

ROAR, the University of East London Institutional Repository: <http://roar.uel.ac.uk>

This article is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

Author(s): Daniel Briggs

Title: Below the surface and beyond the rhetoric: youth, consumerism and the London riots

Year of publication: 2012

Citation: Briggs, D.(2012) "Below the surface and beyond the rhetoric: youth, consumerism and the London riots", *Dialogue Society*, 23 May [online].

Link to published version:

<http://www.dialoguesociety.org/articles/787-youth-riots-below-the-surface-and-beyond-the-rhetoric-youth-consumerism-and-the-london-riots.html>

Publisher statement:

Published version available at <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/articles/787-youth-riots-below-the-surface-and-beyond-the-rhetoric-youth-consumerism-and-the-london-riots.html>

Information on how to cite items within roar@uel:

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/roar/openaccess.htm#Citing>

Below the surface and beyond the rhetoric: Youth, consumerism and the London riots

Dr Daniel Briggs

Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice

University of East London

d.briggs@uel.ac.uk

Introduction

In this short essay, I would like to suggest that, more than anything else, the London riots exposed a feature of contemporary British youth culture which, despite governmental and independent scrutiny, was laid completely naked during the unrest and downplayed in subsequent reporting – a strong social and individual commitment toward consumerism.

The ‘trigger’

Who could have predicted that Mark Duggan’s killing would trigger some of the most chaotic scenes of rioting this country has seen for 30 years? If you recall, Libya was dominating the headlines until, on that Thursday evening, some reports of a man being shot hit regional news in London. While the local community got increasingly angry at the manner of his death and events surrounding it, the imbalanced reporting started to frame him as something between a ‘gangsta’, on one hand, and devoted family man who was central to the Broadwater Farm community on the other. Who could have foreseen that the protest, which was organised outside Tottenham Police Station two days later, would quite quickly get out of hand and would evolve into rapid, contagious episodes of violence and disorder which dominated urban landscapes across the capital? As with previous London riots in 1981 and 1985, Mark Duggan’s death was the trigger event. However, those collective messages calling for justice for Duggan made outside Tottenham Police Station quickly disappeared when significant amounts of looting took place. While the media focussed on emotive stories of ‘innocent victims’ and the targeting of small, family businesses, it was the retail chains and designer outlets which were the main targets. A free-for-all had ensued.

Three paradoxes

Any academic who witnessed (or perhaps more accurately, heard or read about) this could have quite easily considered the unrest to represented youth disaffection, their crude marginalisation in public spaces as well as dissatisfaction at their precarious employment prospects. This perhaps, to some extent, is undeniably true. But let us explore this a bit further. The predictable political labelling and hotchpotch of academic analyses which followed unhinged three opposing paradoxes: 1) the political attribution toward feral underclass youth who either had previous criminal convictions or made ‘bad decisions’ to participate - which was actually a bubbling cauldron of subjective youth dissatisfaction with various social and governmental institutions; 2) the immediate political assumption that ‘youth gangs’ *caused* the disturbances - when in fact it was, to some degree, a collective urban youth response, not only from those involved in gangs, but also those with fringe association and those familiar with that urban lifestyle, against mistreatment through police stop and search practices and general criminalisation in public spaces; 3) the political assumption that the looting which ensued represented ‘greed’ - when it was in fact it was an unbridled display of a commitment to consumerism, and a lifestyle to which most of these young people have been

socialised into believing they should be living. Despite the complexity of these issues and any intended (as well as unintended) political messages of protest were quickly lost. This conveniently gave State agencies greater autonomy to label what the disorder represented and allowed them to selectively frame its origins as 'unexplainable' and perpetrators as bent criminals before pushing ahead with premeditated plans to 'tackle gangs' and the like. After all, in a neo-liberal market-driven society, who would want to reveal it was our insidious addiction to consumption which was the underlying source?

My evidence

What we shouldn't be surprised about is therefore how apolitical the riots may have been. I base this statement on ethnographic work I am undertaking in East London with some of the rioters. My work indicates that rioting in the name of Mark Duggan, any persistent police mistreatment or any youth austerity agenda were surface-like narratives which covered up the fact that this was a serious opportunity to loot. For example, when I first met three young men in East London (aged 15, 17 and 20) just after the rioting who made between then £20,000 from a series of raids on designer shops in two nights, they said they did it in the name of *'that boy who was killed by the feds [police]'*. At the time, they couldn't remember his name or when he was killed. When I recently re-interviewed them, between some sort of half-hearted allegiance to 'rioting for Mark Duggan' and police repression, they could not help but boast about the money they made and the good times it was. They even went back to the same shops they looted and spent the money they had earned on the same goods they stole! There is therefore something going on below the surface; something beyond the rhetoric. To me, this suggests that the underlying feature of the London riots reflects more consumer capitalism's ugly grip on contemporary society in this country rather than any stable anti-State/police narrative. If anything, I think it may say more about how distant some young people feel from any political agenda, how individualised they are and how attached they are to artificially-constructed, market-led lifestyles to which they have been sold.

Word length: 843