

Reflections on the Riots

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So, what was at the root of it? That summer storm of looting, arson and disorder which broke over some of our major cities and towns in August, providing a spectacle which was beamed around the world. One thing seems certain. Unlike Brixton in 1981 or Broadwater Farm in 1985, any attempt to impose a meta-narrative on what happened is bound to fail. From the politicians who offered instant opinion that the cause was gang-related, to the youth and community workers who warned that the cuts would have consequences, to the *eminence grise* of modern sociology, Zygmunt Bauman (2011), who fingered ‘defective and disqualified consumers’, no over-arching explanation will suffice because the facts do not support one. So, eschewing a Hercule Poirot-type exposition with all the suspects gathered in the library, how do we frame a plausible interpretation from the clues on offer?

The first step is to avoid falling into the trap of thinking that, because we have some statistical information about the profile of those arrested and charged, we can safely make assumptions about why they rioted. As the Ministry of Justice bulletin released in October somewhat inelegantly put it: ‘...none of the factors explored imply causality with the public disorder events’ (Ministry of Justice 2011:3). But taken together, the data and analyses released by the MoJ, Home Office, and the Metropolitan Police provide a picture (albeit a partial one) of social deprivation, educational under-attainment and young male anomie. Two in five of the young people appearing in court were receiving free school meals. Two in three were identified as having special educational needs. Of the adult defendants, more than one in three was claiming some kind of benefit. From such raw material, it would be tempting to construct a version of the riots as an uprising of the underclass, a playing-out of the thesis of the *Spirit Level* (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) that unaddressed inequality breeds “psycho-social” frustration, to the point where violence is a predictable outcome.

However, other factors may have played an equally influential part. The MoJ stats show that 26% of those brought before the courts for disorder-related offences were juveniles (i.e. 10-17 years old) and a further 27% were aged 18-20. Only 5% were over 40 years old. This differs quite markedly from the age profile of those appearing in court for similar offences in 2010 when the proportion of juveniles was 16%; that of 18-20 year-olds, 15% and those 40-plus, 15%. Conclusion? That the opportunity of an adrenaline rush during the school-free days of August was a seductive incentive for many teenagers, whether or not they were encouraged onto the streets by Blackberry Messenger. And this was confirmed by the interviews of 50 young people carried out for the NatCen survey, commissioned by the Cabinet Office. It was ‘described in terms of a wild party or “like a rave”,’ (Morrell et al., 2011).

The NatCen ethnographic evidence also suggests that opportunism and a dissatisfaction with the police were motivational factors and it is highly likely that they came together in the pallid response by the Metropolitan Police (MPS) to the first outbreaks of trouble in London. The ‘early emerging findings’ of the MPS internal review conceded that the force did not have enough officers available on the first night of disturbances, despite the activation of the force mobilisation plan. This was critical, not just for London but for other cities too. As the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, Peter Fahy, commented: ‘A certain group of people saw what was happening in London and decided they seemed to be getting away with it. The authorities weren’t in control and they decided they wanted their opportunity’ (*BBC Panorama*, November 14, 2011). More disturbing still, from a policing perspective, the impression was given, perhaps for the first time in living memory, that, for a

period, *operational* decisions were being made, not at BCU level, not at management board level at Scotland Yard but by local and national politicians. In retrospect, for all the talk about the usefulness of deploying water cannon and plastic baton rounds, this is the most significant legacy of the riots for the Met. Here was a force consistently wrong-footed by public order challenges in recent times and reeling from the loss of two commissioners in under three years. Nothing has done more to reinforce the Prime Minister's (misplaced) faith in elected police commissioners than the sight of the police in London seemingly caught in a directionless funk by a rag-tag bunch of kids in hoodies.

The Met has also acknowledged that its most important weapon in tackling public order challenges, reliable intelligence, was neutralised by the speed with which information was transmitted on social networks. It has to be said that this is not an unexpected failure. The Met has tended to see the output of the media as a flow which needs to be tamed and channelled in the service of a tailored version of events. It is the 'golden hour' theory of policing, that what gets put into the public domain in the first 60 minutes after a crime will shape perceptions thereafter. But the fluidity and interactivity of new media makes it a slippery foe. As the former deputy assistant commissioner, Brian Paddick, says:

The Met has already had problems with Facebook and other social networking sites, where, in the run-up to the G20 protests, officers were publishing what might have been seen as inflammatory stuff - how they were up for it, or whatever. So, it is going to become increasingly difficult for the Met to control information in the way they have liked to in the past (cited in Silverman, 2011:122).

Paddick's own experience, when he was a commander in Lambeth a decade ago and decided to engage with a locally-based website called *urban75*, in a discussion about anarchy, spoke volumes for the normative cultural outlook of the Met at that time and of sections of the media. Dubbed 'Commander Crackpot' both by *The Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* (in a column by one, Boris Johnson!) and the subject of a whispering campaign by some in the Met hierarchy, Paddick's unauthorised foray into virgin territory became a warning to others. On the evidence of last summer, the organisation has some way to go before it discovers sufficient self-confidence to thrive in the new media ecology rather than be lost in it.

References

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