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Chapter 2

Frustrations, urban relations and temptations: Contextualising the English riots

Dr Daniel Briggs

Introduction

In August 2011, England's cities experienced significant social disorder, resulting in violence and criminal damage. Unsurprisingly, politicians and police ascribed this unrest to the usual suspects - such as 'gangs', 'problem youth', 'dysfunctional families', and the 'feral underclass' while the media debates tended to revolve around the scale and severity of the violence, 'innocent victims', effective policing techniques and stiff sentencing practices. In a definitive speech, David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, branded the behaviour 'criminality, pure and simple.' At the time, balanced or accurate explanations for what was taking place were entirely absent; in particular, how and why the disorder developed and spread so quickly. In the months since, numerous commentators have tried to make sense of what happened and this is the principle aim of this chapter. Using empirical data gathered from 20 of those who participated in the riots,¹ I seek to place the events in context by showing why people may have participated in the disorder. I focus in this instance mostly on what happened in London and borrow on theoretical insights where the narratives indicate some association. This chapter shows that what took place in August 2011 does match the political rhetoric and media representations of the unrest and suggests that the events were perhaps more complex – even in the wake of the subsequent analyses which followed. The chapter also acts as the 'springboard' for deeper discussion, in the chapters which follow, of the numerous social issues which were at play. I begin by discussing, what is considered to be, the 'trigger' event - the killing of Mark Duggan - before highlighting why people may have participated.

Frustrations and the 'trigger': Mark Duggan's death

Mark Duggan lived on the Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham, north London; an area with a history of tension between the black community and police (Chapter 1). In the early evening of Thursday 4th 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 (Angel, 2012). 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. Both bystanders and some community members witnessed or heard quickly about the events via Facebook. Shawn, a friend of Duggan's, said:

Shawn: *The day Mark Duggan was killed, before the news went out, a friend put his picture on Facebook saying 'this picture speaks a thousand words' and it was a picture of the police standing over what looked like to be Mark Duggan. This was minutes after it [he was shot] took place, so someone had recorded it and put it online and this person was saying like*

¹ For more information on the methodological approaches see Briggs (2012b).

'looks like the police are trying to get their story straight'. The picture was posted on Facebook four minutes afterwards.

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 (Klein, 2012). 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. Nadine, a local resident in Tottenham, said:

Nadine: *On Friday the police was confusing it and that they [the police and Duggan] both fired but because of the Facebook, people in Tottenham knew he didn't discharge his gun or didn't believe that he discharged his gun. The police shot another officer and Mark Duggan already knew he was being followed [by the police] and put out a BB message. They [the local community] agreed that there would be protests on Saturday and we were all invited, my partner and my friend.*

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 6th 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. Some like Dave and Dev - who remembered the riots which occurred in similar circumstances in Broadwater Farm in 1985 - participated in the protest, the potential injustice was not just about Duggan but about wider discrimination against the black community:

Dave: *For the black community, there was a message which was about treatment. A lot of black guys die in custody, a lot are poorly treated by the police but that message got lost. The peaceful demonstration was not getting through, it was getting lost in the fact that the 'look at these gangs, look at these blacks, gangs or whatever'. Lost.*

Dev: *Questions aren't being answered. So much frustration. They [the police] could have just come out and said 'we hear you and we are looking into it'. They could have nipped this in the bud. All the people wanted to know was that they wanted to be heard. It does look like there is something to cover up if the taxi driver suddenly isn't available.*

Their views reflect what Reicher et al. (2004: 561) note in the context of riots which are "groups have collective memories which can sometimes go back well beyond the experience or even the lifetime of any individual member." The crowd 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.

When Mark Duggan was shot, the local community were unconvinced for the reasons how and why it happened. They organised a protest at which the police failed to respond to their demands. These sequences of events are now widely believed to be the 'trigger' (Briggs, 2012b; Angel, 2012; Laville, 2011; Žižek, 2011), or as Moxon (2011) puts it, 'the initial moments' which led to the disorder that followed in London and around the country. They were, however, not the cause because, as we will see, it seems not all were engaging in acts of violence and criminal damage in the name of Mark Duggan's death.

From protest to provocation to plunder: Urban relations and temptations

As the disorder was evolving in Tottenham, a lack of police presence seemed to attract others to the scene and some of those people seemed to have been encouraged through social media and news coverage of the disorder (Guardian and LSE, 2011). Yet those that came that Saturday evening, and in the days which followed to other areas of London and throughout England, did so with different agendas. The decision to participate, or turn up at least, it seems, was quite subjective and this was evident in the testimonies of those with whom I spoke. Some attached initial reasons to deep-rooted feelings of hate for the authorities (Klein, 2012; Morrell et al., 2011) and the government (Angel, 2012; Hatherley, 2011). Take Jamal for example. He is black, experiences life on a disadvantaged estate where there is almost no social mobility, a strong presence of 'gangs', drugs and crime, and habitual police harassment on people like him. He said to me it '*didn't take much*' for him to decide to get involved in the disorder: although he downplayed his accumulation of free clobber, he seemed mostly upset that he couldn't get work and was treated like '*dirt*' at the job centre - which was where he took out his anger:

Jamal: *I am no rude boy, no road boy, I carry no gun. I am not into rap music or being on road. I went to school but this government is making me think that the road is the only place for me because I have done everything they have asked of me. I have good GCSEs, A levels, university 1st degree but there is nothing for me. Since graduating I have been a cleaner. There are no opportunities. Down the job centre, they treat me like dirt and accuse me of not trying but look at what I have achieved. I have been on the dole for so long and they tell me I need a job but I have no experience, and can't get it because no one is taking anyone on. Three guesses where I took my frustration out – job centre.*

Research shows that others living in the area had also become the target for aggressive/restrictive social policies, law enforcement operations and broader social stigmatisation (Guardian and LSE, 2011). This did little for their inclusion – or shaming them into conformity (Grover, 2011) – but instead exacerbates their marginality, likely contributing to fragile feelings which were easily stimulated by gestures like incessant stop and search practices, police raids, etc (Badiou, 2011; Lea, 2011; Young, 2007). This perhaps made them a population quite ready to counteract their structural position in an effort to send a message to those in charge who had been perpetuating their misery.

In this conversation with Paul who claimed 'gang affiliation', he reveals how local 'rival gangs' united against the police (see Chapter 10):

Paul: *Obviously yeah there is serious rivalry between Tottenham and Hackney² and no one generally goes from one area to the other, there would be bloodshed. But on the riots, there was no gang war. The gangs was in the same area on Saturday night, came together against the police and I thought 'wow, it would have been nice if it had been a better situation but they are coming together for a cause they thought worth fighting for as a unit'. I was impressed, nah what I mean?*

Dan: *So even though there was beef [vendettas] between the gangs, they wanted to unite against something which was repressing them collectively.*

Paul: *Yeah, BB messages were sent out to cool it, saying like 'its not about a postcode war, it is 'us' against 'them' and 'forget our beef with each other and lets get the police'.*

While most of the people I talked to saw little decisive action from the police (Hatherley, 2011; Klein, 2012; Newburn, 2011), some became fascinated with the revolving media images of the disorder (Body-Gendrot, 2011; Guardian and LSE, 2011); which made it easier for some just to turn up to see what was happening. This, some said, gave them some 'ideas' to make money. Some commentators would therefore suggest that their participation was almost 'senseless' in that there was little motivation other than they could (Žižek, 2011; Chapter 8).

This was perhaps the case for a group of three young men from East London. Their 'planned' operation for Sunday night looting quite quickly dissipated when they struck three designer shops followed by a Sainsbury's store, loading thousands of pounds worth of stolen goods into their car. They stashed the goods in a friend's garage and gave him a £2000 cut of their profit. Overall, they made £20,000 between them which they split four ways. When I first met them in Stratford, one month after the disorder, their narratives were around 'hate for the police' and this, at the time, they said was largely their motivation. However, six months later after keeping in touch through Facebook, I had the opportunity to undertake a more focused interview. While the interview narratives point at hate for the police and criticism of the State, this time, however, they seemed less convincing, less sure of a reason:

Will: *They [the police] shot him [Mark Duggan], killed him for no reason. You don't have to get shot for nothing.*

Dan: *Yes, but why then? Presumably you must hear of people getting hurt all the time or done over or whatever. I remember that conversation we had on Facebook about gangs and that.*

Will: *Probably because it was so close to home. It's a piss take, you know. How can police get away with shooting someone with no gun and get away with it and not go to prison? [pause] It's the police, man.*

² These are two areas of London with 'gang' rivalries.

Dan: *Right, I want everyone to chip in here because Will's doing all the work. I'm a little lost. Talk me through it in detail, from start to finish. Tell me as if I was from another planet and knew nothing about this.*

Will: [To Craig] *Tell him why you started rioting [nudges him and then sits back], tell him your part.*

Craig: [Seriously] *Right [sits forward as if to suggest his answer will be definitive], everyone started rioting so we started rioting. I just joined in.*

[Steve laughs a little to himself]

Craig: *We was smashing up shops [Steve sniggers], getting bits [looting], that boy was shot.*

Will: *Was it because he got shot?*

Craig: [Looking a little vacant] *Because he got shot. Police was covering it up. Shot for no reason.*

Steve: *I needed the money.*

Note the general confusion which surrounds the narrative as they try to locate the essence of their behaviour. This dichotomy continues throughout their interview. In hindsight, it was difficult to see just how the significance of Mark Duggan's killing or the police oppression could have been at the centre of their intentions. When I pressed them on it, they seemed unconvinced at their own answers:

Dan: *Ok, I am going to challenge you now. You say it is about the police [that you rioted] but you can't ignore how much you looted.*

Steve: *Its just that guy [Will]. Some people use it as an excuse. Like dese days, people haven't got much money as they had. I done it because I needed money. Like its hard to explain. People wanted to get back at the police but at the same time get some bits.*

Craig: *Money for me was the main reason.*

Steve: *Like people was using the police as an excuse because no one wants to admit 'yeah I am a bit poor' or 'I need a bit of money because I am poor' but they do make an excuse that just because that boy died. When I saw everyone do it, I fought 'why can't I do that'. I felt a bit jealous. It was like everyone was out there, getting that money and I was sitting indoors.*

Craig: *Same here.*

But 'money' was also not the clear motivation either because what they made from their designer-shop raids was legitimately reinvested back in some of the same shops they had looted – it went straight back into the consumer market. Furthermore, no money was saved or put towards any long-term cause, and if anything, had to be spent quickly.

In the absence of law enforcement, a few made arrangements to carry out more specific, targeted acts, which they argued, would be seen to be interpreted as 'part of the disorder' (Briggs, 2012b). On

one evening of the riots in London, Stevie and 20 of his friends agreed to avenge some 'beef' they had with another youth in their area. They said they were not part of a 'gang' per se, but just didn't like this person. They met up and torched his house, reasoning that the social disorder and chaos made it possible. Similarly, Wez, who said he used to 'roll with a crew' [gang], gives some insight into how some properties were avoided in the unrest while others were targeted on Saturday 6th and Sunday 7th:

Wez: *Like on my road there is a really popular chicken shop, like on a Friday night everyone is there. It is ram, bruv [very busy, man]. Then to the side, but not next door, there is a kebab shop. Proper nice kebabs, init. Now, the owners were called before the riots came that way and were told not to worry, init. But the businesses either side got torched or robbed. So I think there was some like loyalty in it because like the chicken shop looks out for us, but also there was this opportunity to settle beef, carry out revenge attacks and all the rest of it. But today is the best opportunity to burn down somewhere which we have beef with.*

This suggests that there were different phases of the disorder which meant that the initial reasons for the unrest were not necessarily the same when it unfolded – people were in it for different reasons (Gorringer and Rosie, 2011; Sumner, 2011; Briggs, 2012b). For example, some testimonies also reflected a sense of disgust at the way in which the ruling classes had been robbing them, 'the poorer classes'. Harvey (2011) refers to this power imbalance as 'daylight robbery of the poor'. Some had watched news stories of various austerity cuts (such as Educational Maintenance Allowance, Youth provision, etc) yet, at the same time, learned about banker bonus increases, MPs expense fiddles, and the FIFA³ and phone hacking scandal (Angel, 2012; Badiou, 2011; Hatherley, 2011; Žižek, 2011). In fact, the words of those with whom I spoke seemed to reflect a real sense of disorientation especially given that, in their eyes, so many social institutions were rife with corruption, and concerned only with never-ending profiteering. Some participants in the riots therefore justified their actions by 'taking what was theirs' (Varul, 2011) since, they felt, those in power were doing similar things (Harvey, 2011); thus a 'taking from' attitude is rationalised because access to the symbolisms of the good life are unavailable to them. Here, Jamie rationalises his looting of a commercial store that Saturday evening:

Jamie: *Basically, the government are stealing things all the time, so why can't we steal from them. It is justice. They can't say one thing and do another. When you did your election, you promised jobs, equality, benefits for families. I don't see anything like that in my area. There is no 'we' in the community. The government were talking about building a better community but how can you take away from the community and expect us to stomp up for it when we are suffering as well. What is the point?*

However, as we have seen in the example of Steve, Will and Craig, finger pointing at the police, the State or any kind of lived structural oppression feels like a smokescreen – it is not the whole story. It's true that inequality and injustice play some role, but the narratives were also heavily structured around a desire for consumption (Bauman, 2005, 2011; Žižek, 2011) – claiming the 'free stuff', as they saw it. This was also evident in the places which were looted as a result. While the media stories hinged on coverage of the 'innocent victims' who had been plagued by the 'criminals' (Briggs,

³ Fédération Internationale de Football Association.

2012b), it was the designer boutiques, town centres, and main shopping precincts where chains such as Argos, Currys and JD Sports which were more widely targeted. The looters, it seems, unable or unwilling to strive for tokens of meritocratic recognition through education and work, went for the numerous symbols of consumer accolade which were now potentially available for retrieval (Bauman, 2011; Grover, 2011; Young, 2002). Indeed, Nadine's house party in Tottenham, full of family and friends that Saturday evening, emptied very quickly when the guests started to receive Facebook notifications and BB messages; of which were a mixture between offers for goods people had acquired and invitations to take part in the looting (Baker, 2012; see Chapter 9). Many, she said, left to claim 'free shit [stuff]'. Paul, who attended Saturday's events in Tottenham and claimed 'buff [nice] trainers', was feeling otherwise about getting involved in another night of 'rioting' and 'looting'; however, the pressure to participate and the promise of handsome rewards did not disappear on Sunday. His friend Shawn, although equally attracted by the booty, was drawn to potential participation for numerous reasons:

Paul: *We was getting BB messages about the next destination, who has got this, if you want it, we can get it. There was like loads of adverts! I was with my mates and we was all getting similar messages of people getting stuff: 'This is what we have got', 'these are the goods if you are interested'; bags, trainers was a big one, paintings, computer things, games, clothes, anything really designer.*

Shawn: *I was getting messages as well but it wasn't all about tiefing [stealing]. Like if I was there, I would have got involved but not really with the looting but say if a police station was being done over, I would like get involved because I have bare [lots] problems with the police. Anything to do with the police, I would have got involved.*

In this way, participation was also fun and exciting (Katz, 1988; Spalek et al., 2011). However, what these testimonies confirm is that the 'rioters' seemed as concerned about their treatment by the authorities/State as they were about claiming free goods when the opportunity presented itself.

Discussion

This chapter has tried to frame the book in context and set the scene for the discussions which will ensue by presenting an account of what is considered to now represent the 'trigger' for the social disorder (Briggs, 2012b; Angel, 2012; Laville, 2011; Moxon, 2011; Žižek, 2011). While my colleagues will take forward some of these issues in greater depth in the chapters which follow, it is evident thus far that there was no one single explanation for the social unrest which took place in August 2011 (Briggs, 2012b; Gorringer, and Rosie, 2011; Lea, 2011); it was more than just 'criminality, pure and simple' (Harvey, 2011). What started off as a protest seemed to quickly turn into something else (Sumner, 2011): from declarations of frustrated urban relations to underlying narratives of consumer temptations - from protest to provocation to plunder.

Indeed, the chapter highlights perhaps predictable narratives of frustration; of mistreatment, discrimination, and social inequality (Badiou, 2011; Young, 2007). People in these communities, it seems, feel tired of watching successive governments continue to marginalise them and seek only to 'control' them while ratcheting up law enforcement. Some say they are also tired of seeing people in powerful positions continue to cream off cash at their expense (Harvey, 2011; Varul, 2011). And while some protagonists of the English riots may be able to locate these injustices, they didn't seem

to have articulated a critique of consumer capitalism (Harvey, 2011) or even their own participation in the market; and I don't think we can expect them to either (see Moxon, 2011). Some would say this instead represents a 'material force of ideology' (Žižek, 2011) which beckoned the 'disqualified consumers' to find ways to consume (Bauman, 2005, 2011). In this respect, rioting and looting could perhaps been considered 'senseless' in that it was the rioters trashing their own communities with little social motivation other than because they could.

So when people saw the law enforcement buffers were down (Hatherley, 2011; Hughes 2011; Klein, 2012; Newburn, 2011) when they watched the 'live violence' unfold or received phone calls or texts (Briggs, 2012a), the authorities weaknesses were exploited by social media. People quickly learnt of what was taking place – BB, Twitter and Facebook messages were posted of what was being targeted, what was available to loot, what people had got, and then followed the invitations – just like those described at Nadine's house party and between Steve, Will and Craig. Once the invitations started to travel across cyberspace, it became something subjective for the receiver. On the face of it, deep personal feelings of frustration with the authorities were apparent but below the surface, the narratives reveal a clear commitment to consumerism and quite calculated intentions to claim the prizes which they perhaps thought they were being starved of/wanted in any case. In this respect, it some became excited by the carnival of it all (Katz, 1988; Spalek et al., 2012), went along for a laugh or to see what was happening – perhaps to participate, witness (Morrell et al., 2011) or with no discernible rationale. Perhaps it was as Žižek (2011) states: a violent action demanding nothing. So if that is the case, what have people got to show for their participation?

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