

Marginality and banality in the segregated city: Reflections on the 'riots' in Oslo

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journals.sagepub.com/home/etn**Bengt Andersen** Work Research Institute, Oslo Metropolitan University,
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Abstract

The Israeli invasion of Gaza in late December 2008 triggered demonstrations—or, as several commentators termed them, *riots*—in Oslo's city centre, as it did in other European cities. Many young people from the Oslo's 'immigrant-dense' suburbs participated in these protests. The demonstrations in December 2008 were followed by unusually violent protests on 8 and 10 January 2009. Oslo's city centre was turned into a battlefield, with vandalised shops and 'warlike' clashes between demonstrators and police. Media coverage emphasised that most of the 'rioters' were young males from immigrant backgrounds. Commentators speculated that the demonstrations offered these males an opportunity to vent their frustrations towards both Israel and mainstream Norwegian society. Explanations of the urban unrest were similar to those put forth in the aftermath of unrest in other European cities. It was suggested that Norwegian youth were taking the opportunity to release their pent-up rage as marginalised residents of stigmatised neighbourhoods. This paper does not attempt to identify any universal, deeper-lying causes of urban unrest. However, based on prolonged fieldwork in Oslo prior to, during and following the demonstrations, it is argued that contextual knowledge of ordinary life can be helpful when trying to understand such extraordinary events.

Keywords

Ethnography, everyday life, minority youth, segregation, urban unrest

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Introduction

As 2008 drew to a close, Israeli forces invaded Gaza. The invasion led to riots in many European cities, and Norway's capital city of Oslo was no exception. Young people flocked to Oslo's city centre, where they took more or less active part in the demonstrations in December, and subsequently participated in January 2009 in what journalists and politicians were quick to categorise as 'riots' (Andersen and Biseth, 2013). During the riots, newspapers carried many reports about rioters setting fire to rubbish bins, smashing shop windows, throwing stones and shooting fireworks at the police, while the police responded by making arrests and deploying tear gas, horses and dogs. The demonstrators, or 'rabble-rousers', included many young men from Oslo's eastern, 'immigrant-dense areas' (Søholt and Lynnebakke, 2015: 2315). A journalist from the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) reported that 160 people had been 'arrested by the police', and the image that accompanied the story showed that it was primarily young males from a 'visible minority background' who had been taken into police custody (Jenssen, 2009a). It was far from just young men who took part in the demonstrations but, based on journalists' stories and my own conversations, observations and interviews (including with the police), it seems clear that male youths were the most aggressive participants. Since the purpose of this article is to provide a contribution to the research literature linking urban uprisings to ethnic segregation (Mayer et al., 2016), via a detailed discussion of everyday life, a focus on young men is natural as they appear to be the key actors (e.g. Dijkema, 2019: 252; Slater, 2011).

This article's use of categories is inspired by Gullestad (2002) and Eriksen (2011), who both point out that phenotypes (observable characteristics or appearance) are used actively in Norway in boundary work (also Ezzati and Erdal, 2018: 370). The choice of categories is based primarily on prolonged anthropological fieldwork in Oslo from August 2007 until the end of 2009 (see Andersen, 2014). During this fieldwork period and in connection with subsequent fieldwork studies in Oslo, it clearly emerged that youths and adults often divide people into groups or categories based on skin colour and other visible characteristics. This article therefore uses the analytical categories of 'visible minorities' and persons with a 'visible minority background'.

Following the riots in Oslo—those 'critical events' (Andersson, 2010: 5–6)—several high-profile politicians and opinion-makers expressed concern that if the authorities or Norwegian society as a whole failed to take 'the challenges of integration seriously' (Moe, 2010), Norway, and Oslo in particular, would see an 'uprising in the suburbs' similar to that experienced in other European cities. Although Oslo has not experienced similar riots since the events in January 2009, warnings of 'failed integration', 'parallel societies' and the 'ghettoisation' of the eastern suburbs have been put forward by teachers at local schools, the Norwegian Police Security Service (Lundgaard et al., 2016) and, as late as May 2019, by a major political party (Fremskrittspartiet, 2019). Urban scholars have also warned that frustration among East Enders resulting from social exclusion

and inequalities could lead to ‘riots’ in Oslo, similar to those seen previously in Sweden and France (Holt-Jensen, 2013). Members of the general public seem to share these concerns about ‘integration’. Anthropologists report that ‘many majority Norwegians [residing in an eastern suburban neighbourhood] feel alienated by the increasing dominance of especially Muslim immigrants’ (Eriksen, 2019: 172). The suburbs to which these anthropologists refer are located in the outer eastern parts of Oslo. These housing estates have long been associated with challenging living conditions, working-class housing and, since the 1990s, ‘non-western immigrants’ (Andersen and Biseth, 2013).

Urban scholars describe Oslo as a socio-economically segregated city (e.g. Wessel, 2015) which has ‘a distinct pattern of macro-level [ethnic] segregation... between the east and the west’ (Rogne et al., 2019: unpaginated). This pattern of ethnic and socio-economic segregation has been observed at least since the 1990s (Ljunggren, 2017). Related to these findings, a recent study of the Oslo housing market points out that this is a segmented market with a ‘separation between East and West’ (Turner and Wessel, 2019: 16). While Oslo’s East End and West End are contained within the same municipality, there are thus several indications of a fragmented urban society (Ljunggren, 2017). The West End has an overrepresentation of the upper and middle classes as well as a concentration of ‘a wide variety of Oslo’s social goods’ (e.g. spacious dwellings and sport facilities), whereas social burdens (e.g. unemployment and road traffic injuries) are more prominent in the eastern suburbs (Ljunggren et al., 2017: 370–376). Because segregation has been associated with ‘riots’ in the research literature, with the instigators coming from more ‘immigrant-dominated’ areas (Malmberg et al., 2013), it is interesting to take a closer look at the situation in the Norwegian capital.

This article gives an account of the everyday lives and aspirations of young East-End males. I argue that routine activities are indicative of what these individuals want and value as well as of their moods and preferences. I also claim that an understanding of the ‘everyday world’ (Turner, 1991, quoted in Forrest and Kearns, 2001: 2127) of these individuals is useful when attempting to examine the extraordinary events that some of them participated in and most of them talked about in December 2008 and January 2009. I follow Forrest and Kearns (2001: 2127), who warn urban scholars interested in challenges to social cohesion not to overlook ‘the dull routine [and stability] of everyday life’.

Interestingly, in 2018, almost 10 years after the riots, I met one of my former informants as I took the train out of Oslo. We did not have much time to catch up as he was there working, but he did seem happy with his life. While attending a seminar at a university in Oslo, I met another one of the ‘youths’, now an adult and university student, and we spoke briefly about a book before we both had to run. On Facebook, I have seen that yet another of the East-End ‘boys’ has settled down with his girlfriend and has a young daughter. Although I do not know if these three individuals are in any way representative of all the youths I met during my fieldwork 10 years ago, their lives seem nonetheless to have followed the map many of

them drew up about their future when they were still hanging out at the youth clubs in 2008 and 2009.

Analysing my material, I also draw inspiration from Billig's (2013) study of nationalism, particularly his insistence that, in order to understand nationalism, scholars should pay attention to how nations are reproduced daily 'in a banally mundane way' (Billig, 2013: 6). Additionally, I am inspired by Gullestad (1997) and her scholarly interest in everyday life, specifically her 'focus on... what is usually considered most ordinary, trivial, and mundane' (Gullestad, 1989: 72).

Some caveats are worth making. The young males referred to here are those I met during my fieldwork; they are not meant to represent every male who participated in the demonstrations. I also have no way to verify that all of the research participants who claimed to take part in the demonstrations actually did so, as I was not able to physically observe all of them at the same time. Moreover, I did not join the demonstrations, but stayed behind at the youth centre.

Rioting—The prevailing explanatory models

Malmberg et al. (2013) point out that those who try to explain the prevalence of 'urban unrest' often point to segregation which, in turn, implies that material resources are unequally distributed between different neighbourhoods and groups. In other words, inequality gives rise to rioting. It is also claimed that the poor and immigrants are often discriminated against and live in stigmatised neighbourhoods, which also creates fertile ground for unrest since marginalised people become frustrated and angry over time (Dikeç, 2017). In a study based on empirical data from France, Dikeç (2016) explains how the uprising there must be understood as a manifestation or a release of pent-up rage among marginalised suburban residents. As Wacquant in particular has discussed, the French suburbs and the *banlieues* around Paris are urban areas to which ethnic minorities are confined and spaces subject to intense stigmatisation (e.g. Wacquant, 2008, 2015). Several scholars have also pointed out that police brutality has triggered riots (e.g. Dikeç, 2017: 214 and *passim*; Malmberg et al., 2013: 1032). Dijkema (2019: 252) summarises a study from 2007 by Garnier of the French '2005 revolts that broke out in 400 marginalized social housing neighbourhoods' by stating that '[g]roups of men—and some women—went out on the streets and made their fury visible'. Their rage can be seen 'as political expressions in the sense that they are a means of drawing attention to unmet needs' (Dijkema, 2019: 252). Even though the demonstrators do not explicitly say so, their actions must be seen as a cry for social justice. Moreover, 'urban uprisings are political events, because they are episodic mobilisations that expose injustice and [the participants'] grievances, stage public appeals to justice, and raise claims about equality and accountability' (Dikeç, 2016: 96). Dikeç therefore underlines that it is important to understand 'the geography of grievances' (Dikeç, 2016: 96). In *Urban Uprisings: Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe* (Mayer et al., 2016), a number of scholars, in addition to Dikeç (2016), contribute analyses of why such events occur in

European cities. These authors also primarily point to structural explanations, specifying that poverty, social inequality, structural racism and territorial stigmatisation must be emphasised in analyses of such urban protests (Mayer et al., 2016).

Reviewing the literature, Malmberg et al. conclude that:

... it is clear that the *phenomenon* of urban unrest can be understood either as a form of political protest, or as an outburst of criminal activities in particular times and spaces of the metropolis. Regardless of the wide divergence in political and policy implications, however, both perspectives emphasize a link between segregation and unrest/rebellion. (Malmberg et al., 2013: 1036, emphasis in original)

In explaining the *rage* that results in uprisings, the aforementioned scholars prefer to look at what Sampson (2019) refers to as macrosocial trends (e.g. increased segregation) and macrostructures (e.g. politics). Although these are important perspectives and insightful contributions, I propose that we should not lose sight of the ‘micro’ (see Sampson, 2019: 9), the actions and perceptions of individuals when they do or experience unusual things.

Research strategies and fieldwork sites

In order to present an account of the everyday lives and perceptions of young males from eastern Oslo, I draw on data collected over several years of anthropological fieldwork in the eastern inner city and outer eastern suburbs of the city, including fieldwork I carried out as part of my doctoral research (from summer 2007 until the end of 2009). The fieldwork was carried out in youth clubs, shopping centres, outdoor spaces and the homes of some East Enders. Every week from 2007 to 2009, I spent many hours almost daily in youth clubs and the surrounding neighbourhoods discussed here (see Andersen, 2014). Most of the youths at the youth clubs were regular visitors. One of the centres was located in an outer eastern district known as Grorud Valley, and the other in Gamle Oslo, a downtown district in the inner east. Although a 30-minute metro ride separates the two areas, both are neighbourhoods defined by the public authorities as having some of the city’s worst living conditions (Gabrielsen, 2012: 78; Halvorsen et al., 2015). Even though the working class ‘is overrepresented’ in both areas (Ljunggren and Andersen, 2017: 73), middle-class residents reside there as well. In Gamle Oslo, a relatively long history of gentrification and a new, up-scale waterfront project nearby (Andersen and Røe, 2017; Huse, 2014) have contributed to increased diversity in the district. But child poverty and high levels of ‘street crime’ close to the youth centre (according to statistics provided by the Oslo Police District) both testify to the widespread disadvantage in the area. In the Grorud Valley, social and material diversity is easily observable as well.

Nina was an adult who volunteered at the youth club in Grorud Valley, not far from where she lived as child. She had grown up in Høybråten, a Grorud Valley neighbourhood of detached and semidetached, single-family houses, and said that

her husband, who grew up in an apartment in an area dominated by apartment buildings adjacent to Nina's neighbourhood, used to joke that she 'came from the grand villas', while he 'came from the slum'. Although the different housing types are (in terms of distance) relatively proximate, they are often thought of as belonging to different kinds of neighbourhood. As Nina indicated, they are experienced, talked about and valued differently, and thus boundaries between groups are also created (Andersen, 2014: 52). When talking to adult residents, it was the areas with apartment buildings, and not the single-family-housing areas, that were associated with 'problems' in the Valley. In the inner east, distinctions in housing are at times less visible, but social boundaries are nonetheless often drawn between the ethnic majority and visible minorities, for instance when looking at social networks of friends or the use of coffee shops and bars. When residents discussed those with whom they spent their spare time—and when I observed such interactions—it became clear that friendship groups tended to be strikingly homogenous (both ethnically and socio-economically).

In the two administrative sub-districts where the centres are located, residents with a visible minority background make up about half the total population, while the ethnic majority constitute a numerical minority in both places. So, even if the populations of the inner and outer east are relatively mixed (Andersen, 2014), few sons and daughters from middle-class families used either youth centre. While a few 'majority Norwegians' would use the youth centre in the Grorud Valley, almost all of the users at the one downtown, and the majority at both centres, were Norwegian-Pakistani, Norwegian-Somali or Norwegian-Afghan youth, or they were youths from other visible-minority groups. In conversations with 'white middle-class youth', respondents had different reasons for not frequenting such youth clubs. Some said that the patrons of these centres belonged to different groups than they did, whereas others stressed that they had many other after-school activities and thus did not have time to spend time at youth clubs. Some parents would also say that they did not want their children to visit such clubs, some explaining that it was not the proper environment for their children. Social workers, teachers, police officers and other public officials would stress that the middle-class or majority Norwegian youths lived in large houses with an extra living room (basement sitting rooms) and could have friends over. Minority youths seldom had the same living standards and could therefore rarely invite friends to their homes.

I was not able to systematically record all youth club users or the number of individuals with whom I spoke. However, I came to know about 100 regulars, some more than others. In addition, during the daytime and at night, I spoke with and observed many others in these clubs and in other arenas such as in the metro, in shopping centres and on street corners. To provide some more information about the users of the youth clubs, it can be noted that, in order to use the facilities, teenagers and young adults had to show identification and register their names and other information before entering. During a random month in 2007, 127 individuals registered as new users at the downtown centre. Nine self-identified as

Norwegian, whereas the rest mainly reported themselves as speaking Arabic, Somali or an Afghan language such as Dari.

In the years following the fieldwork, which ended in 2009, shorter periods of fieldworks were conducted in several parts of the East End. Consequently, walk-alongs and ride-alongs with residents and the police have contributed to my knowledge of local place-making as well as my understanding of encounters between residents and police. Moreover, data from more than 250 semi-structured interviews (recorded and transcribed) with other teenagers and adults (parents, police officers, teachers, social workers, etc.) as well as extensive survey data (from six different neighbourhoods and with a total of more than 2000 respondents) provide valuable contextual knowledge about everyday life in the East End from 2007 until the present (May 2019).

Several of the young research participants in Oslo's East End took part in or reacted to their acquaintances' participation in the demonstrations. I base the following analyses on, in particular, conversations with and observations of these individuals prior to, during, and in the weeks and months after December 2008–January 2009. I had not initially planned to study 'rioting', but it became a natural topic of conversations while the demonstrations were taking place and in their aftermath.

Life at the youth centres

The downtown centre welcomed youths between the ages of 15 and 23, while the club in Grorud Valley welcomed young people between the ages of 13 and 25. Whereas the majority of users of the Grorud Valley centre lived in Grorud Valley, the majority of the downtown centre users came from many different neighbourhoods, with the majority coming from the East End of Oslo. In fact, youths from the West End seldom dropped by. At both centres, the teenagers and young adults would occupy the sofas or walk around, waiting to play a game, use the computers or play video games. Among the older users, different ethnic groups would often self-segregate—an observation that corresponds to Lauglo's (2017: 400) finding that many minority youths in Oslo 'tend to identify with their ethnic origin'—whereas the younger members (the teenagers) would mix more. The boys would often engage in chit-chat about parties, girls, school or a fight they had seen or been involved in themselves, but more often they would talk about the game they were playing or the next match of their favourite football team. The girls tended to talk about everyday events—for instance what they were going to do the following Saturday—or they would play chess, use the computer or flirt with boys. But the girls also talked at length about travels they had taken abroad, and some would discuss potential husbands with their girlfriends. Both boys and girls would ask for help, either with homework or a job application, and their interest in schoolwork fits well with Friberg's (2019) quantitative study of 16–17-year-old students in the Oslo region. He found that 'children of disadvantaged immigrant groups...

have [educational] aspirations on par with those of native origin youth' (Friberg, 2019: 11).

When we went outside, we would sometimes play football (mostly the boys) or go to a café. The topics of their (and our) discussions would be the same. Conversations about national or international politics were few and far between—the exception being some of the Afghan boys and young men, who would talk about the war and US involvement in Afghanistan. So, when Barack Obama was inaugurated as president on 20 January 2009, I was the only one watching it on the big screen at the youth centre, while the youths played video games and pool or sat around talking about everyday 'stuff'. The following ethnographic vignette, based on my fieldnotes, describes a typical afternoon at one of the youth centres.

18 September 2007: This afternoon, most of the faces here [at the downtown youth centre] are regulars (mostly Somalis). They have congregated in their usual corner, sitting on the sofa where they are chatting, laughing and playing video games. Most of their conversations are in Somali. However, one of the young Somali men is playing pool with a young Afghan man, and when necessary, they talk English and some Norwegian. Two other Afghan men are [as is often the case in their group] sitting by themselves in another corner of the premises. One Somali man is reading about tomorrow's football match in the [European] Champions League between Chelsea and [the Norwegian team] Rosenborg in VG [a Norwegian tabloid] online using one of the computers here. One other Somali sees this and shouts out, 'Go Rosenborg!' [A few hours later], it's getting more crowded; although there are some young women/girls here, the males are in the majority. Even if there are some people I do not recognise, most are regulars. While everybody interacts when playing a game, people mostly keep to their own ethnic group—more here than at the youth centre in the Valley [where the clientele, on average, is younger]. For instance, two young women from Turkey sit next to each other in front of their respective computers where they chat and flirt with boys (online). One young Somali woman needs help writing her CV as she wants to apply for a job. I also help her with her application (mostly correcting her spelling and grammar). She wants to get a job at a grocery store while she is finishing senior high school. While we sit doing this, she tells me that she has just returned from London, where she lived with an uncle for about six months. When some of the other Somali women see her, they exclaim, 'You're back!?' More Somali women are coming (most of them regulars) and they talk [because I am sitting there, they speak in Norwegian]; it doesn't take long before they are chatting, laughing and flirting with the Somali men (of the same age).

Even if fights and quarrels did occur, most interactions were friendly. However, as Danielsen and Bendixsen (2019) observed in their study of parents in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood and school setting in Bergen, Norway, the relations at the youth centre can also be interpreted through the concept of conviviality, as this 'concept inhabits a tension and "potential ambivalence at the heart of the everydayness of

living together” (Danielsen and Bendixsen, 2019: 3, citing Wise and Noble, reference omitted). The following is typical of the kind of insults that tended to be exchanged among the youths every day at both centres, illustrating how similar practices (re)produce relations of both nearness and distance.

Baha (an Afghan) was sitting and playing cards with a Pakistani male the same age as Baha. Throughout the whole game, Baha called his opponent ‘gay’, which was clearly intended as an insult, albeit a friendly one. Additionally, Baha said while laughing that ‘we [i.e., Afghanistan] own Pakistan’. Baha was a young man who would often speak of his abilities as a street fighter and his experiences from the war in Afghanistan. Moreover, he often challenged me in order to see who could kick the highest and also talked about going to the gym and boasted about how strong he was. In short, he was constantly trying to appear like a masculine tough guy. For such males, being identified as ‘gay’ was not something positive. However, the kind of relations the interlocutors had, or what they knew about each other, largely determined whether it was intended or interpreted as a true insult or as friendly mockery. That Baha did not intend to insult the other player—and the Pakistani did not react in any visible way either—was clear from the fact that while Baha wanted to be considered tough, the other man had already established such a reputation. Baha respected and admired his opponent, who was a member of a gang and drove an expensive car. By calling him ‘gay’ and saying that his group owned Pakistan, Baha tried to create or strengthen a friendship relation so typical of many young males, in which ‘joking’ or ‘fucking’ with each other was the common form of communication. By joking, one demonstrated that one liked the other person. As Baha was, in this case, in the company of an ethnic other, his friendly jokes were rather untypical. When Baha was with his kin (his father’s brother’s sons) and other co-ethnics, they would often fight, but it was fighting amongst brothers (as they said), and they would laugh when doing it. Then they would go for a bite to eat at a nearby inexpensive Pakistani/Indian restaurant or play a game. In short, they would do the things friends often did. However, if another Afghan man from another ethnic group entered, Baha and his kin or co-ethnics teamed up and mocked the other to such an extent that it was evident that the latter was uncomfortable. Moreover, this ethnic other would not be included if Baha and his group then left for the restaurant. To disparage someone, then, was often a signal of trust, and thus of a common social bond or allegiance, but when an individual from another ‘tribe’ entered the ‘interaction order’ (Goffman, 1983), the group would make the newcomer the object of ridicule.

Having said this, the case of Baha and his peers also resembles the findings of ‘relational aggression’, ‘coolness hierarchies’ and ideas about masculinity among Norwegian ‘majority boys’ discussed by Eriksen and Lyng (2018: 400–404). This points to social and cultural similarities between different categories of youths and young males, supporting the more general claim by Andersen and Biseth (2013) and Friberg (2019) that so-called visible minorities living in stigmatised East-End neighbourhoods to a large degree ‘share in the ways of life and projects of the “majority”’ (Andersen and Biseth, 2013: 18; see also Lauglo, 2017: 413). However,

there are ethnic and/or gender differences, as for instance when it comes to participation in organised sports, where far fewer ethnic minority girls are registered members compared to ethnic majority girls and boys in general (Eriksen and Frøyland, 2017: 15–18, 84). Overall, *socio-cultural similarities* exist even though ‘ordinary people’ at times do ‘(re)produce boundaries of nationhood’ (Strømsø, 2018: 15). This holds true even though discrimination does take place (Midtbøen, 2015, 2018) and Oslo is markedly ethnically segregated (Andersen, 2014; Lauglo, 2017; Rogne et al., 2019; Wessel, 2017).

East End take to the streets of Oslo

As noted above, the everyday lives of the young males and females that I observed, talked to and played with could best be described as ‘banal’ in the sense that these individuals were seldom involved in extraordinary events, but instead performed mundane activities and had many of the same aspirations held by majority youths (Andersen and Biseth, 2013; Friberg, 2019; Lauglo, 2017). When some of the youths did bully others, these acts had clear parallels to the ‘relational aggressions’ observed among majority boys (Eriksen and Lyng, 2018). However, in January 2009 one particular event did break this pattern of banality and ordinariness. As noted in the Introduction, after Israeli forces invaded Gaza at the end of 2008, riots erupted in many European cities. Also, in Oslo, many would take to the streets. At the youth club in the Valley, we all knew that something extraordinary would happen one January evening, and especially some of the boys were very excited. One of the reasons we knew this was that several of us (including the anthropologist) had received a text message stating that the restaurant chain McDonald’s would donate all of their profits to Israel so that Israel ‘can kill thousands of innocent children in Gaza’. McDonald’s was therefore singled out as a possible target ‘to destroy’, and it later turned out that it was especially McDonald’s restaurants that bore the brunt of the damage. Anyway, some boys were more thrilled than others, and several of them agreed that they would join the demonstration to ‘make chaos’. One of them also said that they should go there to beat up some Jews, and no one presented objections, not even the adults employed at the centre. After a short while, a group of the young males took the metro downtown. I, however, stayed behind.

While I do not know how many of the males did end up making ‘chaos’, some did return back to the club smelling of the tear gas used by police. During the period of demonstrations, these events were a recurring topic in conversations at the two centres. However, most at the centres were interested in the ‘chaos’ part, less so in the political issues formulated by the organisers which mobilised many youths from different organisations and groupings outside the social worlds of the two centres (see Jacobsen and Andersson, 2012). To illustrate, it can be noted that just a few days after the riots, I left some teenagers at the downtown centre after having helped them with their CVs and turned to talk to one of the young Somali men who had taken part in the demonstrations. As did many others,

journalists tried to understand what it was that had happened during the demonstrations and visited downtown youth clubs to talk to the youths there. Following one such interview, I thought it would be interesting to speak to the young man who had just talked to the journalist. Asad, who lived with his family in a public housing apartment nearby, explained that he did not have any particular reasons for going, but that he felt pressured by some of the social workers at the centre to talk to the journalist. To the journalist, he had stressed that ‘many young people heard about it and thought it was cool to make chaos as they have nothing else to do’. As we talked, Asad briefly mentioned ‘the chaos’, but he was more interested to speak to me about football. Two days later, we met again as Asad wanted my help to write his CV as he is going to apply for a job.

So, while the stories of what happened continued to be told, but with less and less frequency and with fewer and fewer interested listeners in the following weeks, things rather quickly returned to their normal order, and the content of local discussions was again focused on the familiar: parties, school, girls and soccer. However, via newspapers, radio and TV, analyses continued to be communicated. For instance, the head of the Norwegian Centre Against Racism (Bach, 2009) stated that it was primarily ‘youth from the Middle East and North Africa’ who ‘dominated the riots’ on the streets of Oslo. The police added that a large proportion of them came from Oslo’s eastern suburbs (Jenssen, 2009b). Furthermore, it was emphasised that the youths ‘[are] rightly enraged about Israel’s behaviour in Gaza’ (Bach, 2009: 5), but there were also other triggering factors—factors related to the youths’ experience of being excluded in Norway (Moe, 2010). In brief, minority youths from Oslo’s stigmatised East End are excluded and marginalised, which is important if we are to understand why they took to the city centre streets and created chaos (Bach, 2009).

It is important to remark here that there were actually very few people from Oslo’s eastern neighbourhoods who took to the streets and even fewer who rioted. As one of my young informants emphasised, ‘I had to go to work, so I couldn’t take part’. Others could not understand what was happening: ‘I don’t understand why they vandalised the city, Norway hasn’t treated them badly!’ Another point worth repeating is that, both before and after the demonstrations, the youths who took part lived banal or ordinary lives. During fieldwork (before and after the riots) in the inner East End of the city and in the eastern suburbs further out, the atmosphere was not particularly tense, and the young men showed little anger. And during fieldwork in 2015–2019, anger of this kind has not been displayed in everyday conversations, although some, like Baha, do fight with their peers or make trouble in the classroom (based on fieldwork at schools in the Grorud Valley, autumn 2017). Even though I did not pick up any signs of anger, it is possible that people could still be angry without me knowing it, and so ‘fun’ and ‘anger’ could both be possible reasons that youth from the centre took part in the demonstrations. However, in interviews with the police in the eastern suburbs of Grorud Valley (in 2011 and 2016), they emphasised that they had not seen any signs of pent-up rage or organised opposition among youth to society at large.

In a follow-up interview in 2018, the police patrolling a different eastern suburb did nonetheless stress that there were ‘too many with bad attitudes against gays and Jews’ as well as ‘a few with anti-democratic attitudes’. Yet, when it came to the ‘rioters’ they arrested in 2009, none of these individuals have been arrested again. One officer remarked, ‘We have been keeping in touch with some of them, but I think they learned their lesson when we talked to them in 2009’.

Admittedly, I have been able to shed light on only parts of the social context of my research participants, including those who participated in the demonstrations. I still hold that, when examining events such as urban unrest, it is useful to have a broad knowledge of the social environment the ‘rioters’ were part of before and after the unrest took place. In other words, examinations of critical events can benefit from ‘observations of the banality of everyday life’ (Soukup, 2013: 237).

I would like to remark that the term ‘banal’ has been deliberately chosen here, since a lot of the research on segregation and other studies of ethnic minorities often emphasise more ‘dramatic’ or ‘spectacular’ aspects (Bourgois, 1999; Sernhede et al., 2016; Wacquant, 2008), especially the literature linking ‘high levels of residential segregation of foreign-born populations’ and urban unrest (e.g. Malmberg et al., 2013: 1044). ‘Banality’, then, refers to the everyday practices of my research participants and how they perceived or talked about them (Simonsen, 2008). Some of my participants even asked me why I bothered to do fieldwork in their neighbourhood as it was so ‘boring’ (also Holgersson, 2011: 224); a place where nothing happened.

Based on my fieldwork, I would suggest that part of the reason why some youths from eastern neighbourhoods ‘occupied’ some of Oslo’s most exclusive streets for a few hours in January 2009 could be that they sought to break from the ordinary and the occasional ‘dullness’ of everyday life. Few plans were made in advance, but the aforementioned text message alleging McDonald’s intentions to donate profits to Israel could have been seen as an invitation to do something extraordinary. It was also important that rumours spread among the youth that something fun was going to happen, that there was going to be chaos. One of the youths explained that, ‘yes, many of my friends care about Gaza, but the main reason that they went to the city centre was because it was fun and cool’. However, though few of those I met during fieldwork seemed particularly interested in politics, this does not mean that political engagement and concern for the people of Gaza did not motivate the other demonstrators. Other studies have shown strong indications of political motivations among groups in other settings. For example, Jacobsen and Andersson’s study of political engagement among youths in a mosque showed how their research participants took to the streets to show their engagement and protest politically. Jacobsen and Andersson (2012: 838–839) also draw on the prevailing ‘urban rioting explanatory model’ (with reference to Dikeç, 2007) and argue that the events in Oslo can be understood in the same way: The demonstrators expressed, more or less directly, concerns relating not just to oppression and war but also to their own experience of ‘discrimination, marginalisation and racism’ (Jacobsen and Andersson, 2012: 839). I contend that our two

studies can provide *supplementary* explanations for why many different youths from Oslo chose to demonstrate more or less forcefully in 2008 and 2009. Unlike Jacobsen and Andersson, I am unsure whether the more structural analyses such as those presented by Dikeç (2007, 2016) can be used as the *general* explanation of the events in Oslo.

Concluding discussion

An analysis of the extensive discourse about Oslo's East End as a problem area shows that the alleged challenges facing the neighbourhood are closely linked to the socio-economic and ethnic composition of its inhabitants. Even though the prevailing myth alleges that young men from the East End are potential 'trouble-makers' (Andersen, 2014: 149), I claim that the large majority of these young men and older boys live 'normal' and 'banal' lives. They go to school, work or look for work, play football or cricket, watch films, go to cafés and eat ice cream in the upscale waterfront development (Andersen and Røe, 2017), or go swimming at Huk in Bygdøy (the epitome of a West End upper-class neighbourhood). And, as indicated by my 'chance meetings' in 2018, they will probably go to university or be employed, and start a family. Moreover, they spend most of their leisure time within the geographical confines of the East End and settle down here as well (Andersen, 2014; Turner and Wessel, 2013; Wessel et al., 2018), which indicates that many people also like living in these neighbourhoods despite their negative reputation. In fact, some of them clearly express patriotic feelings for their neighbourhood and regard Oslo as *their* city (Andersen and Biseth, 2013), even though many of them probably feel more at home in the East End, where more people 'resemble' themselves (Andersen, 2014).

The goal of this paper has not been to arrive at a general theory on 'urban unrest' but rather to examine how young minority males residing in stigmatised parts of a segregated city lived their lives prior to, during and after the eventful days in late 2008 and early 2009. I claim that such an understanding is useful also when we try to comprehend extraordinary events involving some of those I happened to study. When social scientists look for explanations for social phenomena or events, it is expedient to refrain from reducing the phenomenon to one final explanation. There is, indeed, much to indicate that scholars such as Dikeç (2007, 2016, 2017) are correct in stating that analyses highlighting the importance of structural factors increase our understanding. The case of Oslo cannot be used to contradict findings from France, Sweden and other countries. Jacobsen and Andersson's (2012) findings also support this thesis, as many of their informants took part in the Gaza demonstrations because they were genuinely politically engaged and 'angry' about how the inhabitants of Gaza have been treated by the Israeli authorities. But my own data make me hesitant to see the Oslo demonstrations as, first and foremost, a result of anger or political engagement (based on experiences from living in an unjust society). Even if it is well documented that Oslo is segregated and that many from ethnic minority backgrounds live in

stigmatised neighbourhoods, especially in the Grorud Valley (Aarland et al., 2017: 68), and although many categorised as ‘visible minorities’ suffer from discrimination (Midtbøen, 2018: 349), my observations nevertheless seem to support Lauglo’s (2017: 4, 14) conclusion that ‘the trends do not support fears about ethnic polarisation among adolescents in Oslo’. When some of my informants said that they went to the city centre looking for fun or excitement, there might be reason to take them seriously (see also Ceccato and Haining, 2005). In such cases, the ‘Gaza demonstrations’ can also be understood as a break from the banality of everyday life, an event that, for ‘my’ east enders, has more in common with a carnival (Turner, 1983) than a political mobilisation in pursuit of urban justice. If that is the case, this discussion can be read as a warning against spatial and material determinism: Living in a specific urban area does not determine social practices nor does social disadvantage necessarily make one angry.

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