

# THE DRUNKEN BRAWL

Market Riots in Eskilstuna 1937 and  
the Fight for the Right to get Drunk

# Market Days

- Eskilstuna early in October 1937, a three day traditional autumn market – with a fun fair.
- Authorities declares that the increasing drunken-ness observed the previous years has to end.
- The police declares that it will not tolerate any overly drunkenness during the market days.
- Arrests for public drunkenness, disorderly conduct or violent resistance.



# A Culture of Orderliness

- A working class culture of orderliness and respectability was prominent – not least within the social democratic working class movement.
- A cultural shift from rough artisans in the 19<sup>th</sup> to orderly workers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

# A Social Democratic Welfare Society

- In 1937 the Social Democratic Party (SAP) had been in power since the elections of 1932 and was launching an ambitious welfare program, building the "peoples home".
- The social democratic welfare program was centered around the scientific field of social engineering, and a part of that policy was the state ordering of citizens life's to a high degree.

# Eskilstuna 1937

- An industrialized city with deep roots in the artisan culture as a place for manufacturing since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- The social democrats in power even before the equal suffrage reforms of 1919 – thereafter in total political power.
- Inhabitants:
  - 1870 5 059
  - 1880 7 692
  - 1890 10 330
  - 1900 13 672
  - 1910 27 777
  - 1920 30 101
  - 1930 32 430
  - 1937 36 685

# Orderliness as Cultural Norm

”The typical cultural strategy of dominant actors and institutions is not so much to establish uniformity as to organize difference. They are constantly engaged in efforts not only to normalize or homogenize but also to hierarchize, encapsulate, exclude, criminalize, hegemonize or marginalize practices and populations that diverge from the sanctioned ideal. By such means, authoritative actors attempt, with varying degrees of success, to impose certain coherence into the field of cultural practice.”

William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, 2005. p 172

# Alcohol as Cultural Resistance

- A strict regulation of alcohol consumption existed, leading to a thriving black market.
- Alcohol as a part of popular culture:
  - Among the artisan culture the ritual drinking of alcohol was an important (almost sacrosanct) part.
  - Disciplinarian repression of drinking led to collective direct action, freeing arrested a part of the repertoire.
  - Alcohol still a part of the workers culture.
  - The right to get drunk as popular resistance of the imposing orderly cultural norm.

# Violent Arrest & Violent Confrontation

- The police arrest a drunken young working man who violently resists this.
- The onlookers responds trying to free him.
- The police takes the man away, the crowd turns against the police – hated policemen singled out.
- The police retreats and the crowd follow to the city square and city hall – attempt storming jail.
- The police reinforced and crowd increased – carnivalesque crowd violence against policemen.

# Repression – by forces of order and culture of orderliness

- The confrontations ending with violent repression by the police late in evening and during night.
- Media responses - three newspapers (social democrat, liberal and conservative) – not orderly workers at all, but...
  - Juvenile thugs without any political awareness (how can they be singing the International while fighting the police).
  - Farmhands not culturally adapted to city-life – strangers to the orderly life of the modern city.
  - The excessive use of alcohol as the main reason behind the violent disturbances – political responses.
- The trials – 20 persons (almost all workers from the city) accused according to the Riot Act, 19 condemned but all on lesser charges.

# Transforming Repertoires

- Tilly on transforming structures of repertoire:
  - From:
    - Parochial (local)
    - Particular (distinct)
    - Bifurcated (direct/indirect)
  - To:
    - Cosmopolitan(translocal)
    - Modular (transferable)
    - Autonomous (direct)
- We must beware of seeing what happens in Eskilstuna as a remnant from a traditional, backward-looking pre-political 19<sup>th</sup> century repertoire.
- We must also beware of seeing all 20<sup>th</sup> century contentious events from a too limited social movement or new social movement perspective.

Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain 1758-1834*, 1995, p 45-46

# Orderly Sweden

- Sweden as a modern welfare society with an orderly self image...
- With consequences for how contention has been seen – also within academia.
- Confrontations as not being “the Swedish way of doing things” – the Swedish model as the orderly culture institutionalized.
- Makes it very hard to understand – even more so violent – confrontation today.