Panic on the streets of Birmingham? Struggles over space and belonging in the Revanchist City

Basia Spalek, Arshad Isakjee and Thom Davies reflect on what they saw

The riots of 2011 have generated substantial interest, leading many media commentators, politicians, senior police officers and others to consider the causes of the surprising, and even, shocking series of events that took place. Whilst some of these incidents involved extreme forms of violence in the form of murder, physical assault, arson, gang-related violence, other incidents are not so easily classified – looting, handling stolen goods, accepting items that had been looted by others. These sets of behaviours have been presented in media accounts as amoral, as people getting kicks out of lawless behaviour, as a symptom of a society whereby parents have lost control of their children. At the same time, it is important to also note that the riots took place days after some of the largest stock market falls for a decade, and were followed in a matter of a few months by the worst youth unemployment figures ever; child poverty is increasing and, for the first time in over half a century, Britain's youth can expect a poorer quality of life than their parents (Brewer et al., 2011).

Whilst some media commentators have labelled them 'consumer riots', we suggest that struggles over place and belonging were a significant dimension to the riots in Birmingham. Neo-liberal policies have meant that city centres are no longer the domain of the poor; regeneration policies aim to attract inward investment, appealing to the wealthiest and the most skilled. The rioters were not part of the 'creative classes' but rather those who are unwanted within urban centres. The actions of some of the rioters were a brief form of empowerment, challenging state power and panoptican means of control of urban spaces as they struggled to take back spaces from which they felt excluded.

Masked faces

It was the *visibility* of the chaos in Tottenham that led to its spread to Birmingham and elsewhere. From the pictures that were beamed across television and computer screens of police hapless in the face of mass deviance, it was clear that the image of a powerful, all-seeing state was just an illusion. In Birmingham city centre, the masked faces were not to prevent riot police from recognising them, but to avoid the imagined power of the lens. Yet as this thin veneer of control appeared to dissolve, more disorder became inevitable, the footage proof indeed that the gaze was impotent, and the 'panoptic power' of the state a mere illusion (Foucault, 1977; 1980). Still, for the government (consistent with Foucauldian ideas of surveillance), where policing had failed, technology would prevail, with David Cameron proclaiming in

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parliament '…even if they haven't yet been arrested, their faces are known and they will not escape the law.'

The second night of the Birmingham riot, more than any other, challenges the dominant view that consumerism was the only goal of the rioters. This was something more than 'shopping with violence' (Starkey, 2011), this was about power. The most striking feature of the behaviour of the rioters in Birmingham on the second night was not opportunism, 'criminality' or aggression, but sheer enjoyment. It might seem strange that the rioters were having fun, obscene even, but there is no doubt that there was thrill, bravado and camaraderie on display. For those watching the rioters command the streets outside The Bull Ring and The Mailbox, one could not help thinking that the rioters' very use of these spaces looked strange, unexpected, and out of place.

The audio-visual landscape of the riots, on radio and television, portrayed the standard themes; smashing glass, burning shops and emergency sirens. But stand a little closer and another sound could be heard amongst the mêlée; that of laughter. Above the bark of police dogs, and behind the masked and hooded faces of the throng, were smiles, laughter and shrieks of joy. Not so much 'panic on the streets of Birmingham' (The Smiths, 1986) but hedonism. There is a reason that the phrase 'it was a riot' can mean 'fun'. As a Second World War guide to riot prevention put it, '…humour can occasionally snap people back into objectivity' (Cantril, 1943). In twenty first century Birmingham, however, it was the lack of control and the strange uses of public space that created a sense of joy and abandon. To put it plainly, people were doing things in a public space which were not planned.

The city centre of Birmingham has been effectively gentrified over the last several decades. The neo-

liberal consensus on urban regeneration involves replacing old failing industries and developments in favour of those that attract inward investment, and these also tend to appeal to the wealthiest and the most skilled. Thus the spaces in the city centre are increasingly exclusive to people who have the ability to consume. What began with post-war slum clearance and city-centre redevelopment to improve the lives of residents, has now advanced to the stage that cities select the very residents they desire. But the rioters were not part of the 'creative classes' that we try to attract to our cities (Florida, 2002; 2005). They do not have the economic or cultural capital to be wanted.

Social inequality shapes a spatially unequal landscape. The movement of the poor away from urban centres, and the movement of capital towards them, creating the inequalities of developed cities, is what Neil Smith (1996) calls a 'revanchist' movement. The name derives from late-nineteenth century France, when the bourgeoisie sought to reclaim parts of Paris from the working classes after the Paris Commune of 1870, following the defeat of Napoleon III. The use of capital and neo-liberal attitudes towards urban development is a re-incarnation of that streak of revenge against the poor and dispossessed. Perhaps there is an irony here; the original Parisian revanchist movement was notorious for its vengefulness, and urban neo-liberal policy is a resurrection of that vengeance. But the riots too themselves can be seen as equally vengeful, a form of revanchism in itself.

For two nights, only those who had no business and no invitation to use the spaces around the city's consumer hubs had taken over, and everyone else, the workers who had left home early, the businesses who had shut their doors and the police who had poured into the city streets; everyone was marching to the beat of the rioter's drum. For some of those rioting, it was that reclamation of power that was so exhilarating.

There is no singular or simplistic lesson to be learned from the events of early August 2011, in Birmingham or elsewhere in England, but researchers and policy-makers should neither dismiss the individual, the emotional, dimension, nor the socio-economic landscape in explaining what took place. In part the riots can be viewed as a manifestation that lays bare the inequalities which are an inevitable consequence of our socio-economic structure. The rioters embody those ill-equipped to compete, wreaking revenge on those higher up the economic food chain by violently reclaiming spaces from which they have been excluded. For policymakers, the lesson is a stark reminder that inequalities, when they become entrenched to the point that they restrict access to any 'social mobility', will eventually be expressed, if not cogently or rationally, in acts of defiance against the state. According to the Chief Constable's Interim report into the disorder, 75 per cent of those arrested in Birmingham had previous convictions (West Midlands Police Authority, 2011). Whilst smashing Poundland might bring little in the way of economic benefit, for those who had comparatively little to lose, it was a deliciously vengeful taste of otherwise elusive power. And it was fun. ■

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