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## REVOLTAS POPULARES CONTEMPORÂNEAS NUMA PERSPECTIVA COMPARADA

# Violence, global unrest and advanced capitalism: the case for the English riots of 2011

*Violência, agitação global, e capitalismo avançado:  
os motins ingleses de 2011*

*La violencia, agitación global, y el capitalismo  
avanzado: los disturbios británicos de 2011*

Daniel Briggs\*

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**Abstract:** Over the last five years or so, we have witnessed increasing forms of violence and unrest across the world. In the media, these depictions of violence are presented as actions of resistance to oppressive regimes and corrupt politics yet are, at the same time, deliberately detached from a global *politik* which is collapsing in numerous ways: the manifestations evident in market instability, and increasing austerity, unemployment and marginalisation; a sign perhaps that the orgy of globalisation is reaching its climax. Some of this was reflected in what we saw across English cities in 2011. In this paper, I discuss these riots – why they might have happened and the State response – but perhaps more importantly how they should be reconsidered as part of other forms of violence and dissatisfaction against oppressive regimes and corrupt politics as a collective response to a global system on the brink of collapse – in Europe, the Middle East, or Latin America – as a result of its neverending pursuit of rampant profit at the expense of millions of people.

**Keywords:** England; riots; protest politics; western democracy.

**Resumo:** Ao longo dos últimos cinco anos ou mais, temos assistido ao aumento de formas de violência e instabilidade em todo o mundo. Nos meios de comunicação, representações de violência são apresentadas como ações de resistência a re-

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gimes opressivos e políticos corruptos, mas são, no entanto, ao mesmo tempo, desligadas de uma política global que está em colapso de várias maneiras: na instabilidade do mercado, no aumento da austeridade, desemprego e marginalização; talvez um sinal de que a orgia da globalização esteja atingindo seu clímax. Tudo isto teve reflexos em várias cidades inglesas em 2011. Neste artigo discuto essas manifestações – por que elas aconteceram e a resposta do Estado – e ainda também como eles devem ser considerados como parte de outras formas de violência e insatisfação contra regimes opressivos e política corrupta, como uma resposta coletiva para um sistema global à beira de um colapso – na Europa, no Oriente Médio, ou na América Latina – ou seja, como resultado da desenfreada busca sem fim de lucro à custa de milhões de pessoas.

**Palavras-chave:** Inglaterra; motins; política de protesto; democracia ocidental.

**Resumen:** En los últimos cinco años, hemos sido testigos de las formas crecientes de violencia e inestabilidad en todo el mundo. En los medios de comunicación, las representaciones de la violencia se presentan como acciones de resistencia a los regímenes opresivos y políticos corruptos, pero son, sin embargo, al mismo tiempo, desconectadas de una política global que se derrumba en muchos aspectos: la inestabilidad del mercado, aumento de la austeridad, el desempleo y la marginación; tal vez un señal de que la orgia de la globalización está llegando a su punto culminante. Todo esto se ha reflejado en varias ciudades inglesas en 2011. En este artículo analizo estas manifestaciones – por qué acorrieran y cuál fue la respuesta del Estado – y sin embargo, también la forma en que deben ser considerados como parte de otras formas de violencia y el descontento contra los regímenes políticos opresivos y la política corrupta, como una respuesta colectiva a un sistema global al borde del colapso – en Europa, el Medio Oriente o América Latina – es decir, como resultado de la desenfrenada búsqueda sin fin de lucro a costa de millones de personas.

**Palabras clave:** Inglaterra; disturbios; protesta política; democracia occidental.

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## Introduction

This paper begins by framing the English riots of 2011 in a historical and cultural context before discussing what the riots represented. A quick analysis is made of the expected State response before I wade into the main substance of the paper which hinges on the stalling machinery of the neo-liberal social system. Here I analyse some features of these problems such as the endless pursuit of profit at the expense of others, how the English riots – although largely inarticulate by comparison to those occurring across southern Europe and the middle East – are reflective of a new age of rioting and global unrest. Lastly, I examine the problem with mainstreaming Western democracy as a political system and suggest that instead this form of politics is only interested in feeding

the hand from which the neoliberal order eats. The unrest we saw in English cities in 2011, and across the world over the last few years, I want to suggest are related to these issues.

### **The trigger event for the 2011 riots: Mark Duggan's death**

Like other historic episodes of rioting, there is normally some sort of trigger event: a spark to light the fire. As we have seen in other countries where rioting and disorder have evolved – such as Tunisia, Egypt and Greece – it takes the death of someone in the margins of society to prompt collective action; often letting loose other subjective and shared feelings of dissent, frustration and oppression. For the 2011 English riots, this was unfortunately Mark Duggan. Duggan lived on the Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham, north London; an area with a history of tension between the black community and police. In the early evening of Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> August 2011, Duggan was shot and killed by the police after they stopped a cab in which he was a passenger. One police officer was also shot but survived. The way Duggan's death was reported on Thursday suggested that he was wanted by the police. It was also suggested that Duggan fired his gun first and that the police acted in response to the threat of his firearm. However, evidence now indicates Duggan was not armed when he was shot and that the policeman who was shot had been fired on by another officer (LAVILLE, 2011). This exchange of gunfire did not go unnoticed.

It seems attention to this event was quickly stimulated through online social media through Twitter and Blackberry messenger ('BB' hereafter). However, the police failed to instigate any formal notification to the family; in fact, it was rumoured that Duggan's mother found out her son had died when she watched the news that evening. Unfortunately, the police stalled the family's demands for clarity, and instead issued a statement suggesting that officers were fired upon by the 'suspect', Mark Duggan, before shooting back. Some in the local (and virtual) community found this difficult to believe having seen/read various posts about the event through social media. The following day, national and local news seemed contradictory; some media played upon images of a 'gangsta badboy' while others described him as a 'family man'. The latter seemed to be the view of local community members from the Broadwater Farm Estate who said Duggan was coming to terms with the death of someone close to him some weeks earlier. Local criticism

quickly started to build against the police at the manner of the killing, because it was largely perceived as unjust.

Unsatisfied with police action and lack of clarity on Duggan's death, a protest was arranged by the local Broadwater Farm residents. It was to take place on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> August in an effort to acquire transparency. Late that afternoon, around 300 people from the local community, including family and friends, gathered outside Tottenham Police Station after marching from Broadwater Farm Estate. The crowd said they wanted '*justice*' for Mark Duggan's family and wanted answers. The crowd that then gathered outside Tottenham Police Station started to get agitated when no senior police representative materialised to give transparency on the issue. By around 8pm, there were reported confrontations with the police. From 8.30pm until 10.30pm, a double-decker bus was burnt out and police cars and buildings were vandalised and set alight. Then shops and businesses in the area started to get ransacked and looted. These sequences of events are now widely believed to be 'the initial moments which led to the disorder that followed in London and around the country. However, the mistake many commentators made was to generalise this event as something representative of the collective behaviour of the rioters and looters. However, as we will see, not all were 'rioting in the name of Mark Duggan' when they were claiming I pads, designer clothes and wide screen TVs from commercial stores (BRIGGS, 2012a).

### **Looking back but thinking forward: Contextualising the English riots of 2011**

In a television interview for RAI 2 in February 2012, I was probed on whether I thought the riots were something historically attributable to the English; whether this form of disorder was in 'our blood.' If we examine areas of our past, at various points England has been marked by violent rioting so what happened in the summer of 2011 was therefore another chapter of disorder in our national history. Just as times past, anger and sour feeling about the police and the State quickly came to the surface. However, history tells us that, regardless of motivation, very disorganised behaviour such as rioting enables politicians and moral entrepreneurs to close their eyes, reach in the usual-suspect cupboard and pull out a straw man at which they can attribute the disorder. First out was some sort of feral, underclass youth; '*a lost generation*' in the words of Kenneth Clarke.

Perhaps it is a lost generation. It is certainly one which is dissatisfied and outraged which means the collective feeling shouldn't be delegitimised or misinterpreted for something else. Take for example, the recent *student riots of 2010* where thousands of students-to-be as well as other graduates walked on Whitehall, the street lined with government departments and ministries, to protest against cuts in higher education and the rampant increase in student fees (which increased from around £3,000 to £9,000 a year). Widespread disorder and violence broke out at the climax of the protests in Millbank – the headquarters of the Conservative party. In the aftermath, politicians, media and the police attributed the violence to a minority of 'other people' while the majority were peacefully protesting. For example, the Metropolitan Police's Commissioner, labelled the behaviour 'thuggish, loutish behaviour by criminals' thereby reducing the collective dissent to some pathological outburst from some wayward troublemakers. The cause was lost and the message depoliticised. So much for peaceful protests when the government went ahead with their plans to increase student fees.

And like those disturbances of 2010, much of the disorder and violence of 2011 was framed as a 'youth problem'. As Pearson (1983) points out, it may be easy to blame the immoral youth for this sudden break from the social status quo because attribution to social change has always been directed, to some degree, at the 'youth problem'. So therefore moralising youth behaviour is historically endemic; the concerns embedded in the generational anxiety which seems to surface once in a while when people say that *'the country has gone to the dogs'*. But those that were the youth of yesterday are the adults of today and often find themselves saying the same sort of thing. *'Oh the youth of today!'* While the Riots Communities and Victims Panel lambasted 'poor parenting' as the locus of the disorder, we now know concerns about absent or substandard parenting have been commonplace throughout history. State and parental concerns about behaviour 'getting worse' as time passes is a red herring as generations mature they start to reconstruct societal changes around the innocent and 'better times' in which they grew up before the degenerative processes of social change invaded and changed their experience of the world. No doubt one day people will be saying *'in the good old days of BB messenger and Facebook'* and the like!

In the same cupboard, the politicians and moral entrepreneurs pulled out the 'immigrant' or 'alien other' – the person/people from the 'outside' somewhere (wherever that is); people who had somehow

intentionally arrived to invade our idyllic English communities while simultaneously sucking on the nipple of the welfare State, failing to engage with ‘our way of life’ and assimilate to our ‘cultural heritage’, and get involved in crime. Unfortunately, it seems that these days immigration and the ‘alien other’ have started to receive increased attention as the crisis in democracy across the West fuels national insecurity and an increasing support for fringe far-right parties. This has resulted in the rise in anti-Semitism and anti-multiculturalist rhetoric – perhaps most visibly apparent in the recent elections in France 2012 at which the far-right party, *Front National*, gained no less than 19% in the first round of the country’s vote. However, history tells us that anti-immigration and anti ‘other’ discourse, and the legislation which consequently ensues, is generally unhelpful when it comes to a) explaining how and why social disorder takes place in urban minority communities (such as the riots in Paris in 2005) and b) aiding the integration of those groups. If anything, it tends to aggravate minority ethnic urban community relations, the social exclusion they experience and the generic reaction towards them from the aggressive right-wing media and others local to the same area. However, like 1958 and 1981, we are witnessing further anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalist attitudes as countries across the Eurozone also start to impugn this ‘other’ group for the perpetual downfall of their constituency and violation of national identity.

An investment in this ideology frames the English rioters as people who don’t representative of our ‘national character’ – that they did not symbolise the dated, stereotypical post-war-daydream-like England and its constructions of bunny rabbits, green meadows and country picnics. To me, this resistance against typical Englishness signals a broader level of denial of the changes which this country has experienced and is still experiencing. Does the coalition government not know how much we rely on foreign labour just to keep this country going? If it is not evident in the construction metalheap of the Olympic stadium in Stratford, London where a crude mix of Russian and Eastern Europeans plugged away on a daily basis then it is obvious in the GP surgeries where Pakistani and Indian doctors fill in where English doctors have left to open private practices. Our economy survives on the migrant worker. Thus a careful ideological balancing act takes place as government rhetoric tries to paint a picture of our country as ‘untouched’ by the globalised tidal wave of the 1970s yet which somehow retains its quaint, quintessential English personality.

Then ‘gangs’ were pulled out of the cupboard – in the main, blamed for causing the disorder. They became the political plaything as national government started to bail out local misunderstandings of the ‘gang’ problem in favour of indicating that this group was somehow now responsible for the bulk of the disorder. Although gangs were reportedly involved, it was not as central government or some independent studies predicted (BRIGGS, 2012a), because they came together to fight the police and State oppression as well as those attached to that lifestyle or at least familiar to it in some form. Yet their pull to consumerism was ever present in the narratives (MOXON, 2011; BRIGGS, 2012a; TREADWELL et al., 2013), and this meant many used the riots to siphon off as much cash/consumer goods as possible while making clear their hate for the authorities. However, while gang rivalries were suspended as, what it seems, was an opportunity to payback against the police and claim as many freebies as possible, when the rivalries resumed, so too did their volatile relations. So can gangs co-exist more peacefully? Are strained police relations with urban youth the main barrier to reducing youth violence in street scenery?

Lastly, new social media was plucked reluctantly from the cupboard – just because it represented a new form of *social politick* which transgressed geographical spaces through virtual networks. Harboursing the potential for a new moral panic, new social media was lambasted as the ‘driver’ for the disorder when, as we have discussed, it was merely the vehicle in some capacity. In any case, this new form of communication is now affordable and accessible to most people in England evident in most streets where young people walk around with BlackBerry’s glued to their hand as if it is part of their body. Yet it was quickly forgotten that new social media helped to resist participation in the riots as well as assisting with the riot clean-up.

We can’t ignore the continual problems of discrimination and structural violence which have played a part in historical rioting episodes (in particular recent episodes of 1981 and 1985) and we shouldn’t discount the evidence to suggest that things have not changed (*Guardian* and LSE, 2011). The police still hassle urban, working-class groups and minority ethnic populations on a daily basis, on occasions, for little apparent reason. Therefore we can’t ignore the subjective nature of what it feels like to experience discrimination, lived oppression and racism on a daily basis and, to some extent, this was what we saw in 2011. Nearly twenty years ago, it was Stephen Lawrence (a black British man murdered in a racial attack) and, in recent months, we have also started



to revisit questions of police legitimacy – despite our suspicions that very little has changed over the last thirty years. Maybe some of us see history repeating itself; in that, it has to take the death of a black man at the hands of the police to once again remind us of the deficiencies in policing urban communities.

The first thing to note is that riots – as a form of disorder in this country – are nothing new; and perhaps like the dormant volcano they erupt every now and then, reminding us of the power and influence they can generate, only to drift from our consciousness as the collective magma from the social caldera cools forming another layer in our violent history. It is evident that, despite one-sided political framing in news media, riots are often attributable to ‘feral youth’, the ‘immigrant’ or some ‘other’ group or symbolisms of change (in this case new social media). But we have seen that there are more to these disturbances and, in looking back, we need to look forward and consider correctly what the riots represented.

### **What the English riots represented**

It is unanimously evident that the ‘riots’ represented more than just one explanation. Despite the shallow political attempts to mark it as behaviour of the ‘criminal classes’ and the narrow ‘background factor’ conjectures made by the Ministry of Justice, academic commentators tended to favour explanations which highlighted a) growing social inequality, discrimination and racism, and b) the vibrancy and social significance of life in consumer society. The empirical data collected by the *Guardian* and LSE in 2011, indicate that these elements likely interplayed in August 2011. Evidence in this book seems to suggest that while there was some initial motivation to get back at police/State, generally these demands masked a commitment to secure as many consumer items as possible while the law and order levies were down.

Indeed, historical evidence would suggest that periods of economic hardship often lay foundations for such social responses and this period of austerity may have had some bearing on collective social feeling. But it was Mark Duggan’s killing which seemed to stimulate fragile community relations – the similarities of the death of Cynthia Jarrett in 1985 on Broadwater Farm (SOLOMOS, 2011), and Brixton 1981 likely still fresh for some – and this became the moment which led to protests, resulting in the first episode of disorder. The failings of the police in numerous ways also seem familiar: a lack of intervention and

failure to follow procedures correctly allowed for a protest to turn ugly and for a stagnant crowd to look for ways in which to express their frustration and anger.

Just because all this went on in a ‘black neighbourhood’, it didn’t mean the riots were all about ‘race’ – although the UK has witnessed its fair share of urban unrest in the context of race relations, inequality and unemployment in 1981, 1985, and 2001. Although the riots in London were multi-ethnic, they were framed discursively as black, working class and nihilistic – the view presented by David Starkey on Newsnight who said that the ‘whites had become black’ but it was not only ‘blacks’ turning out on the streets of England because Manchester, Birmingham and Nottingham saw ‘whites’. So ‘race’ became politicised in the context of both ‘black’ and ‘white’ constructions of the protagonists.

Some linked the unrest to “battle for public space” (LEA, 2011), by hypothesising that the rioters’ responses represented aggressive statements against increasing criminalisation of young people and the urban spaces in which they interacted. Indeed, some YouTube clips recorded prior to the riots seemed to confirm that many urban youth had little choice but to ‘hang around’ on the streets – an idle population seeking activity but instead attracting continual police attention – because school was out and so was youth provision (ANGEL, 2012).

But Slavoj Žižek (2011) is right to some extent, some people were not completely destitute like some live in other parts of the world; they had means, homes, clothes, etc. Nor did they have a political message such as the students who walked on Whitehall in London in December 2010. Moreover, Žižek argues, the rioters and looters were raging disorder in their own communities, reflecting what he calls, ‘*society against society*’; a discord ‘*between those with everything, and those with nothing, to lose*’. Different areas experienced different levels of crime and disorder, and in some places the targets were symbolisms of the police and State while, in the main, the targets were just designer boutique shops, retail stores and shopping malls. Indeed, despite all the political waffle and the relentless news media interviews, the most absent accusation for the disorder was that it reflected our shallow dependence on consumption. Without discounting the hassle that some of these people experience from the authorities, could some of the subjectivities about negative police treatment have been talked up to researchers (Guardian and LSE, 2011)? It was evident that the real disorder – highlighted by the extensive looting – was downplayed in some interviews (BRIGGS, 2012a; TREADWELL et al., 2013), and

this points to the centrality of a consumerist way of life and its grip on contemporary English society; an ugly reflection to concede to if indeed we are honest enough to hold a mirror against what happened.

Over a hundred years ago, the economist Thorstein Veblen (1994), introduced the concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’; that is, whether rich or poor, we seek to present our social position through the self adornment of commodities. Today, with more choice than ever, the higher up the social ladder we can climb if we are seen to display how much we can consume. This ‘consumer society’ breeds a constant need for something new in an effort to escape boredom and existential disuse. Thankfully consumer society neutralises this through shopping malls, trendy cafes, designer outlets, cinemas, the leisure industry and the night time economy. The pressure for satisfaction (or maybe to counter dissatisfaction) is never-ending, non-stop. Indeed, the criminologist Steve Hall notes:

Rather the constant waves of consumer symbolism and the partial democratisation of opulence in the consumer/service economy renew their desire to acquire, to go out and be seen to successfully wrestling significance from a harsh world. (HALL et al. 2008, p. 87)

Maybe this was what last summer represented; maybe some protagonists of the riots were seeking to create ‘experience’ in real terms rather than in the unreal world of consumer culture. Because it seems to me that living in an everyday vortex of ontological insecurity, social exclusion, perpetual unemployment, boredom and in a general day-to-day attitude of ‘lets see what happens’ unfortunately generates a populace quite passive to virtual invitations to loot and claim as much as possible – especially for those who have no access to a life of consumption. Zygmunt Bauman (2005, p. 78), says “*it is precisely the inaccessibility of consumer lifestyle that the consumer society trains its members to experience as the most painful of deprivations*”. For some, the riots presented a chance to transcend all the (social, individual and moral) boundaries under which one is measured and generate credibility – without perhaps being caught; a way to cheat the consumer game at its own rules.

For me, the irony was that while politicians were pointing the finger at those lower down the class structure for their ‘take-what-they-can-get’ attitudes, those looking up must have been equally bemused given that the elite had been doing similar things such as fiddling MPs expenses,

the irregularities in FIFA, the phone hacking scandal and the risks which were taken which led to the banking crisis of 2008. It didn't seem that there was much gained by attacking the police or the State because a form of symbolic accumulation seemed to come more from the freebies no offer in the shops.

### **Closing time at the shops and the State homecoming**

While the disorder and looting spread throughout London on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> and Monday 8<sup>th</sup> August, other areas such as Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham also started to experience similar forms of unrest. Indeed, while the Brixton riots raged for a few weeks in 1981, by comparison, the 2011 riots were short lived. Flooding the cities with police seemed to deter disorder from continuing in London but in areas such as Birmingham, it took the death of some community members before pleading that the disorder stop – and the next evening it did. But perhaps it couldn't have lasted longer because there seemed to be no coherent political message to the disorder; people seemed to have some idea that this was temporal and that they needed to take advantage of the moment. There was severe criticism against the police for being too timid and their lack of action was framed in numerous media images. Yet we can see now that they were in an awkward position, with little strategic leadership, low morale because of impending austerity cuts to the force, and worried about accountability should they act improperly under the media's nose. To account for this, there needed to be a central ideological theme which could excuse the social issues which were at play below the surface.

### ***The 'riot' rhetoric***

I have come to learn that, the greater the distance from the essence of the social problem, the more authoritative the label on what the problem is and what it represents, but unfortunately, the more inaccurate the diagnosis of it. This was reflected in the riot discourse during and after the disturbances. Predictably, the political and police riot rhetoric was painfully distant, reflecting no real sense of what the violence and disorder represented. In the main, David Cameron's confined it to some 'simple' form of criminality – an absence of 'morality' and 'community' among the urban underclass – probably as a means to distance the coalition from social policies instigated by him (Solomos, 2011). People like David Lammy stayed close to a discourse around

poor parenting probably just so it could be conveniently confirmed by the Riots Communities and Victims Panel. Kenneth Clarke said it was the ‘criminal classes’ who were responsible. Perhaps this was true: only inferences from my contacts in the youth justice industry indicated that police procedures seemed to be along the lines of ‘who do we know who we can nick [arrest]’ – thereby skewing who was caught in the criminal justice net (BRIGGS, 2012a). Indeed, the police were under immense political pressure to ‘get the baddies’. I remember watching one TV interview with one senior Met officer who said how they hoped to make ‘3000 arrests by Saturday’ – a week after the riots began; as if there was a satisfactory threshold at which they had to reach to justify their authoritative efforts. No wonder they banged up any old Tom, Dick or Harry who took a bottle of water or stole a sandwich from Greggs (a bakery store). This meant the supposed ‘law abiders’ who took part were not represented in the police figures which probably bolstered an argument that it was ‘criminality, pure and simple’ because the ‘pure criminals’ were the ones arrested and charged for the disorder.

There was further confusion. It seemed as if the riots provided a political arena by which contemporary social division could be played out by using existing social feeling about particular groups to either talk up their deviance or ratchet up political attention towards them such as the accusations made against the ‘gangs’ and English Defence League (EDL). At the same time, social media was branded part responsible yet the merits such as resistance to the riots and the riot cleanup were downplayed and discounted. In fact, I don’t think we ever got a clear picture of who was doing this and why. Perhaps there was an easy way out – to confine an understanding of the protagonists to that weird person specification; you know, the one who failed school, didn’t get qualifications, can’t get a job, takes drugs and the like. People like that surely deserve to be treated harshly for their meritocratic failure and participation in the disorder.

### ***Harsh punishments***

Within a few days, the State was able to restore its power and the way it did this raised significant questions about established criminal justice processes and procedures. Promises of ‘feeling the full force of the law’ seemed to represent typical neo-classicist blame attribution on the faulty moral compass, the decline of civility and the deterioration of family values and discipline among ‘feral’ youth. When the green light was given to licence 24-hour courts to process offenders, my contacts

indicated it was mostly professionally-trained district judges rather than lay magistrates who took the stand. Youth Offending Team (YOT) workers, youth workers and probation officers told me the people (both young and old) who came before the court were being denied bail; that there was little, if any, consideration of their welfare or background circumstances, or even seriousness of the offence with which they were charged. ‘But what else could happen?’ explained one probation worker: ‘some social control needed to be exercised’ he said (BODY-GENDROT, 2011).

A paradox of opportunity arose: while on one hand the rioters and looters were taking advantage of the moment to enable their subjective frustrations and/or claim the goods available to them, the State, similarly, took the opportunity to ratchet up already-agreed social policies on them – such as ‘Gangbos’ – and enable severe punishments on the culprits in the name of deterrence. However, because the ‘rioters’ actions came under the banner of the disorder, blanket sentencing measures were orchestrated by the Justice Secretary. There was also evidence to suggest that magistrate court personnel were urged to disregard normal sentencing procedures and that prison term sentences were 25% longer than normal. Is a tariff of six months in prison for throwing a bottle appropriate for someone with no previous convictions? How is this reflective of ‘justice’? How helpful is it to issue heavy sentences for people already well known to the criminal justice system or who are quite vulnerable in society in any case?

### ***The ‘inquiry’, policy responses, and research endeavours***

In 1981, Lord Scarman reported on the oppressive policing culture in Brixton and the widespread grievance attached to protest and rioting (SCARMAN, 1981; BENYON, 1984). In my view, the only ‘official’ response to the English riots of 2011 was to get a bunch of smartly-dressed people of varying ages together who look as if they represent urban communities (because they are ethnically diverse) and ask them to write something which Whitehall was dictating over the phone. I mean let’s be honest: how could any serious investigation be undertaken which did not even consider the views of those who participated in the riots? After all, who would want to fund a study/investigation into something which would only reflect badly on the governing party? Better yet, who would want to find out about something which may involve significant thought to resolve and likely, at the first hurdle, produce more questions than answers?

To me, it feels like denying the structural significance of a large crack in the front of a house and this seems to be the default response when social problems arise. At the moment, the way of dealing with the unsightly crack in the house is to just apply a fresh coat of paint but the problem is the crack doesn't go away because it seems to keep reappearing; the paint peeling away after some time has passed. Funny that. Each time it reappears, it is that little bit larger, having attracted the damp and exposing new areas of concern. But no one living in the house is concerned with actually resolving the potential structural issue which may threaten the foundations of the building. Instead the residents get more fretful when the aesthetics of the house deteriorate and fool themselves into thinking that a little DIY 'here and there' will resolve the problems. They quickly paint over the crack so the neighbours won't talk about it, lying to themselves in the process about the significance of the fault.

This is precisely what happens in the event of major social disturbances like rioting – the coat of fresh paint being the Riots Communities and Victims Panel. The riot-affected areas seemed to have been exaggerated and there was no clear means of determining what crimes were considered to be 'riot related' nor any breakdown of their classifications of the crimes included in the disorder. Both the Interim and Final report written by the Panel regurgitated many things which we already know about discriminative police practices in urban areas and deprivation but quickly started to condemn parenting practices and recommend people build up greater personal resilience. We have heard it all before. Gone are the Keynesian days of Welfare State (LEA, 2011). We need a new, radical response to these issues which does not recite the same difficulties only to advocate the same solutions, and then, only to sound surprised when the issues resurface.

The coalition's policy responses were to enable already-established social policy plans on 'gangs', 'problem families' and immigration. Aside from the downgrading 'gang member' to 'gang affiliate' (well in most urban deprived neighbourhoods, who doesn't know someone in a gang?) acted as a rationale to pass through controversial 'Gangbo' policies – which prior to the riots were in the pilot stages. Suddenly, they were elevated to the national rollout status. In fact, 'ending gang violence' became one popular headline from the riots. Another was 'problem families' which received new financial and policy backing. The government also used the riots to take forward new legislation to

restrict immigration to the UK, when our workforce and student body relies so much on these groups that, we start to strangle ourselves while simultaneously calling for more rope with which to tighten the grip. But all this, if anything, reflects the meagre difference there is between the main political parties and their approach to dealing with social issues.

Research endeavours have come in the absence of this ‘official’ void and in the wake of the government denial. Some seem to be churning out the same sort of material, harking out the familiar defects of the ‘rioters’ as people who failed at school, can’t get it together to get a job and have criminal records (MORRELL et al., 2011). The most commendable efforts are probably being made by *the Guardian* and LSE but this research risks missing a key feature of the riots: that while the riots were constructed as political, they were also apolitical. Indeed, at some post-riot meetings and symposiums, left liberal academics seem to be anchoring themselves in quite familiar theoretical constructions of riots. Should we pursue this pathway, we will be just as guilty as the Riots Panel, the government and the media because we are also undermining our position and the opportunity we have to document what is really taking place here. The narrative constructions of the riots have been quite opposing and almost contradictory. In hindsight something more apparent seems to be coming to light – the ‘rioters’ were as much victims as they were perpetrators, talking up their anti-police/State grievances but at the same time revealing a default setting to loot and indulge in free shopping.

And perhaps the public, to some extent, also recognise this; maybe they know more than we think – despite their confused initial reactions. Look at the way in which some seem critical of the government and media’s ideological framing of the riots and, to some extent, seemed to see something into the rioters’ motivations. In the words of one village pub quiz attendee, ‘the rioters were just as bad as those they thought they were attacking’ leaving the ‘capitalists unscathed’ (BRIGGS, 2012b). This person, whoever they were, certainly seemed to have a point which is why I think the mistake many commentators have made post English riots 2011 is to confine themselves solely to discussions of the rioters motives without retracting themselves far enough from these affairs to consider how they might be related to the systemic deficiencies which plague the world’s social and economic engine while, at the same time, recognising how easily it can be brought to its knees.



## **Neo-liberalism and the dark clouds of global discontent**

The world has entered a new phase. We face new economic, social and ecological catastrophes which don't seem to be taken that seriously by our world leaders – perhaps evident in the continual failure to balance the 'Eurozone' markets; make the banking sector more 'ethical and accountable'; rebalance the rich/poor divide; and protect the planet from its impending demise. The State point the finger at the market only for the market to point the finger back at the State and, in the end, it is the 'irresponsible citizen' who finds themselves at the centre of all the problems for their moral, social and financial lacking. While some peaceful protests have tried to draw attention to these issues, such as the Occupy Wall Street and Occupy London movements, there is little sign of change. Yet the crises continue and efforts to resolve these problems have not really materialised. Instead they become familiar soundbites on the news and part of the accepted social fabric of 'that's just how things are' – a normalisation of insecurity. We become so used to hearing it that its authenticity fades, safe in the knowledge that, although the problems do actually exist, we aren't doing enough to solve them and it isn't our responsibility in any case; we always have the fake tan to look forward to at the weekend or Coldplay gig in the summer.

### ***Global capitalism, profit and consumption and why Wile E. Coyote never catches Roadrunner***

What is perhaps most disturbing about the neoliberal order is the eternal obsession to ensure that each year there is continual growth which can be churned into sizable bonuses. Surely there is not much more room to grow, if anything! Yes there is – it just comes at the expense of powerful, corporate CEOs who are applauded when they streamline business by severing thousands of jobs, offloading labour to unregulated sites in developing countries where a blind eye can be turned to human rights and working conditions, and generally raping the environment in the name of mineral pursuit – basically whatever the cost to squeeze out some more growth, some more profit. Still no one seems to be in control and we are left asking questions while the bonuses continue – just where exactly is this growth coming from as countries and their economies retract? How many zeros can be added to the debt which is incestuously being repackaged and miscellaneously misplaced only to be placed on the taxpayer's tab? Just how 'real' is the money? How 'real' is the problem?

Like advanced capitalism and its endless quest for profit and hegemonic power, the situation feels like Wile E. Coyote's and his fruitless pursuit of Roadrunner. Roadrunner is an obsessive chase for Coyote; the former is permanently on the horizon and the latter never arrived. And because of that Coyote dreams up any means – often using violence – to attempt capture Roadrunner, even in the face of potential self destruction. But Coyote negates his pursuit by the very methods he uses to capture Roadrunner – he must religiously return to the drawing board. Similarly, the quest for more profit and power is never satisfied and has entered a new phase in its intensification: it is advanced. And because of that advanced capitalism innovates by any means – often using violence through various political systems – to generate profit and/or maintain power, even if it means the destruction of whole communities/countries. But the very nature of the advanced capitalist system counteracts the reward it promises, and thus backfires: yet it is often what is returned to in the absence of an alternative. At the moment, it feels like Coyote has run off the cliff but keeps running...then he looks at the camera and realises that there is nothing underneath him before dropping into the canyon. Its to say, we have already exhausted the precipice, already run over the cliff edge yet somehow we are still running...but only on very thin air; in fact, there is little, if any, substance to our movement. The moment of realisation being the glance at the camera when we see the extent of the problem. When, then, will we drop into the canyon?

The only way there can be growth is at the expense of the third-world countries and/or if we, the West, can politically bully other countries into making use of their resources while, at the same time, perpetuate their domestic fragility by taking advantage of their enthusiastic workforces. We don't know much about people in these countries but we see a few stories on the news or, if we are that interested some half-an-hour documentary, about a few poor kids making Nike jumpers or beaten-out women slaving over sewing machines in India for 18 hours a day. Nevertheless, it is a world away from our leisure lives of takeaways, whole weekends watching box-set DVDs and getting pissed on holiday in Ibiza. And these days very few cultures are exempt from this default setting of profit and consumption: from the ancient retreats of the temples in Bali where hundreds of tourist sellers descend to sell different Balinese cultural paraphernalia to the Andaman Islands where only recently a tribe has come into contact with the Western world in the late 1990s. Tourists flock there to pay them to dance by giving them

food and money; it is essentially illegal but the police turn a blind eye and also cash in as well by doing so. Global capitalism touches everyone and affects everything. Thus, we (the consumers) consume their misery (the producers). It is structurally embedded.

So what's this got to do with the English riots of 2011? In an insecure world where all we see on the news is the economic fragility of the world, war, famine, ecological crises, thank god for the comfort of our leisure lives. All we need to do is turn off the TV and it disappears and we can indulge in a bit of shopping to further escape all these catastrophes. Best make the most of this world and take as much advantage of it as possible – after all its what everyone else seems to be doing – regardless of the level of responsibility they have. And when global capitalism throws more people into the margins, while at the same time, offers them a way to seek a sense of self through consumption, a familiar strain occurs (YOUNG, 2007). People become less concerned about their class position and instead seek self actualisation through participation in consumption practices and the symbolism of social envy which is consequently generated (HALL et al., 2008). They are the 'Consumtariat' as Žižek argues:

The 'Consumtariat' (the idea that, in developed societies, the lower class is no longer a proletariat but a class of consumers kept satisfied with cheap, mass produced commodities, from genetically modified food to digitalised mass culture) becomes a reality with basic income: those excluded from the production process are paid the basic income not only for reasons of solidarity, but also so that their demand will fuel production and thus prevent crises. (ŽIŽEK, 2011, p.236)

They essentially become docile to the market, powerless to their own demands and redundant to political action. This is how it might work on a daily basis. People in these positions seek inclusion through the market rather than through collective political representation so when the opportunity arises to take such a stance, it is seized. This is what happened in the summer of 2011 when the 'flawed consumers', as Zygmunt Bauman describes, came forth to claim what was rightfully theirs when the law enforcement levies were suspended. Some tried to articulate frustrations, but at the same time, in some narratives, the default setting of consumption was disguised somewhat beneath these subjectivities of police treatment, inequality, anti-State feelings, etc. (Moxon, 2011; Briggs, 2012a; Treadwell et al., 2013). An odd duality

of power and powerlessness therefore arises: for those who took part in the English riots last summer, who have very little to show for their participation, might now be thinking that they were in control – that they exhibited power. Yet if anything it may have revealed their powerlessness and subordination to consumerism.

### ***A new age of rioting and social discord?***

The use of new social media has been a recurrent theme in anti-globalisation protests in recent years (SOLOMOS, 2011), as well as demonstrations across southern Europe, Northern Africa and the Middle East. It has changed the way in which social issues in these countries come to light while simultaneously impacting on how people form a collective response. In addition, like many other episodes of violence and disorder we have witnessed in recent years, what happened across English cities in 2011 seemed to be triggered by police injustice/maltreatment of particular minority ethnic social groups. In this respect, it is evident that this has something in common with what took place in places like France in 2005, Greece in 2008, and Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. There seems to be something resolutely similar in the way in which these events have also been orchestrated with the use of social media as a means of communicating between different social groups. Take the way in which, for example, social media was used as a means of communication and organisation when traditional media was shut down in Egypt and the importance of mediums such as YouTube in communicating messages where regimes were reluctant to reveal the extent of the violence they waged on their own people in Libya, Tunisia, and Syria. Paradoxically, in England, people were arrested for boasting about their escapades by uploading images of their booty on Facebook or when they uploaded clips of themselves in action against the police.

### ***The crisis of contemporary political systems: The failure of democracy (and the stuttering steps towards it)***

In contemporary times, democracy seems to be stuttering. In countries across Europe such as Spain and Greece, an electorate of all ages have protested and rioted against a restrictive political system, austerity measures, fiscal mismanagement and police treatment. The resulting violence exemplified a resistance to the political power structures and was also manifested in other ways through, for example, ‘Yo no pago’ (I don’t pay) in Spain and Greece whereby people refused to contribute to the system – perhaps as a more individualised means

of power resistance. In Northern Africa such as Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, and in the Middle East such as Syria and Yemen – and even in places like Brazil, there is a general feeling among a predominantly internet-savvy, youth cohort that politics do not represent the majority – that the public are generally excluded from political representation. In particular, there exists a real passion for the cause reflected in the way in which thousands of lives have been lost to protest and violence across North Africa and the Middle East. In interview after interview, the people reiterate their commitment to the cause because they say they would die for it. In countries pushing for some sort of democracy against quite stagnant, autocratic Militaristic regimes, there has been a long and bloody road to convey the message. In episodes of violence and disorder, the manifestations of protest have come against the symbols of the political regimes, which in response, often wage all out violence on those who campaign against them. It is difficult to fathom the extent to which some of these regimes are polluted and corrupt, and the measures by which they will take to cling to power by instigating all out violence on their own populace. Take for example how Mubarak hired ‘thugs’ and set criminals free from prison to try and quell the Egypt uprising (Strawson, 2012). Yet despite death, injury and continual suffering, still they take to the streets, still they protest.

In England, despite widespread awareness of the inconsistency of the political classes and their obscene behaviour, still we vote. We know the extent to which they fiddle the books, claim second or third homes at our expense, have incestuous relations with the police and media, and increasingly appear in more and more farcical predicaments only to step down from one parliament position and assume another. No one notices a reshuffle and still we vote. As in Spain and Greece, we also experience a similar disorientation with our politics; there are very little differences between our centre left (conservative) and centre right (labour) parties. They say they offer different policies but their approaches are not dissimilar to their rivals. So where is our sustained protest? Why do we not display a similar level of passion against our crooked political regime? Why is there very little politically-driven protest in England?

- Firstly, as discussed, it is to do with the way in which the working classes – who may normally lead such a charge – have been made docile through consumerism.
- Secondly, it seems to be the case in this country that if protest is not ‘done properly’ (i.e. in a civilised manner, peacefully and the

like) then it is not a democratic form of expression – it somehow represents a savage way of conveying dissatisfaction and one which we should not be tolerated. This was certainly the case in the post-riot constructions of the student protests in London in 2010. The very ideology which circulated around the protests depoliticised it; that is, anything which may have happened as a result of genuine frustration was then attributed to ‘outsiders’ or some senseless minority who came along with the intention to cause trouble and therefore didn’t represent core protestor values. Consequently, we don’t tend to have sustained protests; there are more important issues in our lives to consider such as our leisure commitments and the time it may take out of our precious lives. I feel that we are an individualised and atomised populace, too accepting of the status quo while too sceptical that we can instigate change.

We return to the analogy of the structural crack in the front of the house, except these days, we don’t seem to be bothered that another coat of paint has been plastered over the fault of our English dwelling. To me, it seems we are told to be more concerned about the structural faults which exist among others on the same street (Europe) and in other neighbourhoods (North Africa and Middle East) because they might affect our mortgage payments and living standards. For just down the road (Europe), our neighbours have similar problems with cracks – some more severe than others. At the residents meetings, everyone glosses over the significance of the fractures in their buildings, and talk up the stability of their residence even though there is obvious subsidence in some houses (Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal). In some districts, we seem concerned that the residents can’t manage their tenancies (Iraq, Afghanistan) so we intervene but end up leaving more structural uncertainty. While in other neighbourhoods (Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Libya), we just seem to walk past, raising our eyebrows at the state of affairs while showing some mild concern, and hoping that they will manage to summon the means to patch up the structural faults themselves.

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