

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Contention and social order: The historical relation between political and social riot dispositives

Johan Gøtzsche-Astrup

Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

ABSTRACT


The relation between political contention and social order is a fundamental field of sociological inquiry. This article puts forward a dispositive perspective on the relation by analysing its constitution in concrete objects of control. Focusing on the object of riots, I uncover a significant change at the turn of the nineteenth century. Before the change, political and social riot dispositives were both mutually exclusive and in danger of transforming into each other. This meant that riots were sites in which the relation between contention and social order was negotiated. This negotiation was brought to a halt by a new relation. Consequently, political and social riot dispositives could coexist on the condition that riots became a liminal object. This article contributes to our empirical knowledge on the link between political and social dispositives and opens up a new perspective on the general relation between contention and social order.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 28 July 2021; Accepted 18 March 2022

KEYWORDS Contention; riots; Foucault; social order; dispositives

During the protests and riots following the police murder of George Floyd, President Trump tweeted that ‘when the looting starts, the shooting starts’. Trump was invoking the words of Miami police Chief Walter Headly who had used the phrase in 1967 to target ‘young hoodlums, from 15 to 21, who have taken advantage of the civil rights campaign’ (Sprunt, 2020). On the other side of the aisle, Democratic congressional representative Ilhan Omar noted that the rioters were ‘not our protesters’ (Omar in Greenwald, 2020). Coming from different political positions, both statements put riots in a liminal position. Riots are neither political protest nor merely apolitical social disorders.

This effort to distance riots from protests undermines their ability to promote change. It also poses an ontological question for sociologists concerning the relation between political contention and social order

CONTACT Johan Gøtzsche-Astrup  jga@ps.au.dk

© 2022 European Sociological Association

(Lefort, 1988, p. 11). How is contention delineated and connected to other social practices? Although this question is not new (Turner, 1969; Yates, 2015), it has become acute given the rise of anti-austerity as well as anti-racist protests and riots in the last decade (e.g. Della Porta, 2015; Giugni & Grasso, 2015; Martin & Gabay, 2018).

In this article, I home in on how this relation is constituted in control practices. There is a long-running discussion about the connection between political control, focused on actual protest (e.g. Earl, 2011), and social control (e.g. Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2010; Wacquant, 2009). The social control literature tends to subsume political control under social control (e.g. Kienscherf, 2016; Neocleous, 2000), while the political control literature has wrestled with the relation more directly (e.g. Earl, 2004; Oliver, 2008; Piven & Cloward, 1971/1993). It has mostly done so by expanding the definition of political control, bringing phenomena such as vigilantism and labour control into its analyses (e.g. Cunningham, Ward, & Owens, 2019; Delpech, 2015; Earl, 2003; Oliver, 2008).

I offer a culturally inflected dispositive perspective on this discussion. This allows us to analyse how the relation between political and social control is itself historically constituted. Although this does not resolve the real conceptual debates in the control literature, it may inform future work. More importantly, it makes possible a new way of studying and thinking about the relation. I illustrate my perspective by uncovering a historical shift in the relation via the case of riot dispositives. I thereby provide a historical vantage point from which to reconsider the liminality of riots and the interplay between political and social dispositives premised upon it. Ultimately, this feeds into a reconsideration of how contention and social order are delineated and connected.

I first construct a new dispositive perspective on political and social control. Second, I apply this perspective to the history of riot dispositives at the turn of the nineteenth century in England. I identify a reconfiguration of the relation between political and social dispositives that put riots in a liminal position. Third, I discuss how this analysis allows us to rethink the relation between dispositives as well as between contention and social order.

A dispositive perspective on political and social control

I conceptualise social and political control as two dispositives (Foucault, 2007) that structure encounters with necessary contingency (Marchart,

2007). The social dispositive maintains the cohesion threatened by contingency (Castel, 2003), while the political dispositive focuses on the contention that may result from it. We can analyse the relation between social and political control by analysing the relation between these dispositives. I develop this perspective by distinguishing between social and political imperatives of control and through the concept of the dispositive.

Distinguishing imperatives of contention and cohesion

I root my perspective in a post-foundational ontology in which all societal orders are necessarily contingent (Marchart, 2007). Control practices can be understood as ways of encountering this necessary contingency through different strategic imperatives (see Marchart, 2007, p. 22). These imperatives prescribe distinct ways of offering necessary contingency up to thought and action (see Foucault, 1980, p. 195). I see social and political control practices as oriented by two imperatives that inscribe necessary contingency in the internal dynamics of society.

We can develop a social imperative by drawing on Castel's (2003) genealogy of the social question. According to Castel (2003, pp. xix–xx), the social question deals with 'a fundamental aporia through which a society experiences the enigma of its own cohesion and tries to forestall the dangers of its disintegration'. From a post-foundational perspective, the social question makes necessary contingency thinkable and actionable through a *social* imperative concerned with maintaining cohesion and preventing disintegration.

I suggest we distinguish the social from a *political* imperative. The political imperative relates necessary contingency to contention, a conflict internal to society. This imperative is at the centre of agonistic democratic theory (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Paxton, 2020). However, it is also embedded in control practices. For example, protest policing practices maintain order by managing conflicts between protest communities (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021). In these practices, necessary contingency is made thinkable and actionable as a political problem of contention and not cohesion.¹

To be clear, these overarching social and political imperatives are themselves historical products. However, they predate the period analysed here. Castel (2003, p. xxi) shows this in the case of the social imperative. The prevalence of civic republican thought, which emphasised conflict (Pocock, 1975), and the widespread legitimacy of some forms

of crowd intervention at the beginning of the eighteenth century (see Stevenson, 1992) suggest a similar conclusion for the political imperative. I therefore analyse historical shifts in the imperatives and their relation but not their historical emergence.

Embedding the imperatives in dispositives

We can analyse the relation between social and political imperatives through Foucault's concept of the dispositive. There are many discussions of the dispositive (e.g. Agamben, 2009; Deleuze, 1992). Here, I draw on the recent exposition in organisation studies, which foregrounds relations between dispositives (Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer, & Thaning, 2016; Villadsen, 2021). Foucault (1980) described a dispositive as a 'heterogeneous ensemble' of discourses, institutions, laws, and ways of knowing that form to meet an 'urgent need' (p. 195). These practices are bound together by a shared strategic imperative that disposes without determining them (Villadsen, 2021, p. 477). Analysing dispositives brings out how this prescriptive dimension creates regularities in becoming (Raffnsøe et al., 2016, p. 278). That is, we do not attempt to capture the fullness of practices but to (re)construct the imperatives that were partly actualised in them (Villadsen, 2021, p. 475).

I prefer the dispositive to the concepts of control (Earl, 2004), repression (Davenport, 2007) or governance (Peterson & Wahlström, 2015) for two reasons. First, it acknowledges that control practices are 'epistemologically distinct': they differ in how they render the world amenable to observation and intervention (Dean & Villadsen, 2016, p. 98). In a dispositive analysis, we can therefore distinguish between practices that actualise a political imperative of contention and a social imperative of cohesion (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2022a). This distinction crosscuts Foucault's (2007, pp. 1–86) own distinction between dispositives of law, discipline, and security. For example, the imperative of 'normation' (Foucault, 2007, p. 57) in a disciplinary dispositive can be centred around a norm of cohesion, such as ensuring that the poor are employed, or contention, such as keeping a protest peaceful.

Second, we can analyse relations between dispositives by asking how they construct the same object (Foucault, 1980, p. 195; Villadsen, 2021, pp. 476–479). In the case analysed here, riots are constructed through distinct imperatives of cohesion and contention. These different constructions may engender a series of conflicts or relations of support between the dispositives (Foucault, 2007, p. 8). It is by paying attention to how

these constructions intersect that we can analyse the relation between political and social dispositives.

The analytical perspective makes possible a sociological analysis of the relations between political and social dispositives. This gives us a window into how societies encounter their necessary contingency as well as how, in this encounter, they delineate and connect contention and social order.

The changing relations in riots

I apply this perspective to the object of riots, which have been at the centre of discussions on political and social control (e.g. Oliver, 2008; Piven & Cloward, 1992) and the relation between contention and social order (Hörnqvist, 2016; Thörn, Mayer, & Thörn, 2016). Riots have a liminal quality, not quite political or social objects, making them an exemplary case for understanding the relation between political and social dispositives.

I trace their liminality back to a shift in the relation at the turn of the nineteenth century in England. The case saw the emergence of modern protest politics, which spread to many liberal democracies (Tarrow, 2011; Tilly, 1995), alongside new ways of regulating poverty (Dean, 1991; Neocleous, 2000), which became consolidated in England and influenced the institutionalisation of police forces in other countries such as the United States (Vitale, 2017). While we cannot simply transfer this analysis beyond England, the case provides a key historical vantage point from which we can reconsider the relation between political and social dispositives.

In this analysis, I focus on the movement for parliamentary reform and the attempts at police reform. These were influential in the development of protest politics (Rogers, 1998, pp. 212–213) and the regulation of poverty (Dean, 1991; Dodsworth, 2019, pp. 129–187). More importantly, they were centrally concerned with the problem of riots. Parliamentary reformers were faced with the dilemma of how their own contention related to riots (Rogers, 1998). Police reformers sought to change both the particular institutions dealing with riots, centred on local magistrates empowered by the Riot Act 1714 (Stevenson, 1992), and to tackle the overall moral disorder out of which riots were seen to emerge (Dodsworth, 2019, p. 156). Although this focus does not capture the complete universe of riots in this period, it does give us a rich perspective on the interplay between political and social dispositives.

I began the analysis by creating an archive of pamphlets, treatises, and internal constitutional documents by sampling texts that touched on the regulation of riots. I sampled in three ways; through the influential reviews of the period, which indexed the most prominent texts, the secondary historical literature, and a thorough archival study of the Wilkes and Liberty campaign and the London Corresponding Society. These two cases were chosen because my preliminary analyses and the extant literature indicated that they illustrated two distinct ways in which riots were constructed. This gave me an archive of 151 texts that I read through. I selected particularly influential texts for an in-depth analysis of how riots were constructed (Villadsen, 2021, p. 483). Here, I drew on Bacchi's (2012) 'What is the Problem Represented to be' approach, which shares the Foucauldian emphasis on construction. I note that my analytical strategy privileges discourses because they offer a clear way of delineating strategic imperatives. In order to ensure that the imperatives were actually embedded in control practices, I sought to relate them to these practices through the secondary historical literature.

This analysis outlines two successive relations. I call the first *a game of reversals*. It related a social dispositive, exemplified by attempts at police reform, with a political one, articulated in the push for parliamentary reform surrounding John Wilkes' election in the 1760s (Brewer, 1976, pp. 163–216; Rudé, 1962). At the turn of the century, a new relation of *double liminality* slowly emerged. It joined a social dispositive, exemplified by the police and moral reformer Patrick Colquhoun who influenced the New Police of 1829 and the Poor Law of 1834 (Dean, 1991, p. 174; Neocleous, 2000, pp. 51–56), with a new political dispositive. The political dispositive took shape in the London Corresponding Society (LCS), the leading organisation for parliamentary reform in the 1790s and a 'paragon' of mass protest, whose example would be influential in the revival of the mass platform following the Napoleonic Wars (Davis, 2015, p. 156; see also Rudé, 2005, p. 246).

A game of reversals

Before the American Revolution of 1776, the Gordon Riots of 1780 and the French Revolution of 1789, riots could be approached through the framework of constitutional corruption. To contemporaries, the constitution prescribed a balance between the monarch, the aristocracy in the House of Lords, and the people represented in the House of Commons. Corruption was an imbalance produced through, for

example, the growth of luxury among the people or the dependence of parliament on patronage (Dodsworth, 2004, p. 205; Pocock, 1975, p. 408). This problem of corruption is the starting point for the dispositives. Below, I first outline how the social dispositive connected riots to the people's corruption. I then turn to the political dispositive, in which riots were exercises of public spirit against governmental corruption. I outline their relation as a *game of reversals* wherein the dispositives were mutually exclusive and in danger of transforming into one another.

The social dispositive focused on the people's corruption, a widespread concern in the period and especially in the campaign for police reform. In the period under analysis, police had a broader meaning than just an institutional police force. It referred to a system of moral regulation and, more generally still, the regulation of a city (Dean, 1991, pp. 55–57; Dodsworth, 2019, p. 156). I use Henry Fielding's *Enquiry into the Cause of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1751) to exemplify the campaign for police reform because the text was a key reference for reformers (Dodsworth, 2004, p. 205; Hitchcock & Shoemaker, 2015, p. 209).

For Fielding, riots belonged to 'those Evils which have arisen in the lower Branches of our Constitution' (Fielding, 1751, p. vii). They were 'political disorders' (Fielding, 1751, p. 2) because they threatened the body politic with dissolution through 'wild Notions of Liberty that are inconsistent with all Government' (Fielding, 1751, p. xxx). However, riots were constructed inside a social dispositive concerned with cohesion and not contention. For police reformers, riots and crimes were prevented by kerbing 'the Luxury of the lower People, to force the Poor to Industry, and to provide for them when industrious' (Fielding, 1751, p. 197). Riots were the manifestation of a constitutional corruption located in the people's moral disintegration. Rehearsing a common trope (Dodsworth, 2007), this disintegration was often presented as being caused by a growth of trade. As Fielding himself wrote:

... [trade] hath indeed given a new Face to the whole Nation, hath in a great measure subverted the former state of Affairs, and hath almost totally changed the Manners, Customs, and Habits of the People. More especially of the lower Sort. The Narrowness of their Fortune is changed into Wealth; the Simplicity of their Manners into Craft; their Frugality into Luxury; their Humility into Pride, and their Subjection into Equality. (Fielding, 1751, p. xxiii)

More specifically, trade resulted in the lower orders giving way to the 'Temptation' of festivals and public houses (Fielding, 1751, p. 9). This corrupted their morals and resulted in riots and crime.

When riots broke out, they had to be repressed by magistrates. However, this was a last resort. Instead, the police were to focus on the moral reformation of the lower orders, which would prevent the corruption made manifest in these riots. This social dispositive was not confined to utopian reform schemes but shared and actualised by the movements for the reformation of manners and civil government in general (e.g. Burt, 2006, pp. 124–127; Dodsworth, 2008, p. 603; Hunt, 1999, p. 30).

The political dispositive reversed the connection between riots and corruption. Riots were exercises of public spirit opposed to governmental corruption (Bolingbroke, 1844/1967a, p. 427). This was expressed in the contention surrounding Wilkes and drew on a tradition of ‘Country’ critique (Burt, 2006, pp. 16–19; Pocock, 1985, pp. 73–80; Robbins, 1968). The dispositive was, however, more than a discourse of critique. Although it was never as organisationally rooted as the social one, it was actualised in practices. Magistrates and rioters often agreed on the need to exercise public spirit in defence of the rights of the freeborn English (Randall, 2006, pp. 17–19; Thompson, 2013, p. 87).

In the political dispositive, riots were problems of contention and not cohesion. Riots were inscribed in the struggle between public spirit (also called a spirit of liberty or freedom) and the corrupt ‘spirit of domination’ that Bolingbroke (1844/1967b, p. 90) spoke of in *A Dissertation upon Parties* from the 1730s, a key reference during the Wilkes contention. Riots were one way a spirited people defended the constitution. Joseph Towers (1769, p. 11), arguing in favour of Wilkes, makes this explicit:

With respect to riots, however, irregular they may be in their own nature, and however dangerous, it is impossible to prevent them in a country where the spirit of Freedom is predominant, if those who have the management of public affairs labour to pervert and to violate the laws of the land, and disregard the spirit of the constitution.

Likewise, an anonymous pamphleteer noted that: ‘the nation is in a *ferment*, which must increase in proportion to the prejudices and apprehensions of a free and spirited people’ (Anonymous, 1768, p. 26). Although riots were not necessarily productive manifestations of public spirit, they were constructed in relation to it.

It was through this relation to public spirit that riots could be controlled. Bolingbroke (1844/1967b, p. 57) outlined a general maxim for this control:

... it is the duty of those who govern, to discern the spirit of the people, to consider even their passions, to have a regard to their weaknesses, and to show

indulgence to their prejudices, and that ministers who punish what they might prevent, are more culpable than those who offend.

Riots were to be controlled by governing according to the people's spirit. This meant purging the corruption against which the rioters reacted. In the case of Wilkes, it meant restoring his seat in the House of Commons and removing parliament's dependence on the crown (Towers, 1769, pp. 21–22). In any particular riot, the magistrates should listen to the rioters and could even side with them (Reynolds, 1998, p. 32). While the social dispositive sought to reintegrate the lower orders, the political one adjusted itself to the people's public spirit.

How were the dispositives related to each other through these constructions of riots? On the one hand, the dispositives were mutually exclusive. The link between riots and corruption in the social dispositive was the mirror image of that found in the political dispositive. The former connected riots to the people's corruption, while riots were exercises of public spirit opposed to corruption in the latter. Riots could not simultaneously be manifestations of and exercises against corruption. On the other hand, the dispositives could subvert themselves and transform into each other. The social dispositive could worsen corruption and riots were not necessarily public-spirited in the political one.

For the social dispositive, this became clear in the repression of riots. In kerbing the people's corruption, the dispositive could upset the constitutional balance (Anonymous, 1768, p. 19). The Riot Act of 1715, which strengthened the powers of the magistrates, became the fulcrum of precisely this back and forth (Nippel, 1985). The proposed system of police was a source of corruption as well. Its bureaucratic organisation, staffed by specialised and salaried officers, broke with the constitutional ideal of a public-spirited citizen militia. The police reformers argued that their system was a necessary adjustment of the ideal in a commercial country. However, this was consistently challenged (Dodsworth, 2004, p. 206; McCormack, 2012; Reynolds, 1998, p. 74). In short, the social dispositive, which tackled corruption among the people, could engender the governmental corruption that the political dispositive addressed. A problem of cohesion transformed into one of contention.

This danger of reversal was also acute in the political dispositive. Riots could become so tumultuous that they stopped being exercises of public spirit and threatened the constitution they purported to uphold, as the 1780 Gordon riots revealed. Even in defending the Wilkes contention, the anonymous pamphleteer quoted earlier framed the people behind it as:

... the alarmed public, who are of more consequence in the state than what inflammatory people call the *Mob* or *Rabble*. By people I mean the middle order of the nation; which, as Dr. Goldsmith justly observes, is known to be the truest preserver of freedom and wherein consists the arts, wisdom, and virtues of society. (Anonymous, 1768, p. 49)

The quote reveals a deep uncertainty about the boundary between public-spirited action and social disorder, which was a recurring problem in the period (see Rogers, 1998, p. 18). Riots could become manifestations of corruption instead of exercises of public spirit. A problem of contention transformed into one of cohesion.

The relation between political and social dispositives was characterised by a mutual exclusivity and a risk of transformation, resulting in a *game of reversals*. The historical literature has seen riots as sites of negotiation between paternalist authorities and rioters defending their rights (e.g. Randall, 2006; Thompson, 1991). I suggest that they were also sites of a different negotiation with ontological stakes. In riots, two ways of encountering necessary contingency met, clashed, and displaced each other. When magistrates and rioters, alongside police and parliamentary reformers, drew the boundary between public-spirited action and corrupt disorder, they were negotiating the relation between contention and social order. It was an open negotiation in which any answer was provisional because the possibility of reversal was always present.

A double liminality

During the last part of the eighteenth century, structural changes such as population growth, market consolidation, and political centralisation put the old dispositives under pressure (see Tilly, 1995, pp. 365–366). For instance, growing urbanisation alongside the expansion of the proletariat made the status of the lower orders deeply problematic (Tilly, 1995, p. 366). This spurred efforts at police reform (Neocleous, 2000, p. 16) and raised the question of how parliamentary reformers should relate to riots (Davis, 2008, p. 26). Key events such as the American Revolution, the Gordon Riots, and the French Revolution also made magistrates and authorities in general increasingly fearful of riots (Thompson, 1991, p. 249).

However, the old dispositives were not automatically replaced. Police reformers followed the track laid out by Fielding even after the Gordon Riots (Dodsworth, 2004; McCormack, 2012). It was slowly institutionalised, exemplified by the Bow Street Runners of 1749, a proliferation of

local watchmen, and the Middlesex Justices Act of 1792, which introduced six new Police Offices (Reynolds, 1998). Furthermore, the new technique of political association (Black, 1963; Goodwin, 1979) did not break with the dispositive of public spirit. The texts on association (Burgh, 1775; Hulme, 1771) do not distinguish between inquiry and riots in the way discussed below. Rather, when parliamentary reformers addressed the Gordon Riots, they called for public-spirited citizens to suppress riots (e.g. Jones, 1782).

The shift in the relation between social and political dispositives was therefore connected to, but not determined by, structural changes and seminal events. It can be seen as a contingent consequence of police reformers struggling with the regulation of poverty in the context of urbanisation and a growing proletariat and parliamentary reformers attempting to incorporate a new class of citizen. Below, I analyse this shift by outlining a social dispositive of indigence, a political dispositive focused on public inquiry, and the new relation of *double liminality*.

The social dispositive of indigence resembled its predecessor in some ways. Both were concerned with the moral regulation of the poor and the construction of a police system. Moreover, the civic ideals reoccurred in this new dispositive (Dodsworth, 2007, p. 447). However, there was a fundamental change in the construction of riots. They were connected to indigence and not constitutional corruption (see Dean, 1991, p. 174; Neocleous, 2000, pp. 51–56). We can see this in the reform efforts of Colquhoun, who was active in the movements for police and moral reform (Hunt, 1999, p. 69; Innes, 2009, pp. 179–226) and influenced by the new science of political economy (Barrie, 2008). In singling out Colquhoun, I do not suggest that subsequent police or poor law reformers merely implemented his ideas. Rather, he exemplifies a new way of constructing riots through an imperative of cohesion.

For Colquhoun (1806b, p. 42), riots were public felonies ‘having peculiar relation to the State’. These felonies were rooted in ‘Private Offences’ produced by indigence and not poverty. Colquhoun’s break with previous reformers lay in his development of this distinction, which took centre stage in the 7th edition of *A treatise on the police of the metropolis* and *A treatise on indigence*, both published in 1806 (Neocleous, 2000, p. 52). According to Colquhoun (1806a, p. 7), ‘Poverty is that state and condition in society where the individual has no surplus labour in store, and, consequently, no property but what is derived from the constant exercise of industry’. It was a necessary condition in society because it was ‘the source of *wealth*’ (Colquhoun, 1806a, p. 7). This differed from

indigence, 'that condition in society which implies *want, misery, and distress*. It is the state of any one who is destitute of the means of subsistence, and is unable to procure it to the extent nature requires' (Colquhoun, 1806a, p. 8).

The relation between riots and indigence was complex: riots were both a part of and a break with the condition of indigence. Colquhoun (1806b, p. 36) noted that 'from indigence is to be traced the great Origin and the Progress of Crimes'. Riots were rooted in indigence. At the same time, Colquhoun distinguished those who had descended into indigence from 'another numerous class, rendered noxious, offensive, and even dangerous, in consequence of depraved morals and criminal turpitude' (Colquhoun, 1806a, p. 33). Rioters belonged to this class of people who had their origin in indigence but had broken with it. They were not a part of the community in which poverty could descend into indigence but were 'at war with the Community' (Colquhoun, 1806b, p. 510). Riots were a liminal object, both inside and outside the condition of indigence (see Rose, 1996).

This liminality was actualised in practices that managed indigence to prevent riots and crime: 'The great art, therefore, in managing the affairs of the Poor is to establish Systems whereby the poor man, verging upon indigence, may be propped up and kept in his station' (Colquhoun, 1806b, p. 366). This was to be accomplished through a criminal police, similar to that instituted in 1829, charged with both the detection of crimes and the regulation of alehouses, pawnbrokers, and friendly societies (Colquhoun, 1806b, pp. 501–564). Colquhoun also argued for a municipal police tasked with paving, sewerage, and the regulation and education of the poor (Colquhoun, 1806b, pp. 565–601). This suggestion would influence the Poor Law of 1834 (Neocleous, 2000, pp. 66–68). Although Colquhoun's own proposals were never directly implemented (Dodsworth, 2019, p. 170), the imperative he exemplifies was.

Alongside Colquhoun's reform efforts, a political dispositive took shape in the parliamentary reform movement. This is illustrated by the LCS, the leading reform organisation of the 1790s. In contrast to previous organisations, it incorporated the lower orders in the push for reform. In the repressive environment of the 1790s, it faced the problem of riots in a way that its predecessors had not. This laid the groundwork for a new construction of riots inside a dispositive centred on public inquiry. Riots were no longer exercises of public spirit but the outcome of a public inquiry gone wrong (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2022b).

Public inquiry was characterised by an orderly exercise of reason aimed at political education and was conducted in the LCS's private and public meetings (e.g. Thelwall, 1795). At a public meeting in 1795, the reformer John Gale Jones summed up the focus on inquiry: 'with nations as with individuals, it sometimes happens that the *Hour of Danger is the Hour of Inquiry*' (LCS, 1795/2002b, p. 69). This process of orderly inquiry was also embedded in the society's original constitution, which held.

That this Society do express their abhorrence of Tumult and Violence, aiming at Reform, not Anarchy, Reason, Firmness, and Unanimity are the only arms they themselves will employ, or persuade their Fellow Citizens, to exert, against ABUSE OF POWER. (LCS, 1792/2002a, p. 79)

Riots were in a position of liminality similar to that in the dispositive of indigence. They were constructed in relation to a process of inquiry and subverted this process, marking its tumble into an inarticulate violence. John Thelwall, the LCS's main intellectual force, put this clearly:

When men are forbidden to seek redress from reason and enquiry, they have no other resource but to break their chains on the heads of their oppressors: they are obliged to plunge into tumult and violence before they can begin to speak; and when tumult and violence begin, the level course of reason and enquiry cannot properly flow. (Thelwall, 1795, p. 16)

Preventing riots was essential for the LCS because they defined themselves explicitly as 'Reformers no rioters' (LCS, 1794/2002c), opposing their contention to riots. The LCS's concern with civility (Davis, 2015; Thale, 1983, p. xxviii) helped them manage their contention and prevent its riotous destruction. A proposal for organisational reform provides a stark example: 'When decision is taken by a shew of hands every member shall give his vote silently by shewing one hand: The practice of shewing both hands, or of calling all! all! or other such exclamations are tumultuous, indecent, and utterly unwarrantable' (LCS, 1794/2002d, p. 338). Although the practice of the LCS was more raucous than this account suggests (Davis, 2008, p. 33), the organisation did regulate their contentious conduct through the distinction between inquiry and riots.

This dispositive, which slowly took shape in the LCS, would be influential in the revival of the mass platform after the Napoleonic Wars. Moreover, the distinction between inquiry and riots could travel from the contentious actors to the authorities charged with their control. The New Police of 1829 developed techniques of crowd control that

would allow protest so long as it did not escalate into riots (Miller, 1999, pp. 12–16).

Having outlined the two dispositives of indigence and inquiry, we can now ask how their emergence changed the relation between social and political dispositives. The riots related these to each other through their *double liminality* and not a game of reversals. This liminality prevented the transformation of one imperative into the other. It also halted the negotiation between two ways of making sense of and acting on the necessary contingency of society.

Any particular riot could simultaneously be constructed in relation to indigence and inquiry because the social and political dispositives were not mutually exclusive. Public inquiry could not collapse into indigence and vice versa because they did not share the common reference of constitutional corruption. This meant that the imperatives of contention and cohesion were divorced in a way they had not been previously. We can see this as one factor in the slow stabilisation of protest politics (see Tilly, 1995).

This divorce also resulted in the eruption of riots eluding both imperatives. The riots were no longer part of a process of social disintegration or of people contending. They stood outside the community and society, as we saw in Colquhoun's dismissal of the noxious class and the LCS's distinction between themselves and rioters. To be clear, they still raised the question of the relation between social order and contention, remaining an object of fierce debate with ontological stakes. However, it became increasingly difficult to resolve this debate by labelling a riot as a clearly political practice or merely a form of social disorder (see Silver, 1967). Riots were always already different from a political practice of inquiry and the social problem of indigence.

Opening a new dimension in contention and social order

The relation between social and political control can be seen as an empirical and historical problem concerning the relation between different ways of encountering the necessary contingency of society. Specifically, how dispositives focused on cohesion and contention construct the same objects. I summarise how this perspective enriches our understanding of the relation and conclude by discussing its contemporary configuration.

The historical transformation

The turn of the nineteenth century saw a transformation in the relation between social and political dispositives. Before the transformation, social and political dispositives were related through a *game of reversals* in which a social dispositive approached riots as the manifestation of corruption and a political dispositive saw riots as a public-spirited action opposed to governmental corruption. These dispositives were mutually exclusive as riots could not simultaneously manifest and oppose corruption. They could also transform into each other. In kerbing the people's corruption, the social dispositive could inadvertently create governmental corruption. Likewise, in addressing the government's corruption, riots could become too extreme, revealing a corrupt people. This made riots the sites of an ontological negotiation about the boundary between contention and social order.

The development of new social and political dispositives at the end of the eighteenth century changed this relation. A social dispositive took shape around the condition of indigence. Riots were both inside and outside this condition. Likewise, a political dispositive emerged in which riots were both connected to and distinct from the process of public inquiry. The dispositives were related through the riots' *double liminality*. Riots were outcomes of and breaks with indigence and inquiry. These dispositives no longer transformed into each other because the eruption of riots escaped them. This stabilised protest politics, which was clearly distinguished from riots and social disorder. It also made it increasingly difficult to resolve the question of whether any particular riot was political or merely a form of social disorder.

Although the new dispositives did not dominate society or continue unchanged until the present day, they are similar to current riot dispositives. For example, the 2011 England Riots were both related to and distinct from a dynamic of community disintegration and of protest escalation by a series of dispositives traversing the state (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021). This connection to and delineation from social dynamics of community disintegration (Bagguley & Hussain, 2008, p. 120) and political dynamics of protest escalation (King & Waddington, 2004) is widespread. The analysis deepens our understanding of why riots are so difficult to pin down as either protests or social disorders. They are in a relation of double liminality that is deeply embedded in the dispositives that structure encounters with necessary contingency and delineate contention and social order.

Reconsidering the relation

The dispositive perspective is a culturally inflected approach to the relation between political and social control. To be clear, there are important conceptual debates in the extant control literature (e.g. Cunningham et al., 2019; Delpech, 2015; Earl, 2003; 2011; Oliver, 2008) that cannot be resolved through the dispositive perspective. Although the perspective may inform these debates, its main contribution lies in carving out a new way of asking and answering questions about the relation. It homes in on the historical constitution and shift in the relation between political and social control and, more generally, contention and social order (see Turner, 1969). We can trace how contentious practices are constituted, delineated, and changed through societal encounters with contingency.

The ultimate promise of this way of thinking is that it may contribute to a reconfiguration of the current relation between contention and social order. The case analysed here proved influential for the development of protest politics and the regulation of poverty in and beyond England (e.g. Dean, 1991; Tilly, 1995). At the same time, we should be wary of simply transferring the substantial conclusions made here to other cases and historical trajectories. Hörnqvist's (2016) analysis of the 2013 Stockholm Riots suggests a different way of making sense of riots in which they can be configured as intelligible political practices. Likewise, the recent Black Lives Matter contention in the US and the UK was not only marked by the problem of double liminality. It also suggested a way of making sense of riots as political practices that were not categorically different from ordinary protests (Boonen, 2020).

The historical analysis can become effective in this contemporary context by jolting a reflection on the relation between contention and social order in the case of riots. The relation of double liminality stabilised a set of contentious practices around protest politics, which were clearly distinct from social disorder. The integrity of these practices is necessary in a democratic society (Mouffe, 2005). However, this meant breaking up the game of reversals and halting the ontological negotiation in riots. The problem that the current riots pose is how we can reconfigure the relation between contention and social order in a way that maintains the integrity of contention without confining riots to a liminal position. This analysis suggests that it may be necessary to rearticulate the game of reversals in our own time, acknowledging that riots can sometimes be both destructive and public-spirited.

Note

1. There is a different imperative that can be called political in a radical sense, which I do not discuss. In this, conflict is not internal to society but seen as an enemy outside society (Mouffe, 2005).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Aarhus University, Department of Political Science Internal Grant.

References

- Agamben, G. (2009). *What is an apparatus and other essays*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Anonymous. (1768). A letter to an august assembly, on the present posture of affairs: Wherein the hard treatment of Mr. Wilkes, and the cause of riots, are duly considered, and remedies provided. London: L. Tomlinson.
- Bacchi, C. (2012). Why Study Problematizations? Making Politics Visible. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 2(1), 1–8.
- Bagguley, P., & Hussain, Y. (2008). *Riotous citizens: Ethnic conflict in multicultural Britain*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Barrie, D. G. (2008). Patrick Colquhoun, the Scottish Enlightenment and police reform in Glasgow in the late eighteenth century. *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés*, 12(2), 59–79.
- Black, E. C. (1963). *The association: British extraparliamentary political organization, 1769–1793*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bolingbroke, H. (1967a). *The works of Lord Bolingbroke I*. London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd. (Original work published 1844).
- Bolingbroke, H. (1967b). *The works of Lord Bolingbroke II*. London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd. (Original work published 1844).
- Boonen, C. (2020). At the outer limits of democratic division: On citizenship, conflict and violence in the work of Chantal Mouffe and Étienne Balibar. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 33(2), 529–544.
- Brewer, J. (1976). *Party ideology and popular politics at the accession of George III*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burgh, J. (1775). *Political disquisitions: Or, an enquiry into public errors, defects, and abuses*. London: Edward and Charles Dilly.
- Burt, S. (2006). *Virtue transformed: Political argument in England, 1688–1740*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Castel, R. (2003). *From manual workers to wage laborers: Transformation of the social question*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Colquhoun, P. (1806a). *A treatise on indigence*. London: J. Watchard.
- Colquhoun, P. (1806b). *A treatise on the police of the metropolis (7th ed.)*. London: Bye and Law.
- Cunningham, D., Ward, G., & Owens, P. B. (2019). Configuring political repression: Anti-civil rights enforcement in Mississippi. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 24(3), 319–343.
- Davenport, C. (2007). State repression and political order. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10(1), 1–23.
- Davis, M. T. (2008). The mob club? The London Corresponding Society and the politics of civility in the 1790s. In M. T. Davis, & P. A. Pickering (Eds.), *Unrespectable radicals?* (pp. 21–40). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Davis, M. T. (2015). Reformers no rioters': British radicalism and mob identity in the 1790s. In M. T. Davis (Ed.), *Crowd actions in Britain and France from the Middle Ages to the modern world* (pp. 146–162). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dean, M. (1991). *The constitution of poverty*. London: Routledge.
- Dean, M., & Villadsen, K. (2016). *State phobia and Civil Society: The political legacy of Michel Foucault*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1992). What is a dispositif? In T. J. Armstrong (Ed.), *Michel Foucault: Philosopher* (pp. 159–168). New York: Routledge.
- Della Porta, D. (2015). *Social movements in times of austerity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Delpach, Q. (2015). Concealed repressions: Labor organizing campaigns and anti-union practices in the apparel industry of Guatemala. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 20(3), 325–344.
- Dodsworth, F. M. (2004). 'Civic' police and the condition of liberty: The rationality of governance in eighteenth-century England. *Social History*, 29(2), 199–216.
- Dodsworth, F. M. (2007). Police and the prevention of crime: Commerce, temptation and the corruption of the body politic, from Fielding to Colquhoun. *British Journal of Criminology*, 47(3), 439–454.
- Dodsworth, F. M. (2008). The idea of police in eighteenth-century England: Discipline, reformation, superintendence, c. 1780–1800. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69(4), 583–604.
- Dodsworth, F. M. (2019). *The security society: History, patriarchy, protection*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Earl, J. (2003). Tanks, tear gas, and taxes: Toward a theory of movement repression. *Sociological Theory*, 21(1), 44–68.
- Earl, J. (2004). Controlling protest: New directions for research on the social control of protest. *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change*, 25, 55–83.
- Earl, J. (2011). Political repression: Iron fists, velvet gloves, and diffuse control. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37(1), 261–284.
- Fielding, H. (1751). *An enquiry into the causes of the late increase of robbers, &c (2nd ed.)*. London: A Millar.
- Foucault, M. (1980). The confession of the flesh. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge* (pp. 194–228). New York: Pantheon Books.

- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giugni, M., & Grasso, M. T. (2015). *Austerity and protest: Popular contention in times of economic crisis*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Goodwin, J. (1979). *The friends of liberty: The English democratic movement in the age of the French Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gøtzsche-Astrup, J. (2021). The political signification of riots: A dispositive perspective on the 2011 England riots. *Journal of Sociology*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/14407833211037399.
- Gøtzsche-Astrup, J. (2022a). A sociological perspective on the experience of contention. *Sociological Theory*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/07352751221097115.
- Gøtzsche-Astrup, J. (2022b). The constitution of political contention: The case of protests and riots at the turn of the 19th century. *Current Sociology*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/00113921221084359.
- Greenwald, G. (2020, June 4). What is the goal of the protests, and which tactics are morally justified and strategically wise? *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/04/what-is-the-goal-of-the-protests-and-which-tactics-are-morally-justified-and-strategically-wise/>
- Hitchcock, T., & Shoemaker, R. (2015). *London lives: Poverty, crime and the making of a modern city, 1690–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hörnqvist, M. (2016). Riots in the welfare state: The contours of a modern-day moral economy. *European Journal of Criminology*, 13(5), 573–589.
- Hulme, O. (1771). *An historical essay on the English constitution*. London: Edward and Charles Dilly.
- Hunt, A. (1999). *Governing morals: A social history of moral regulations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Innes, J. (2009). *Inferior politics: Social problems and social policies in eighteenth-century England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, W. (1782). *An inquiry into the legal mode of suppressing riots*. London: C. Dilly.
- Kienscherf, M. (2016). Beyond militarization and repression: Liberal social control as pacification. *Critical Sociology*, 42(7–8), 1179–1194.
- King, M., & Waddington, D. (2004). Coping with disorder? The changing relationship between police public order strategy and practice—a critical analysis of the burnley riot. *Policing and Society*, 14(2), 118–137.
- LCS. (2002a). The London Corresponding society's addresses and resolutions. In M. T. Davis (Ed.), *London Corresponding Society I* (pp. 77–81). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1792).
- LCS. (2002b). Narrative of the proceedings at a general meeting of the London Corresponding society. In M. T. Davis (Ed.), *London Corresponding Society II* (pp. 67–81). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1795).
- LCS. (2002c). Reformers no rioters. In M. T. Davis (Ed.), *London Corresponding Society I* (pp. 289–296). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1794).
- LCS. (2002d). The report &c. In M. T. Davis (Ed.), *London Corresponding Society I* (pp. 335–349). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1794).
- Lefort, C. (1988). *Democracy and political theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Marchart, O. (2007). *Post-foundational political thought: Political difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Martin, I. M., & Gabay, N. (2018). Tax policy and tax protest in 20 rich democracies, 1980–2010. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 69(3), 647–669.
- McCormack, M. (2012). Supporting the civil power: Citizen soldiers and the Gordon Riots. *The London Journal*, 37(1), 27–41.
- Miller, W. R. (1999). *Cops and bobbies: Police authority in New York and London, 1830–1870 (2nd ed.)*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. Abindon: Routledge.
- Neocleous, M. (2000). *The fabrication of social order: A critical theory of police power*. London: Pluto Press.
- Nippel, W. (1985). “Reading the riot act”: The discourse of law-enforcement in 18th century England. *History and Anthropology*, 1(2), 399–426.
- Oliver, P. (2008). Repression and crime control: Why social movement scholars should pay attention to mass incarceration as a form of repression. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 13(1), 1–24.
- Paxton, M. (2020). *Agonistic democracy: Rethinking political institutions in pluralist times*. London: Routledge.
- Peterson, A., & Wahlström, M. (2015). Repression: The governance of domestic dissent. In D. Della Porta, & M. Diani (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of social movements* (pp. 634–652). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (1992). Normalizing collective protest. In A. Morris, & C. Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in social movement theory* (pp. 301–325). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (1993). *Regulating the poor: The functions of public welfare*. New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1971).
- Pocock, J. G. A. (1975). *The Machiavellian moment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Pocock, J. G. A. (1985). *Virtue, commerce, and history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raffnsøe, S., Gudmand-Høyer, M., & Thaning, M. S. (2016). Foucault’s dispositive: The perspicacity of dispositive analytics in organizational research. *Organization*, 23(2), 272–298.
- Randall, A. (2006). *Riotous assemblies: Popular protest in Hanoverian England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reynolds, E. A. (1998). *Before the bobbies: The night watch and police reform in metropolitan London, 1720–1830*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Robbins, C. (1968). *The eighteenth century commonwealthman*. New York: Atheneum.
- Rogers, N. (1998). *Crowds, culture, and politics in Georgian Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Rose, N. (1996). The death of the social? Re-figuring the territory of government. *Economy and Society*, 25(3), 327–356.
- Rudé, G. (1962). *Wilkes and liberty: A social study of 1763 to 1774*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Rudé, G. (2005). *The crowd in history: A study of popular disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848*. London: Serif.
- Silver, A. (1967). The demand for order in civil society: A review of some themes in the history of urban crime, police, and riot. In S. Poole (Ed.), *The police: Six sociological essays* (pp. 1–24). New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Soss, J., Fording, R. C., & Schram, S. F. (2010). *Disciplining the poor: Neoliberal paternalism and the persistent power of race*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sprunt, B. (2020, May 29). The history behind ‘when the looting starts, the shooting starts’. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/29/864818368/the-history-behind-when-the-looting-starts-the-shooting-starts>
- Stevenson, J. (1992). *Popular Disturbances in England 1700–1832*. London: Routledge.
- Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thale, M. (1983). *Selections from the papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792–1799*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thelwall, J. (1795). *Peaceful discussion and not tumultuary violence the means of redressing national grievance*. London: J. Thelwall.
- Thompson, E. P. (1991). *Customs in common*. London: Penguin Books.
- Thompson, E. P. (2013). *The making of the English working class*. London: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1963).
- Thörn, H., Mayer, M., & Thörn, C. (2016). Re-thinking urban social movements, ‘riots’ and uprisings: An introduction. In M. Mayer, C. Thörn, & H. Thörn (Eds.), *Urban uprisings: Challenging neoliberal urbanism in Europe* (pp. 3–55). London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Tilly, C. (1995). *Popular contention in Great Britain 1750–1834*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Towers, J. (1769). *Observations on public liberty, patriotism, ministerial despotism, and national grievances with some remarks on riots, petitions, loyal addresses and military execution*. London: J. Towers.
- Turner, R. H. (1969). The public perception of protest. *American Sociological Review*, 34(6), 815–831.
- Vitale, A. S. (2017). *The End of Policing*. London: Verso.
- Villadsen, K. (2021). ‘The dispositive’: Foucault’s concept for organizational analysis? *Organization Studies*, 42(3), 473–494.
- Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the poor: The neoliberal government of social insecurity*. London: Duke University Press.
- Yates, L. (2015). Everyday politics, social practices and movement networks: Daily life in Barcelona’s social centres. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 66(2), 236–258.