

The Making of Protest and Protest Policing

Negotiation, Knowledge, Space, and Narrative

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Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i sociologi vid sociologiska institutionen, Göteborgs universitet, som med tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsnämnden läggs fram fredagen den 13 maj 2011 kl 10.15 i sal Sappören, Sprängkullsgatan 25, Göteborg.

Mattias Wahlström (2011) *The Making of Protest and Protest Policing: Negotiation, Knowledge, Space, and Narrative*. Doctoral dissertation at the Department of Sociology, University of Gothenburg, Box 720, SE 40530 Gothenburg, Sweden. English text. 186 pages. ISBN: 978-91-979397-2-0. ISSN: 1650-4313.

Abstract

The overall aim of this thesis is to advance our knowledge of the preconditions, processes, and consequences of the interaction between police and political protesters in contemporary Western democracies. Using qualitative analysis of interviews with police officers and political activists, activist Internet forum discussions, and documents produced by police and activists, along with direct observation of protest events and police training in policing tactics, the study seeks to capture the interplay between police and protesters as a continuous process, as opposed to a series of isolated incidents. A better understanding of the dynamics of this process is vital for facilitating vibrant, plural public spaces for deliberation and political representation in a democratic society.

The four studies comprising this dissertation look at events and processes in Denmark and Sweden in 2001 through 2008 – a time period seeing a reform of policing tactics and an upsurge in protest activism in the two countries.

Paper I analyses the communication between the police and activists, including explicit negotiations, both before and during the European Union summits in Gothenburg 2001 and Copenhagen 2002, examining in especial the protesters' initial attitudes towards and subsequent evaluations of this communication. The analysis reveals that the possibilities for achieving sustainable agreements between the two parties were frequently constrained by a mutual lack of trust that made any commitments by the other party seem less than credible. Activists' trust in the police was found to be heavily dependent on the recent history of police behaviour and something not easily influenced by the individual efforts of the negotiating officers. In addition, the different protest performances that various activist groups wanted to stage were found to be crucial in explaining their attitudes towards communication with the police.

Paper II explores the way in which the Swedish police force works to improve its protest policing practices by trying to reform police knowledge through training and police officers' individual interviews with activists and other counterparts. The discussion centres on the meanings that police officers confer on two organizing concepts framing the reform work – provocation and dialogue – and on the way in which police officers use "reality maintaining" strategies to comprehend activist perspectives without allowing these to fundamentally challenge their own points of view. It is suggested that the current policing style in Sweden, as used also in Denmark, is best conceptualized as proactive management of protests, which captures both the softer and harder aspects of this approach.

Paper III draws upon Henri Lefebvre's theory of production of space to explore how space is produced through protests and protest policing, using a series of annual racist marches and counterdemonstrations as a case study. Conversely, the paper also considers certain key spatial aspects as explanations for how interactions between protesters and police unfolded in the cases concerned. It is argued that territorialization and deterritorialization affecting the boundaries of both physical spaces and the social order constituted the central spatial dimensions of this interaction. The case study, furthermore, illustrates how specific sites for protests can be used as 'truth-spots' for movement claims.

Paper IV explores how police provocation and subsequent violence by demonstrators are retroactively constructed in activist milieus in the aftermath of protests. Through an analysis of narratives about protest events as gleaned from interviews and Internet discussion forum discussions, the role of 'provocation narratives' in collective evaluation of protest tactics within activist milieus is examined. The analysis reveals how violence is accounted for by using distinct types of plot and particular characters to present the demonstrators as both victims and agents. Accounts of specific episodes of violence during demonstrations were found to theoretically bridge situational and cultural explanations of collective violence.

Keywords: Collective violence, Narrative analysis, Negotiation, Police knowledge, Protest policing, Protest, Provocation, Public Space, Social Movements, Territoriality.