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Riot: Race and Politics in the 2011 Disorders

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Abstract

The 2011 riots have already been the most commented upon riots of recent decades. Casting some doubt about generalised and holistic explanations and responses, we seek to locate the events in a matrix of race, policing and politics. This approach enables us to identify shifts in political discourse around the riots from the simple to the complex, as well as significant changes between how the events of 2011 and earlier riots have been 'read'. We seek to unravel some of these strands, to show how race, place and political discourse have been located in the reaction to the riots. In drawing attention to important unevenness, we argue that sociologists need to focus on both continuities and changes since the 1980s.

Keywords: Racialization, Media, Haunting, Policies, Politicians, Police

Introduction

1.1 The social unrest or riots in parts of England in August 2011 have already seen a stream of commentary across the internet and social media as well as conventional media. Almost every conceivable 'cause' and 'solution' has been flagged up somewhere. The range and sheer number of commentaries provide ample evidence of sociologists and other social scientists in the UK who are engaged in the public sphere and deliberating as to the meanings that can be read from the disorder, as well as debating the causes of a short summer of violent discontent.

1.2 For, Zygmunt Bauman, the riots were the 'mutiny of defective and disqualified consumers' (http://www.social-europe.eu/2011/08/interview-zygmunt-bauman-on-the-uk-riots/). Slavoj Zizek broadly concurs with that while making a broader link to the debt crisis in Europe (http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite). The theme of neo-liberal consumerism and its excesses is also evident in Bakhtinian carnivalesque explorations of the riots (http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/stephen-humphreys-and-yoriko-otomo/carnival-in-capital-how-englands-riots-recall-history-), as well as the cuts agenda' of the UK government in the views expressed on the BSA's own blog site (http://sociologyandthecuts.wordpress.com/). The stream of commentary and instant analysis can easily seem unanchored from any empirical research. Thus, it is welcome to see some attempt to investigate empirically the riots in a venture started by the *Guardian* newspaper and the London School of Economics.

1.3 In another rapid response issue of this journal – following the 1999 Macpherson report – John Solomos (1999) made an important comment about the lack of detailed empirical knowledge about race and processes of racism in the UK. While a stream of research in the decade since then has added to our knowledge, the demands of instant analysis and the willingness to frame discordant and inchoate events into a preferred framework may do the academy a disservice rather than demonstrate our relevance.

1.4 In this rapid response paper, our theme is the links that between past and present and about some intriguing, paradoxical and somewhat overlooked – aspects of the riots that resonate with our own work and previous research (see for example, McLaughlin and Murji 1999; Neal 1998, 2003; McLaughlin and Neal 2004, 2007). In particular, we focus on the ways in which the political and policy responses to the 2011 riots - and the commentary surrounding these - reflect the contemporary and recent histories of race and politics, and of the tradition of public inquiries into those things, in the UK.

Explaining the riots: race, hauntings and previous disorder

2.1 The sense of surprise and incomprehension that surrounded the reaction to the disorder in England in August was one of the most striking features. This was not just the surprise of an unprepared government or police force – a sense reinforced by senior government figures having abruptly to return from their holidays and an outnumbered police force caught on 'the back foot' – but also an existential surprise – riots! In London! In Birmingham, in Manchester, in Gloucester! Where did all that rioting come from? Why did it happen? Who would have predicted its range and intensity, and not just its occurrence? These seemed to be the questions that hung in the air surrounding the violence and disorder.

2.2 Yet England has, as detailed by Bagguley and Hussain (2009) and Husband and Alam (2011), a long and very riotous history. The 19th and 20th centuries were particular marked by disturbances and protest; it is only ten years since the Pennine cities and towns had become conflict zones. More recently, anti-globalisation, student and anti-welfare cuts demonstrations have all involved significant levels of urban disorder and conflict. Of course, each of these outbreaks of unrest and violence had their own stories and specificities. In some ways, the incomprehension about the events of 2011 reflects the absence of such stories and specificities – or immediate, easy to read, stories and specificities. Historically, riots as a phenomenon of the social world tend to make a relatively 'easy' sociological sense – perhaps too easy, as Paul Rock (1981) observed in the wake of the 1981 riots - even if the post riot reflections and explanations are highly contested.

2.3 For example, the events of Los Angeles in 1992 or the Paris suburbs in 2005 presented an immediate logic. Similarly, the unrest of 1980/1 and 1985 were the commonest reference point for the 2011 riots in that they took place in some of the same areas and, although complexly constituted in terms of ethnicity, predominantly involved African-Caribbean communities. The 1980s disorders have been variously but predominantly explained in terms of racism, police brutality, social exclusion, economic disadvantage (Benyon and Solomos 1987) by both political left and right, though the right kept criminality and hooliganism as active discourses too. The 2001 disturbances (which, interestingly, have not been used as reference point for the 2011 riots and a point we return to) were variously explained through racism, ethnic conflict, cultural withdrawal and separation, economic disadvantage. In the 1990s there were various minor outbreaks of disorder and violence in outlying massive social housing estates in towns such as Luton and Newcastle that again tend to be explained in terms of deprivation and social exclusion. Why then did the 2011 riots appear not to have straightforward causal stories and contexts?

2.4 Initially they did make sense. The events in Tottenham were haunted by the riots of 1980/1 and 1985 in particular and this was endlessly commented on in the media. Tottenham was an area repeatedly referred to as a place with a history of riot, a history made more highly charged because it involved the death of a police officer PC Keith Blakelock. However, alongside these ghosts, there was another political logic – and oddly, the key parallel is not with the Broadwater Farm riot of 1985 - which is what much of the media concentrated on – but rather the disorders in Brixton of the same year. In a now well-known chronology, in August 2011 Mark Duggan, a young man of African-Caribbean descent was shot dead in a car by police in strange, unexplained and unclear circumstances in Tottenham, a super-diverse (Vertovec, 2007) and deprived area of North London. With local feeling running high, a protest to the local police station reached a tipping point and transformed into widespread disorder and some looting. The protests that followed the Duggan shooting eerily echoed the events surrounding the 1985 police shooting of Cherry Groce in Brixton in a raid where the police were targeting her son (Murji 1985). That too led to a protest around the police station and, eventually, disorder.

2.5 These events, three decades apart, in North and South London are linked by the vexed and persistent questions around race, racism and policing. Thus it is important to recognise that the ways in which the Metropolitan police worked (or failed to) with Mark Duggan's family in the immediate aftermath of his shooting contributed very directly to the organized protest - and its mood - at Tottenham police station on 6th August. The Metropolitan police's poor response to Stephen Lawrence's family was central to William Macpherson's political and policy path-breaking formal acknowledgment and definition of the Metropolitan police as being institutionally racist. After Macpherson, family liaison techniques became a policy focus for improvement (see Hall, Grieve and Savage 2009). Alongside that, there been sustained initiatives and training on community relations, stop and search and 'critical incident' management. Despite the post-Macpherson policy developments in these very areas the events in Tottenham - what appeared to be weak or ineffectual family liaison and poor critical incident management confirm and mirror the findings of earlier research in relation to improved race training in the Metropolitan police (see Foster et al 2005 for example). This research showed that such initiatives had been uneven and a continuing problem of embedding good practice in 'learning organisation' that the Metropolitan police describe and claim themselves as being.

2.6 However, the 'familiarity' of the topologies of urban disorder was profoundly disrupted in the period between the evening of Saturday 6th August and the afternoon of Monday 8th August when the unrest in London and then in Birmingham and Manchester and other places such as Gloucester between Tuesday 9th and Thursday 11th August mutated into something less recognisable and something much more socially and spatially surprising. This is reflected in the positioning and explanatory discourses that have been articulated in the post riot period and in the status allocated to race. These explanatory discourses are evolving ones, moving from and between themes of criminality, moral nihilism, social breakdown, gangs and lawlessness to themes of social exclusion, hopelessness and the anomic consequences of a consumerist and materialist society.

2.7 Where and when race has fitted into and driven these discourses is also striking as race has been - and then not been - at the centre of the reflective and explanatory immediate and post riot discourses. This race/not race couplet has been supplemented by a 'sometimes race and sometimes not' in ways that

highlight the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of racism. Thus, the 2011 riots have been *racialised* (Murji and Solomos 2005) because the events in North London most visibly involved young African-Caribbean men and the wider African-Caribbean community and because the unrest that was used as a reference point was the racialised disorders of the 1980s rather than the culturalised disorders of 2001. Race was explicitly made present in David Starkey's now notorious BBC Newsnight evocation of Enoch Powell - the oldest ghost of British post-war race politics - when he made his widely criticized claim that it was African-Caribbean culture and crucially its appeal young people that was the root of the disorder.

2.8 But the riots were harder to straightforwardly read and treat as being about race. On one level, there was a process of *deracialisation* because of the ethnic compositions of the riots and the visible involvement of young white men. However, this deracialisation also had a spatial component in that riots happened in unracialised or only selectively racialised geographies (for example Gloucester, Enfield, Ealing). So for example, the status of Ealing, a relatively affluent London suburb with a significant South Asian population read 'differently' to the riotous 'gang culture' of people of African-Caribbean origins. On another level, and with some irony, the deracialisation of the riots reflected the unfamiliar and multicultural sub-narratives of the disorder in London and Birmingham. The self defence campaigns by shopkeepers such as the Turkish communities in Dalston and Green Lanes, in North London and in Southall, West London, were for example, treated as either and both heroic instances of community action and slight suspicions of vigilante action in a vacuum created by the police operating in full emergency response mode.

2.9 What the disorders provided insight too was the extent and depth of the super-diversity of England's urban spaces in which rioters, victims, bystanders, youth workers, commentators and residents were utterly multicultural and heterogeneous. The 1981 disturbances in Toxteth, Liverpool and Brixton had also involved people from white and black local populations (Kettle and Hodges 1982, Keith 1993). However, this mix was largely marginalized as race, read as black, became *the* co-ordinate that the 1980s urban unrest was positioned and explained through. Thirty years on, while the 2011 riots drew on the 1980s riots as their antecedent, the social and spatial complexity of cultural difference and ethnic diversity in England militates against those older and totalizing race discourses.

Explaining the riots: criminal or meaningful?

3.1 The ambivalence and uncertainty as to the place and shape that race occupied in the responses to the riots extended into the wider interpretations of them. Just as totalizing race discourses were sought – even if not successfully - so too were totalizing explanations sought in relation to criminality and morality. The early government responses began with the Home Secretary, Theresa May taking up a simplistic criminality position a as she repeatedly described the rioting as 'pure thuggery' and the rioters as 'criminals'. Prime Minister David Cameron initially used the same language, while the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, said *"Its time we stopped hearing all this (you know) nonsense about how there are deep sociological justifications for wanton criminality and destruction of peoples' property"* - see http://sociologyandthecuts.wordpress.com/?s=keith). But the 'wanton criminality' position did not quite suture the explanatory logic of the disorders and, in the noisy and crowded and intensely mediated public sphere, a battle to be seen occupying the moral high ground led Cameron and the Leader of the Opposition, Ed Miliband, to rapidly reposition the riots as having happened for complicated reasons. This 'complexity' position allows room for multiple explanations that can iteratively move between criminal meaninglessness *and* social meaning on the one hand, and between depth and surface on the other.

3.2 This interplay is very apparent in Ian Duncan Smith's analysis:

> *So while we have to be tough on the perpetrators and on the gangs, we also have to ask ourselves what lies behind this. We cannot simply arrest our way out of these riots. We also need a robust social response that members of all political parties can sign up to. […]*
>
> *For too long the political class have understood that we have a social problem, but considered it a second-order issue. The riots have provided a moment of clarity for all of us, a reminder that a strong economy requires a strong social settlement, with stable families ready to play a productive role in their own communities. The challenge of our generation is to reforge our commitment to reform society so that we can restore aspiration and hope to communities that have been left behind. (Times, 15th September, 2011)*

3.3 The complexity argument – in which even those on the political right agree on the need for a more empathetic turn as reflected in Smith's 'we cannot arrest our way out of these riots' declaration - suggests to us, following our earlier work on Scarman and Macpherson (McLaughlin and Murji 1999, Neal 2003), that is not to only necessary to ask why disorder happened but to simultaneously spend time analyzing the ways in which disorder is responded to. To acknowledge that people on the political right can look beyond 'law and order' solutions does not mean that we ignore wider issue about what kind of proposals do emerge and their consequences for thinking about issues of social justice. Our point is not that the complexity viewpoint replace or supercede simplistic causal explanations, rather both elements are in play at the same time.

3.4 The argument regarding the need to recognize complexity and to be reflexive is fast became the cross political orthodoxy on the riots and is also manifested in four of the emergent architectures through which responses are being filtered and shaped: the research partnership between the *Guardian* newspaper and the LSE setting up the Reading the Riots project; the input from intellectuals and public sociologists (see above), the Coalition Government setting up of the Communities and Victims public review into the riots and the ongoing political and policy public discourses relating to the riots.

3.5 The LSE-*Guardian* project and the Communities and Victims review approach (as opposed to the more traditional public inquiry model followed by Scarman Macpherson, Cantle and the Commission on Integration and Cohesion) aim to deliver both insights and 'data' about the riots as well as informing and enriching policy understandings and responses. The LSE-*Guardian* project focuses on those who took part in the riots and seeks to challenge some of the inherent difficulties of social science interpretation – the long time frames of social research and efficacy in fully getting to particular populations in particular situations. Combining the 'quickness' of media worlds and the research knowledge/experience of academics the LSE-*Guardian* project may develop methodological skills – how can social science access and research the phenomenon of disorder, its fast changing permutations and its new communications dimensions and contribute empirically to public deliberations? The government's Communities and Victims panels again can be seen to be an innovative response to new formations and circumstances of social disorder or as an evasion of serious commitment to develop a focused policy agenda. The various pitfalls and possibilities of these emergent 'architectures' for finding out what the disorders were about may emphasise the dominance of the complexity consensus but it is hard not to think that there is something of an amnesia in these responses.

3.6 Complexity and multi-dimensional and 'humanizing' factors have been recognized before as at the heart of urban unrest or race-related crisis events. The Scarman report, the Macpherson report, the Cantle report and the Commission on Integrations and Cohesion's (2007) report each spoke the need to recognize multiple social and emotional processes of exclusion and discrimination and the subsequent importance for nuanced policy responses and interventions. The events that gave rise to all of these inquiries and their subsequent reports were similarly multiply factored and this complexity does filter, albeit, unevenly into those official responses. However, the nuances of policy report documents rarely travel well or effectively into the public domain and into policy interventions and practices (see for example McLaughlin and Neal 2004; 2007 on the Parekh report and Phillips 2006 and Husband and Alam 2011 on the conditionality and contradictions of cohesion policy).

3.7 What is different in 2011 from either the Scarman or the Macpherson inquiry is that the police are not the focus or the subject of investigation. Rather, like the Cantle inquiry, the focus of the Communities and Victims Review panels and the focus of the *Guardian*-LSE's Reading the Riots project will be on those who were affected and the victims and those people that took part in them. The absence of the issue of police and police practice and the concern instead with the relationships between localities and populations is significant as, despite the repeatedly conjured up hauntings of the 1980s riots, it underlines how, in 2011 the explanatory riot discourses - whether criminally mindless or socially meaningful, or both - were not about the police or policing.

Conclusion

4.1 Although this rapid response provides another commentary on the 2011 riots, the main claim we make for it is that we have sought to anchor our reading of the riots in relation to the recent and contemporary politics of race in Britain. We have argued that the disorders were managed through a prism that emphasised criminality initially; this segued into a broader cross-political consensus seeking a more textured focus on the state of society, morality, social welfare and reflexivity. In many ways this reflects the on-going shift in policy formation, exemplified by New Labour approaches to crime control and social welfare provision, whereby these two domains of policy-making and delivery are very much fashioned through a hybrid and convergent policy model (see Mooney and Neal, 2009).

4.2 While we agree with the need for a historical context to the riots, we have suggested that history is selectively mobilised and present in accounts and reactions to the 2011 disorder. The historical narrative that is significant in relation to Tottenham is as a place with notorious associations of disorder, a theme repeated in media references. The 1980/1 outbreaks of urban unrest have been another historical mobilisation. However, one context has been raised at the expense of another possible one: the more recent riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001 have not been an explanatory reference point for the events of 2011. But, in making that observation, we also need to emphasise the contradictions of these historical elisions and engagements in media, political and policy reactions. So the focus of the governments Communities and Victims review panels borrow much more from the Cantle Inquiry that followed the 2001 riots than the 'race focus' of the Scarman or Macpherson inquiries. Furthermore, unlike those inquiries, the focus is not on policing (despite the nature of Mark Duggan's death, the relationship between the police and the Duggan family and the public controversies as to how to contain, manage and maintain social disorder) but communities and localities. And there is a further paradox here. Where Cantle indicated 'too much community' as a core problematic of the 2001 disturbances (in that he saw those communities as silos with their separate populations living 'parallel lives'), in 2011 it is the breakdown and loss of communities and community values - 'not enough community' - that is being mobilised as the core moral problematic.

4.3 The selective and uneven historical referencing in the policy, media and political responses extends to the ways in which the 2011 disorders were racialised. We have drawn attention to the uncertain, 'there and not there', nature of race discourses in the interpretation of the riots. This reflects – sometimes simultaneously – the familiar racisms of threatening and disorderly 'other' populations as well as newer complications that the super-diversity of the current formations of multiculture in England throw up. In short that some migrant and/or black and minority communities were valorised as responsible and moral while some white and black and minority groups were vilified as criminal and morally deviant. We have suggested that it is not the riots *per se* but also the turbulent, argumentative and polyphonic space in which the questions as to what the 2011 riots 'were', what they 'mean' and how they are responded to that requires a sociologically and historically informed scrutiny for developing understandings of the 2011 social unrest in England.

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