THE 2011 ENGLISH RIOTS: A CONTEXTUALISED, DYNAMIC, GROUNDED EXPLORATION

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Abstract

After a brief account of what happened, the question is posed of whether the idea of moral panic is the most revealing approach with which to understand the riots. Before answering, the question of how novel were the riots is addressed in relation to policing, social media, riot areas, the rioters, rioting behaviour, the State's response and the reaction of communities. The elements of a dynamic, grounded explanation are then tentatively offered, followed by an attempt to situate this explanation within the context of the contemporary lives of disadvantaged youth lacking both political support and an economic future. The conclusion returns to the question of moral panic. It suggests that since most of what happened had clear precedents in the series of urban riots since the 1980s, there is plenty of evidence to support the idea that the constructions of the 2011 riots are best understood as a moral panic. However, the small indications of new developments, namely, the sheer vindictiveness of the state's post-riot response – hunting down the rioters, harsh sentencing, naming juveniles – as well as the spread of rioting to new areas and the practice of communities 'fighting back', are important to explore for what they reveal about the present neo-liberal conjuncture. They seem to be morbid symptoms of an apparently intractable series of crises characterised by, among other things, an unprecedentedly grim situation for poor, unemployed, disaffected youth living in deprived areas.

Keywords

moral panic; novel features; neo-liberal conjuncture; youth

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Any attempt to make sense of the English riots of August 2011 will need to start with a chronological account of events: what happened, when and where, and who was involved. What follows, first of all, is my attempt, largely using the *Guardian* newspaper's coverage, to supply such an account¹. Thereafter, I ask whether the idea of a moral panic best explains 'what happened' and consider this question in relation to what were considered by some to be the novel features of the riots. A tentative dynamic, grounded explanation is subsequently offered, and this is then contextualised in relation to the present neo-liberal conjuncture. Finally, I return to the initial question concerning moral panics and novelty to offer an interim conclusion.

A Brief Account of What Happened

It is commonly accepted that the riots started on Saturday 6 August, around mid-evening, after a protest by family and friends of Mark Duggan that started at 5 pm outside Tottenham Police station. The protest was an attempt to force a meeting with a senior officer in order to find out about the circumstances surrounding the fatal shooting of a black man, Mark Duggan, by a member of the specialist gun crime unit, Operation Trident, some two days earlier. Rumours of what had happened were rife, the worst of which suggested that Duggan had been cold-bloodedly shot by the police. About 100 people, with Duggan's family and friends to the fore, were in attendance at the protest. No higher-ranking officer than a Chief Inspector made an appearance.

The precise moment when the protest morphed into a riot is disputed. Some said the 'spark' was a young woman confronting the police, demanding to know what happened, who was then 'pounded by 15 riot shields', according to an eye-witness (*Guardian*, 8/8/11:2). Others said it was the torching of two police cars by young men angry at the non-appearance of the promised senior police officer. But either way, from around 8pm onwards, protestors began to clash with police, vehicles and buildings were set alight, and looting commenced.

At first, the burning and looting were confined to local shops on Tottenham High Road. Homes too were burned, but these all seemed to be a by-product of the shop burnings and not a target in their own right. Around 1.30 am, BBC and Sky News Crews were attacked and driven out of the area. Around 2.30 am, rioting and looting began in Wood Green High Street, some two miles from the original rioting, 'where approximately 100 people...spent hours burning cars and breaking into high-street shops. Some...even filling suitcases...Gaming shops and mobile phone outlets were targeted, as well as clothing stores' (ibid). Back in Tottenham, the rioting spread to Tottenham Hale Retail Park, the site of the big clothes, electrical and mobile phone chains that were targeted, while stick-wielding youths in balaclavas established burning barricades to prevent motorists approaching the shops being looted. The Magistrates' Court windows were 'hammered' and the probation service office was torched.

The rioters were predominantly male, 'some apparently as young as 10' (ibid: 2), and were, racially, a mixed group. However, there were also bystanders, 'dozens of young men and women... watching the blazes on the High road' (ibid: 3) from the comparative safety of the side streets, or 'families and other local residents, including some from Tottenham's Hasidic Jewish community' who 'gathered to watch and jeer at the police' (ibid). Some actively opposed the rioters, advising them to 'go home' or arguing that 'looting was not helping' (ibid: 1).

By the end of this first night of rioting, involving around 300 participants in Tottenham and

¹ This was first written in the immediate aftermath of the riots. Since then the *Guardian* has published two online studies (Elliott, ed. 2011; Roberts, ed. 2011) based on their initial reporting supplemented by interviews with 270 participant rioters. As none of this new material was at odds with what I had to say, I have not substantially altered my original account, merely supplemented it here and there with an updating footnote.

100 in Wood Green, 26 Officers had been injured, 55 rioters had been arrested, two police cars and one double decker bus had been burned (and countless private vehicles), and fire-fighters had attended 49 fires.

On Sunday, the riots restarted in Enfield and spread to other parts of north and north-east London (Edmonton, Walthamstow and Islington) and to Brixton in south London. In Enfield, young people, mostly white males, began gathering from 4 pm, apparently in response to social messaging, as did a large contingent of riot police. Some of the group of around 200 young people 'knocked down walls, and were smashing bricks into smaller pieces...to make them easier to throw at police' (*Guardian*, 9/8/11: 4). What followed was a cat and mouse game with small groups roaming the streets 'looking for unguarded shops' (*ibid*). These groups 'simply melted into the back streets at the first sign of police, only to regroup minutes later'. This 'waiting' game continued until around 9 pm when 'the crowd started moving on mass' (*ibid*), shops began to be broken into and looted, and rocks were thrown at the police.

Guardian reporters were told that Ponder's End was next, 'and then, from midnight... Edmonton' (*ibid*). There, 'the massive police presence...prevented any sustained looting' (*ibid*), although a car was torched, but 'the cat and mouse chase between police and looters continued into the early hours of the morning' (*ibid*). There was also looting in Dalston, albeit 'smaller in scale than elsewhere' (*ibid*), and in Waltham Forest 'three police officers were taken to hospital after a car was deliberately driven at them' following the looting of a shop (*ibid*: 2).

The worst violence took place in Brixton. It started late evening. The police were called to deal with a large fight on a local estate and 'were pelted with missiles' (*ibid*: 4)². The fight apparently 'escalated and moved towards the centre of Brixton' (*ibid*: 4). Around 200 strong, these young people again 'hurled missiles at the police' (*ibid*: 4) and started looting high street stores, watched by an 'apparently powerless' (*ibid*) police force: 'Only a fire put an end to the looting of Foot Locker' (*ibid*). The attempt to 'push people back up the high street' (*ibid*), even with the assistance of protective riot gear and heavy rain, could not prevent the complete ransacking of a local Currys: 'When police tried to intervene, they were pushed back by a hail of rocks' (*ibid*).

According to Deputy Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan police, Stephen Kavanagh, Sunday's looters 'were younger, with some in their teens' (*ibid*: 3). Paul Lewis, a *Guardian* reporter who was at Enfield felt 'the mood was calmer...premeditated' (*ibid*: 4). The policing strategy entailed flooding the streets with riot-clad officers (who seemed to know where to be in advance). From midnight, Scotland Yard introduced an additional weapon, namely, the power to stop and search without reasonable suspicion, using section 60 powers³, in Lambeth, Haringey, Enfield and Waltham Forest. Despite all this, at the end of an evening spent 'chasing groups of youths around Enfield, Ponder's End and Edmonton...using dogs and batons' (*ibid*: 2), the *Guardian* concluded that 'for the second night running' the police, including 'The Metropolitan police's public order unit, CO11, [which] once prided itself on being the world leader in containing disorder', had been 'entirely outmanoeuvred' (*ibid*).

On Monday, day three of the riots, 'rioting, fires and pitched battles erupted around the city from late afternoon...In Hackney...masked and hooded youths smashed up shops and threw missiles, planks of wood and wheelie bins at riot police. Several abandoned vehicles were set alight...in Lewisham...petrol bombs were reportedly thrown at officers, and shops looted. A bus was torched in nearby Peckham [and]...a 100-strong mob cheered as a shop...was torched'

2 The first chapter of Roberts (2011) would seem to suggest that the Brixton riot started at the Brixton Splash Music Festival, not on a local estate.

3 From the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994.

(*Guardian*, 9/8/11: 1). The catalyst for the violence in Hackney was, reportedly, a section 60 stop and search (*ibid*). The disorder also spread beyond the poorer areas. It spread to Croydon, for example, where ‘there was a large police presence backed by Jankel armoured vehicles’, and which witnessed ‘some of the worst disorder’, including the spectacular torching of a nearly 150 year old family run furniture store, Reeves, and the shooting of a man after an altercation between two groups of men (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 7). The disorder also spread to Notting Hill where ‘luxury goods shops’ were ‘trashed and looted’ and ‘homes and pubs in the leafy Ledbury Road had their windows smashed’ (*ibid*: 1).

Personal attacks were also recorded. Looters punched a man in Ealing who ended up ‘in a critical condition in hospital’ (*ibid*: 9). Other witnesses, in Hackney, talked of an upsurge of ‘violent attacks and robberies’ (*ibid*). One young man was forced to give up his bike to a group of ‘seven young men’ (*ibid*). Elsewhere in the Borough, there were signs of a fight-back as Kurdish and Turkish shopkeepers, some armed with doner knives, chased away ‘potential’ looters, a scene repeated in East Ham ‘where a ‘group of rioters was chased away by several hundred Asian residents’ (*ibid*: 8). Local shopkeepers, some said to be armed, also defended their property in Wood Green, Green Lane, Haringey and Bethnal Green (*ibid*).

If this day witnessed, according to Scotland Yard, ‘the worst UK urban violence in living memory’ (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 1), it was also the night that saw the riots spread beyond the capital. There were ‘outbreaks of disorder in Birmingham city centre’ where ‘shops, including a branch of Louis Vuitton, had windows smashed and were looted’ (*Guardian*, 9/8/11: 1). Liverpool, too, saw ‘sporadic...prolonged trouble’ (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 2) by ‘several hundred people, some as young as 10’ (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 4). They roamed the streets smashing windows, looting a Tesco Express, torching cars (including a police van) and wheelie bins and pelting police with missiles.

‘In the early hours of Tuesday’, the policing strategy altered somewhat with ‘the decision to use heavily armoured Jankel vehicles to clear the streets of Clapham Junction’ (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 2) This, apparently, constituted a change of plan from the heavily criticised ‘watch and wait’ plan in operation until this point. After three days, the number of arrests was 215 ‘with 27 people charged’ (*ibid*).

Day four, Tuesday 9th August, London was relatively calm. The police presence increased from 6,000 to 16,000 and David Cameron returned from holiday, offering police the option of using plastic bullets for the first time in the UK, outside Northern Ireland. Shops closed early and some areas, like Clapham Junction and Hackney, saw social media coordinated clean up campaigns involving 2-300 people each time (some with ‘Looters are scum’ vests). Other areas, Like Eltham and Enfield, saw half-hearted attempts to reclaim ‘their’ streets. ‘In Eltham...up to 300 people, mostly men, some of whom said they were from a “white, working class area” and were out to “protect the community”...were kettled by police around 11 pm’. Further north, ‘in Enfield...video footage showed a group of men running through the streets shouting “England, England”’ (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 4). A Guardian reporter, Paul Lewis, who followed the riots all week, witnessed ‘more than 70 white males [the same men seen chanting ‘England, England’?], in their 30s and 40s, running in unison down a street shouting “get the pakis”, “get the blacks”’ (Lewis, 2011: 6).

Elsewhere, the worst of the violence was in Manchester – ‘the worst unrest in the city for 30 years’, according to the Greater Manchester police (*ibid*: 1) – as ‘groups of masked and hooded young people looted dozens of shops in Manchester and adjoining Salford over several hours, consistently evading riot officers and setting one fashion store on fire’ (*ibid*)⁴. In Birmingham, the

4 A research-based study of rioting in Salford suggests that these riots were largely anti-police and not, predominantly, about looting (Jeffery and Jackson, 2012; Jeffery and Tufail, this issue).

trouble was said to be ‘sustained, if slightly less serious’ than the night before (ibid: 2), involving some 300 youths in Central Birmingham (see also Spalek, Isakjee and Davies, 2012; Davies, 2012). Similar ‘sporadic but long running trouble’ was also observed in Wolverhampton and West Bromwich (ibid: 1). Liverpool was said to be ‘quieter’ (ibid: 2) than the previous night with volunteers joining clean up operations. ‘A police station in Nottingham was firebombed...by a gang of 30 to 40 men’ (ibid: 4) following ‘the arrest of 10 youths’ in connection with ‘a small group of people [who] got on to the roof of...Nottingham High School’ (ibid). Two teenagers were also arrested after rocks were thrown at another city police station. The ‘sporadic trouble in Leeds’ included ‘a gang’ throwing stones ‘at cars parked outside’ a Mosque in Chapeltown (ibid). Looting by ‘200 youths’ was reported in Bristol (ibid), and ‘a group of youths in Leicester city centre’ (ibid) were dealt with by the police.

Too late to be reported in the following morning’s papers was the single most tragic incident of the riots, the killing of three Asian men, Haroon Jahan, 21, and brothers Shazad Ali, 30 and Abdul Musavir, 31, ‘part of a group of around 80 guarding a petrol station and shops from looters in Winson Green [Birmingham]...victims of a hit-and-run in the early hours of yesterday [Wednesday]’ (*Guardian*, 11/8/11: 1).

Possibly the most surprising location to where the riots spread was Gloucester. According to Paul Lewis (2011: 6), ‘the damage was not on the scale of bigger cities, but in places appeared just as intense’. A local witness ‘described bins and bricks being hurled at police’ (ibid) and local teenagers showed Lewis ‘BBM [Blackberry Messenger] messages that had been calling on Gloucester to be attacked since Monday. One said: “Pussys stay at home! Bad man dnt come alone. Tell a fren to tell a fren!” (ibid).

The Manchester violence was not confined to the rioters: ‘In...footage posted on YouTube a group of officers with batons and riot shields run towards a group of young men on bikes. A youth straggling behind the others dismounts...and is knocked to the ground by an officer. Two officers then appear to strike him while he is on the ground. This lasts a few seconds and he gets up unaided’ (*Guardian*, 11/8/11: 2).

Day 5, Wednesday 10/8/11, was a day of tension in Birmingham, following the hit-and-run killings in the early hours of the morning, but the country-wide unrest was effectively over⁵.

Another Moral Panic?

Nearly 40 years ago, Stan Cohen (1973: 9) offered up the idea of ‘societies’ appearing ‘to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic’. This happens, he said, when something ‘emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests’, gets ‘presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media’, and is accompanied by a manning of ‘the moral barricades...by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people’ and by ‘socially accredited experts’ pronouncing ‘their diagnoses and solutions.’ What triggers this kind of reaction, ‘the object of the panic’, can be something that ‘is quite novel’, or ‘something that has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight.’ Endpoints vary but can entail ‘serious and long-lasting repercussions’ including ‘changes...in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.’⁶

5 For the sake of brevity, I deal with the issue of sentencing only once, below in the section exploring what was new about the riots.

6 For an argument suggesting the need to go beyond the concept of moral panic, see Steve Hall (2012). Unfortunately,

Might not this be the most revealing angle to adopt in thinking about these latest riots? Riots, with their long pedigree in British social history have clearly ‘been in existence long enough’, were ‘suddenly...in the limelight’; high-minded talk of society’s moral collapse by ‘right-thinking’ people was endemic, as was the stereotypical depiction of the rioters as a ‘mindless mob’ intent on ‘pure criminality’. The subsequent harsh, exemplary sentences could be viewed as excessive enough to constitute, in themselves, an unsanctioned change in legal and social policy.

Given this apparent ‘fit’ between the reaction to these latest riots and Cohen’s classic definition of a moral panic, how might one test more rigorously the idea that the response to the riots was another example of a moral panic? Not easily, is the answer. The conservative mindset (taking the moral high-ground, stereotypical thinking, punitiveness) is all but synonymous with key elements of the moral panic response, and (perhaps not unrelatedly) moral panics in the years since Cohen first published his classic text have become increasingly common. Moreover, since every adult will have lived through some of the recent British riots, and many will have lived through decades of them, it is impossible to accept that anyone believes these riots were entirely without precedent. What may, therefore, prove a more fruitful line of enquiry might be to examine the claims to novelty: the idea that these were a new form of riot. This, one could argue, might explain why riots are now ‘suddenly...in the limelight’, rather than because of a moral panic. This, then, is the tack I intend to pursue in what follows: to interrogate what were considered, by some commentators, to be at least relatively novel features, pit these claims against the available evidence, and only then conclude on the moral panic question.

So, What Was New?

There were seven areas where there was some suggestion of novelty: policing; social media; the riot areas; the rioter profile; rioting behaviour (specifically the looting); the State’s follow up; community ‘fight-backs’. Let’s take each in turn and examine the evidence for novelty.

‘Timid’ policing?

If the response to public disorder is usually characterised by robust policing, what was unusual about the initial police response to the riots was what seemed to be both an unpreparedness for the events and a willingness to stand by and watch looting take place. ‘There were hardly any attempts to prevent looting, with police only marching in formation and sealing off roads’, according to the *Guardian* (9/8/11:2) report of the policing of Tottenham High Road. Later, when the rioting moved on to Wood Green, the rioters apparently had free rein between around 2.30 and 5 am with ‘no intervention from police at all’ (*Guardian*, 8/8/11:3). The next night saw a more aggressive police presence, with riot vans, dogs and batons in use, but ‘for the second night running’ they were ‘entirely outmanoeuvred’, according to the *Guardian* (9/8/11:4): ‘When riot vans lined a shopping centre in Edmonton Green...groups of youths were simply diverted into side streets, finding smaller businesses to attack. Police were in tow, but always a minute or two after the damage had been done’ (*Guardian*, 9/8/11:3). Despite the introduction of S60

the reasons for his dismissal of the concept as ‘threadbare’ (p. 151) are very muddled. His discussion of ‘objectified fear’ and ‘objectless anxiety’ (p. 151), using the case of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism by way of example and introducing Lacan’s concept of the ‘Real’, is both contradictory and obfuscating. Despite all this and the disavowal of the concept, his argument (to the extent that I follow it) does seem to depend on the idea of transforming anxieties (which are ‘objectless’, by definition) into nameable fears (which have an object, by definition) via the production of ‘folk devils’, which is the core of the notion of moral panic.

stop and search powers (allowing wholesale stop/searching without ‘reasonable suspicion’) in the four worst affected Boroughs (Lambeth, Haringey, Enfield and Waltham Forest) from Sunday midnight, Monday night saw the worst of the violence spread all over the capital. In the early hours of Tuesday morning, ‘the decision to use heavily armoured Jankel vehicles to clear the streets of Clapham Junction...was the first indication of a radical change of plan’ (*Guardian*, 10/8/11:2). The next day police numbers on the streets of London were increased from 6,000 to 16,000 (‘the biggest police deployment in UK history’, *Guardian*, 10/8/11:1) and the riots effectively ceased in London.

The notion of a ‘wait and see’ start to the policing of the riots was confirmed by senior police officers themselves who ‘told the *Guardian* that for the first three nights of trouble officers in London were told to stand by, watch and wait rather than actively seek to arrest rioters and looters’ (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 1-2). Elsewhere in the country, police were engaged in ‘sporadic but long running’ battles with rioters (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 1), but only Manchester police talked about struggling ‘to regain control of some streets’ (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 1).

If this was a new strategy (in London), it was eventually replaced with what we might call the traditional, highly visible, active response to the riots. It might be argued that the ‘unprecedented’ numbers on the streets on Day four, coupled with the assigning of 450 detectives to hunt for rioters in the aftermath (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 7) were an over-compensation for earlier mistakes. But, even before that, day two’s ‘cat and mouse’ battles with potential rioters around the streets of London, coupled with blanket stop and search powers in many areas after midnight, were hardly passive even if not very successful. Even day one’s policing lies within the orbit of an approach to policing disorder premised on the notion of trying not to antagonise further the original protestors. That it was a manifest failure does not alter anything in this regard. As for why this happened - cock up, conspiracy or a new management team out of its depth – this need not concern us for present purposes.

Social media as organiser/inciter?

Much was made of the idea of social media being used to incite and organise the riots. In every protest event, the idea (always unproven) of an organising group usually gets trotted out. Spontaneous, unplanned events seem harder to accept, somehow. Fortunately, ‘The *Guardian* has compiled a unique database of more than 2.5 million tweets containing keywords, phrases and hashtags linked to England’s riots’ (*Guardian*, 25/8/11: 17). What ‘preliminary analysis of this Twitter activity in 12 riot locations shows’ is that ‘the majority of surging social media traffic occurs after the first verified reports of incidents in an area, which could suggest that Twitter was used far more by those seeking to follow fast-moving events than to incite trouble’ (ibid)⁷. They do add that ‘anecdotal evidence suggests Blackberry Messenger was...used by some rioters to disseminate messages inciting unrest’ (but ‘extensively by those seeking to avoid trouble’: ibid)⁸. We also know that two young men were jailed (each for four years) for attempting to arrange riots using Facebook, even though no riots materialised.

There is no doubt that social media were used extensively in the riots, as they are generally in everyday life, to communicate information. The what, where and when of riot-related events was constantly circulating in this way. Some of this traffic was undoubtedly an attempt to make such events happen. But, sorting out the meaning of this excited traffic – the meant from the

7 Later analysis confirmed that ‘Twitter was not used by rioters to incite or organise the disturbances’ (Roberts, 2011: Chapter 8).

8 On why Blackberry Messenger was a system widely used by young people, and its unintended advantages, see Roberts (2011: Chapter 7).

half meant from the joke, the hopeful bravado from the sheer fantasy – requires a different, more qualitative, approach. For now, in broad terms, what social media essentially enabled was the potential to suggest both time and place to start off an action, and to move elsewhere if the police presence or other factors looked unpromising. Such suggestions read more like invitations from the committed to like-minded fellow travellers than anything more organised⁹.

New riot areas?

London witnessed the spread of rioting to areas, like Clapham Junction, Croydon, Lewisham, Bromley and Beckenham in the South, Enfield, Ponders End, Waltham Forest and Wood Green in the north, and Sloane Square and Ealing in the west, that have not (at least, noticeably) rioted before. Outside London, places like Gloucester, Reading and Gillingham witnessed riotous disorder, probably for the first time.

These new riot areas were not at the expense of the ‘old’, riot-hardened areas: Tottenham itself, and Brixton, scene of the worst violence on day two of the riots, for example. More generally, and in line with what one would predict, ‘riot hotspots’ were areas of high and rising unemployment: ‘analysis [of the latest unemployment figures] by the TUC showed that several of the [riot] hotspots were among the 10 areas of the country where the largest number of claimants are chasing each vacancy’ (*Guardian*, 18/8/11: 5). These included Tottenham’s borough, Haringey (10,518 people chasing 367 vacancies), Hackney (‘fewer than 500 vacancies for more than 11,000 claimants’, *ibid*) and Lewisham (‘21 claimants...for each potential job’, *ibid*). Predictably, ‘young people had borne the brunt’ with close to a million 16-24 year olds, ‘or 20.2% of the young workforce...unemployed’ (*ibid*).

In addition, research by the IPPR [Institute for Public Policy Research] into ‘the relationship between different indicators of poverty and deprivation and the boroughs where violence took place...found that in almost all of the worst-affected areas, youth unemployment and child poverty were significantly higher than the national average while education attainment was significantly lower’ (*Guardian*, 19/8/11: 4). These findings were replicated in an early analysis (of data provided by the *Guardian*) by Alex Singleton, an urban planning lecturer, of the first 1300 or so cases to appear in court: ‘he found that the majority of people who have appeared in court live in poor neighbourhoods, with 41% of suspects living in one of the top 10% of most deprived places in the country...[and] 66% of neighbourhoods where the accused live got poorer between 2007 and 2010’ (*ibid*).

An examination of the new riot areas would reveal, either that they exhibit similar profiles to the riot hotspots, in terms of unemployment, poverty and deprivation (like Lewisham and Enfield) or have poor, deprived enclaves, particular estates for example, within areas of generally greater affluence (like Croydon). Those areas not particularly noted for their deprivation statistics, like Gloucester or Reading (about which I have read nothing apart from its appearance as a ‘riot location’ on one *Guardian* map, 18/8/11: 5), were not in the forefront of the disturbances, despite (in the case of Gloucester) BBM messages urging people onto the attack.

What all this suggests is that riot hotspots were, as usual, poverty, deprivation and unemployment blackspots, like Tottenham, where it all started, which is ‘one of the most economically deprived areas in the country’ with some ‘desperately rundown’ housing, ‘few amenities for young people’ and high unemployment figures: ‘54 people chasing each registered employment vacancy’, according to ‘recent government figures’ (*Guardian*, 8/8/11: 3). The expansion of the riots to newer areas would seem broadly to dovetail with the expansion of

⁹ On the importance of social media to new social movements more generally, see Castells (2012).

areas wracked by (worsening) unemployment and deprivation, in line with the historical legacy of neo-liberalism.

A changing demographic profile of the rioters?

As with the idea that the riots were somehow different because they had taken place in new areas as well as those with 'previous', there was also a notion in the coverage that the demographic profile of the rioter had changed somewhat. As we saw earlier, mention was made of younger rioters evident on the second night in Enfield. The riot in Hackney on the third night mentioned the noticeable presence of women helping to build the barricades. And, in the court cases that followed, the presence of students, or people holding down jobs, got much of the attention.

However, as the *Guardian's* own analysis of its 'unprecedented access to [riot-related] court results' (19/8/11: 4) revealed, the vast majority of rioters were the 'usual suspects': 'the accused are overwhelmingly young [49% 18-24, 79% 30 and under], male [91%] and often unemployed [only 8.6% had jobs or were students]' (ibid). (We should not overlook a certain self-fulfilling prophecy here: policing the streets, especially under pressure to produce, tends to focus on the 'usual suspects'.) The idea of the 'new rioter' would seem to have been largely a function of the media's attention to the atypical, in the interests of newsworthiness.

New rioting behaviour: shopping riots?

'These are shopping riots, characterised by their consumer choices: that's the bit we've never seen before' (Williams, 2011: 8)¹⁰

It is certainly true that, outside London, where rioters tended to loot shops near where they lived, people often travelled 'from their homes on the outskirts of the cities, or in some case satellite towns, to riot and loot in the city centres [of Manchester and Birmingham, for example]' (*Guardian*, 19/8/11: 4). This might be thought to support Williams's point; as might the apparent targeting of shoe shops, sports outfitters, mobile phone and electrical shops, the sorts of shops selling the consumer goods of choice of the young, of which much was made in the media coverage.

As against this notion of the new looting, we should bear in mind several things. First, there was also plenty of very mundane looting: low value items from Poundland and Lidl; cheap booze from corner shops. Second, looted TVs and other electrical goods being wheeled away in shopping trolleys is a familiar image from previous riots. Third, there is the apparently paradoxical combination of burning and looting. If the motive for looting was purely acquisitive, the arson makes little sense, especially of the shops housing the goods you intend to loot. This suggests that the acts of destruction are meaningful in their own right, not merely a prelude to looting. Fire can be spectacular and destruction exhilarating. To be the agent of destruction can be empowering, especially where the target symbolises the authorities, or rich corporations, or merely those that 'have' (local shops and private cars, for example). If the by-product of such destructive mayhem sometimes includes the loss of homes, this is probably more by the thoughtless excitement of the moment, than by design. Fourthly, there is the fact that looting takes place in full view of the

10 For the record, 'the most common type of unlawful activity' to come before the courts was looting (Roberts, 2011: Chapter 2), although this doesn't, on its own, prove anything.

police whereas common or garden shoplifting, or burglary of shops, takes places secretively, away from the gaze of any superintending authorities. In short, as against the claim that the looting this time was new, since largely acquisitive (and, by implication, apolitical) there is plenty of evidence that the looting conformed to its historical (political) pattern. As Gary Younge (2011: 25) exasperatedly put it, in defence of the political nature of the riots: ‘They were looting, not shoplifting, and challenging the police for control of the streets, not stealing coppers’ hubcaps’¹¹.

Three comments from the media coverage are indicative of the complexity of looting. The first is taken from a BBM broadcast. According to the *Guardian* (9/8/11: 7), it starts with an apparently unequivocal invitation to make money: ‘If you’re down for making money, we’re about to go hard in east London, tonight’. However, it continues in a slightly different vein: ‘Police have taken the piss for too long and to be honest I don’t know why it’s taken so long for us to make this happen’. At this point, getting one’s own back on the police, not making money, seems to be to the fore. Or, perhaps, getting one’s own back by ‘taking the piss’ through looting. This emphasis is built upon when the message continues: ‘Doesn’t matter if the police arrive ‘cos we’ll just chase dem out because as you’ve seen on the news, they are NOT ON DIS TING’. The shock (and delight?) in this heavily emphasised realisation is surely part of its meaning. If this message can be taken at face value, it is hard to deny that it is as expressive as it is utilitarian. An invitation to criminality to be sure, but one that is far from ‘pure’.

The second comment is a BBM message urging people ‘to head to Oxford Circus for “pure terror and havoc and free stuff”’ (*Guardian*, 9/8/11: 7). Who is to say which, ‘terror’, ‘havoc’ or ‘free stuff’, is the most important, or was found most appealing to those who responded to the message? This is not just an excuse, as some saw it, to go ‘on the rob’; clearly acquiring ‘free stuff’ is only part of the picture.

The third comment is about the complexity of the ethics of looting. The criminologist John Pitts made the point that looters ‘feel they can rationalise [their actions]...by targeting big corporations. There is a sense that the companies have lots of money while they have very little’ (quoted in the *Guardian*, 9/8/11: 4). The actual picture was more complex. The *Guardian* reported this exchange between two youths they interviewed: ‘When his friend admitted that the looting of local shops “wasn’t right”, the other youth corrected him: “And it weren’t wrong”’ (*Guardian*, 9/8/11: 6). Although the *Guardian* reporter did not follow up on this, by asking what the last comment meant, what it does reveal is an ambivalence in relation to looting local businesses: neither right nor wrong. This may constitute an ambivalence towards the local businesses: not really part of the community, ‘us’, but part of ‘them’ because richer, or immigrant. Or, it may be a reference to the fact that one shouldn’t judge the looters: they ‘weren’t wrong’, from their perspective, they had their reasons. Either way, it is in line with the evidence that local businesses were not spared, even if the high street chains would seem to have been harder hit because (in line with the acquisitive looting argument) they had more lucrative booty to loot.

Hunting down the rioters: A new vindictiveness?

If the police started off ‘timidly’, standing by and watching much of the time, they certainly made up for it in the aftermath. Using ubiquitous surveillance technology, buttressed by a government baying for blood and willing to sanction the over-riding of established human rights,

11 For an alternative viewpoint, one where the ‘new’ looting is seen as central, see Treadwell et al (2013). Although a passionate and trenchant article with much of interest, by reducing the riots to a single set of behaviours, they inevitably end up ignoring much. Despite the fact that it is based on interviews with rioters, its interest in the ‘deeper context’ (p. 2) tends to be in command, rendering it, ultimately, a ‘top-down’ theory-driven piece, with all the attendant problems of over-reading.

the MPD [Metropolitan Police District: London, minus the City of London] assigned ‘more than 450 detectives...to hunt for rioters and looters in the biggest criminal investigation’ they had ever mounted (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 7). My memory of previous riots is that the normal procedure had been to make arrests during the riots, with only the more serious acts of arson or violence meriting post-riot follow up. This time, nothing seemed too small to follow up. By the 19th August, 2,823 arrests had been made, most of them (1,744) by the MPD¹².

The *Guardian*’s preliminary analysis of the first 1300 or so cases to appear before the courts revealed a picture of quite stunning harshness: 70% of magistrates’ cases were remanded in custody [against a ‘normal’ rate for serious offences of 10%]; 39% were transferred to Crown Court; of those sentenced by magistrates, 70% were imprisoned (against a norm of 2%) with sentences generally longer than normal, some up to 40% longer. Bail had been granted in only ‘a handful of cases’ (*Guardian*, 19/8/11: 4). Furthermore, Magistrates ‘are being advised by the courts service to disregard normal sentencing guidelines’ (*Guardian*, 16/8/11: 7) in riot-related cases, and ‘the Crown Prosecution Service...issued guidance to prosecutors...effectively calling for juveniles found guilty of riot-related crimes to be named’ (ibid).

Although it is common, if only for symbolic purposes, to ensure that rioters do not ‘get away with it’, and thus we have certainly seen post-riot exemplary sentences before, I think that this level of follow up does seem to mark a new and unprecedented vindictiveness¹³.

Community ‘fight-back’?

During the course of the riots we witnessed various forms of what might be called community ‘fight-back’, from the groups of ethnic shopkeepers banding together to protect their shops and businesses, through the various Twitter organised clean up campaigns, to the attempted vigilantism by some white males in Enfield and Eltham. To my knowledge, this has not been a feature of previous riots and could thus be seen as a novel development.

Elements of a Dynamic, Grounded Explanation

On the basis of my brief account of what happened and the examination of how novel were features of the riots, what might be the elements of a tentative, dynamic, grounded explanation of the riots? I say ‘elements’ in recognition of the important distinction between the ‘necessary’ elements of an explanation, and the (always elusive) ‘sufficient’ explanation. Or, as Martin Kettle (2011: 33) more concretely puts it: ‘No one should underestimate the difficulty of explaining why some simmering street situations turn into full-scale riots and others don’t...Nor why copycat riots take place in this city rather than that one’. I say ‘tentative’ because, like Gary Younge (2011: 25), I believe that ‘attempts to establish a definitive reason for [the riots]...inevitably implode under the weight of their own dogma’. My preference for an attempt that stays grounded in what

12 The final figure for arrests, according to Roberts (2011: Chapter 1), was ‘over 4000’

13 This claim was the one that caused referees of this paper the most difficulties. They reminded me that the response to the largely Muslim ‘rioters’ after the Bradford riots of 2001, involving extensive investigations lasting several years using video footage of the rioters, was similarly punitive (typically 3-5 year sentences). I was also told that changes in the law and technology make it difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the 1980s and the present. I don’t disagree with either point. However, the Bradford riots, unlike the 2011 riots, did not spread nationwide, and the State’s punitive response was conducted in the aftermath of 9/11 (which occurred just after the riots), with all that that entailed for Muslim suspects in the new ‘War on Terror’. Moreover, it seems the public, somewhat surprisingly given their general tendency to regard the courts as too lenient, also thought the sentencing too harsh (Roberts and Hough, 2013). Given all this, I stick by my claim about a new vindictiveness, but repeat that this is a tentative, impressionistic claim, not a scientific one.

happened and sees the riots dynamically, as an unfolding process, is a recognition that, as Aditya Chakraborty (2011: 9) put it, 'Offering up a single explanation for the violence and looting that began in one London borough...and...spread as far as Birmingham and Salford must be a nonsense'. With these important caveats in mind, let us start where the riots did, in Tottenham.

Origins

I said earlier that the origins of the riots in Tottenham were a political protest about the unexplained police killing of a local, black male that remained unaddressed by the legitimate authorities. As I have dealt elsewhere (Jefferson, 2012) with this contemporary history of deprivation, policing and riots, which should by now be both familiar and recognisable, I will confine myself here to the following summary quotes:

'As the violence unfolded in Tottenham, it appeared to be following a familiar pattern. A young black man is killed by the police. The 'community' protests. Violence ensues.'
(Kunzru, 2011: 38)

'The sequence of events in Tottenham at the weekend has many echoes of the Toxteth riots in Liverpool of 1981, as well as unrest in Tottenham itself in 1985 and other incidents of unrest that decade: a local flashpoint in a deprived urban area, the rapid escalation of a local protest into mayhem as others pile into the area – and long summer nights'
(Kennedy, 2011: 6)

The violence spreads locally

Once the riot got underway, looting and more general burning were added to the 'tactics' of attacking police officers and their vehicles. At this point, community cohesion around a pacific protest gave way to community division. The Duggan family immediately dissociated themselves from the violence and disorder and appealed for calm, in the name of the dead Mark, as did many others, some of whom became bystanders, watching but not actively participating, others of whom became opponents of the rioters, bravely risking reprisals as they urged desistance. An interesting feature of the rioter/bystander distinction is that many of the bystanders were clearly also angry with the police, but were unprepared to take that further into violence and looting. How might we make sense of these distinctions?

We know that most of the rioters were young men. As a group, these are some of the worst affected by the Borough's poverty and deprivation. Unemployment rates among 18-24 year olds run higher than average, maybe 25-30%, which only accentuates the problem of the lack of amenities for them. They are also the group most likely to have had negative relations with the criminal justice system, especially the police, whose use of stop and search in the 'wars' against drugs, robberies and knife/gun crime is seen as oppressive and persecutory, especially by black youth who are regularly over-represented in stop/search statistics (see, again, Jefferson, 2012). And, being young men, they are more likely to let rip with their anger than either older people or females. However, some of those who stood by or opposed the rioters were also young men. Were they simply the less deprived/disaffected, the few with jobs and/or otherwise empowered/resourced? Maybe. But, one suspects that this is not the whole answer and that there would have been those with a similar demographic to the rioters who did not join in.

Here one can only speculate but my hunch would be that those who are the most active and destructive in riot situations, those who throw the first brick, petrol bomb or flaming torch into a shop, will be those who are most angry/disaffected or otherwise troubled (and that there will probably be a relationship between the intensity of anger/disaffection and how troubled someone feels). To explore this fully though would require more access to personal profiles than we have; but such a psychosocial approach is essential if we are seriously interested in who does, and who does not, participate in serious outbreaks of disorder¹⁴. Relatedly, there is the question of leaders and followers in the riot itself. In other words, even among rioters, there are important distinctions to be made between those who participate fully and intensely, and those who are only willing to loot once others have started, who join in, perhaps tentatively or reluctantly, to avoid not being one of the crowd should they fail to do so.

The final stage of the night's riots, the more systematic looting of shops on Wood Green High Street and Tottenham Hale Retail Park, albeit accompanied by torching cars, may have had something to do with a virtual absence of police and the power of social messaging quickly to spread this information. But, in the context of a night in which the (hated) police had been, apparently, outwitted, outmanoeuvred and outfought, is it not the case, in war, 'to the victor, the spoils?' Opportunistic, yes; but the opportunity was probably as much to do with the thrill of the adventure as with the spoils. However, once again, individual motives and levels of commitment would have varied, even as a sort of collective hysteria would have sucked in some to do acts that they might not ordinarily have done.

Day 2: 'Cat-and-Mouse'

'Many teenagers showed off the same Blackberry Messenger (BBM) alert passed round on Sunday, telling people to meet at Enfield train station at 4 pm. "Everyone I know got that BBM..." said Alice..."It told you to pass it to all your contacts."

Her friend, Alixe, also 17, did what the message asked. "There was a load of people at the station from 4 pm, waiting around for a couple of hours."

(*Guardian*, 9/8/11: 6)

"What happened in Enfield and neighbouring suburbs on Sunday was not a riot. There was looting, but the mood was calmer: it felt pre-meditated."

(*Guardian*, 9/8/11: 4)

This 'pre-meditated' waiting followed by a 'cat-and-mouse' run-a-round with the police, coupled with looting, constitutes the origins of the notion that, at this point, the riots had morphed into something else, less political, more acquisitive. Certainly, it would seem to demonstrate the power of social messaging, to 'invite' people to take part. The reason for taking up the invitation would, no doubt, cover a spectrum from curiosity and 'something to do', through excitement and being part of what was happening, to a strong identification with the anti-police sentiments expressed in the Tottenham protest of the night before. In the case of the less committed, the importance of being part of what was happening, of peer group 'belonging', might have been central. What was certainly clear was that, at some stage, there would be conflict with the police,

¹⁴ To expand on this point would take me too far from my present purpose. However, those who are interested in what such an approach entails, theoretically and methodologically, should see Gadd and Jefferson (2007) and Hollway and Jefferson (2013).

since walls were being dismantled and broken into stones for throwing at them, and looting would provide the touchstone of that conflict. Minimally, one needed to identify with some element of that to remain an active part of the marauding group. If one was there in order to 'belong' to one's peer group, then being one of a crowd and the 'de-individuation' such membership promotes might well have led to the commission of acts that normally one would not contemplate (see Jack Levin, Professor of Sociology and Criminology, on 'belonging' and 'de-individuation', quoted in the *Guardian*, 13/8/11: 6).

What seems to have happened in Brixton was somewhat different. There, a fight between youths that the police were attempting to break up turned into an anti-police riot followed by looting¹⁵. Rather than a 'pre-meditated' riot, police action appeared to precipitate the riot. The Tottenham riot of the night before seems to provide the essential context and point of identification; but local police action provides the immediate trigger. It is in this sense that I understand the remarks of Jay Kast, a 24 year old youth worker from East Ham: 'In some senses the rioting has been unifying a cross-section of deprived young men who identify with each other' (*Guardian*, 10/8/11: 6).

Day 3: Violence spreads London-wide and nationally

"I wish I was in Manchester", he [14 year old boy] said, "They did it properly there. Here [in Toxteth] it was just burning cars but there was no looting or nothing."
(*Guardian*, 11/8/11: 4)

The opening quote is a reminder, should one still be needed, of the different, locally-specific, shape of the riots, around London, and around the country. What happened in Toxteth was different from what happened in Manchester; and what happened in Manchester (mainly looting) was different from what happened in Salford (more anti-police than looting). At this point in time, the events in Tottenham might provide only a remote point of identification, having been overtaken by events elsewhere which might prove to be more salient (a spectacular fire, like that in Croydon, for example). What is important is how such points of identification intersect with local grievances. Motivations and levels of commitment will inevitably vary; but for the riots to happen at all one needs a point of identification, a local grievance and an opportunity of some kind. If Tottenham broadly supplied the point of identification, and police-youth relations provided the grievance, the 'timid' policing was probably responsible for providing many of the opportunities ('they are NOT ON DIS TING', remember). Perhaps the best summary of this notion was provided, cryptically, by a 25 year old man from Toxteth, quoted in the *Guardian* (11/8/11: 4):

"Police patrol these streets [in Toxteth] every night of the week and we only get to riot every few years...They can't come here laying down the law like they do all year round. People are rioting because the riot is finally here."

15 But see note 1.

Contextual Features: No Past and No Future

“‘Why do you think everything’s going off? Because we fucking hate you’”

(Young woman speaking to police, quoted in the *Guardian*, 9/8/11: 4)

‘In the absence of any community leadership, viable social movements or memory of collective struggle, the most these political orphans could hope to achieve was private acquisition and social chaos’

(Younge, 2011: 25)

‘This week, copycat looting has again shifted attention from the core problems within black communities: poverty, disaffection, police harassment, educational underachievement, family breakdown...

Over the last three decades we’ve allowed ourselves to be fooled that, with greater integration, plus a few black faces in sport and entertainment, things have improved...this is not 1981. In many ways its worse.’

(Harker, 2011: 32)

As well as the contingent, foreground factors in any unfolding process there are the background factors that are necessary elements of any explanation. These are the kind of factors that have been associated with rioting since the 1980s (Jefferson, 2012). Any of these factors, singly or in combination, might be enough to provide the necessary point of identification with the rioting. They include anger, especially with the police, unemployment, boredom, poverty, deprivation and disaffection. That these so often go together should come as no surprise: being unemployed as a young man tends to produce boredom, poverty, deprivation, problems with the police, and disaffection. Educational underachievement and family breakdown (by no means confined to black communities) are other relevant factors, as Joseph Harker reminds us in the above quote.

So far, so familiar. But, what both the Younge and the Harker quote also suggest is that life for youth on the margins has worsened through the 1980s and beyond. Economically, high levels of youth unemployment have become endemic as unemployment in the de-industrialised zones has become chronic for many. At the same time, the rich have got richer such that we are now probably the most unequal society in Europe. Politically, Thatcher’s neo-liberal revolution crucially entailed taking on and defeating those organisations that existed to give voice to subordinated interests: the unions, principally, but also the Metropolitan authorities (that constantly took up the struggle over policing in London, Liverpool and Manchester). The result, as Younge’s quote concisely puts it, is an absence of ‘viable social movements or memory of collective struggle’. In the 1980s, rioters and miners, for example, realised they had a common enemy, Thatcher and the police. Many a miner confessed to finally understanding what black complaints of oppressive policing were about. Black youth had community leaders, like Bernie Grant in Tottenham, who stood up for them and were prepared to speak about discriminatory policing. There were community media, like *Race Today*, that defended the riots as acts of resistance. Today, these organs no longer exist, or have been completely transformed. In 1981 there were no black MPs; now there are several, including Danny Lammy, MP for Tottenham. Did he, or any of them, defend the rioters? No; they were condemned (as ‘violent thugs’, Lammy, 2011:6). Their communities no longer included them. This is what Younge is referring to when

he talks of 'no community leadership' (see also Palmer, 2012)¹⁶. Culturally, the 1980s saw the rise of a culture of consumption, celebrity and reality TV: the 'blingification' of everyday life. The politically inflected black culture of the 1970s, with Bob Marley its undisputed head, gave way to a more problematic, celebrity driven one, even as it became the dominant culture among young people. Thus, these 'political orphans' could only hope for 'private acquisition and social chaos'; but, in the context of contemporary culture, one should not underestimate the significance of such acquisitions: in the absence of any other – economic or political – identity, one's identity as a consumer is not a trivial matter¹⁷.

Conclusion: Moral Panic...or What?

What can we conclude from all this? On the issue of whether or not these events are best approached as the latest in a long line of moral panics about youth, with 'feral underclass' just another 'folk devil', there is plenty of evidence to support that view. Specifically, the spark that ignited the original Tottenham disturbance, the death of a black person at the hands of the police in a poor, deprived neighbourhood with long-standing antagonistic relations between police and young people, uncannily echoes many of the major urban disturbances of the past 30 years. However, the small indications of new developments, namely, the excessively vindictive nature of the social reaction, the spread of rioting to new, albeit still deprived, areas, and the novelty of communities 'fighting back', may be worth exploring for what they might tell us about the present conjuncture.

It is possible that comparative work on previous post-riot responses may reveal as mistaken my idea that the recent reaction of the police and the courts has been unusually excessive. A cursory re-examination of Scarman would seem to suggest that the idea of policing that failed to deal forcefully enough with looters has a clear precedent in Brixton 1981, when, apparently, the delay in responding to the looting was also criticised:

'I am satisfied that any delay by the police in stopping the looting arose not from any reluctance to do so but from the fact that because of the limited resources they had available in the early part of the evening, they could not cope with both the disorder and the looting'

(Scarman, 1982: 118)

But, until compelling evidence arises to the contrary, I shall stick with the idea that the response signified 'a new vindictiveness'¹⁸. On the issue of the new riot areas, we need not hesitate: many areas were seeing riots for the first time. The same would seem to be true of communities 'fighting back'. A new vindictiveness; the spread of riots to new areas; communities 'fighting back': how to think these developments?

In the 1970s, when we (Hall et al, 2013) were trying to make sense of the moral panic about

16 The point is not restricted to black communities, as one referee helpfully pointed out, but is also true for many poor white communities too.

17 Here the article by Treadwell et al (2013) can be usefully revisited, but read for its contribution to the looting dimension of the riots rather than as a totalistic explanation of the riots as a whole.

18 But see again note 13.

mugging, we suggested that the idea of a moral panic needed to be situated historically if we were to be able to explain why it happened when it did. Using Gramsci's notion of hegemony, we argued that the mugging panic was symptomatic of a crisis of authority that began to appear in the 1960s and developed into a law and order campaign in the 1970s. In conjunctural terms, this was the crisis that proved the death knell of post-war, social democratic welfare capitalism. Whether the new neo-liberal conjuncture inaugurated by Thatcherism was ever characterised by hegemony may be a moot point; but Thatcherism certainly intensified some old conflicts (strikes and industrial conflicts) and produced new ones (inner city riots) as it forced through its brutal, cost-cutting agenda, assisted by the Falklands war, the proceeds of North Sea oil and the normalisation of exceptional measures to deal with crises. This project, leavened with a little social democracy, continued under New Labour (Hall, 2003), and beyond. The de-industrialisation of the 1980s gave way to a new service-based economy, underpinned by a deregulated and now dominant financial sector that seemed to promise limitless growth, the end of 'boom-bust' economics, even the 'end of history'. As we now know, this new casino capitalism proved to be based on a series of speculative bubbles, fuelled by a toxic combination of cheap credit, an inordinate appetite for risk, greed, corruption and white-collar criminality. In 2007, the outlets for further speculation ran out and the bubbles burst, revealing a mountain of global debt that would have destroyed the world's financial system had not governments taken on the banks' debts, thus effectively nationalising them. Now, in the new age of austerity, the 'imperative' to pay down these enlarged sovereign debts is producing a new toxic combination: reduced public services, growing unemployment, a lack of demand, reduced credit for small businesses, a constant threat of recession, growing impoverishment – and, unsurprisingly, a renewed sense of crisis. Within such a context, the spreading of rioting to new areas seems unsurprising; as does the new vindictiveness and the exclusionary practices entailed in communities distancing themselves (by 'fighting back') from those from their own communities involved in the riots: morbid symptoms (blaming the victim) of an apparently intractable series of crises. If this is right, we can also expect what Gary Younge has predicted will be the riots' legacy: 'greater authoritarianism, more police powers and an emboldened far right' (*Guardian*, 15/8/11: 25).

But perhaps the single most novel feature of the riots, the one that I cannot get out of my mind, is how unprecedentedly grim things are now for that growing section of young men who are poor, under-educated, unqualified, unemployed, bored, disaffected, angry, and lack either memories of better times or any realisable hopes for the future: Younge's 'political orphans'. Like someone with memory loss, they seem stuck in the perpetual present of, in their case, permanent adolescence, condemned to a life of dependency, unable ever to achieve the kind of financial independence we associate, traditionally, with becoming an adult. Writing in the 1950s, Paul Goodman (1956) wrote a classic text on 'the problems of youth in the organised society'. He argued that the disaffected youth of his day, the beatniks and the juvenile delinquents, were reacting against the nature of the system and the lack of jobs 'that are necessary or unquestionably useful; that...draw on some of one's best capacities; and that can be done keeping one's honor and dignity' (p. 17). He called this situation, 'Growing up Absurd' (the book's title). He was bemoaning the type, not the lack, of jobs in a period of full employment in the USA. How much more absurd is it now, in a global situation where regular work of any kind is increasingly hard to come by, especially for the young. As Pankaj Mishra (2011: 34) concisely puts it, 'the dead end of globalisation looms clearly before Europe and America's youth: little chance of stable employment, or even affordable education'. If we continue to ignore the plight of these 'men-children', and fail to provide scope for them to live useful lives with 'honor and dignity', we should not be surprised when they wreak their revenge.

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