

The changing nature of riots in the contemporary metropolis from ideology to identity: lessons from the recent UK riots

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(Received 10 November 2011; final version received 10 November 2011)

Whereas past episodes of rioting in UK cities confronted the state authorities with a conscious and collective political problem – either through opposition to job losses or to institutional racism – in the post-political climate today we witness a shift towards individual action driven more by identity than by ideology. The one element that united the otherwise disaggregated rioters across the UK recently was more their taste in expensive sportswear (branded trainers) and electrical goods (plasma television screens) than anything else. Far from being a backlash against the police shooting of a petty, local black criminal in north London, or to the austerity measures introduced by the Liberal-Conservative government to combat the UK state deficit, some commentators suggest that what we now see is the product of a generation brought up on welfare for whom the old allegiances of work, family and community have lost their meaning and who, accordingly, are only able to assert their identity through the expression of their consumer tastes. This article examines what really drove the recent UK riots and explores the twin crises – of authority and of identity that they have exposed.

Keywords: riots; welfare; identity; crisis; authority

Background

The episode of rioting across the UK for five days in August 2011 makes an excellent case study in social and political analysis. It is largely evident to all *what* happened, but the real question of interest is *why*.

There are numerous purported explanations. The superficially most obvious was that the riots were provoked by an instance of police brutality – the shooting and killing of a local, petty criminal, Mark Duggan, in a minicab by Tottenham Hale station in north London on 4 August 2011. This incident was made more confusing by an apparent attempt by the police to promote a story to the media that the youth was armed and opened fire first. This was soon shown to have been untrue, encouraging conspiratorial stories and accusations of an attempted cover-up.

But a single instance of police violence, even if it concerned the killing of what was widely understood to be – even by some of his friends and family – a fractious

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youth, is unlikely to prove sufficient to explain the ensuing public disorders that spread across England (although noticeably not Scotland), and that lasted almost a week and led to a number of further fatalities, as well as costing a significant amount in damages – both to the UK’s reputation and image overseas, and through lost business.

At best, this incident could be seen as the spark that lit the tinder box, and no doubt the relatives of the deceased party were indignant and well within their rights to organise a protest outside the local police station. But this avoids addressing why this incident had so much traction outside – if indeed it was relevant to what ensued at all.

Some have sought to suggest that this particular shooting was somehow representative of wider police–community relations – that maybe in the now infamous words of Sir William Macpherson, who had led a major inquiry into the actions – or specifically inactions of the Metropolitan Police in the aftermath of the killing of a black teenager – Stephen Lawrence – in south-east London in April 1993 – that this could be construed as yet another example of ‘institutional racism’ among the ‘canteen culture’ of the police rank-and-file, as he had described it in his final report of 1999.

But this would also be to ignore the extent to which British society, and the police, has been transformed over the intervening 18 years. The British police are well aware of the conclusions of the Macpherson report and have also, in several instances rebranded themselves from being a ‘Police Force’ to becoming a ‘Police Service’, more in tune, and regularly in dialogue, with community needs and community leaders, precisely to avoid their old image. There is an acute sensitivity to all issues pertaining to race within the service as further exemplified over recent years through the internal enforcement of new laws that oppose racial, and subsequently religious, hatred, as exemplified in particular through the use of language.

This is a far cry from the Greater Manchester Police at the height of the last major episode of inner city riots across the UK in the early 1980s, some of who drove around the city streets beating their truncheons on the sides of their vehicles shouting ‘Nigger, Nigger, Nigger. Out, Out, Out’. Even in the early 1990s, there had continued to be a spate of mysterious killings of young blacks and Asians held in police custody that had led to understandable protests and resistance from some at the time.

Despite occasional flashbacks, Britain in the early years of the twenty-first century is a very different country. A multi-racial country within which few would tolerate, let alone encourage, such mindless acts.

Perhaps then, others have suggested, the riots can be seen more as instances of what happens in poor communities, particularly at times when the government, currently led by prime minister David Cameron, in an alliance between the Conservative and Liberal parties, is having to make some supposedly severe cuts to public services, as part of a series of ‘austerity measures’ designed to attempt to bring the public sector spending deficit under control at a time of significant financial and economic turmoil and uncertainty.

But again, it should be evident to most that people have been poorer before, cuts have been more severe before, and anyway, not all of those who participated in the various episodes of looting were necessarily the most poor or downtrodden, despite attempts by some to correlate the rioting with areas of inner city deprivation.

There are countless other attempted explanations that seek to explain why what happened, happened. These include arguments about youth alienation, or a poverty

of aspirations, and suggestions that there is a deep moral crisis afflicting the UK, as evidenced through a breakdown of authority among parents, teachers and even the police. Others still have tried to suggest that what happened was the somehow inevitable consequence of a generation of disaffected youths having witnessed what they describe as a 'culture of greed' among their supposed superiors – whether these be bankers or even their elected Members of Parliament.

This latter mode of explanation is particularly favoured by commentators who we could describe as having been on the old Left of the political spectrum, whilst those of the old Right appear to be more obsessed with the possibility of some kind of gang element having been the driver, possibly inspired by black American rap music or ghetto culture, as well as a fear of what they describe as 'feral' youths coming from irreparably 'broken' homes and 'problem' families.

Many commentators noted the use of new social media as a possible partial explanation for the widespread and simultaneous character of these incidents, particularly the use of Blackberry phones that have a messaging system that is held to be difficult to trace by the authorities. But again, this latter element seems to avoid the difficult question as to why anyone should act on the suggestion of such messages in the first place. New technology may facilitate people coming together for particular causes but one notable element of these riots was that there were few instances of people coming together. Rather there appeared to be, a lazy, almost casual and matter-of-factual going about the looting, largely in isolation from the others who just happened to be doing the same thing.

And if the new media are held to be some kind of explanation at all – what of the old media? Presumably, the sheer weight of the countless newspaper, magazine, radio and TV station articles and interviews, that all, by-and-large, contained the same message – that these were despicable, anti-social acts, conducted by a few mindless fools should, according to any media-effects theory, more than readily have cancelled out the impact of the Blackberry messages purportedly saying the opposite.

One thing is clear – that these incidents were reported worldwide with dramatic implications for the discussion and understanding of the UK by outsiders. In an apparent effort to address this aspect in particular, former British prime minister, Tony Blair wrote a column for the influential Sunday newspaper, *The Observer*, stating that there was now a danger of the 'wrong analysis, leading to the wrong diagnosis, leading to the wrong prescription'. This is certainly true although, as I shall suggest, Blair's own analysis, and accordingly prescription, is just as faulty as many others. That would certainly not be the first time he finds himself in such a position.

His view – largely articulated to fight off any suggestion of a deeper British malaise among some commentators – and pointing accordingly to the events simply being a one-off, triggered by a very small number of individuals who largely – but certainly not all – came from difficult backgrounds, have more recently been echoed by his former aide, side-kick and occasional minister, Lord Peter Mandelson, upon a recent visit to Singapore for the Singapore Global Dialogue.

It is evident therefore that – as in all instances of crisis – there is now, an ensuing competition to attribute what is held to be the correct meaning to these episodes. This is a political combat – although one not necessarily perceived or articulated as such but, nevertheless, one that, whoever wins will be able to force through, as Blair rightly noted, their own pet 'prescription' or solution onto the situation. This will then go on to shape society for some time to come. And that is

why this is such a significant case study as, more than most, it reveals immediately how what happened is far less important to the situation than why it is held to have happened, and by who.

Events

These were certainly not the worst instances of rioting in British history as some commentators, lacking any sense of perspective, were quick to suggest. They were – possibly – among the most costly, but even then that depends on how such episodes are accounted for. The British state – it should be recalled – had stood firm in the face of a significant outbreak of inner city rioting across the UK in the early 1980s (1981 and 1985 in particular), which had occurred particularly in deprived areas, populated largely by immigrant communities, viz. Brixton, Tottenham, Southall and Acton in London, Moss Side in Manchester, Toxteth in Liverpool, Chapeltown in Leeds, St Pauls in Bristol and Handsworth in Birmingham.

The mid-1980s (1984–1985) had also witnessed pitched battles between the British police and striking miners and their supporters, who easily numbered 100,000. The last significant UK riot had probably been that which occurred at the time of the introduction of the poll tax in 1991, although a smaller, one-off incident also occurred subsequently upon the closure of the final working pits and coal mines in the UK.

These episodes, and particularly the earlier ones as well as preceding ones, could be characterised as broadly political in character. There were clearly demarcated sides to the conflict, each with a relatively clear sense as to where their interests lay. The rioters formed, to some degree, a conscious and coherent collective, fighting either against job cuts, or racism and police brutality. The participants, typically, were politically active members of various left-wing groups, some even wielding slogans such as ‘Police off our streets’ that suggest them as having a strong sense of who they were.

As has been noted by some, violence and gratuitous damage were associated with these moments – but they were not central to them, despite what the government and the media reported at the time with a view to discrediting the political purposes of the rioters.

This latter point is extremely significant as it is very clear that in the latest incidents, looting was the main, if not sole, rationale. And what united the youths involved in 2011 was not a shared ideology, but rather their taste in footwear (Nike trainers) and electrical goods (plasma TV screens). In other words, to some extent at least, the main – unconscious – focus was on their identity, as consumers.

Whilst much of the damage occurred in poorer areas, it was certainly not limited to these on this occasion, and whilst those initiating the break-ins were disproportionately from less well-to-do backgrounds, there were also many better-off ‘scavengers’ with respectable jobs and families including, notoriously, a millionaire’s daughter and various students and professionals.

Certainly, the fact that many appeared to trash their own neighbourhoods or backyards, as some have noted – the neighbourhoods and shops that their own parents would make use of – indicates that suggestions as to the involvement of gangs – who are famously protective of their territory or ‘hoods’, is wide-of-the-mark. It rather points to the need to grasp for any explanation that particular commentators with pre-existing prejudices and worldviews latched onto at the time.

In fact, rather than there having been any evident anger or rage on display (although it should be noted here that the more effete elements of the middle and upper classes are rather readily dismayed and disturbed by any display of strong emotions and language, immediately labelling these as dangerous and offensive accordingly), it was the casual pursuit of looting in an almost relaxed atmosphere that should be the most alarming element.

Anyone who has visited or lived in the UK over recent years will know that there are increasingly certain areas, even in respectable neighbourhoods, and certain pubs and clubs which, at certain hours they would be well-advised not to frequent. Even casual glances at particular strangers doing odd things in quite public spaces will often lead to a retort of; 'What are you looking at?' and remarks that you should mind your own business or 'Piss off'.

This incivility, verging on a threat of violence, has been effectively acquiesced to by Britons over a protracted period of years. It is not a one-off, or the product of a sensitive imagination. It is a tacit, and routine neglect of one's own community areas that speaks volumes as to the real depth and breadth of the moral malaise that now faces the UK.

Causes

If we are to identify what is novel and original in terms of the drivers of the recent episodes of rioting across the UK, then there are probably two aspects that should be highlighted – the gradual erosion of community life across Britain, with a consequent disconnection of people even from their own neighbourhoods, combined with the disorganised reaction of the state authorities, as evidenced by the remarkably weak and, in the words of one former senior officer, 'impotent', response.

The non-organised, non-political aspect of the violence on the side of the looters is an important clue here – that these were the manifestation of a post-ideological age – on all sides. The police too lacked coherence and conviction. Having progressively been transformed over a 20-year period through the growing fashion for risk assessment, they seemed to have forgotten the bare essentials of how to maintain law and order. They appeared more focused on ensuring their own health and safety, and conducting robust videoing rather than robust policing.

Rather than standing their ground – the police of a state that had previously faced-down the Soviet Union's Red Army, that had recaptured the Falkland Islands from Argentina in a bloody war in the early 1980s, and withstood the massed ranks of the miners and their supporters – now appeared all too willing to capitulate. They advised shopkeepers to board up their premises and to leave any area where rioting might be expected. This, of course, only acted as a form of encouragement to the mindless teenagers, who numbered never more than a few hundred in any one instance, to come and have a go.

This confusion among the police is an expression of the problem – not the cause – but it suggests that the problem itself will not readily be solved simply through the use of stronger measures – after the horse has bolted. Images of the police raiding homes over the ensuing period – after the fact – were largely generated for media purposes, to project an image of swift justice. But the problem was exposed at the time, not after things had quietened down.

Summary and rapidly coordinated Courts that stayed open all night to charge the rioters, were exemplars of procedural justice rather than clarifying, or

exercising, an appropriate judgement. Accordingly, some children who, in the past would have been considered below the age of criminal responsibility, were held on remand for protracted periods. Calls for stronger measures and more equipment to arm the police are misplaced in such a confused environment. A police state without a police force is to no one's benefit.

What was exposed was a crisis of authority across society, and this cannot be gained merely through heavy-handed measures. Rather, the authorities need to work out how to inspire their citizens to be part of and engage with their own society. But, in the contemporary period, what we see are establishments and authorities who are confused themselves as to who they are, what they stand for and where they are going. Little wonder that they fail to engage others with their absent sense of vision, purpose and direction.

In a way the crisis of policing exemplifies a wider crisis of all forms of authority in British society today. Parents and teachers too are noticeable by their apparent inability to control children. But maybe then, the state only has itself to blame for all of its constant interferences with these key social institutions over recent years. Parents in the UK are socially constrained from smacking their children and government schemes, such as 'Sure Start' encourage parents to 'negotiate' with their children and never to shout at them. Little wonder that, in such circumstances, some have chosen to abdicate responsibility for their offspring altogether.

The teaching profession and the police force have suffered similar state intrusions as, unable to trust that people will independently and benevolently make the right decisions on their own, on an informal basis, state legislatures have increasingly sought to formalise all such relationships across society. Parents, teachers, students and schools are now held to contract with one another on various aspects of schooling and the syllabus and various associated tests are prescribed on an almost constant basis.

The real driver of these elements therefore, as well as of the gradual erosion of any genuine sense of community and its associated responsibilities, has been the expansion of the state into all aspects of daily life. This is possibly most noticeable in certain areas where the state effectively now acts as a form of artificial life support mechanism for entire communities. From the cradle to the grave, and encompassing lifelong learning (increasingly a euphemism for unemployment), long-term sickness benefit and a whole host of other supposed entitlements that isolated individuals are taught to access – the state now supports whole sections and even whole geographical districts of British society, which would otherwise wither away.

Individuals in communities who, in the past, should there have been a severe shock to their areas, leading to a significant loss of jobs and industrial closures, would have either left the area to find employment elsewhere, or organised collectively to fight against employment cuts, are now effectively taught to acquiesce and accept the state's supposedly benevolent largesse in keeping them afloat.

This is not a welfare state as would have been understood, or recognisable, by the original architects of the British welfare system. This is no longer a temporary safety net, designed to insulate people against the vagaries of the market and illness, as all civilised societies should be capable of providing. Rather this is now a form of permanent immunisation against the realities of life. A mechanism that has allowed an entire generation not to have to strive in order to survive, and that has left them without any link to the labour market. It is hardly surprising then that some should prove so nonchalant as to the meaning of other people's labour – and

that they should find support among the only other group in society that is similarly so disconnected – the disillusioned rich and the liberal commentariat.

Consequences

At the height of these confusions when a small number of shopkeepers (most, initially and notably, from immigrant communities, such as Asians and Turks, where the full erosion of any sense of social solidarity has yet to have occurred – an effect also noticeable in Scotland where no riots occurred and where there remains a much stronger community base), decided that they were perfectly capable of taking matters into their own hands if they were to be abandoned, or advised to leave, by the police, a degree of indigenous social resistance emerged.

But the police and the government were extremely wary of such initiative. They feared in their apocalyptic mindset that this may burn into some form of violent ‘vigilantism’, especially when the idea spread to a few white, working class neighbourhoods, particularly in south and southeast London. They, and the media, preferred to portray the appropriate response as being that of some middle-class communities who came out to clean-up after the damage, rather than those who actively, and at their own instigation sought to oppose it.

In this, we can detect the key problem of contemporary community policies. The government has spent considerable resources over recent years wanting to be seen to be ‘building resilience’ among ordinary people, particularly in response to terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 in 2001 and the London bombings of 2005. But when a community truly comes together, spontaneously, and at its own initiative to confront a shared problem, the authorities are immediately worried by it. In fact, what they want and have been trying to shape – albeit unconsciously – is not resilience, but compliance. And in the recent UK riots we have a vignette or insight into what a world populated by compliant individuals can become.

Despite calls by some that the police and government should be doing more to talk to their communities, it is far from obvious who it is exactly that they should be talking to. Who are the community leaders that truly represent their communities and are authorised by these to do so – aside that is, from the steady flow of self-appointed, or government-anointed community leaders, who are quite incapable of articulating the problems, or doing anything about them when the time and need arises?

The government, for its part, and particularly the Liberal-Conservative administration under prime minister David Cameron is acutely aware of its own lack of, and crisis of authority. It has, accordingly, adopted the language of the immediately preceding Labour administration – of the need for better parenting among certain problem families – as its preferred solution.

This – according to the analysis presented above – will only serve to make things worse. If the fundamental problem of British society today is that of an expansive and overarching state that does not allow its citizens to develop and maintain informal relations at their own initiative, but would rather constantly formalise these through constant codes and procedures, then it is difficult, if not impossible to see how yet more state intrusion is to somehow alleviate the matter.

The UK riots of 2011 may not happen again in the same form. History seldom, if ever, repeats itself exactly. But they ought to be a wake-up call as to the existence of a much deeper malaise that afflicts British society today. This is promoted

through the gradual spread of the state into all of the minutiae of everyday life and expressed through its own incoherence of purpose and authority, just as much as through the unconscious and pointless actions of the rioters.

Today, in certain quarters, it is almost as if the riots had never happened. They were a bad dream that some would prefer to see go away. But the structural causes of them remain. Where once communities achieved their sense of who they were through developing organic relationships to their families and through an identity gained in the labour market, the erosion of these in recent years, compensated for by the state itself has left them with the shallow identity of consumers.

That the authorities themselves are unaware of, or in denial over, the implosion of their own communities – as evidenced by them turning a blind eye too to incivility when they encounter it – is the biggest crisis of all. British society may continue to appear to function in the meantime, but it is sitting on a deep rooted social problem. It is also high time the over-indulged, self-pitying youth that this system has created were encouraged to pursue some higher goals and aspirations than accepting the infantilised state that the British state provides them with.