violent tactics are effective in general, but under which conditions they are effective, precisely the point Pye emphasised. Guigni suggests that the conditions determining the relative effectiveness of actions tend to be contingent, that is, specific to the temporal and spatial context of a particular protest event, as opposed to being 'general' conditions in the manner of: if conditions x, y, and z hold, then violence is effective in furthering the stated goals of the movement (Guigni, 1999: xxvi).

This, however, raises another question: what is 'effectiveness'? While Tilly (1999) focuses on the stated goals of a movement, it seems apparent that there will be some unstated goals such as the creation and recreation of collective identity that should be included in an attempt to analyse the 'effectiveness' of an action. Here, it is important to understand the crucial function that physical confrontations with riot police play in the maintenance of collective identities of militant groups (Peterson, 2001). Now it becomes really difficult, especially when talking about movements with a high degree of internal diversity: whose goals are we talking about? In part, the discussion about the effectiveness of a particular tactic within the movement consists of the actors talking past each other: how can a member of ATTAC, an organisation devoted to the implementation of a 'Tobin-tax' on international financial speculation, engage in a discussion about ends with a member of AFA who supports the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism? I'm not saying that this is impossible – just that they may not easily find common ground here.

Sifting Through the Rubble: Assessing the Impacts of *göteborgshändelserna*

Come to think of it, it's not at all that easy to answer the question I've posed here, about the political usefulness of riots. Every riot is a spectacularly multi-faceted and complex event, and to find clear connections between causes and consequences (yet another one of those terribly old-fashioned concerns) is quite difficult. Below, I have therefore chosen to concentrate on what I take to be two crucial issues that we often ask ourselves after a political action: how did the media respond, that is, how is the action interpreted by 'public opinion' (as problematic a concept as that may be); and, does the action open or close political space?

You Lose Some... The Riots and The Media

You were sitting at home watching your TV, while I was participating in some anarchy! (Sublime)

No other aspect of the Gothenburg riots is as well-researched as the role of the media (cf. Afkhami, 2001; Enbom, 2003; Hultman, 2003; Parsmo, 2002; Sundell and Sundell,

2002; Olausson, 2002; Weibull and Nilsson 2002). This is unsurprising, for two reasons: first, the response by Swedish mass media was nothing short of spectacularly one-sided and vicious towards the demonstrators in general, and the rioters in particular. Examples below will illustrate this. Secondly, the vast majority of Swedes formed their (at least initial) opinions about the events through the mass media (Parsmo, 2002: 25), and since it is “our initial understanding of events [that] will determine the way we later remember them” (Sundell and Sundell, 2002: 78), the media become a crucial actor in the politics and effects of a riot. Insofar as the media frame our understanding of the event, they can act to legitimise or delegitimise those who choose riots as a tactic (cf. Schlesinger, 1991: 1-3).

How then did the local and national media portray the riots and the protests surrounding them? Coverage in the largest national newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* was dominated by pictures of the riots and headlines such as ‘stone throwers sabotage the summit.’ The tabloids *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, too, were filled with articles about the riots, as opposed to ‘issues’ surrounding the protests. Also, the shootings of three demonstrators were portrayed as acts of self-defence, and criticism of the police-actions that arguably triggered the riots was extremely muted (Joseffson and Quistbergh, 2001: 63; also Wijk, 2001: 231-2). This should not surprise us: given that no demonstrator has been shot with live ammunition in Sweden since 1931, such an event should be expected to elicit considerable outrage, suggesting that the occurrence of riots is indeed likely to make it easier to justify and legitimate repression. However, media coverage ‘prior to’ the protests had already been extremely positive towards the police, and the siege of Hvitfeldtska was not really criticised in the media the day before the crucial riots on Gothenburg’s main shopping street *Avenyn* occurred (it was those riots that were described as ‘the rape of Gothenburg’) (Sundell and Sundell, 2002: 66). This stands in contrast to the belief, widely held also among activists, that it was the riots on *Avenyn* that turned the media and subsequently Swedish public opinion against the rioters (cf. Liliequist, 2002); this leaves us with the old question: do the media hate ‘us’ anyway, or do we make them hate us through our tactics?

It is clear, though, that the riots generated extensive media coverage – although a common response to this is that such coverage may not be politically desirable, because emptied of content (cf. Sundell and Sundell, 2002). An analysis of protest events in Washington DC suggests that protests without arrests and violence have a higher chance of receiving ‘thematic’ (‘message’-related) as opposed to ‘episodic’ (‘event’-related) coverage (Smith *et al.*, 2001: 1412).⁸ However, it is quite likely that ‘violent’ events receive more coverage, so that even if they receive less thematic coverage on average, they still receive a greater absolute amount of thematic coverage. Also, anecdotal evidence suggests that after the riots there was an ‘increase’ in thematic articles about moderate groups, as their leaders were repeatedly asked to clarify their positions on tactics and goals (cf. Kellberg, 2001; Ehrenkrona, 2001). In addition, the riots were covered in detail by the international press – something that did not occur after the much larger anti-EU protests in Brussels and Barcelona. A comparison between British and Swedish news media reveals that while in the Swedish media, coverage of the

8 Similarly, Waddington’s analysis of the British Poll Tax riots finds that media coverage of the riots was event-, not content-oriented (Waddington, 1992: 161).

protests was overwhelmingly negative, British newspapers, from left (*Guardian*) to right (*Daily Telegraph*), tended to sympathise with, or at least understand them as, signs of a growing resistance within 'the people' of Europe to an ever-more centralised EU-project (Enbom, 2003).

And finally, from a militant perspective: consider that while the moderate protesters need thematic coverage to get their point across, the militants' aims are served to some extent even if the coverage is exclusively episodic. This is because a key message they want to communicate is that there is resistance to the status quo. A picture of a black-hooded rioter throwing stones at riot police is likely to communicate that there is militant dissent, no matter how the media spin it. And indeed, unsurprisingly the coverage of events focussed on the militants, rather than the moderates: "those activists who use violence as a means of protest receive many times more space than the peaceful demonstrators" (Parsmo, 2002: 21; cf. also Weibull and Nilsson, 2002: 188). The small and resource-poor militant wing of the larger alterglobalisation movement could not hope for better opportunities to publicise its positions.

You Win Some... Bricking The Windows of The People's Home

Granted: the traditional argument against riots – that they attract appalling media coverage, and that not all publicity is good publicity – probably held true in Gothenburg. I doubt that anybody who participated in the protests can forget the witch-hunt mood that descended on the town, we felt hunted not only by the police, but also by residents, who – having read the occasionally deliberately misleading (Sundell and Sundell, 2002; Björk, 2002a) reports from the riots – saw us as 'terrorists' who had 'raped' Gothenburg.⁹ We were spit at; cars refused to slow down at traffic lights when they saw 'activists' crossing the road; the normally oh-so-gentle Swedes, ever so outraged when the US executes yet another minor, or Israeli soldiers, heaven forbid, shoot at stone-throwing youth with live ammunition (!), suddenly felt the urge to *en masse* write letters to the editors of national newspapers, suggesting that the police had been too soft on us, that we should hang high... It is difficult to describe this mood of feeling hated, hunted, cast-out (but see Liliequist, 2002). Granted, then: the riots in Gothenburg did not win us many friends.

But remember the statement quoted above; 'something had to happen in order to break through the consensus'. This is to say, while it is of course the goal of any political movement to 'win friends', radical movements often have a different goal, play a different role. Not to 'win friends' – especially not through media coverage, given the role played by media in capitalist democracies (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Sundell and Sundell, 2002) – but through opening political space, through shattering hegemonic representations of societies at peace with themselves. This, I believe, was precisely what the riots in Gothenburg achieved, where they were successful: in breaking through the consensus, *samförståndslinjen*, the widely and deeply held belief that, while other societies may be beset by internal strife, conflict, exclusion, racism, class, etc., Sweden, the fabled 'people's home' (*folkhemmet*), is blissfully free of such problems. Or, in the

9 For an interesting analysis of the racial and gender politics in the reporting of the riots see Hultman (2003).

words of a key organiser of the protests: the hegemonic representation of Swedish society is one “where people never quarrel, never engage in violence and never, never demonstrate” (Svensson, 2002).

How did this image change due to *göteborgshändelserna*? Obviously, this is difficult to ‘prove’, especially in the limited space I have here. I can here only use textual evidence written in the aftermath of, and about, the riots in Gothenburg to highlight the depth of the impact these events had:

Something fundamental had happened during those days in Gothenburg. The country wasn't itself anymore. What happened to Sweden in Gothenburg? (Löfgren and Vatankhah, 2002: 7)

What first the riots and now the trials [against activists] in Gothenburg show us is maybe how the whole social contract we have lived with since the 1930s has finally been broken, primarily from above. Confrontation might now replace consensus as the basis of coexistence between both classes and individuals. (Wijk, 2002: 744)

The events during the EU [summit] in Gothenburg constitute a traumatic challenge to the Swedish nation. (Weibull, 2002: 33)

Writers of all political stripes agree with this perception. While those cited above tend to come from the progressive end of the spectrum, the head of research for the government-funded ‘Centre for Psychological Defense’ suggests that “Sweden ended up in something that could be compared to a crisis in connection with the EU-summit in Gothenburg in June 2001” (Granström, 2002: 6). A report on the situation of disenfranchised youth in the suburbs of Gothenburg, who participated heavily in the rioting, states that “the summer of 2001 involved the cracking of the picture of Gothenburg” (Joseffson and Quistbergh, 2001: 63) and Sweden as peaceful, consensual societies (Sernhede, 2001); and Oskarsson and Peterson (2002) argue that the drastically increased levels of political violence have led to Sweden ‘losing its innocence’.

Again, this evidence is only anecdotal. It is, however, indicative of a sense of a crisis of common sense, of hegemony, where dominant social representations that have so long guaranteed social peace begin to crack up; and the fact that this sense of crisis stretches across the political spectrum indicates that this is not merely the wet dream of some benighted radical. It would, however, indeed be a stunning piece of militant hubris to suggest that it was ‘exclusively’ the riot which cracked this powerful image of Swedish society. Rather, the riots should be seen as an explosion onto the public stage of a hidden transcript (Scott, 1990) of discontent and – crucial in a society that prides itself on its consensus model – ‘dissent’, which in turn arises on the fertile ground of the many contradictions of the Swedish model: for example, the contradictions between the formalised, legalistic and cooptative form of politics that obtains the de-centred, non-hierarchical and informal politics that characterise the alterglobalisation movement (Weibull, 2002); or the ‘democratic deficit’ that the contemporary global political economy entails, and the challenge this issues to nationally based politics (Abrahamson and Hettne, 2002; Carlheden, 2001); or Sweden’s internal contradictions, where one of Europe’s most Social Democratic countries sports some of its most segregated cities, where downtown areas are practically uni-cultural milieus (Peralta, 2002), and riots, for immigrant youth, are one, possibly the only way to get heard.

This is not to minimise the importance of the riots, only to put them into context. These 'structural contradictions', as an earlier era might have called them, do not exist by themselves: they only exist in and through the practices of those who live them. In other words, it was not the structural contradictions that finally shattered Sweden's image of itself as blissfully unaffected by the chaos going on 'out there' – it was the riots that in a sense 'enacted' the pressure of these contradictions on this representation. As such, from a radical perspective, the riots were successful. And this longer-term opening of political space defies its short-term closure in the immediate aftermath of the riots.

This opens up the next question: what actually happens in that political space which I have argued has been opened up by the riots? Politics, after all, abhors a vacuum as much as nature does – political space is either taken up, or it collapses again. Here I propose, in an embarrassing agreement with conservative critics of the alterglobalisation movement, and contrary to many moderates' protestations, that there exists a tacit 'division of labour' in the movement between militant and moderate activists: in short, militants' actions open up discursive and action space within which different arguments and positions can then be expressed – and this space is subsequently filled/taken up primarily by the moderates' arguments and discourses.

I suggest that the events of Gothenburg were understood – after an initial period of outrage over the rioting (cf. Olausson, 2002) – by most 'spectators' within a frame where the goals of the globalisation-critical movement, which received quite some public airing before and after the protests in Prague, and during the Swedish EU-presidency (cf. Myrdal, 2000; Eklind, 2000; Expressen, 2001a), are perceived relatively positively. These goals easily strike a chord with the solidaristic frame of *folkhemmet*.¹⁰ As a result, the riots are likely to have positive effects both for the moderates' message, as well as their long-term mobilisation-capacities, a point that is acknowledged both by some militants: Pye suggests that, while the militants rely on the moderates' legitimacy, the latter rely on the former's "initiative and commitment" (2002: 113); and conservatives, who bemoan the fact that, while the militants throw stones and create attention, the moderates, especially from ATTAC, exploit this attention in order to gain media-access (Ehrenkron, 2001: 102). Unsurprisingly, moderates tend, for political reasons, to disagree with this assessment. In short, there appears to be some sort of division of labour between the militants and the moderates: the former create the stage, the latter write most of the play.

Some Conclusions

But in the end, we will win! (Graffiti in Gothenburg)

What are the conclusions that activists in the movement can draw from this discussion? Two themes recur throughout the paper: first, that the goals of the militant wing, and therefore the messages it wants to send, may be quite different from those of the

10 Although Uggla (2003) suggests that support for ATTAC in Sweden was much lower than the vast media echo initially suggested.

moderate wing. As a result, the debates about tactics are bound to continue. However, this is not to suggest that the movement will necessarily break along this fault line, for there is another current that runs through the discussion: that the Gothenburg riots opened up a stage, a discursive and action space, where the concerns and messages of different progressive actors can be articulated, whether it is disenfranchised youths, or the moderate wing of the movement, or indeed the forces of law and order calling for more powers to better keep at bay the rapacious anarchist mob clamouring to overthrow the order of society.¹¹ Apparently, riots are a double-edged sword.

But the most significant conclusion I draw from this investigation is that which Pye already suggested: while there may be many tactical reasons to choose *not* to riot (the fear of increased repression being a very salient one – friends of mine sat in jail for months, some for over a year), there is also no reason to categorically rule it out as a tactic. In the Swedish case, where a long-established hegemonic political culture rested on, and constructed the image of a society totally at peace and in agreement with itself, the riots in Gothenburg managed to shatter this image, and thus create political space where previously there was very little: for who would notice 20,000 moderates marching down a road; whilst without the moderates there would be no real content to the militants' actions – to show a picture of rioting youth has little of a positive message if not understood within the frame of a wider alterglobalisation movement. To sum it up, then: yes, riots are political tools that can be gainfully employed, and were so to some extent in Gothenburg. And as for the cobblestones: it seems that nobody really knows what's under them 'in general'. This study, however, indicates that sometimes it might be useful to have a look.

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¹¹ The story of the vicious assault by the Swedish state on Swedish and international activists after *göteborgshändelserna* is told chillingly well esp. in Wijk (2002) and Flyghed (2002).

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Appendix A: Timeline of göteborgshändelserna¹²

Thursday, 14 June 2001

At 11am, George W. Bush lands in Gothenburg; at around the same time, the police use containers to surround Hvitfeldtska high school, which had been provided as sleeping space for activists by Gothenburg's council, and served as the main convergence centre for *Göteborgsaktionen* (one of the two main umbrella coalitions organising the protests), and for *Globalisering Underifrån* (GU), which was planning to use 'confrontational non-violence'/White Overall tactics to break through police lines surrounding the conference centre on Friday morning. During the afternoon, street fighting breaks out both outside the school, where activists seek to support their surrounded comrades, and inside the school, when the police stormed the school.

12 Sources: primarily Wijk (2002: 113-116); Björk (2002a); and personal experience.

Previously, an attempt to break out of the siege, led by the White Overalls had remained non-violent. At about 6pm, between 12,000 and 15,000 people demonstrate peacefully against George W. Bush. Just before midnight, the police finally manage to clear out Hvitfeldtska high school.

Friday, 15 June

The first day of the EU summit. At about 8am, three members of *Göteborgs ickevåldsnätverket* (Gothenburg non-violence network) scale the fences surrounding the conference centre. They are arrested without incident. At about 9am, *Göteborgsaktionen*'s manifestation begins in downtown Gothenburg. At about 10:30am the manifestation ends and the non-permitted 'Anti-capitalist march' begins to move towards the barriers surrounding the conference centre (it was from this point that the White Overalls as well as AFA were planning to begin their actions, but the police's attack on Hvitfeldtska had destroyed the militants' plans). Fights break out around 11am close to the barriers, after the police tries and fails to separate the 'black bloc' from the rest of the march. The march breaks up, and the police chase groups of protesters onto Gothenburg's main shopping street, where some of them begin smashing windows, and burn port-a-potties as barricades.

During the early afternoon the police drive some of the protesters towards *Fritt Forum* (Free Forum), an entirely peaceful space for debates and seminars. About seventy people who accidentally find themselves on Viktoriabridge are surrounded and subsequently detained by the police.

At 6pm, 15,000 to 16,000 people gather on *Järntorget* for a demonstration, arranged by *Nätverket Göteborg* (Network Gothenburg), under the slogan 'Sweden out of the EU – No to the EMU'. Before the march leaves, a group of provocateurs tries to attack a bloc of Norwegian demonstrators, but is repelled. The demonstration moves through the downtown area and passes without incidents.

At around 8pm, *Reclaim the City* begin their party around Vasasquare. Fascists attempt to provoke fights, and the police surround the dancing crowd. Around 9pm, fights break out between youth and police. Several policemen shoot live ammunition. A 19-year old unmasked demonstrator is critically wounded, and two other protesters are wounded.

Saturday, 16 June

The second and final day of the EU summit. Beginning at 9:30am; people gather for the final demonstration, organised by *Göteborgsaktionen*, under the slogans 'No to the militarization of the EU – No to racism and the development of 'fortress Europe' – No to the constitutionalisation of neoliberal policies in the EU – The environment and the public sector are not for sale'. Numbers for participants vary between 9,000 and 20,000. The demonstration is peaceful.

At ca. 7pm, people gather in downtown Gothenburg for an spontaneous protest against police violence. The police surround the demonstrators and other who happened to be on the square. They are kept there until midnight.

During this time, at ca. 10pm, the national SWAT team storms Schillerska high school (another sleeping space for activists) with automatic weapons, ostensibly searching for an armed German terrorist who had sworn revenge against the police. Seventy-eight activists are forced to lie on the cold, wet schoolyard for hours. They are let go at around 4am. The 'German terrorist' is never found.

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