Mitch Hernandez was on holiday, visiting family in the Netherlands in late June 2015. On a Saturday evening the 42-year-old man from Aruba, one of the Dutch Antillean islands, attended the festival “Night at the Park” in The Hague with some friends. A few hours later, he was laying in the back of a police van, passed out from lack of oxygen, his face bruised and swollen. A day later, he was dead. Word spread quickly that Hernandez had been violently arrested by the police¹, and that this arrest had caused his death. Soon after, riots broke out in the Schilderswijk, a working class and multicultural neighborhood in The Hague. Enraged crowds of young people threw stones at the police, broke windows, plundered a supermarket and demolished the interior of a local theater². For several days the unrest in the neighborhood continued. The events brought into mind the similar, but more extensive riots around Paris and other French cities in 2005, and around London and other British cities in 2011³. In these three cases riots broke out after unarmed men of color died following a confrontation with the police. The majority of the ones involved in the disruptions were young men of migrant descent, their families often linked to Western Europe through its colonial history, living in neighborhoods affected by poverty. In the media and amongst authorities an immediate moral condemnation of the rioters prevailed; the events were predominantly interpreted as senseless, criminal disorder instigated by deviant ‘outsiders’, threatening the cohesion of society⁴. Researchers, on the other hand, often focused on the sense of exclusion and socio-economic deprivation which underlay the riots (Lapeyronnie 2008, Kokoreff 2008, Sloor 2015, Lewis et al. 2011, Bertho 2009, Body-Gendrot 2005, Sutterlüty 2014, Klein 2012 a.o.). While the motives of young people for engaging in riots and other public disturbances are often diverse and diffuse, certain shared frustrations and grievances can be noted across contexts. A pervasive sense of injustice, lack of opportunities, anger about surveillance and police brutality played a role in all three cases mentioned here; the French riots in 2005, the English riots in 2011 and the Dutch riots in 2015. In this article, I focus on the political implications of these shared grievances and the disruptive ways in which they are expressed. I investigate the political significance of riots instigated by rebellious adolescents of migrant descent in Western European cities such as Paris, London and The Hague.

Can certain uncivil⁵ or unruly behavior have political significance outside of an institutionally endorsed understanding of politics? It is this question which is often left insufficiently addressed in the analysis of unorganized civil disturbances, urban violence⁶ or riots. I use the term “unruly politics” to designate the political agency of people who are not recognized as worthy, or formal, political actors within the domain of institutional politics, but who nevertheless interfere in the political organization of society, while they do not abide by the formal, moral and legal rules of accepted practices of civil engagement and political participation. I state that the young rioters involved in the events here discussed can be seen as unruly political agents who express a denunciation of an unjust state of affairs in institutional politics. In what follows I first take the recent riots in The Hague as my
main example to explicate how youth from deprived neighborhoods are often excluded from the accepted citizenry because they are associated with deviant street culture. Their disruptive public interventions are easily perceived as senseless violence. The ones involved are not recognized as political subjects but either seen as threatening ‘outsiders’ to society, or pre-political victims of exclusion. However, in reference to Jacques Rancière’s notion of politics as dissensus, I propose to consider disruptive interventions like riots as events of unruly politics. Despite the fact that unruly politics should not be seen as a conscious political strategy to establish social change, it makes political sense. Events of unruly politics are politically significant not because they offer clear-cut solutions, but because they indicate a problem. They confront us with existing inequalities and socio-economic deprivation and signal the flaws in the existing formal structures of political representation.

Rage about exclusion and desire for emancipation

Despite the fact that Mitch Hernandez was not a youth from the neighborhood, his death ignited a powder keg of rage and frustration, which had been filling up for quite some time in the Schilderswijk in The Hague. Young men, often from Dutch-Moroccan families, felt discriminated and unjustly treated by the police due to recurrent stops, identity-checks and searches, sometimes in front of their own home and often leading to mounting fines. Several violent arrests further increased the tensions between youth and the police in the neighborhood. In addition to the bad relationship with the police, inhabitants felt stigmatized by the media. In 2013 a national newspaper Trouw published an article based on investigative journalism in the Schilderswijk, announcing that a part of the neighborhood was informally ruled by the Sharia. This news caused quite a political stir. Right-wing politician Geert Wilders visited the neighborhood, where he commented that he felt like he was no longer in the Netherlands. Questions were asked in Parliament and Minister of Social Affairs Lodewijk Asscher promised that the government would protect the ‘central values of the Dutch democratic and constitutional state’ and prevent the emergence of ‘parallel societies’ where inhabitants take the law into their own hands. Despite complaints of several inhabitants who did not recognize their neighborhood in the media coverage, the Schilderswijk became easily associated with the territory of deviant, non-integrated and radicalized foreign elements, perceived as causing a threat to Dutch society. This image was further enforced when a small group of radicalized young Muslims demonstrated with an ISIS-banner in the neighborhood in the summer of 2014. The newspaper Trouw eventually withdrew the article about the so-called ‘Sharia-triangle’ in the Schilderswijk, after having discovered that the journalist responsible had invented sources. However, the negative image of the neighborhood persisted.

Several researchers and community organizers warned that riots could break out if authorities would not make public efforts to recognize the sense of exclusion of the especially, young inhabitants of the Schilderswijk. When Mitch Hernandez died at the hands of police officers from The Hague, this seemed to be the last straw. Violent clashes with the police followed and the division in the area between young people and the authorities was once again enforced. Ironically, the same image which led to mounted frustration was enforced by the riots: that of the Schilderswijk as an area where ‘outsiders’ undermine the well-being of Dutch civilized society.

It is not surprising that the riots were not readily recognizable as a political event, since there were no signs of a deliberate political, militant strategy. The disturbances emerged randomly, with social media bringing together young people who had never met before and who did not express clearly formulated demands or a clearly formulated political ideology. The rioters did not make public statements about their motives and were not
represented by spokespersons who addressed the press. Without intentionally communicated vision or goals the riots were easily perceived as a haphazard, mindless provocation. Some, including the Mayor of The Hague, indicated the Ramadan and the outdoors heat as causes of the disruptive events. Due to these factors young Muslim people in the neighborhood seemed to be on edge, looking for excitement as soon as the sun set. However, others who themselves had participated strongly linked the riots to unequal opportunities and other experiences of unequal treatment by the authorities. On radio channel FunX, Yusuf said that after the riots he felt relief from his stress about the many times he was stopped and rudely treated by the police for only being a young brown man driving a nice car. Sky said that he wanted to target the government and that the death of Mitch Henriquez was not even on his mind when he joined the rioters. These statements indicate that the initial tragic event became a pretext for expressing a variety of latent frustrations. Large numbers of young people from outside of the neighborhood became involved in the disturbances. The violence seemed to be motivated by a variety of incentives, ranging from rage about regular confrontations with racism and discrimination, to the pleasure of breaking the power monopoly of the police in the public domain, or the personal opportunism of obtaining material goods which are completely out of reach under normal circumstances. A journalist who observed the scene stated that the Schilderswijk became a ‘collection site of anger’. He quoted another rioter saying: “Everything that belongs to the state can be destroyed. (...) Talking does not solve anything. They are not listening. Once a white man, always a white man. We have to fight for our rights.” French anthropologist Michel Kokoreff also concludes that the structural ingredients in the pressure-cooker that lead to the emergence of riots are feelings of injustice and humiliation, most often inflicted by the police (2008, 19). According to Kokoreff, the violence of riots has two dimensions: an expressive dimension and an instrumental dimension. The expressive dimension reflects the feeling that the use of violence is the only way to convey discontent and to be heard by those in power, while the instrumental dimension reflects the wish to make the state and other public services aware of the basic resources that the adolescents involved lack in their lives (Kokoreff 2008, 18). It is both the rage about exclusion and the desire for emancipation that inspire riots. Even the looting which takes place during riots could be seen as an attempt of disqualified, poor young people to finally gain the tokens of success belonging to a dominant culture of consumption in neoliberal, capitalist societies (Bauman 2012, Winlow & Hall 2012). In this sense, the riots can be seen as a desperate act to make the state and the general public aware of the grievances of young people in marginalized positions. This brings the famous Martin Luther King Jr. quote into mind: A riot is the language of the unheard. However, the state is not inclined to listen.

Street culture versus civil culture

The fact that riots are not readily recognized as political events is emphasized by the reaction of state representatives, who are primarily focused on the maintenance of public order and deny responsibility for the root causes of the disturbances (Lamble 2013). Authorities offer a representation of the events as a certain state of exception that can only be rightly dealt with by effective risk-management and a repressive practice of policing. As a consequence, the events tend to be understood not in relation to, but in opposition to society as lawless deeds, inspired by personal frustrations or desires of abnormal young people who do not know how to behave like good citizens. This attitude of state officials enforces the perceived lack of representation in mechanisms of institutional politics of the young people involved.

In the case of the riots in The Hague a pattern can be distinguished which was also visible at the onset of the earlier riots in Pa-
ris and London (Sutterlütty 2014, 41-43). In all cases violence erupted after a confrontation with fatal consequences took place between the police and a man of color21. The police initially refused to take responsibility for the events. In The Hague, the police announced that Mitch Hernandez had been fine before entering the police van, and had become unwell during transportation. However, video footage emerged showing that a group of officers held Hernandez in a choke-hold before dragging him into the van while he was already unconscious. Research later proved that police violence was indeed the cause of Hernandez’ death22. Secondly, when peaceful protests started, representatives from the institutional domain showed a lack of recognition for the grief of those surrounding the victim, and a lack of respect for those expressing their frustration and discontent regarding the events23. In The Hague the first violent skirmishes took place in front of the police station Heemstraat in de Schilderswijk, when demonstrators felt they were not sufficiently and seriously addressed by the police24. Other state representatives added fuel to the fire by failing to recognize the frustrations leading up to the riots, and primarily focusing on the rioters as criminals. In the Netherlands, Prime Minister Mark Rutte called the rioters achterlijke gladiolen (retarded knuckleheads) and seemed to be more upset by the destruction of property in the neighborhood than by the death of Mitch Hernandez25. Mayor of The Hague Jozias van Aertsen spoke about the brute violence of ‘vandals’ and denied the existence of police violence or discrimination in his city26. The reaction of Nicolas Sarkozy, then French Minister of Internal Affairs, to the Parisian riots and the reaction of David Cameron, British Prime Minister, to the London riots were even stronger.27 Sarkozy described the youth involved in the French riots as criminal gang members and scum from whom the country should be liberated. British Prime Minister David Cameron analyzed the London 2011 riots as a sign of the “moral collapse” of a “broken society.” By stating that this moral collapse is manifested by a lack of parenting skills in “troubled” families, and that an “all-out war against gangs and gang culture” is needed, Cameron sought the origin of the riots in deviant socio-psychological behavior, youth culture and youth delinquency. He explicitly stressed that the riots were a matter of gang culture and not of poverty, discrimination or unequal social opportunities.

These statements indicate that the riots are not seen as an aspect of the social dynamics within society, but as a threatening destabilization of society by those who do not merit to be seen as fellow citizens. The riots are framed as originating from a deviant street culture which generally threatens the public sphere in Western European cities28 (Decker and Weerman, 2005), while possible political motives are not acknowledged. Frustrations in relation to discrimination, ethnic profiling, poverty and isolation are not recognized as valid incentives underlying the disruptive events and are consequentially not seen as issues of injustice and inequality which could be tackled in the political arena. Hence, the rioters seem to be alien aggressors, affecting society from the outside. Politicians deny having a relation with these troublemakers, let alone take responsibility for addressing their grievances. Prime Minister Mark Rutte said he did not see the need to visit the Schilderswijk to engage in a conversation with the rioters because he considered them fools causing a scene29.

A continuous emphasis on the ‘pointless violence’ in the actions of young ‘troublemakers’ places them outside of the body of ‘normal’ citizens, and inside a frame of deviant exponents of a dangerous street culture. Their abnormality is seen as being caused by social and educational deficiencies, alcohol and drug abuse, criminal tendencies and/or an aggressive, antisocial youth culture30. This street culture seems to collide with the dominant, civil culture in society (Van Strijen, 2009) and seems to be devoid of any socio-political awareness. As a consequence of this dichotomy young rioters are easily placed outside of the moral structure and political rules of society. They are not recognized as political agents because their actions seem to lack a clear poli-
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Otical goal and a strategy aimed at constructive and effective alternatives. This depoliticization of the riots becomes possible when political participation is defined within an institutional context. One acts politically if one either remains within the framework of political institutions by the practice of voting or membership of a political party, or if one aims to deliberately reform this framework of political institutions, by adopting social movement strategies such as demonstrations and strikes. The actions of young rioters do not fit in with this representation of politics.

I wish to contest this exclusion from the domain of citizenship and politics of young urban troublemakers, by stating that their disruptive interventions in urban space can be seen as a form of unruly political agency (Kaulingfreks 2015). In the act of rioting, marginalized young people can make themselves visible as citizens who are not sufficiently represented in the formal practice of politics. Their disruptive actions therefore have a political sense, even if they express themselves in unconventional ways, even if they operate outside of the domain of the law and even if they do not share a dominant culture, which is imagined as the foundation of good citizenship.

The apparent senselessness of riots

Before I take a closer look at rioting as a form of unruly political agency, it is important to indicate that the events are often interpreted as non-political or pre-political because the people involved are not recognized or represented within the political domain. Various analyses of the French riots of 2005 can serve as an example here, in which the lack of political agency of those involved is emphasized, exactly because they are positioned at such a distance from institutional politics. According to French anthropologist Alain Bertho, riots in general can be seen as an enraged and frustrated reaction to the painful distance between an officially recognized political discourse and the complicated social reality in which people living in precarious circumstances find themselves (2009). Riots thus indicate a profound rupture between the political domain of the state and the desire for political recognition of the people. Robert Castel equally states that riots in which youth from the French banlieues are involved can be seen as a desperate call for attention of those who are not recognized as full citizens in possession of political agency (Castel 2006). The rioters cannot be political agents, because of their exclusion. Peter Sloterdijk explicitly looks at the Parisian riots in 2005 and states that a lack in the political system was painfully presented, but no political agenda was established. The rioters rage and “hatred against the status quo” were not effectively channeled by existing political movements and could not therefore be translated into one overarching project of transformation. No political parties took up the task to convert the violent and destructive energy of the riots into a constructive political strategy (Sloterdijk 2010, 206). The rioters therefore remained stuck in a senseless destruction of territory, infected by an “epidemic of negativism” (Sloterdijk 2010, 211). For Sloterdijk, the demonstration of a lack in the existing political order has no political meaning in itself. It is only in a profitable operationalization for actual and effective change that the violent expression of anger and frustration can make sense. He therefore makes a distinction between useless, and thus senseless, violence and the profitable operationalization of violence for a higher goal.

Michel Wieviorka and Étienne Balibar also emphasize the incapacity of young rioters to convert their violent disruptions into a constructive and effective political agency. Michel Wieviorka characterizes those who are involved in urban violence as “floating subjects” (2005, 292-293). The floating subject is not capable of translating his or her social demands into actions, which make sense within a socio-political frame of reference. Hence, the violent behavior of such a “floating subject” seems to be
Within these reflections on the riots it is assumed that in order to act politically, a certain political subject intentionally applies violent measures in order to reach a predetermined goal. The distinction between senseless violence, which stands alone, and purposive violence as a means to an end can be inscribed in a more general analysis of the political meaning of public, violent agency. Discussions of the political meaning of violence are often understood in a relational setting between means and ends, revolving around the question of the legitimacy of an instrumental use of violence in light of a higher political goal. The central question here is whether violence can be legitimized as a temporary tool to be used in the project of the creation of a better, more equal and more just world, in which the very violence itself can later be completely abolished (Welten 2006). Violence appears to be senseless if it has no clear instrumental value in relation to an external, recognizable goal. The more riots seem to emerge as singular events, which “just” seem to happen because it was hot, and/or the opportunity was there and the adrenaline took over, the easier they are discredited as acts of senseless vandalism.

It is this “autotelic” aspect of senseless violence that is the most frightening and the least understandable (Schinkel 2010). Autotelic violence is pure and immediate since it is not focused on anything other than its own performance (Schinkel 2010, 100). While a form of violence which is purely autotelic is hard to imagine, every kind of violence is at least partially inspired by a certain attraction to violence itself and is therefore partly autotelic. Cases of urban violence can easily be seen as examples of autotelic – and therefore senseless – violence because of their sudden, unpredictable appearance, irrational development and lack of clear focus. It is the random element of destruction and also the apparent enjoyment of the violence by its instigators which makes them an ideal cause for moral panic amongst the general public (Schinkel 2008, Cohen 1972). The fact that urban riots seem to defy all laws imaginable, even those of militant strategies, ma-
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point of departure for considering his notion of politics, even if it carries us across the boundaries of lawful political participation. He explicitly focuses on the role that marginalized groups, which are not recognized as taking part in any existing political process, can play in the emergence of a new, political evocation of equality. Politics, in his opinion, emerges in the moment that people express their disagreement with an order of governance which falsely pretends to reflect the equal distribution of "social parts and shares" (Rancière 2010, 35,37). Rancière speaks of a disagreement which is fundamental to such an extent that it cannot be solved by aiming at a consensus under the same shared terms, because the one party does not even recognize that the other party is communicating something. Both parties disagree because they not only speak a different language, but also because at least one party is not recognized as an equal addressee or an equal adversary in the same discussion (Rancière 1999, xii).

This kind of radical disagreement involves not only situations in which the language used by a party is not recognized as meaningful language, but also – and even more often – situations in which the very existence of a group of people is not recognized as the existence of a meaningful part of society. According to Rancière, those who are marginalized because they are poor, or because they deviate in other ways from the accepted norm, are structurally kept in their subordinate place. This happens not only because they are not taken seriously as actors in the public domain, but because their utterances, whether linguistic or not, are not recognized as having any meaning at all (Hewlett 2007, 97). A failure to recognize someone as a "political being" begins by "not understanding what he says" (Rancière 2010, 38). This happens, for example, when expressions of certain people are not recognized as meaningful in the public domain, because they are confined to another domain. An example would be the situation in which rebellious young people are confined to the domain of street culture, which is seen as detached from the domain of civic culture. In that situation, these young people are not recognized as "political beings," since their public interventions are seen as senseless vandalism, which does not conform to the political rationality of "normal" citizens. Yet, if we follow Rancière's understanding of politics, it is precisely those who disturb the existing socio-political order who are acting-out politically. The act of disruption in itself gains political significance. Young rioters can reveal who is not included within the system of governance, and hence confront us with the very limits of the majority's dominant understanding of politics.

Riots as events of unruly politics

Ranciere's analysis clarifies how those who disrupt an exclusionary political order can be seen as political agents. When people stand up to declare their own equality to others, and also if they do not conform to dominant norms of good citizenship, this is an act of political subjectification, according to Ranciere. In such a case, the division is denied between those categories of people who can share in the construction of a political order, and those who cannot, and it is recognized that "equality cannot be received, because to receive equality is already to be less than equal to the one who bestows it" (May 2008, 71).

Because politics as disagreement causes a sudden awareness of the equal presence of certain excluded groups, its emergence is always simultaneously embedded within a particular situation, and causes a deregulatory effect within that situation. Riots emerge in a direct reaction to a specific practice of political governance, which does not guarantee civic equality (Sutterlüty 2014, 49). Rancière offers a general, structural analysis of disagreement and disruption as politically meaningful. I propose to understand the riots here discussed as events of unruly politics, because in these cases the disruption of the political order is explicitly subversive, violent, and law transgressing. The perceived senselessly violent nature of the events and the perceived
incivility of those involved indicate how much unruly politics can differ from accepted forms of political agency. It defies the boundaries of dominant rules. Rioters take the law into their own hands, when the existing laws no longer correspond with the principle of justice as they perceive it. However, even though riots and other cases of urban violence manifest themselves outside of the ruling legal order, they do not lack every relation to the law. Such violent events emerge out of a discontentment with – and therefore a direct engagement with – that legal order, rather than a complete detachment from that legal order. Unruly politics does not spring out of nowhere. It might be the only option left, if disadvantaged groups feel that their moral outrage about their situation is not shared by the general public, and if laws and institutions represent only a narrow sense of justice, serving the interests of certain privileged groups in society (Shelby 2007, 157-158). In the uncomfortable and disruptive act of street disturbances and rioting, it becomes apparent who is excluded from the political game, as it is played in the conventional way. Young rioters often do not feel that they are part of the system of political representation at all. This feeling of exclusion can become a legitimation for rebellious young people to design their own rules of the game. In this sense, unruly politics is not about creating a state of total anarchy, but rather about creating “subversive ruliness.” The translation of justice into a system of laws is not dismissed as useless or unnecessary altogether; it is the functioning of existing laws which is questioned.

To sum it up: Unruly politics is a name for describing the interventions of those who disrupt the framework of institutional power relations, because they are in a position which leaves them no other option for influencing the organization of society other than to disrupt the status quo, which does not represent their needs. It is a practice of politics that would not make any political sense if we were to define politics only within the limits of the institutional political game.

Unruly politics, as we define it, is political action by people who have been denied voice by the rules of the political game, and by the social rules that underpin this game. It draws its power from transgressing these rules – while at the same time upholding others, which may not be legally sanctioned but which have legitimacy, deeply rooted in people’s own understandings of what is right and just. This preoccupation with social justice distinguishes these forms of political action from the banditry or gang violence with which threatened autocrats wilfully try to associate them. (Khanna et al. 2013, 14)

Unruly politics demands “a new mode of political enquiry which spills outside of traditional notions of politics, and in which the relevance of acts and events is not reduced to the effect they have on formal structures of the political establishment” (Khanna et al. 2013, 11). Expressions of unruly politics do not allow themselves be translated into the language of negotiated demands and interests, within a setting of parliamentary mechanisms (Khanna et al. 2013, 10). They do not abide by the logics of representative politics, but rather enunciate a political meaning which is unmediated, which does not let itself be represented or translated in another context, in another moment or for the benefit of other people. Unruly politics is always situated in a specific time and place, engaging specific people. It cannot be reduced to fit into general procedures, designed to bring a plurality of people together in one body of manageable citizens. At the same time, expressions of unruly politics evoke a deep wish to live a dignified life and be treated justly by state representatives, regardless of the particular envisioning of what a dignified life might entail in each different situation, for every different person. It is not carefully designed as a party-political campaign, nor is it driven by great revolutionary aspirations or clearly defined ideologies, but rather emerges in unexpected events. It does not only take place at sites that are specifically designed for public and political debate; it also politicizes spaces which are meant to be neutral or private, such as the streets.
Unruly political agency is necessarily critical towards the legitimacy of the state, as long as the state does not safeguard justice and equality for all, regardless of people's social and economic privileges, or their citizenship status. Those who lack a formal citizenship status, or who feel impaired in making use of their formal citizenship status, literally gain space for their lives in informal or extra-legal ways. Through these same informal channels they sometimes have considerable impact on the formal domain of politics. The more the range of unruly political events expand and become publicly known, the more chance they will gradually transform into a more conventional mode of political agency and be incorporated into the domain of formal politics. After the flames are extinguished and the smoke clears, politicians can feel the pressure to recognize the grievances of rioters, and new social movements can emerge from the initial, violent and disruptive events. In relation to the English riots of 2011, Nunes states that the events were politically significant as a starting point for further politicization, even though a variety of motives and incentives was apparent and not all participants were consciously ‘doing politics’. The events showed tensions, but also possibilities for solidarity between a young gentrifying lower-middle class and a young underclass in the neighborhoods where the riots took place, for example (Nunes 2013, 572-573).

In this sense, the notion of unruly politics is similarly related to the domain of institutional politics as the “informal politics” which Asef Bayat describes in his book “Street Politics” (1997). Bayat explores the political agency of the urban poor and marginalized in the Middle East, who have no ‘institutional power of disruption’ (1997, p. xii), but rather disrupt institutional power constellations with their day to day struggles to gain, sometimes literally, a place in society. What Bayat names street politics, is first and foremost a movement of ordinary people who wish to secure the necessary means to make a living for themselves and their close ones, while suffering from a “lack of an institutional mechanism through which they can collectively express their grievances and resolve their problems” (Bayat 1997, 9). At the same time, the fact that many people struggle simultaneously for their personal survival makes it possible for a shared political sense in these singular struggles to emerge. The streets are the domain where they meet and form occasional alliances (Bayat 1997, 17).

These people live perform without the support of official state institutions, yet, at the same time, they often deeply distrust any state interference in their lives. Out of fear of being regulated, controlled or disciplined by formal state procedures, they search for autonomous and alternative ways to sustain themselves and gather in informal communities in which they are free to mind their own business. They do not feel the urge to make publicity for any claims of general interest or to recruit allies in the perspective of a general transformation of society. These struggles are related to what James Scott named ‘everyday forms of resistance’, which are less concentrated in singular, public, violent and explosive events such as urban riots. Informal street politics therefore differs from unruly politics. However, it can be similarly differentiated from both institutional politics and the ‘contentious politics’ of new social movements (Lettinga & Kaulingfreks 2015). In contrast to social movements, both the urban poor who engage in street politics, and young rioters who instigate events of unruly politics, do not form a coherently structured collective around clearly formulated, shared political claims or a collective ideology. Bayat prefers to speak of “nonmovements”, in reference to “the collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations” (Bayat 2010, 14). Other than in social movements the emphasis is placed on the undertaking of collective ‘action’ (sometimes out of self-interest) rather than on the articulation of collectively-shared ‘meaning’ (Bayat 1997, 7). Conflicting motives, convicti-
ons and agendas are common in the domain of street politics as well as in events of unruly politics, and strong leadership is absent. Bayat’s analysis further clarifies how the agency of people with similar experiences, who do not organize themselves into political pressure groups or social movements, can nevertheless make political sense in an unruly way.

Recognizing the rioters

The analysis of unruly politics is aimed at finding political meaning beyond the borders of formal governance. These considerations should not be understood as a simple celebration of violence, illegality and incivility. It is not a matter of celebrating unruliness as the only true political option here. As I have emphasized before, unruly politics takes place in an inextricable relationship with formal political institutions and cannot be seen as an alternative replacement for these institutions. However, a critical examination of our imagined political community cannot take place without listening to the voices of those who express themselves in unconventional or undesirable ways, but who nevertheless share the social world with us. Whether we condemn or support their actions, young rioters co-exist in the same society with “familiar”, law-abiding citizens, and we therefore have to consider the possible political meaning of their actions before we make further judgments.

If we a priori dismiss the involved actors of riots and other unorganized civil disturbances as not having any relation to the practice of active citizenship and politics, the lack of recognition and representation which they experience is enforced. An analysis of said disruptive events in the light of unruly politics prevents such immediate exclusion. We should merit the political sense of unruly political actions, such as riots and public disturbances, as acts in themselves, without immediately demanding an effective outcome. In a situation in which structural social changes are hard to imagine for a young generation growing up in times of crisis and polarization, one should not measure their political conscience by their ability to propose alternative models for society, but with their ability to open our eyes to the flaws in the existing political model of representation.

Femke Kaulingfreks (1981) received her Masters degree in Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam and completed her PhD at the University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht in 2013. Her dissertation consisted of an interdisciplinary research into the political meaning of public disturbances and urban violence caused by adolescents with an immigrant background from deprived neighborhoods in France and the Netherlands. She currently teaches Political Theory at Webster University in Leiden and works as a researcher in the research group “Diversity and Citizenship” of the The Hague University in Applied Sciences. She has published in Business Ethics: A European Review, Ephemer: Theory and Politics in Organization, the Journal for Humanistics and the Magazine for Resistance Studies. In 2015 a monograph based on her dissertation, entitled “Uncivil Engagement and Unruly Politics”, will be published by Palgrave MacMillan. As a freelance researcher she also cooperated with partners such as Forum: Dutch Institute for Multicultural Issues, Hivos (Dutch organization in development cooperation), the Municipality of Amsterdam, Vrijwilligers Centrale Amsterdam (Association of Volunteers Amsterdam) and de Doetank. Besides her teaching and research work Femke regularly organizes youth exchange projects and is engaged in activism related to housing, migration and social justice issues.

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Bystanders said that Hernandez made a somewhat improper joke right before he was arrested. He had bragged about having a gun while grabbing his crotch. This appeared to have been the reason for his arrest.


4 In her study of responses in the printed press on the French riots of 2005, Costelloe notes that an image is created of violence instigated by immigrant minority groups who fundamentally differ from mainstream French society. Bristow notes about the British riots of 2011 that the media discourse focused on the narrative of a generalized moral collapse, the problems of ‘troubled families’ and a problem of discipline. Cooper indicates that the riots were framed as ‘mindless criminality’. Dutch media headlines about the riots in the Schilderswijk in 2015 predominantly focused on the arrests and legal convictions of rioters.

5 I use the term “uncivil” to describe events, people and behavior that are placed outside of a civil order. I wish to emphasize the double meaning of the term. Uncivil has both a social and an ethical connotation. It indicates the negative of behavior that can be ascribed to a citizen, who is seen as a member of a specific society, and as the negative of behavior that is in accordance with the mores of that society. It is used to indicate behavior of those who do not fit into the social structure of society and those who do not fit into the approved moral codes of that society.

6 The use of the term “urban violence” is controversial, because it tends to focus on the deviancy of rioters’ behavior and therefore facilitates a dismissal of the political character of riots in favor of an interpretation of riots as being nonsensical and irrational (Lapeyronnie 2009). The term “urban violence” also tends to undervalue racism as a central dimension of the riots in question (Mbembe 2009). I make use of the term urban violence here, first of all because the riots do imply violence which takes place in an urban setting. I recognize the fact that racism plays an important role in the riots here discussed, but this does not lead me to use a different term, such as “race riots,” since in the riots around Paris in 2005, the riots around London in 2011 and
the riots in The Hague in 2015, race was not the principal characteristic that distinguished those involved.


16 In relation to the French riots of 2005, Balibar notes that the term “uprising” was hardly used to describe the events, since it is suggestive of a delib-erate revolutionary tradition of oppressed classes rising up against dominant powers. Such an uprising seemed irrelevant to most commentators in the case of the riots, since no traditional revolutionary political statements were made (2007).

In Paris, in the northern banlieue of Clichy-sous-Bois, two boys were electrocuted when they were hiding in a power substation after fleeing a police check. The police initially denied that the boys were fleeing the police and insinuated that they were involved in criminal activities. However, the boys did not have a criminal record. In London, a young man from the impoverished Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham, was shot dead by the police in an attempt to arrest him. The police initially insinuated that the victim had fired a gun first, which was not the case. (See, Kokoreff 2008 and Lammy 2011, amongst others).


In France major riots broke out after the police threw a tear-gas canister at the entrance of a mosque where a commemoration ceremony was held for the electrocuted victims. In London riots started when a peaceful demonstration including family members of the shot victim was not addressed by a senior police officer.


See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Udxzytfgc0&feature=youtu.be


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The reflections of Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre and Franz Fanon on the use of violence in a political context show how this means-end logic can offer
different reasons for either accepting or rejecting violence as a political strategy (Arendt 1970, Fanon 2004). The distinction between the legitimate and illegitimate use of violence as a means is first made in relation to the state and its role as the protector of law and order, and the revolutionary power of the people, who in certain cases feel the moral duty to replace the existing state with a better one. The question then becomes whether a political transformation of society can be brought about by violent means in contestation of the law, or whether the law should be respected as the final resource of justice, and politics as a practice, which can only be performed through deliberative means. However divergent the conclusions of Arendt on the one side and Sartre and Fanon on the other, their positions demonstrate the dominance of an instrumental approach to violence, for the sake of conceptualizing its political significance.

Because of this explicit violent and subversive nature I do not describe the riots as a form of civil disobedience. Like unruly politics, civil disobedience can be expressed when citizens doubt the constitutionality of the measures of government, or if they can no longer sufficiently influence the government by standard means of participation. However, when understood in the Arendtian tradition, civil disobedience should always be non-violent, directed at the laws and policies of the government, and openly expressed in public. Civil disobedience becomes permissible when it is expressed by "organized minorities that are too important, not merely in number, but in quality of opinion, to be safely disregarded." (Arendt 1972, 76). Here Arendt emphasizes that acts of civil disobedience should be well organized, rooted in a rationally defendable position and related to clearly formulated demands. This is not the case in relation to the riots here described. Jacqueline Rothfus proposes to stretch the criteria that Arendt defined for civil disobedience, in order to include expressions of discontent which are violent and not directly addressed at governing authorities (2012, 24). She proposes to identify a broader borderland between criminality and civil disobedience. The expressions of dissent of young rioters could thus be labeled as civil disobedience. I do not adopt this interpretation of the term civil disobedience, since the young rioters here discussed do not represent an accepted minority voice within the public debate, but rather have the position of outsiders to the very domain of civil participation. Given the characteristics of their expressions, and the fact that they are not accepted as a valuable part of civil society, it is not civil disobedience but rather "uncivil" disobedience, which is expressed by young urban troublemakers. Costas Douzinas discusses the term 'democratic disobedience' as an alternative in cases where the defense of fundamental rights or their implementation in specific policies is not prioritized, but the entire operation of the political system and social hierarchies are at stake. He also states that it is doubtful whether this term extends to contemporary cases of resistance and revolt, in which the democratic deficit is enormous (Douzinas 2013, 95). Lastly, the disruptive interventions of young rioters are very distinct from other, more activist-oriented examples, which are understood as civil disobedience – such as the Occupy movement and feminist movement FEMEN – because of their spontaneous and chaotic character, as well as their lack of a clearly formulated organization and political agenda. Instead of using the same term – civil disobedience or democratic disobedience- to describe all these disruptive actions, the additional term 'unruly politics' can help to clarify certain important distinctions.
Femke Kaulingfreks – Senseless Violence or Unruly Politics?

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