

Something Happened...

But What?*

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Summary

How do we know what really happened? I discuss this question by relating it to certain events which took place in Southern Norway (Vennesla, Kristiansand and Mandal) during the summer of 1982. These events were classified in different ways by various agents, as "youth revolt", "youth riots", "disturbances", "criminality" and so on.

I argue that events like these are best understood by using a method of recontextualisations and redescriptions. This is in contrast to a methodology that takes the nature (and the description) of the events more or less as given (for example as riots), and which searches for the best sociological explanation. My argument is that the usual sociological understanding has a kind of objectivist or essentialist character, looking for the underlying and real causes of events as something that is not constituted or constructed via the agents' classifications per se. This may also be seen as the various

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agents' attempt to establish a hegemony for their own classification(s) – to produce the events. I argue that the sociologist, as a participant observer in such a situation primarily should attempt to establish a distance by regarding the situation as a struggle over classifications, thereby also strengthening the possibilities for the actors to acquire the same distance.

Introduction

In this essay I focus on some minor, local events which took place in Southern Norway during 1982-1983. These are events that most people – even the young people that participated – have probably forgotten.

In the summer of 1982 a series of what we, by a preliminary catchword may call "youth riots" took place in Southern Norway – in Kristiansand, Vennesla and Mandal. At this time the *Natt til 1. mai* (The Night before 1 May) was already a yearly tradition in Oslo, resulting in confrontations between police and youth groups. The differences between the events in Oslo and those in Southern Norway are obvious, at least on a common sense level. What happened in Southern Norway was regarded unimportant; it did not lead to the establishment of a group; it was not repeated year after year. The "riots" in Oslo were of national interest, related to a group or a milieu ("Blitz"), and interpreted and reinterpreted by various agents.

With this background I will present possible descriptions of these events in Southern Norway, focusing on the question "How do we know what *really* happened"? I will furthermore utilize this question for two other purposes. First, the above mentioned question and its answers will be interpreted as a part of the social context of these events and the sociological re-contextualising of these events. Doing this, I hope to present valid arguments against some widespread sociological views of the nature of events such as these, views that are more or less (unknowingly) objectivistic. In doing this, I will also present some arguments for what is often called social constructionism, or social constructivism. This will be presented as a fusion of my own experience from the events of 1982 and those sociological concepts and perspectives that my local experience

accentuated, and which I could use to substantiate and clarify my own ideas. It is important to emphasize that I started with the events, and picked out rather inductively and pragmatically theoretical perspectives that at the time seemed illuminating for my purposes and relevant for the construction of "data".

This leads us to the second purpose of this essay: My views of the nature of the events also necessitate the presentation to be dialogical or self-reflective. When the main objective is to transcend an objectivist mode of understanding events, then one's own changing ways of seeing it, and non-privileged observation status, should also be reflected upon.¹ I attempt therefore to historicize my own analysis, presenting a text including different possible versions instead of a ready-made, "best version".

The Background/My Background

In 1978 the first "riots" took place in Oslo, and three weeks later in Trondheim. During the period 1978 to 1984 "riots" occurred every year in these cities, as well as in other parts of Norway – including Southern Norway. This preliminary description makes it possible to ask: Are there connections, regularities, and some common features (or even common causes) that can be discovered in the events themselves? I will first present some general comments on answers given as well as my own background knowledge at that time.

There was no consensus among the agents about what had happened. Youths, police, politicians and social workers gave different answers. In this context what the sociologists said is most important. But in so saying I am confronted with the problem of keeping strictly apart looking back and being there. Previous to 1982 I had regarded these events mostly in an objectivist way, even if I programmatically was an anti-positivist. What I

¹ After writing this I see that it fits well with both Steier's and Glaserfeld's views claim to move from a trivial or naive constructivism to a radical, self-reflexive, social constructivism (F. Steier, *Research and Reflexivity*, Sage, 1991).

later, after having been in Southern Norway, looked upon as problematic is the following: First, some sociologists defined the events in Oslo and Trondheim as riots. Thereby the events became meaningless: No motivation could be discovered for the deeds, or the doers. Other sociologists behaved more like social workers: They adopted the youths' own definitions.

Explanations were offered to some extent: The causes of the riots were subsumed under general theoretical concepts, such as "normlessness", "alienation" etc. Another explanation, associated with the term media distortions (*mediavridning*) – seeing the events as produced by the media – was also applied. This was, and still is, a very general diagnosis that is widely used, not only among sociologists. It is a term introduced in Norway by Gudmund Hernes in the article "*Det mediavridde samfunn*" (The Media-Distorted Society) in 1976. There are few and vague criteria for defining media distortions. But just because of this, the word (with its many possible meanings) circulates as a general, social diagnosis. These interpretations of the events were mainly the interpretations of sociologists (and some other social scientists), when asked about their opinion in the media, in articles etc.

Secondly, a main point is that most sociologists looked for the "real" (*virkelige, egentlige*) causes of the events, accepting the description (as riots) more or less as "given", or as preconstituted. This mode of viewing these events was also the basis for a sociological project about the "riots". It was started by the initiative of the Minister Sissel Rønbeck, financed by two ministries and located at The Trade Union Research Centre (FAFO). The first reports from the project presented many correlations between participation and demographic variables. It was also an implicit understanding that one could find the causes without putting much emphasis on the different actors' definitions. To the degree that the correlation analysis was supplemented, it was by trying to present typical *general* explanations, for example "anomie", "class" and so forth.

In short this is my reconstruction of the "national" background for understanding what happened in Southern Norway in the summer of 1982. The established understanding of the nature of the "riots" in Oslo was an

element of the situation as such. But it is not certain that this was a context in a strong sense, implying that the different agents in Southern Norway were inspired or influenced by it.

Looking back, I would summarize that this explanation can be characterized in this way: 1) the explanations of the events were in focus, rather than the descriptions, 2) the explaining factors, the possible real causes, were structural or demographical variables, not social definitions or classifications and 3) the events, for many sociologists, were either not easy to regard as reasonable, or they adopted some definition from those participating.

These modes of viewing the events were more or less the same as those who commented on what happened in Southern Norway. But at the same time it is important to note that the interpretations of the events in this part of Norway were even more unclear. The term "disturbances" (*bråk*) was the one used most frequently, while in Oslo there seemed to be a wavering between "riots" (*opptøyer*) and "rebellion" (*opprør*). The debate concerning the events was sporadic, not resulting in any projects or plans from the local authorities. The events were not discussed in the political arena. The only action taken was from the Ministry of Law (Justisdepartementet). They decided that more police aspirants than usual be placed in these areas the following summer. "Disturbances" (*bråk*) was perceived as a valid description of what had really happened. The mode of viewing the events in Southern Norway was the same as that in Oslo, but resulted in different conclusions. Another main difference was also that the events in Southern Norway were forgotten, while the events in Oslo were remembered. In the following I will attempt to demonstrate the shortcomings of the above-mentioned sketched versions of what really happened.

Learning about the Trouble with Classifications from a Police Officer

I visited Mandal Police Station several months after the events in August 1982.² I brought with me some sheets of paper for data collection. My purpose was to obtain information regarding the structural variables: Age, sex, education, employment situation and so on. I also desired a description of the situation: location, police strategies, scale etc.

The Chief Inspector met me accompanied by an officer whose duty was to help me obtain the data about the those participants arrested during the "riots". The officer looked at my sheets of paper, and saw the line *Dato/ "opprør" nr:* (Date/"rebellion" no:).³ He was very upset, and shouted to the Chief Inspector: "He's calling it a rebellion!" I didn't understand his reaction at all. The Chief Inspector calmed down the officer. I said something about the words being used only to arrange the events chronologically. The officer then explained that "This is not rebellion, it's disturbances." Looking back, it is easy to see that he understood that it is of crucial importance to "make things with words".

This was a turning point for me: I was suddenly convinced that it was extremely important to look at the words that were used to describe the events as important aspects of the events; or rather: the only possibility of deciding what kind of events we were dealing with. At the time I didn't relate this view to any one, specific theory. But I used the phrase "struggle over classifications" (*kampen om klassifikasjoner*) for this perspective:

The struggle over classification (for a hegemonic description) is thus the kernel in the theories about "riots". But it is a theoretization where professionals have little influence at the same time as the classifications have more influence on what action/reactions that are seen as legitimate....

² At the time I was working at FAFO, on the above mentioned project.

³ I even used quotation marks around rebellion, something I think reflected that both "rebellion" and "riots" were used in Oslo.

... the main point has been to underline that a theory-free description is impossible, at the same time as the actors fight to get the status of the Description for their theories.⁴

Already the next day the relevance of the police officer's way of putting it was confirmed. The local newspaper (*Lindesnes*) on different occasions used different words for the different events, for example "riots" (*opptøyer*) and "the so-called youth revolt" (*det såkalte ungdomsopprøret*). I talked with the editor, and asked him about the newspaper's use of different headings for the "same" events. My conclusion was that the use of different labels was inspired by neither pure strategy nor total unconsciousness. In later interviews I could also see that some agents used classifications in a purely strategic way, while others were blind "victims" of the classifications. Looking back, I see that this made it possible to understand the active and strategic aspects of classifications, in opposition both to a norm view and a more structuralist classificationism.

I have so far described my "conversion" as having a particular – not to say idiosyncratic – basis. I think this also demonstrates how something experienced in local, historical settings may be given other meanings, and result in more implications for the spontaneous ways of seeing things than do most of those ideas acquired merely through reading texts.

A Redescription of "Southern Norway 1982"

After visiting Mandal, I continued to "collect data" which consisted of demographic variables. But at the same time I now saw new aspects of the events that supported my interpretation of the experiences in Mandal.

First, it became clear that the fact that "events-in-themselves" could be regarded as socially indeterminated was a general problem. In Vennesla this was very clear. The first incidents took place here, on Friday night on 31 July. Between 150-200 youths gathered at "Street'n" (a local name, not

⁴ Translation from unpublished notes, 1983.

without an ironical tone!). Some participants broke windows, built fires in the street, and robbed the shops. Something of the same nature happened the next night. The police then used teargas, and arrested 16 people. After this, nothing more happened in Vennesla.⁵ But *what* happened? Many labels circulated, both in the newspapers, among the youths, among the workers in Vennesla,⁶ among social workers, and so on. The labels varied from day to day. The youths may have stated having done one thing while being there, and another thing when thinking about what had happened. This could be regarded partly as a tactic of using the events for certain goals, and partly as different classifications being frames of different agents' actions and identities. The same can be said about the social workers attempts to label the events in a way that would give them – rather than the police authority – the ownership to the problem.

This also leads to a description of police strategy. If one says that it must be possible to describe the events without heavily relying on the agents' definitions – and that this could be done by describing the sum total of individual acts – one must then recognize this was exactly the essence of the police classification. From their point of view it was natural to decompose the events to individual, criminal acts.⁷ I will not go into detail regarding the various classifications; the point to be made is that the variation and changing of classifications gave support to the conclusion that the most important aspect of the events was precisely this struggle over classifications. And it thereby also seemed to me as inadequate sociology to present just another classification as the best one, or to give "scientific" support to one of the already circulating definitions. In general, the

5 The events in Vennesla were first in time, in Mandal and Kristiansand they started July 31st and August 13th. The number of people participating was about the same in each place. In Mandal and Kristiansand the disturbances took place during several weekends of the summer, in contrast to what happened in Vennesla.

6 Vennesla is a village 15-20 km north of Kristiansand. It is/has been a typical working class area, with two big factories – Norsk Wallboard and Hunsfos Huntonit.

7 At the time I think I noticed this by making an analogy to the police strategy towards the transport workers on strike in the spring of 1982. Some Chief Inspectors (politimestre) regarded the strike situation (and the workers blockade of oil-refineries) as a question about more than pure law and were rather passive. Others "deconstructed" the strike – saw it as breaking different laws – and took action against the workers. (A. Fennefoss, *Politi – streikende – opinion*, Tiden, 1984).

widespread sociological practice of attempting to find the real (*egentlige*) causes of the events became problematic at that time.⁸

Secondly, regarding the events as indeterminated, necessitated another view of the term "description", involving both the meaning of the term and to what extent descriptions should be regarded as important. It became clear to me that both I and most lay actors and sociologists in practice both operated with a problematic division between description and explanation and also put too little emphasis on descriptions. My experience was that one should not only demonstrate in what way descriptions are theories, but also regard description (and redescription) as a main task of analysis, rather than testing hypotheses or using ready-made theories on a set of data. I no longer had a deep interest in "traditional" theories *about* riots – be they radical or conservative, testable or not – because I believed it was decisive to present the events as theories in themselves.

I have to mention one book that in many ways gave theoretical support to my interpretation of the events, the philosopher Audun Øfsti's *Vitenskapsteori og transcendentalfilosofi*, (Tapir, 1980). The author criticizes the HDM-paradigma, represented by Føllesdal's and Walløe's *Argumentasjonsteori og vitenskapsfilosofi*. His main point in relation to my interests is that the division between the level of identifications and the level of explanations is problematic, and that the context of phenomena has to be used already when deciding the identities of phenomena. I read Øfsti's book without any intention of addressing the highly problematic general questions concerning different types of hermeneutics. Øfsti's book first of all provided another type of support to the idea that sociologists should give more attention to these types of descriptions, and less to large, external theories. But I did not attempt to place my perspective in anyone specific theoretical framework. Looking back I think this blindness was necessary in order to enable me to learn in this field, even at the possible price of inconsistency and local, middle-range theorizing.

⁸ Reflecting on this now it is important that this critique is understood as different from stating that the description should reflect only the agents' own definitions. The concepts used in my reconstruction were, and are, partly different from the participants' consciousness. But some of them may be implicit in the sum total of actions.

Thirdly, I became hostile to the idea that sociologists, or professionals in general, should be recognized as the best interpreters of these kinds of events. But this is a general, abstract summation of my point of view. To be concrete: It occurred to me that there is a widely accepted professional contempt for "ordinary people's" understanding. For example, when some workers at a factory in Vennesla described the events as hooliganism (*pøbelstreker*), and threatened that the youths (some of whom worked there) would be thrown in the river the next time, it was regarded by some other agents as a primitive point of view. The police definition was also regarded in much the same way. But what is the foundation for this label? This became even more difficult to understand because there is some good reason to believe that the workers' attitudes resulted in the prevention of more hooliganism/riots/rebellions.⁹

I observed something of the same nature in Mandal. The police there began to arrest youths on the basis of a law paragraph that would defer them from obtaining their first driver's license. It seemed to be effective, and made it possible for me to reflect about the "cause" of the events (working within a situation already constructed), being the lack of application of this paragraph!

It is legitimate for agents, as part of a social struggle, to exclude or deny classifications other than their own. When analyzing events, however, it is not so. To state as a sociologist, for example, that the events *in reality* (*egentlig*) were riots (*opptøyer*) is to forget the most important aspects of the events, even when seen from an empirical viewpoint.¹⁰

9 I did not regard this specific result as being of a general nature. Vennesla is a small village, the youths were employed and the police and social workers didn't provide signals that easily lead to repetition. In Kristiansand the events took place during several weekends. Kristiansand is a relatively large city, many of the youths arrested were unemployed or even "criminals", and the police constructed a situation that signaled "more of the same". This difference is relevant in saying something about the range of possibilities, but not as a prediction or a postdiction.

10 On reflection I believe that the temptation to present the "scientific truth" in this way is often based in a political will to choose a side in conflicts. But the price is too high when it results in objectivism. I have later observed the same within the labor movement. The old classifications (for example class itself and the division *arbeider/funksjonær* ("blue collar/white collar"), established in the beginning of this

Fourth, I became hostile to the concept of media distortions (*media-vridning*). It is obvious that this concept is the opposite of a classificationist view. The normal (social) use of the idea implies that certain classifications are seen as false or distorting, while other ways of describing reality are regarded as corresponding to existing entities. In retrospect, it is easy to see that the term is used within an essentialist framework. I will also emphasize that the media did in fact "misrepresent" what happened in Southern Norway, but in the specific sense that they employed (and influenced the participants self understanding with) terms that none of the participating agents used previous to this. But at the same time: The media, by employing these terms, partly participated in the ongoing transformation of the events. Different individuals, and groups, participating in these events listened to some extent to the media, police and social workers and were confused about what happened.

Fifth, I was given confirmation of earlier acquired knowledge about data being theory-laden. It can be argued that in a second phase of analysis it is important to look at the "objective" variables (gender, age, and so on) to explain participation. The problem then was: In Kristiansand the statistics showed that many participants were "criminals". But the main reason for this was that the police strategy was precisely to arrest those who were "criminals"; the police thereby produced the "objective" traits as well as the composition of participants.¹¹ Another example: The police in Mandal avoided arresting very young girls, they did not register all of those arrested, etc. The usefulness of the "data" is limited anyway, because it is produced for the purpose of policework, and thus lacks variables necessary for other purposes. In conclusion: In this case it is the constructedness of the "data" that is important to note, rather than the more general understanding of data being theory-laden.

century, are seen as objective parameters, while the new classifications (for example profession and vocations) are seen as artificially constructed or ideological.

¹¹ At the same time: Selecting "criminals" is only possible because some of the participants were members of this "group". In Vennesla and in Mandal there were few "criminals"; in Kristiansand they were a component of the events. This also provided the police with the possibility to arrest those individuals they desired to be regarded as representative of the participants.

Once again: This not very new or original knowledge. But my belief is that a research process such as this accentuates certain concepts and perspectives in a fruitful way. Using Merton's critique of adumbrationism,¹² it may be said that it is through this kind of practical learning that some of the concepts offered to sociologists may be given a *central* place in an active vocabulary, with several implications for other concepts used. On reflecting on the events and myself, the trips to Southern Norway provided me with a new point of departure with which to look in other directions, thus making it possible to attempt a kind of constructionism and classificationism in other fields.

I have tried to give a redescription based on my reading of unpublished (and unfinished) papers from 1983, as well as providing both the biographical and historical aspects. Readers may regard this first version as somewhat personal, but it is deliberately so. I believe that it can be regarded as descriptive of ordinary learning processes: not very rational, deductive or non-situated.

I started by asking the question: How do we know what *really* happened? In this first version I have tried to demonstrate that there are no clear-cut answers to this question. It is of course possible to present a picture which takes for granted that the events should be termed hooliganism (*bråk*) and then to concentrate on "objective" variables which explain participation. This could also be wedded to a liberal view, evaluating how it would be possible to avoid new disturbances with the help of "soft" policing and politics. It is *also* possible to regard these events as a kind of rebellion (*opprør*), marginalised (and distorted) by the media and/or the police. But as I have argued, neither of these views provide an understanding that the objective aspect of these events was the struggle over classifications. This is relatively easy to see in Southern Norway in 1982, because the conflict took place over a longer period of time, and because it is possible to demonstrate the classification view with concrete examples. It is also possible to understand why the events in Southern Norway were forgotten. The police – and to some degree the local media – were successful in

12 R. Merton, *On Theoretical Sociology*, The Free Press, 1967, p. 13 ff.

defining the events as disturbances and as individual criminal acts, thereby delegitimizing the events as a possible part of local, social history. The descriptions of the events *as disturbances* were foremost a legitimization of the agents and means chosen to deal with the events. These means, in a second phase, thus validated the description as the correct one; the struggle over classifications is superseded by a consensus naturalizing one description.

Of course, one can not or should not always present all possible reflections concerning the description of historical events such as these. A short version is possible. But even a shorter version, for instance if one had only available one page in a history book, ought to concentrate on the various possible definitions, and to avoid taking for granted the victorious classifications and descriptions, as being objective.

Concluding Remarks

It is possible to raise many questions in relation to my discussion. But in retrospect, I see that the analysis in 1983 resulted in two questions that were of importance to me in my further work. The first one is related to problems with the relatively inductive (and theory-poor) aspects of the analysis: Which sociological concepts and perspectives can be utilized to provide a general view of the struggle over classifications? The second question is: Should this perspective be applied to quite different topics?

It is easy to see that social constructionism became more and more popular during the 1980s. This may be regarded partly as a consequence of the efforts made to overcome the dualisms in sociology (especially related to the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens). But this popularity is also based on works applying constructionism on the natural sciences (Barry Barnes, David Bloor, Bruno Latour, Karen Knorr-Cetina). The earlier inspirations are many: from Ernst Cassirer (via Bourdieu) to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. The specific classificationist view has its origin in Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss famous essay *Primitive*

Classification, and is also central in works by Bourdieu, Ian Hacking and Mary Douglas.¹³

At least in a Norwegian context, I think it is fair to say that until the 1980s the constructionist view was marginal because objectivism was hegemonic both in structuralist, empirical analysis and in Marxist and Marxist influenced sociology. As the above list of authors indicates, the problem is that there is more than one type of social constructionism. This becomes even more accentuated when applied to different subjects with their specific logics, such as gender, technology, media etc. My conclusion after reading some of the relevant texts is that it is neither possible nor desirable to present one single and unified constructionism (or classification perspective). It would be better understood as different perspectives, or tools, with a common goal: To demonstrate how we construct our own social (and natural) world.¹⁴ and to recognize how this construction is disguised in different ways. Thus I also say that I still believe it is a good idea to work inductively – it is better to be dominated by the one-sidedness of the situation to be analyzed than by one (or some) author's version of constructionism.

But this also leads me to another comment. In reading Bourdieu's essay "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups" some two or three years later I found the conceptual frame most appropriate to my analysis.¹⁵ Bourdieu here presents a perspective that even is named (in the English translation) "struggle over classifications". The strength of his argument is that several concepts are knitted together to make the perspective more

13 See Mary Douglas' *How Institutions Think*, Routledge, 1987.

14 Ronald N. Giere (in *Explaining Science. A Cognitive Approach*, Chicago Press, 1988) is skeptical about regarding all aspects/entities of nature as constructed, because this implies that constructionism becomes a cosmology if one decides beforehand that everything is constructed. But at the same time, he uses this argument only in relation to natural entities, and not in relation to the social world. If everything social is supposed to be constructed, we are also faced with the problem that it is not open to arguments, and that the concepts don't differentiate (see also this same type of argument against the wide concept of utility in Amitai Etzioni *The Moral Dimension*, Free Press, 1988). This may be solved by focusing on construction as a general concept that embraces at least two subtypes, or several subtypes in relation to different goals of the analysis.

15 P. Bourdieu "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups" *Theory and Society*, Vol. 14, no 6,1985)

than merely a general idea. Bourdieu demonstrates how different actors create/make groups through the process of nominating. The (unevenly distributed) power to nominate is central to Bourdieu, a power he in a later article calls "the power to make things with words".¹⁶ What stuck me as especially important reading this text is the following: Firstly, Bourdieu emphasizes the active aspect of classificationism. The categories, or classifications, are not regarded as fixed entities. There is an active and power-related process of reconstructing reality.¹⁷ This fits in well with what I have learned in this field: The agents were often aware of what they did when they selected labels for the events, and some of them were even doing so with strategic objectives. At the same time, or in other relations, the classifications constitute the actors' identities and direct their strategies. This flexibility of perspective is important because one does not beforehand have to choose between a more voluntarist or determinist mode of regarding classifications.

My closing remark addresses the question of whether this perspective is applicable in other fields of sociology. As I have already mentioned, constructionism is now widely applied. My own experience is that the "struggle over classification" perspective is especially useful in understanding the continual reconstructions of identities (including what in an objectivist terminology is often termed "positions") in the Norwegian labor market.¹⁸ This is not the subject of this essay, but I wish to conclude with the suggestion that several versions of constructionism may be applied in different fields, but that we can not decide *which* version in beforehand.

16 P. Bourdieu "Social Space and Symbolic Power", in Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, Polity Press, 1990.

17 R. W. Connell (in: *Gender and Power*, Polity Press, 1987) argues against what he calls the abstract logic of categorialism, and desires to make the process of constructing categories a central issue (see pp. 56-57). This categorialism is of course a problem in the before-mentioned text by Durkheim and Mauss, and is in general a problem in several versions of social constructionism.

18 I discuss this in "Lønnstaker-organisering" (FAFO, 1988) and in "Kan LO skape "den utvidede arbeiderklasse", (ADH-serien, nr. 27, 1991).